

## Working Together: Understanding and Respecting Differences in the Workplace

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2020 was a year of reckoning in the United States, and across the globe. The events that took place brought to light the many differences that exist between ourselves, our coworkers and our neighbors. While some of these differences brought division and divisiveness, others built community and strengthened understanding.

As more people return to the workplace and begin to engage with their coworkers again, they will bring with them their experiences of the past year. Some of your coworkers may have lost loved ones, marched to demand racial justice, or are disheartened with current political environment, which has been so divisive. What is true is that these differences are here to stay and in order to succeed in the workplace everyone will need to embrace cross-cultural communications.



### Strength in our Differences

As we come together physically, we must also come together in how we respectfully interact with each other whose experiences may be different than our own. Nelson Mandela<sup>1</sup> wrote, *“Our differences are our strength as a species and as a world community.”*

Organizations that promote and embrace diversity and inclusion have higher employee engagement, productivity and thriving cultures<sup>2</sup>. An important part of these workplaces is the respectful communication between coworkers.

### Four Tips to Support Cross-Cultural Communication

Cross-cultural communication<sup>3</sup> embraces the recognition that there are similarities and differences that are inherent between cultural groups in how they communicate. When we engage in cross-cultural communication, we must understand not only how others communicate within a given context but also how we communicate. Through mutual understanding we can adjust our communication style to collaborate successfully.

#### 1. Embrace Agility

Adaption is key! If how you are communicating with a coworker does not seem to be having the appropriate effect, talk with them about what is or is not working and how you can both adjust how you are communicating to be more successful. It is important to keep in mind our *unconscious biases* that may be impacting our communication. If you get frustrated with a coworker who does not seem to be engaging with you, take a step back and try to see things from their perspective.

#### 2. Be Open-Minded

There is never just one right way to do things, especially when it comes to communication. Taking time to learn about different perspectives and viewpoints greatly increases your ability to communicate effectively. By being more open-minded, you can also help others develop a more open mindset as well. Ask questions that can help others think more critically. Provide valid data to support differing

perspectives. But be aware, when a coworker feels that you are challenging a deeply held belief, they will defend themselves no matter how “right” you are.

### 3. Have Meaningful Conversations

Everyone has different boundaries for what aspects of themselves they share with their coworkers. Meaningful conversations can develop when you go beyond your role in your department to learn more about your coworker’s roles and points of view. These curious conversations help to build stronger relationships throughout your organization and foster inclusiveness.

### 4. Increase Awareness

Developing awareness starts with ourselves. Recognize your personal biases and the impacts they may have on how you communicate your coworkers. When our biases impact how we communicate with others, it is important to take a step back and make room within ourselves for the differing views that your coworkers may have. When we are aware of other’s perspectives, we can adjust how we communicate in a way that is supportive and empathic to them.

## We Can Help

If you are struggling with how to re-integrate into the workplace or how to move forward with the next step in your life, we are here to help. With your VITAL WorkLife Employee Assistance Program (EAP), you and your family members have access to many resources to support your well being and help you navigate life’s challenges. Your EAP includes counseling, in-the-moment telephonic support, financial & legal consultations and resources and much more.

Contact us at **800.383.1908**, through the **VITAL WorkLife App** or [send us a message here](#) to get started today.

#### Sources:

<sup>1</sup> Nelson Mandela (2012). “Notes to the Future: Words of Wisdom”, p.72, Simon and Schuster.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.achievers.com/blog/diversity-and-inclusion/>

<sup>3</sup> Stobierski, Tim. (November 12, 2019). How to Improve Cross-Cultural Communication in the Workplace.

<https://www.northeastern.edu/graduate/blog/cross-cultural-communication/>