



DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AND ADVOCACY SERVICES

communicating in a culturally appropriate way



Effective communication is important in any job ...

In theory, 'effective communication' is a simple process. Someone sends a message, another person receives it, understands it, and perhaps sends back a response. But communication is not always simple or effective.

Consider your own experiences at home. Even people in the same family, who speak the same language and share the same background, do not always communicate effectively with each other. This is due to the impact of factors such as context, environment, personalities, etc.

So imagine the impact of 'culture'. Picture yourself at work, communicating with a person who has a different background, different values and perhaps a different language to your own. This could be a challenging situation for both of you.

What is 'culturally appropriate' communication?

Communicating in a culturally appropriate way means finding a way to communicate effectively that also respects and accepts cultural differences.

Communication is a two-way process, so all parties need to work together to achieve culturally appropriate communication. It's about discovering, recognising, understanding and working effectively within the influences of each other's culture.

What is culture?

'Culture' is a way of identifying groups of people who share common characteristics such as language, social practices, attitudes and values. We are all part of a culture. It's our language or ethnic group, or our community, or even our workplaces (you've probably heard of 'workplace culture').

Many people aren't even aware of their 'culture' until they meet someone from a different culture. Then it's easy to point out the differences – the language, hand gestures, way of dressing, way of behaving, etc.

Being aware of your own culture opens you to understanding and being more sensitive to the cultures of others.



Take the initiative and talk to people. Find out about their values and beliefs, and share yours. Discuss differences and focus on the similarities. Starting this dialogue will lay a solid foundation for effective communication that is sensitive to the influences of culture.

Some important points

Be aware of the impact of culture

For example, if someone avoids eye contact with you when speaking, perhaps that's the impact of culture – not that they are rude, shy or uninterested. Acknowledge it, understand it, and ask about it. You will need to learn and adjust to each other to ensure communication is effective and appropriate.

You are communicating with individuals

Beware of assumptions. Culture gives useful clues but don't assume all people from a certain cultural background share the same beliefs and ways of behaving. People are individuals and need to be treated as such. Start a conversation and find out what the person values and believes.

All cultures are equal

The culture you were raised in is probably the one you feel most comfortable with – you understand the 'rules'. This does not mean it's 'the best' or 'the only' way people should behave. A 'different' culture does not mean a 'lesser' one.

We're all influenced by culture. It shapes how we see the world, what we value, what we believe in, and how we communicate.

Speak clearly and concisely

Speaking clearly doesn't mean speaking slowly (which can seem patronising). Use your natural pace but sound words out properly. Also, break down information into manageable chunks and, if required, use supplementary non-verbal information such as maps and drawings.

Check for understanding

If you're having difficulty understanding a message, ask the person to repeat or clarify it. Similarly, if you don't think your message has been understood, check for understanding.

Be aware of non-verbal communication

Up to two-thirds of the meaning of a message can come from non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone of voice, etc. Always be sensitive to non-verbal communication and how it's interpreted by other cultures.

Case study

On the first day I started working with Yoshi, he nodded his head and said 'yes' to everything I said. I thought he'd understood me. But I noticed he was always asking other employees to show him what to do. It didn't take me long to work out he was too embarrassed to ask me questions because he saw me as a figure of authority. And in his culture you really need to save face, particularly with older people.

At the end of that first day we sat down together and discussed the similarities and differences between Japan and Australia. Things didn't change overnight but they're now much better. I found talking about it opened the way to better communication between us.

Carlos, supervisor

