

Six Ways to Help Employees Heighten Multicultural Awareness



By Rita Balian Allen
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We live and work in a multicultural world. No matter the industry or profession, we work with people around the globe, across different demographics, geographies, and cultures. Whether it be customers, clients, and vendors or colleagues, staff members, and managers, the ability to embrace new perspectives, concepts, practices, motivations, and beliefs with openness, curiosity, and genuine interest is necessary to be effective and innovative.

As we look at many professional roles today, global experiences and multicultural awareness is a sought-after skill set. Learning professionals can incorporate these competencies as requirements for many positions as well as offer development opportunities to enhance them. It can start with identifying opportunities to expand an

employee's multicultural knowledge and experience. Individuals can seek out assignments, projects, or roles that expose them to environments outside their cultural and national boundaries.

Here are six ways to build and enhance the level of multicultural awareness and skill throughout your organization.

- It begins with the *inner strength* and *self-awareness* of identifying our strengths, weaknesses, values, motivations, assumptions, and biases. We must regularly and deliberately observe and reflect on our and others' actions and behaviors. To increase our emotional intelligence, we must continually watch, study, and learn about ourselves as well as others; this is essential to identifying gaps and determining our developmental needs while leveraging our strengths. One way to capture these observations is through journaling, an effective tool for learning and challenging ourselves. It's a continuous work-in-progress as we reflect and peel back those layers of self.
- We must be proactive and *educate ourselves* by asking questions and researching to learn what we don't know and need to know about other people, situations, and perspectives with a true sense of interest and heightened level of empathy. There are many resources that can help, including *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: The Bestselling Guide to Doing Business in More Than 60 Countries* by Terri Morrison and Wayne A. Conaway. Sharing these discoveries and experiences with others is another learning strategy that can benefit all.
- Gain an *appreciation for the richness and complexity of differences* that exist, *creating an environment and culture* that does not minimize or simplify the power of diversity. When the norms include keeping an open mind—being flexible and eager to learn about different people, practices, and cultures within daily interactions—it sets the tone for all. Encourage employees to *build relationships* across all locations, functions, and levels, embracing and respecting differences. The more exposure employees have to differences, the more they begin to avoid stereotyping and heighten their level of awareness as well as reap the rewards and benefits of this diversity, which culminates in better decision-making results.
- Practice *active listening* and help employees develop this skill. When we have a true dialogue—two-way communication—we hold back from making assumptions or conclusions until we fully understand the other person's perspective. This requires us to think before responding and to take the time to recognize and respect potential differences. We must be fully present and attentive to what someone is communicating, then reflect back to ensure accurate comprehension. Creating an open, honest dialogue results in more productive discussions and builds trust, respect, and camaraderie.
- Seek opportunities to push employees out of their comfort zone and *expand their experiences* in new ways. Allow for cross-functional projects that enable employees to develop relationships with individuals outside of their culture. Make it a priority for them to meet new people, learn about different customs and traditions, eat unfamiliar foods, listen to music of different cultures, and travel extensively when possibilities arise. In organizations that have continuous communication with another country, employees can challenge themselves by learning a second language.
- *Model authentic and compassionate leadership*. Be genuine, inclusive, authentic, and transparent in all interactions. Showing vulnerability and sincerity as a leader reflects interest and enthusiasm. Be honest with intentions, goals, and objectives and follow through on commitments. Be as open in sharing about your background as you are about learning about others. Remember to keep judgment out of the equation and work toward earning a level of trust that emerges when there is openness to appreciate, value, and embrace differences. Look for ways to broaden this level of learning throughout your organization and embed it within your organization.

There is a wide variety of demographics in the workplace today, creating complexity and challenges as well as tremendous opportunity and value. Learning organizations can play an important role in ensuring employees see why it is necessary to develop multicultural awareness and skill sets that will ensure effectiveness and success within their roles. Look for opportunities to enhance multicultural awareness within your organization.



About the Author
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Rita Balian Allen is the president of Rita B. Allen Associates, a national career management firm specializing in executive coaching, leadership development, management training, and career development. She is a lecturer at Boston-area universities, a sought-after speaker and presenter, and the author of numerous articles, blog posts, and the book *Personal Branding and Marketing Yourself: The Three Ps Marketing Technique as a Guide to Career Empowerment*. Rita was voted one of the top 10 executive coaches by the *Boston Women's Business Journal*.

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