

Fostering a Workplace Climate for Diversity

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What do we have to do to create and foster a workplace climate where everyone feels welcomed, valued, and respected? This is a central question in the diversity discussions I have held in ARL libraries. The response centers on becoming more aware that each individual's behavior towards others contributes to the climate or atmosphere. The most common reason offered for why more attention is not paid to these issues is that "we're too busy." To implement a successful diversity program, however, these three practices--welcoming, valuing, and respecting--must receive regular and deliberate attention.

Welcoming

We usually think of welcoming as something that happens when an individual first joins an organization. People need to feel welcomed regularly throughout their employment. Almost everyone wants to be recognized by others and to know that their presence is important to the organization.

Co-workers feel connected when their presence is acknowledged on a regular basis. It is easy to speak only with certain people, those we consider our friends or those with whom we work most closely. Speaking to those we pass in the hall or as we pass by their desk can help others feel welcome. It is easy to assume that once we've been here awhile, we no longer need to greet each other regularly.

In these busy times, how often do leaders in the organization walk through the library speaking to staff? We need to avoid coming to others only to resolve problems, or to request or pass on information. Employees need to know that people in leadership positions are aware of the work of each unit, recognize that people are working hard, and care about the employees' well-being.

Activities where staff meet and talk outside of their own units is another way to encourage interaction and sharing. Usually such activities are held only once or twice per year; employees often interact only within their immediate department or division most other times.

Focusing on how to make others feel welcome can help to address other issues, such as classism (support staff interacting separately from librarians) or cliques (certain people only talking to certain others). Ignoring barriers that create divisions will not enhance efforts to foster a workplace supportive of a diverse staff.

Valuing

How do co-workers demonstrate that a colleague's contributions are valued? It requires an awareness and knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of others. We must seek examples of work being implemented or services being used. We must take time let individuals or units know that we have noticed and are appreciative of their work.

Valuing requires us to take an interest in others: their activities, work, and progress. We need to act on what we learn by engaging others about their work. We must listen and respond when colleagues share their progress; this includes offer encouragement when we see colleagues experiencing challenges in their efforts.

Valuing is demonstrating to others that their presence and contributions are noticed, make a difference, and matter in the organization. Some libraries have implemented recognition programs. Usually done only once a year, such programs can give a message that demonstrating value is not an ongoing activity.

Rewards or recognition must have meaning to those to whom it is given. A certificate may be less effective than sharing a break with someone to discuss their work and their contributions; a salary increase may have more impact if someone in a leadership role shares how much the contributions have helped the organization accomplish its goals.

Respecting

In the context of diversity, respecting is finding ways to demonstrate our regard for the quality of work and the contributions of others.

Asking a co-worker questions about their work, or offering observations about what is most impressive in their project is a good way to show clearly that we respect another's skills and talents. Showing an interest in another's projects, being aware of their personal work goals, or just knowing that a co-worker attended a seminar, all provide opportunities for dialogue and exchange.

Supervisors often expect employees to come to their offices or to make appointments to talk about their work; many employees will avoid such meetings because they do not wish to give the appearance of a problem. What employees often are seeking is acknowledgment that their supervisor is aware of their work, and cares enough to ask how things are developing.

This means senior administrators may need to talk directly to staff, otherwise they will not know that leadership has noticed or cares. Some administrators send messages through supervisors, when a direct note, phone call, or email would have a much more positive effect on self-esteem and a sense of personal accomplishment.

While these three factors--welcoming, valuing, and respecting--must be applied to the entire library staff, they are especially important if the organization plans to successfully retain minorities in the workplace. It is challenging to be the only one, or one of few in a minority group. Those in the majority group must make a conscientious effort, on a regular basis, to ensure that minorities are aware and truly believe that their presence and contribution as an employee matters.

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[Table of Contents for Issue 185](#) | [Other Diversity Articles](#) | [Other Current Issues Articles](#) | [ARL Newsletter Home](#)



[ARL Home](#)

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Last Modified: Thursday, July 10, 1996 - 08:47:08 AM