

Communicating Effectively in a Diverse Workplace

As Calgary continues to grow and become more culturally and linguistically diverse, so do workplaces in Calgary. As the largest employer in Southern Alberta, the Calgary Health Region is a particularly diverse environment. Respect for diversity is integral to our workplace. Although respect for diversity comes in many forms, one of the most important factors in creating a work environment that is respectful to all individuals is learning how to communicate effectively with others.

Communication—verbal, written, and nonverbal—is more than simply what is said, written, or expressed. The process of communicating differs among people from different backgrounds. How we say things, when we say things, why we say things, and what we say differs greatly among individuals. These factors comprise one's communication style.

Miscommunication often results when one person's style of communicating differs from that of another person. Miscommunication can be a source of discomfort and conflict, and it is a given in today's diverse workplace that you will work and interact with many coworkers whose communication style differs from yours. Therefore, learning how to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds is an essential skill for all Calgary Health Region staff.

Below are examples of some areas in which differences in communication style may exist. As you communicate with your coworkers, try to remember that factors such as the ones below may contribute to differences in your communication styles. By recognizing that your own communication style may differ from that of your coworkers, you'll take a big step toward communicating effectively.

Courtesy: Greeting styles differ among cultures, as do ways of discussing problems or conflicts and ways of addressing one's superiors.

Objectivity: Argument styles are an example of objectivity differences. In some cultures, arguing in an impersonal manner is the norm; in others, the argument style is personal and emotional.

Specificity: Is thinking focused on the immediate future or on the long term? Does communication focus on details or generalities?

Assertiveness: There are varying levels of assertiveness that are deemed acceptable. In some cultures, it is more appropriate to be reserved and submissive whereas in other cultures assertiveness might be valued.

Openness: Some cultures value "telling it like it is" while others value preserving harmony by not speaking one's mind.

Simplicity: Do you present information in simple, straightforward language, or are your sentences more complex?

Guidelines for Effective Communication

There are a number of skills and guidelines that facilitate successful communication with people from different cultures and backgrounds.

- **Pay Attention.**

Clear your mind of distractions so you can concentrate on what is being said. Remember that half of communication involves paying attention, so there is little point in talking to someone if

you cannot concentrate on what they are saying. If necessary, postpone the conversation until you are able to focus your attention on what is being said.

- **Set your assumptions and values aside.**

Try to hear not just what the other person is saying, but also the meaning of the message. Effective communication involves setting aside your own ideas and trying to explore the other person's ideas. This is a process that may require asking many questions.

- **Withhold judgment.**

You will have more success in communicating with other people if you are trying to understand them rather than to evaluate them.

- **Be complete and explicit.**

Be prepared to explain your point in more than one way and to explain why you are trying to make a particular point in the first place. Give the background, provide the context, and clarify where you are coming from.

- **Pay attention to the other person's response.**

You can usually tell whether you have blundered, failed to make yourself clear, or conveyed your message successfully by paying attention to the other person's verbal and nonverbal reactions.

- **Paraphrase if necessary.**

After the other person has spoken, restate what you heard the other person say and what you thought was meant. You can say something like this: "As I understand it, you are saying . . . Is that correct?"

- **Verify that you have been understood.**

After you have spoken, ensure that the other person understands what you have said. It does not usually work to ask the other person "Do you understand?", as most people will say "yes" whether they understood or not. If you sense that the person is unsure or confused, it may be helpful to say something like, "Just to clarify..." and then restate what you said in a slightly different manner.

- **Be alert for different meanings.**

Certain words, phrases, or actions may have different meanings for different people. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification if you are confused about the speaker's use of certain words or phrases.

- **Use straightforward language.**

Try to avoid using slang or expressions that not everyone will understand. People from different cultures or backgrounds may not understand the sayings that you grew up with (e.g., "fly off the handle", "get down to brass tacks", "in the red", "lickety-split", "keep your fingers crossed"). Try to use the literal meanings of words if you are speaking with someone whose background you are unfamiliar with.

- **If you are having trouble communicating, talk about it.**

Using phrases such as "I don't understand that point", "Let me explain it differently", "Could you try explaining that another way?", or "Let me explain why I'm telling you this" may help clarify the situation. Remember to be patient – getting frustrated will only worsen the situation.

For more specific information on communicating with individuals from diverse backgrounds, including people with disabilities and people from different ethno-cultural backgrounds, see [Communicating with Diverse People](#).