

Your Multicultural Workforce

Diverse employee populations are becoming increasingly commonplace in today's workforce. Though such diversity is positive in many ways, it can also create problems. Differences in culture and language may create tension among your employees or communication difficulties on the job site. Minorities may feel unwelcome or misunderstood and may perceive a strained relationship with site foremen or the company. It is essential that you address these issues proactively to ensure all your employees have a positive working environment.

Learn About Your Workers

Make the worksite a welcoming environment for all employees by keeping an open mind, learning about your employees and avoiding over-generalisations.

- Understand that diversity exists. When gathering information about the ethnic and cultural makeup of their workforce, many employers are surprised to learn the number of identifiable culture groups and subgroups within their company. Each of these groups may gather and process information differently, and they may have different needs and expectations from their employer.
- Learn about different employee groups. Research the various cultures and ethnicities represented in your company to gain a better understanding of each group. Also, keep in mind that any females you employ represent a minority in your typically male-dominated profession. Though research is a start, the best source for information is your employees themselves – ask them about their values, preferred communication methods and how your workplace could better fit their needs.

- Don't generalise. While it is true that certain characteristics or preferences can be common among a gender, ethnic or racial group, you should never assume that all employees of one group feel the same. It is important to learn about broad cultural differences, but always think of employees as individuals with unique feelings and needs.

Communication

Employers often make mistakes when communicating with bilingual employees without even realising it. You may assume that since your workers have an English

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vocabulary sufficient for them to function on a daily basis that communicating everything in English is adequate. However, for many workers, English is a second language, and they feel more comfortable communicating in their native tongue. This is especially true for safety rules, company policies, HR forms and other essential and potentially confusing information.

One way to solve this problem is to use bilingual forms of communication (whether written or spoken) when providing health and safety information.

Communication may prove to be a problem on your job site. If you have bilingual employees, make sure you have someone who can fluently translate back and

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forth if needed, and encourage all workers to be patient if problems arise with the language barrier.

Encourage Acceptance

A multicultural workforce can cause tensions among employees. This may be due to underlying prejudices, discomfort or unfamiliarity with other ethnic groups or displeasure with changing established policies and procedures. In order for everyone to have a comfortable and pleasant working environment, you need to address these issues.

Create company-wide non-discriminatory policies, and distribute them to all employees. Emphasise that the company is committed to a diverse, inclusive workforce and prejudiced or discriminatory behaviour will not be tolerated. You may also want to implement mentoring or shadowing programmes to help new employees feel welcome and help all employees feel comfortable with others.

To open employees' minds to other cultures and raise their self-awareness, consider providing diversity training or learning seminars for your staff. Open or semi-directed dialogues among employees can be useful for breaking down barriers, fostering respect and understanding, and helping employees feel comfortable despite their differences. Planning company social events, including picnics, outings, parties and clubs, can also be beneficial in bringing employees together and providing laid-back opportunities to get to know each other.

Train Your Site Foremen

Site foremen should be trained on communicating effectively with workers of other cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Not only do foremen play an important role in verbally communicating information, but their non-verbal actions can also have a big impact.

Foremen should be careful to always display the same attitude towards all workers regardless of race, gender or ethnicity. Any difference in mood or attitude, whether real or perceived, can make a minority group feel isolated or unimportant and expose the company to unnecessary risks. It is crucial that foremen avoid

becoming irritated or impatient when a minority employee needs extra help or is confused by something. This type of response can cause non-English speaking employees to avoid asking safety questions out of fear of further agitating an impatient or already aggravated supervisor. Plus, the company becomes vulnerable to a discrimination lawsuit if the employees feel they are being treated differently because of their minority status.

Recommend the following tips to site leaders:

- Treat all employees equally, despite any language barriers.
- Don't make patronising comments about a specific group of employees, even if you think they are complimentary. Not only will you risk insulting your employees, but you also open the door to discrimination lawsuits.
- Don't overcompensate any specific group of employees with the belief that the extra money will alleviate communication barriers. This type of activity will ultimately alienate other members of the workforce, and it is a very discriminatory practice.
- Be patient with workers who may have a hard time understanding the English language or who struggle to adapt to certain communication methods or working styles.

Hiring Practices

If your company has a diverse workforce, you might want to include a multicultural aspect in your hiring considerations. Hiring site foremen with multicultural management expertise or workers who have previous exposure to multicultural work settings can help you bridge any communication or personal gaps among your workers.

A Simple Approach

While there are many resources available that can help employers develop, promote and value a multi-ethnic or multicultural workforce, it really all comes down to four simple actions. By encouraging the following, you

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will be well on your way to creating a more welcoming environment for all of your employees:

- Work to understand all your employees and their unique needs so the workplace is comfortable and accessible for everyone.
- Promote open and honest communication within the company between employers and employees.
- Encourage acceptance and respect among all employees.
- Establish a commitment from top management to promote and support diversity and equal opportunity as a core value of the organisation.