



## ***Showing Newcomers the Ropes: Welcoming Immigrants to Your Workplace***

REMEMBER HOW GRATEFUL YOU WERE WHEN SOMEONE HELPED YOU IN AN UNFAMILIAR SITUATION? YOUR IMMIGRANT COLLEAGUE WILL PROBABLY FEEL THE SAME WAY.

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**H**ave you ever felt totally lost and uncomfortable in a new situation? It might have been the time you attended a party at a stranger's home, your first day at a new job, or a trip you took by yourself to an unfamiliar city.

Working in multicultural workplaces, we are constantly faced with the need to help newcomers adapt. Sometimes we react with frustration and irritation. You've undoubtedly heard (or even said yourself) something like, "If they're going to make it here, they'd better learn our ways."

Every organization expects newcomers to adapt to the existing order to some extent — the "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" school of thought. This is extremely critical in the workplace, where success depends on one's ability to understand and follow the rules and norms of the corporate culture.

Here are some ways to help newcomers learn to function successfully in their new organization:

### **1. EXPLAIN THE REASONS.**

A behavior that seems like common sense to you may be new and uncomfortable for the immigrant. Such seemingly simple actions as saying no, giving suggestions at a meeting, disagreeing with a boss, or volunteering for a task might be unacceptable in the individual's native culture. Explaining the reasons for the preferred behavior is helpful.

For example, when dealing with someone who continues to nod and say yes even when he does not understand, you **might say, "It is important to let people know when you don't understand so they can explain it another way. Then they can help you."**

### **2. SHOW THE BENEFITS.**

People are more apt to use different behaviors when they see what's in it for them to do so. You might position the desire for more open requests by saying, "**Here we have a**

**saying that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. This means that you will get help if you let people know that you need it.**" To teach employees to take more responsibility for their careers, you might say, **"You might be overlooked for a project or promotion if you don't let your manager know you are seeking it."**

### **3. SUGGEST RESOURCES.**

Books and movies are great cultural learning resources. Books such as *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States* by Gary Althen (Intercultural Press, 1988) hit the issues head on. Useful insights into American values can also be gained by reading such classics as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *Catcher in the Rye*. Movies such as "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" and "All the President's Men" serve the same purpose.

### **4. SPEND NON-WORK TIME TOGETHER.**

Eating lunch together, going bowling after work, or inviting employees over to your home gives them a chance to experience American culture outside of work. We often complain that immigrant workers are clannish, yet we seldom invite them to join us.

One friend of ours who is a teacher invited an Armenian immigrant colleague and her family over for Sunday dinner. Roth host and hostess were taken aback when the colleague's husband thanked them as they sat down to eat. "You know," he said, "we have been in this country for 12 years and this is the first American home we have been invited to." It's difficult to learn all the cultural rules in the office, on the shop floor, or at the supermarket.

### **5. TALK ABOUT THE DIFFERENCES OPENLY.**

When you see an immigrant colleague hesitating or looking surprised or confused, stop and discuss the cultural differences at play. You might say: **"I'll bet this is different from the way it is done in your country. In your culture, how does a boss give you praise or criticism?"** Or, **"This may be awkward because Americans tend to be quite direct. They don't mean to be rude. It is considered helpful to tell someone when they make a mistake."**

Most newcomers want to succeed in their adopted society, in relationships, and on the job. You can help the learning process by teaching them the norms and showing them the ropes. Remember that person who guided you when you were in an unfamiliar situation? Remember how grateful you were? Return the favor.

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