

## Cultural difference in the workplace

### The changing face of New Zealand

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The face of New Zealand has changed. Nearly one in five of us were born overseas and people who identify as European in the six major cities has decreased from 82.5% in 1991 to 79.6% in 2001. We have a large increase of workers from non-English speaking countries - particularly Asians and in the near future we will also see an increase in the number of young New Zealand born Maori and Polynesians joining the workforce.

At the same time many of us now work significantly more with people from other cultures. This may be as part of a regional team or parts of the workforce may be in different countries or it may be our customers.

With this in mind there is growing need for all workers to improve their understanding of cultural difference and how this impacts the work environment. We can also increase our effectiveness by identifying ways to work in more culturally inclusive ways.

### The impact of culture at work

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A culture consists of shared beliefs, values and behaviours. Beliefs and values influence behaviour. For example in New Zealand culture we believe in equal opportunity and the rights of the individual. In business the behaviours that are influenced by these beliefs vary from the way we select staff to the way we involve ourselves in meetings.

We internalise beliefs and values and learn behaviours appropriate to our culture as we are growing up. Families guide this learning when we are very young and as we mature we learn new ways of behaving from the other groups we mix with.

As adults we continue to adapt our behaviours. At work we may need to adapt to a culture of that organisation. When we travel overseas we observe and if necessary adapt our behaviours to the culture we are visiting. Sometimes, we don't understand the values and beliefs behind particular behaviours and may interpret them incorrectly based on our own values and beliefs.

A common example for New Zealanders first working with an international team is facing the frustration of limited input from particularly Asian colleagues. This is variously interpreted as – language problems, not prepared to stand up for themselves, have nothing to say or that they don't understand the discussion.

However when non-participation is considered in a cultural context the reasons are quite different and could include: the desire to build relationships first, the need for reflective thought, use of indirect communication (that has not been interpreted correctly), respect to management, not wanting to lose face or cause someone else to lose face, or the decision making processes doesn't match needs. With a cultural context in mind how you handle non-participation is significantly different from just slowing down the rate of speaking and / or sending out pre-discussion materials (though this may be required as well).

Within New Zealand there is often the thought that immigrants who arrive in the country should adapt to us – after all they did make the decision to come here. The challenge for new arrivals is often that they don't know what they don't know and can't adapt without support. It is easy to observe and follow behaviours (if you feel comfortable to do so) but in reality it helps if we create environments to make it safe for people to do so.

For example new immigrants from societies with a low tolerance for ambiguity will find the relaxed way that many managers in New Zealand give instructions to their staff is very disconcerting. This can be interpreted by the managers as a lack of ability to take initiative but in reality, if instructions are clear enough, the new immigrant will be able to handle the situation as well as anyone raised in New Zealand.

# cadence

## occasional paper

### **Ways to work more effectively**

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We can be more successfully working cross-culturally if we:

- build an understanding of different cultural values and beliefs and how these influence behaviour
- understand their own belief systems and how these influence our own behaviours
- identify when they are making assumptions about other people and be open to interpreting behaviour in a different way
- identify when cultural difference may be leading to an unexpected behaviour
- use dialogue skills to build understanding
- modify meeting practices and clarify expectations / ground rules
- recognise the strengths that difference (including culture) brings to the workforce

When working with groups outside New Zealand keep in mind the following areas that often lead to cultural misunderstandings:

- lack of respect for authority; challenging people who are in authority
- spontaneous enthusiasm in speaking out in meetings
- directness of our communication (either too indirect for countries like Germany and the USA and too direct for countries in South East Asia and Africa)
- lack of ability to interpret indirect communication
- discomfort in being given too many instructions / too much direction; reactions to feeling over-managed
- wanting our expertise acknowledged – particularly when it is better than everyone else's (including the boss)
- looseness and informality in giving instructions
- expectation that if people don't understand they will ask
- enthusiasm to change / 'improve' things

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