

HR INSIGHT

Building cross-cultural competence

Kathy Jia, for HRP, Financial Post · Wednesday, Jul. 28, 2010

A new human rights system created by the Ontario Attorney General two years ago has made it easier for people with claims to get a hearing before the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario. The Human Rights Legal Support Centre received 38,579 complaints in the year ending March 3, 2010 and many of the cases are race related. This can be shocking for many HR professionals as an overall increased cultural awareness is seen in the workplace. While it is not known whether or not discrimination is on the rise, it is clear that there is a greater need for cross-cultural competence.

Cross-Cultural Competence

Cross-cultural competence, a new term for some and a familiar one for others, refers to the ability to communicate effectively with people from different cultural groups. While the definition varies, the basis of cross-cultural competence is a combination of knowledge, understanding, skill and attitude.

At the organizational level, cross-cultural competence refers to a set of values, principles, behaviours, attitudes and policies that enable a workplace system to work effectively cross-culturally. There are two key points to consider in understanding cross-cultural competence:

Cross-cultural competence is a constant learning process.

Cross-cultural competence emphasizes effectiveness.

Benefits

The main benefits for an organization include employees feeling valued; ability to attract more diverse talent and reach more diverse markets; as well as less time and money lost in grievances.

Four Building Blocks

Four essential building blocks can help one achieve cross-cultural competence: knowledge, cultural relativism, mindful observation and empathy.

1.) Cultural knowledge is not only concerned with learning about other cultures; it also requires a close examination of one's own values and upbringings. This leads to an understanding of cultural differences.

In the workplace, understanding differences in cultural values and communication styles can help engender better solutions. If an employee new to Canada waits until the last minute to tell his supervisor that he could not finish the project on time, they may be perceived as being derelict in their work. The real reason could be that the new employee is afraid of "losing face." People from some Asian cultures put more value on "face." There is a Chinese saying, "never hit a person in the face." Harmony is generally more valued in these cultures than in North America; to refuse a request by saying "no" can also be difficult. Knowing the difference, a competent manager could encourage an employee to express any difficulties early, providing clear expectations and follow up with the employee regularly.

The differences in business practices can also affect performance and work relationships. Employees perform and are motivated very differently in a "top-down" decision making process from a "bottom-up" decision making process. A new hire who is used to the chain of command system in her/his previous country may be uncomfortable taking the initiative and may even view doing so as being insubordinate.

2.) One of the most misunderstood cultural concepts is cultural relativism.

Cultural relativism holds that cultures are "different but equal;" they exist because of their relevance to the people of their cultural group. Cultural relativism counterbalances ethnocentrism.

Confusion occurs when certain cultural practices are clashing with mainstream Canadian values. Some feel that being culturally sensitive may require us to give up ethical principles. This is a misconception. The reason is that: we may not agree, but we need to be aware that there are other sets of ethical or moral guidelines (Jane Suderman, Understanding Intercultural Communication).

A line should be drawn between cultural relativism and extreme cultural relativism. The latter may accept violent acts, such as honour killings, which are illegal under Canadian law and have no place in Canadian society.

3.) HR professionals are well-positioned to study, develop and implement long-term cross-cultural competence strategies, policies, practices and training. As communication is two way, cross-cultural training of both employers and employees is important.

4.) Cross-cultural competence can find its best building ground in mutual respect, understanding and inclusiveness. The principle of justice and fairness should be applied to all. There should also be a balance between diversity and unity. Five fingers are different but equal parts of a hand; yet "one finger can't lift a pebble." (Hopi Indian Proverb).

Kathy Jia is the founder and owner of Cross-Cultural Biz, a training and consulting company specializing in cross-cultural solutions