

Coming to Understand the Culture of Others

In the fast-paced, busy environment of our organization, how many of us can say that we really know the people that we supervise? This lack of familiarity has a negative impact on our work relationships during times of calm and chaos.

There are many techniques that you can employ in coming to understand the cultures of people in your work area better. The following list represents just a few:

- When you do not know a person well, it is always good to start discussions with an opening that allows the individual to feel free to say if he or she has been offended. You could use the following statement, "I have not had an opportunity to come to know you well. If I say or do any thing that offends you during our conversation, please do me a favor and let me know so that I can improve in the future."
- Have a potluck to which each person brings a dish representative of his or her culture.
- In staff meetings, have one or two people share something about their cultures that they would like other people to know. Give each person 60 seconds to share and then allow two minutes for questions. Encourage individuals to bring something tangible, such as a piece of clothing, symbols, etc. Do this on an ongoing basis and make sure that everyone in your department is called upon to share.
- On a bulletin board, post a chart or piece of paper with columns for each person's name, his or her culture, and important characteristics of that culture. Encourage individuals to fill out the chart as they pass by so others can learn more about them. Encourage employees to read what others have written. This exercise can be enhanced by having people provide pictures of themselves. To encourage the chart's use, during a staff meeting make mention of something about a person that you learned from it.