

Cultural Disharmony

An article on the impact cultural differences make in the workplace recently circulated among NC Thrive staff. Published in the Harvard Business School's *Working Knowledge* online publication, "Cultural Disharmony Undermines Workplace Creativity"¹ is spot-on when it concludes that "ambient cultural disharmony" is akin to the legally prohibited "hostile work environment" for co-workers who come from different and too often misunderstood cultural backgrounds. In today's global workplace it is important to acknowledge that the health of the relationships between colleagues, whether they are sitting in neighboring cubicles or Skyping across continents during weekly task meetings, is critical to business' bottom lines.

In case you were dozing during this section of the HR Orientation program, hostile work environment is a type of employment discrimination (otherwise known as harassment) that has been judicially determined to be prohibited under the 1964 Civil Rights Act. It's the type of behavior that makes a worker feel so uncomfortable that going to work simply becomes unbearable. Historically, cases of hostile work environment have been sexually or racially motivated, but there is a rise in cases of national origin (and religious) harassment as well.

The difference between a hostile work environment and ambient cultural disharmony is a matter of degree. How severe, frequent, and pervasive the behavior is will determine whether the workplace is determined to be hostile or abusive and therefore at the level of legally actionable employment discrimination. But even if this behavior doesn't fit the legal definition of hostile work environment, ethnic slurs or jokes, workplace graffiti or exclusionary behavior based on traits such as a worker's birthplace, culture, accent or skin color are nonetheless destructive to that worker's mental and emotional well-being not to mention the office he or she works in.

The role of Extension in bridging the cultural divides that currently exist in North Carolina is growing. In our Success Stories (<http://communitydevelopment.ces.ncsu.edu/working-with-target-populations/>), agents describe a number of programs that benefit our disenfranchised communities, including Latino, the impoverished, the elderly, and others. While these programs are intended to address social concerns, their impact on the economic health of a community is just as important as HR's orientation on acceptable work behaviors is to a business' productivity. The effectiveness of diversity training may have been questioned in recent years, but the value of diversity in the workforce and in our communities has not.² Workers from diverse backgrounds who understand and accept one another's differences tend to work better together, be more creative, and thus experience the benefits of team-building and higher company profits. The same phenomenon could also catch on in our communities, making them more attractive to industry, entrepreneurship, and other economic development efforts. Connecting the dots between what already exists to create something that did not exist before is one of the fundamental principles of creativity. By bringing together the diverse perspectives that exist in every community, the community as a whole will be stronger, more innovative, and better able to compete in creating and retaining the best jobs and the highest quality of living for that community.

To read the entire article, click on <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/7050.html>.

http://www.boston.com/jobs/news/articles/2010/12/05/companies_question_value_of_diversity_training/?page=2