

Diversity issue:

Other languages in workplace

By Marita Baragli and Lami Subia

One of the biggest diversity issues facing DHS today is the use of languages other than English in the workplace.

Dealing with languages in the office comes down to the Department's core values concerning professionalism, respect, and integrity. As managers, we should "lead by example," encourage staff to talk about this with each other in a respectful manner so that misunderstandings are avoided. Regardless of the language spoken, workplace communication must always be respectful.

Here are some questions and answers about this topic.

Q: Can DHS be an "English-only" workplace, to keep workers from conversing in languages that managers and other staff do not understand?

A: No. This is not in line with DHS' commitment to diversity. DHS welcomes and values the diversity of staff and customers (including their languages). Among the goals of the DHS diversity plan are:

- to provide culturally competent services;
- to create and sustain welcoming environments that are inclusive and respectful, regardless of the language spoken.

Q: Why do we hire bilingual staff at DHS?

A: It is a business necessity due to the clients and customers we serve. Language skills are as valuable to the organization as technical skills. And bilingual workers have to work at maintaining those skills by using their language in daily conversations, not only with clients but also with co-workers.

Q: Is it proper to speak a foreign language at work when others don't understand?

A: Here is where we need some "give and take." People conversing in another language need to be aware of others and respectful of their feelings. Don't ignore those around you, but acknowledge their presence and include them in the conversation if you can.

If you're on the "outside" of such a conversation, you also need to show respect and communicate clearly. Don't assume they're talking about you or trying to hide something or purposely "being rude." See the next section for some ideas about "office language etiquette."

Q: What can I do as a supervisor or co-worker?

A: Work together to create an “office language etiquette.”

It's amazing how many misunderstandings can be cleared up by talking about them. Have a staff meeting to discuss the reasons why people speak another language on the job:

- Sometimes it is easier for people to speak their native language than to struggle with English, particularly for complex concepts.
- It can be a stress reliever for people to speak in their own tongue occasionally.
- It allows for a more accurate exchange of information.
- People may be insecure about their English language skills.
- Bilingual workers hone their skills by speaking in their second language.

Co-workers can create options and alternatives. Let people know how you feel: “When you speak together in another language, I feel left out,” is one possibility. Ask for a translation: “I’d like to hear your idea. Can you say it in English too?”

If you are speaking a language other than English, acknowledge others when they approach. You might say "Hi, we're talking about such-and-such..." and continue in English; or, "We just need to finish this thought and then we'll switch to English," or "I'm explaining something that he or she has a hard time understanding in English; we'll just be a minute."

Do you have some experiences you'd like to share, or more questions about this topic? Contact Marita Baragli, (503) 947-5287, marita.baragli@state.or.us or Lami Subia, 503-378-2701, ext. 236, lami.subia@state.or.us

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