

Understanding Others: Diversity

Purpose

This activity is an examination of what makes us different as individuals – and how many of those differences are significant in a work context.

Timing

1 hour

Materials

Activity Sheet 1
Activity Sheet 2
Checklist

Instructions: Understanding Others: Diversity

This activity asks you to think about how you define yourself, and the attitude you have to people who are different to you. It is not an activity about political correctness. The fear of being 'politically incorrect' can sometimes make it difficult for us to examine our feelings and actions in this area. This activity is actually concerned with the combination of characteristics that make each of us unique as individuals. Some of these factors make it easy for other people to label – or even stereotype – us. However, many of these factors are not relevant in a work context.

It is illegal to discriminate against people because of their race or gender. People with disabilities also have certain protection under the law. But there are many other more subtle ways in which we may categorise individuals in particular groups and treat them less favourably as a consequence. You may, for example, have a negative view of how young people are likely to perform at work, or ex-offenders, or single mothers. Your attitudes may be based on your own experience of people in these groups. Or you may be influenced by anecdotes you have heard from others. Either way, you run the risk of judging someone by their label – and not as an individual.

There are several reasons why this is not advisable. Firstly, it is unfair to the individual concerned. Few of us would like to be judged by the actions of other people who happen to share some of our beliefs, or originate from a similar part of the world or perhaps only have the same year of birth as we do.

Secondly, it is unfair to the organisation. If we are unable to appreciate and use the talents of other people simply because they are different from us, we are placing unnecessary limits on the resources available to the organisation – and probably under-using some of the resources it already has.

Thirdly, it is unfair to ourselves as managers. People respond to the expectations we have of them. They may not always do quite as well as we hope, but if we have low expectations, they are likely to recognise this and confirm our opinion. If you undervalue individuals in your team because you have a negative attitude to 'what' they are, you are extremely unlikely to get the best out of them.

Instructions: Understanding Others: Diversity

The activity is in two parts.

On Activity Sheet 1, you are asked to write short descriptions of yourself that you could use in three different contexts. You are then asked to compare your descriptions and underline anything that appears in either the first or second description and is repeated in the third.

On Activity Sheet 2, you are asked to read a series of statements and tick any that coincide with your own attitudes. Try to be honest when you complete this part of the activity – don't just respond in the way you think is most acceptable.

The Checklist provides you with some helpful feedback.

Activity Sheet 1: Understanding Others: Diversity

1. Write short descriptions of yourself that you could use in the following circumstances:

(a) You are arranging to meet a business contact whom you have never seen face-to-face in the foyer of an exhibition centre.

(b) You have joined a dating agency and have been asked to write a word portrait of yourself. This description will go on the agency's database and will be seen by people who will use it to decide if they want to meet you.

(c) Imagine you went back in time and were applying for the job you are doing at the moment. What makes you the ideal candidate?

2. Now underline anything you have written about yourself in (a) or (b) that also appears in (c).

Activity Sheet 2: Understanding Others: Diversity

Read the following statements and tick any that you agree with.

- (a) I would find it difficult to be managed by someone who was significantly younger than myself.
- (b) It's more difficult for a woman to be successful in business and those women who do succeed tend to be exceptional individuals and are not really typical of women as a whole.
- (c) Someone who does not have English as their first language would not find it easy to cope with the demands of my job.
- (d) People over 40 find it more difficult to adapt to change.
- (e) The staff in my department would be slightly uneasy if they were working alongside someone who was openly gay.
- (f) Although it's admirable to offer a job to a person with a disability, it just wouldn't be practical in my department.
- (g) Clients expect a certain image from our organisation and it would not be appropriate to employ an older person, or someone with a disability, on the reception desk.
- (h) A person's sexual orientation is a private matter that should be kept private and not mentioned at work.
- (i) A woman with children has other priorities in her life and this must be taken into account when considering who is suitable for promotion to senior management.
- (j) With the best will in the world, a part-time employee cannot be as involved in his or her job as a full-time employee.
- (k) Customers prefer to deal with someone of similar social background to themselves.
- (l) Most clients would feel more comfortable dealing with a man than a woman.
- (m) Women are more intuitive than men.
- (n) It would be difficult for someone who had spent a long time in the armed services to adjust to the culture of our organisation.

Activity Sheet 2: Understanding Others: Diversity

- (o) People under 25 have lots of drive and enthusiasm, but tend to lack maturity of judgement.
- (p) It is unreasonable to expect a woman to have the same 100% commitment to her job as a man has.
- (q) Married men tend to be more emotionally stable.
- (r) People who are untidily dressed have unmethodical minds.
- (s) I'm not prejudiced, but if I'm honest I feel more comfortable working alongside people who are from the same ethnic group as me.
- (t) It's a pity, but someone who has been in prison will never receive the same degree of trust as someone with a clean record.
- (u) You cannot expect someone in their first job to be as responsible as someone who is a little bit older.
- (v) If I was appointing someone to my team, personal chemistry would be more important than qualifications.

Checklist: Understanding Others: Diversity

Activity Sheet 1 asked you to write three descriptions of yourself. In (a) you will have concentrated on your physical appearance. In (b) you will probably have mentioned what you look like, but you will also have written about your personality and interests. In (c) you will have described your skills, experience and qualifications.

Here is how somebody else described herself:

- (a) I'm about 5 foot 4, with long straight auburn hair and I wear glasses.
- (b) I'm a redhead, and friends say I'm very attractive. I'm 35, about 5 foot 4 and slim. I enjoy long dinners after the theatre, walks through the winter countryside and hunting through antique shops for bargains. *I've got a demanding job, working as a manager in a busy insurance agency in the city* and like to relax at weekends. I enjoy being single and I've got lots of friends – but nobody special in my life. I'm serious about the things that matter and easygoing about the rest. *Loyalty's important to me* and so is a sense of humour.
- (c) I've got ten years experience of working in insurance. I've led a small team and managed to exceed our sales targets each year. I have a degree in Business Administration. My communication skills are excellent and I have successfully chaired the weekly departmental meetings for the last six months. I have particular knowledge of the agricultural sector, having spent two years working as an assistant farm manager. I am extremely committed to my work, enjoy new challenges and hope to build a career in management.

In (d) you were asked to underline anything in (a) and (b) that also appeared in (c). It is very likely that you found very little, if anything, that was repeated in (c). (Look at what's in italics in the example above.) This is because the qualities that enable you to do your job are different from the superficial characteristics that make you recognisable to strangers or the aspects of your personality that are important in a personal relationship. As individuals, we are all different from each other. It is essential to recognise which of these differences are significant in a work situation, and which are irrelevant.

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On a personal level, we may prefer to associate with people who share our interests, have particular personality traits or have the same general outlook on life as us. However, these considerations should not influence our attitude towards the people we work with or choose to employ.

Activity Sheet 2 asked you to identify statements in a list with which you agreed. All these statements were concerned with equal opportunities and your attitude to people who are different from you in some way. Some of the statements were obviously contentious, while you may have found yourself agreeing with others.

Read the comments under any of the statements that you ticked:

- (a) I would find it difficult to be managed by someone who was significantly younger than myself.

Your attitude may be making it harder for young people with talent to succeed.

- (b) It's more difficult for a woman to be successful in business and those women who do succeed tend to be exceptional individuals and are not really typical of women as a whole.

This may reveal that you have a stereotypical view of women in general as non-achievers.

- (c) Someone who does not have English as their first language would not find it easy to cope with the demands of my job.

Many people for whom English is not their mother tongue have an excellent command of the language and a better understanding of grammar than some native speakers.

- (d) People over 40 find it more difficult to adapt to change.

Some do, but some don't. This is a stereotypical view that doesn't represent reality.

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- (e) The staff in my department would be slightly uneasy if they were working alongside someone who was openly gay.

We can sometimes justify our own prejudices by ascribing them to other people.

- (f) Although it's admirable to offer a job to a person with a disability, it just wouldn't be practical in my department.

This is a common remark, but many people with disabilities make an outstanding contribution to the organisations that employ them. Any practical difficulties may not be as hard to overcome as you assume.

- (g) Clients expect a certain image from our organisation and it would not be appropriate to employ an older person, or someone with a disability, on the reception desk.

Clients usually remember the personality and helpfulness of the person who greets them at reception, not their physical appearance.

- (h) A person's sexual orientation is a private matter that should be kept private and not mentioned at work.

This attitude can make it impossible for gay people to lead a normal life in which they are able to be open about their relationships.

- (i) A woman with children has other priorities in her life and this must be taken into account when considering who is suitable for promotion to senior management.

This statement assumes that women are less able than men to organise the logistical side of having a family.

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- (j) With the best will in the world, a part-time employee cannot be as involved in his or her job as a full-time employee.

This is not necessarily true. Part-time employees are frequently more effective than full-time workers.

- (k) Customers prefer to deal with someone of similar social background to themselves.

If you agreed with this statement, you may be ascribing your own prejudices to other people. Customers may actually be comfortable dealing with a far wider range of people than you are.

- (l) Most clients would feel more comfortable dealing with a man than a woman.

Clients are most interested in receiving the products and services they are paying for, not in the person who is delivering them.

- (m) Women are more intuitive than men.

The unspoken corollary of this statement is often that men are more analytical than women. Both statements are based on stereotypes. You probably know many insensitive women and many men who are capable of great insight.

- (n) It would be difficult for someone who had spent a long time in the armed services to adjust to the culture of our organisation.

This attitude can make it difficult for people to switch career. It's important to look at the aptitudes of the individual, not just their employment history.

- (o) People under 25 have lots of drive and enthusiasm, but tend to lack maturity of judgement.

This statement is often made by people who are older than 25 themselves. Long experience is valuable, but it does not guarantee sound judgement. The ability to understand a situation and come to a decision does not necessarily improve with age.

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- (p) It is unreasonable to expect a woman to have the same 100% commitment to her job as a man has.

This is simply not true and is sometimes used as an excuse to exclude women from more responsible jobs.

- (q) Married men tend to be more emotionally stable.

This is a stereotypical view that can discriminate against younger men, gay men and men who decide not to get married. Married men may have greater financial commitments, but they are not necessarily more emotionally stable.

- (r) People who are untidily dressed have unmethodical minds.

Sometimes this is true – but sometimes it is completely false. A person's superficial appearance should not influence your appreciation of their skills and talents.

- (s) I'm not prejudiced, but if I'm honest I feel more comfortable working alongside people who are from the same ethnic group as me.

This may be true for some people, but it is usually based on a fear of the unfamiliar. Cultural diversity in society is a reality but this attitude still makes it difficult for people from minority ethnic groups to move as freely as others in the job market. Discriminating against people because of their ethnic group is also illegal.

- (t) It's a pity, but someone who has been in prison will never receive the same degree of trust as someone with a clean record.

This attitude can be used as an excuse to refuse employment to anyone who has a criminal record. It makes it extremely difficult for the many people who want to rehabilitate themselves in society.

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- (u) You cannot expect someone in their first job to be as responsible as someone who is a little bit older.

This is not necessarily true and can be used to put barriers in the way of talented young people. If they find it difficult to succeed in your organisation, they will move somewhere else where they are able to fulfil their potential.

- (v) If I was appointing someone to my team, personal chemistry would be more important than qualifications.

This is an interesting statement. Of course personal chemistry is important, but it can be used as an excuse to discriminate against people from different social backgrounds or ethnic groups. You may actually find more interesting chemistry with people who are superficially completely unlike you.

