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How to Listen and How to Be Heard

Inclusive Conversations at Work

Alissa Carpenter • Career Press © 2020 • 256 pages

Women in Business / Diversity & Inclusion

Take-Aways

- Diverse workforces benefit from a range of individual strengths.
- Create a more inclusive workplace by addressing and overcoming biases.
- Collaborate and communicate to break down silos.
- Small changes in your communication style boost engagement and inclusivity.
- Arm yourself with effective tactics to deal with uncomfortable situations.
- Build meaningful working relationships to improve communication, collaboration and inclusivity.

Recommendation

Companies with diverse, inclusive workplaces perform better. Their employees are more engaged and more productive. Workplace expert Alissa Carpenter explains how to improve your firm's inclusivity. Her practical, applicable advice on handling challenging conversations, turning differences into strengths and overcoming bias is relevant to any manager. While some points may seem obvious – such as seeking opportunities to interact with your colleagues in person – they are also poignant reminders about the value of personal connection and perhaps about the potential of the hybrid in-and-out of the office model.

Summary

Diverse workforces benefit from a range of individual strengths.

To increase your team members' motivation, productivity and engagement, identify their individual strengths.Recognize that people think and work differently, so resist the temptation to classify certain ways of working as good or bad. View them as neutral traits.

Identifying your own strengths requires introspection. Consider how you act and react to certain situations. Ask your colleagues for their feedback, since they may have other perspectives to share, depending on how closely you collaborate.

To identify your co-workers' or team members' strengths, observe how they approach certain tasks. Minor behaviors can reveal strengths: The co-worker who insists on clear deadlines and always makes careful lists could help a team stay on track thanks to his or her organizational skills. Informal behavior also provides clues. For example, when you interact socially with new hires, you can observe their strengths developing over time.

Psychometric or other analytical tests may provide further guidance and a shared language. Commonly used methodologies include CliftonStrengths (Gallup), Everything DiSC (Wiley) and Character Strengths (The VIA Institute on Character).

Once you have a well-rounded picture, you'll be better equipped to provide team members with personalized feedback, assign tasks to them according to their proficiencies and align their development opportunities with their individual strengths.To avoid micromanaging, focus on your team members' results, rather than their processes. This allows them to play to their strengths within the group. Be open about knowledge gaps. Transparency about weaknesses is just as important as transparency about strengths.

> *"Generations are defined by technology, pivotal events, sociological trends and economics during our formative years."*

Working with colleagues from different generations can be challenging. Workforces today may include employees from five generations, each with its own viewpoint and values.

1. **Traditionalists** – This generation offers a strong work ethic and years of experience.

2. **Baby boomers** – Financial security prior to a pending retirement may motivate this generation. Be sure they pass along their profound institutional knowledge before they leave the company.
3. **Gen X** – This generation tends to be independent. To motivate them, help them achieve work-life balance by offering a sense of autonomy and flexible or remote working arrangements.
4. **Millennials** – This generation experienced rapid technological innovations in their formative years and may quickly leave companies that don't provide opportunities for development and advancement.
5. **Gen Z** – This generation has always lived with social media and the web. Its members seek flexibility, social responsibility, diversity and recognition of their individual contributions to a project.

Employees from different generations may have varying preferences about methods of communication. Establishing which channels are appropriate prevents conflict or frustration. For all generations, face-to-face meetings are the best way to communicate.

Create a more inclusive workplace by addressing and overcoming biases.

Everyone has biases, which can stem from many factors, including gender, generation and socioeconomic status. So-called microaggressions, seemingly subtle but hostile acts, can make people feel excluded. Becoming aware of bias is the first step toward creating a more inclusive workplace, free from insidious microaggressions.

Treating people the way you want to be treated does not help foster an inclusive workplace because it imposes assumptions on others. Instead, treat people as they prefer to be treated. To discover how others want to be treated, build relationships and have open conversations. Avoid having conversations in which you expect a colleague to speak on behalf of a group of people. Don't make people representatives of their ethnicity, disability, gender or generation.

> *"If youre unsure (or completely unaware) of whether something isnt OK to say, these conversations are crucial for you. When people are blind to the fact that statements are indeed derogatory, they continue to say them and perpetuate a microaggressive culture."*

If you find yourself responding to questions that treat you as the representative of your population group, you have the right to define your boundaries, to represent your individual experiences rather than speak for a group, and to choose the time and place to respond – or not.

Use dialogue to defuse potential misunderstandings. If you choose to discuss such incidents, consider your response first, assume that the other person has the best intentions, stay calm, and relate the incident to your personal experience and perception.

If someone tells you that comments you've made were microaggressive, listen and try to understand their message. Be mindful of your reactions, including your body language. Treat the interaction as a learning opportunity and be grateful for it. Avoid privileged explaining, a common form of microaggressive behavior that manifests in being patronizing or assuming the other person is ignorant or incompetent. If someone speaks to you condescendingly, support your suggestions with data, ask questions that demonstrate your knowledge, refer to your experience and expertise, and insist on finishing what you have to say.

If you witness challenging interactions, act as an ally. Speaking up on behalf of an individual or a group can be detrimental if you make assumptions or overstep boundaries. Instead of making assumptions, discuss the situation directly and inclusively.To be an effective ally, consider whether you have privileged status and how it may affect your perspective. Act in a supportive capacity, not as a leader. Support diversity initiatives, and remain engaged not only during high-profile visible events but also in mundane situations.

Collaborate and communicate to break down silos.

Facilitating collaboration and opening silos often requires a change in a company's culture. If leaders set an example, teams will follow. Consider offering bonuses for collaborative efforts and holding recurring interdepartmental meetings to help build lasting relationships across functions.

> "Every department in an organization needs the others to function, whether the organization realizes it or not. Creating strategic partnerships and shared space for ongoing conversations is essential."

All employees should be aware of each others' roles and responsibilities within the company. Sharing success stories and offering regular feedback across departments – such as praising colleagues who supported a project – reinforce the positive aspects of collaboration.

Meetings are not the most efficient collaborative forum, and they cost time and money. Informal conversations can be a valuable alternative to meetings.When you plan a meeting, consider who needs to attend. Share an agenda ahead of time. If you call the meeting, you're responsible for ensuring participation and having an intended outcome in mind.

Remote work has changed the landscape of communication. Help new staff members who work remotely feel included by conducting introductory video conferences. Provide your virtual team members with the tools and training they need.Virtual meetings – like in-person meetings – benefit from small group discussions and time for social interaction.

Small changes in your communication style boost engagement and inclusivity.

Consider which colleagues you need to include on an email, and condense long email conversations using bullet points.Clarify your expected response time. For example, let your team know that emails sent over the weekend don't require an immediate answer.

Choose the most appropriate communication method – email is not always best. For example, to discuss an emotional topic, have a personal conversation. Text and instant messages are suitable for informal or quick requests, but be wary of messaging co-workers on their private numbers. Avoid snarky phrases and be direct and honest.

> "Knocking down walls isnt always the answer, but it can be something to explore as you and your organization think about where communication is now and where you want it to be."

Does your office space invite collaboration and creativity? The traditional desk and power chair setup doesn't encourage open dialogue. Small changes can be effective immediately. Examples include hosting short standing meetings, inviting others to host meetings, and using new seating arrangements or venues.

Arm yourself with effective tactics to deal with uncomfortable situations.

Toxic co-workers undermine working relationships, and some even sabotage their colleagues for personal gain. Before calling out toxic co-workers, make sure you're not guilty of toxic actions yourself. Some toxic behavior is subtle, such as tendencies to stereotype, to interrupt repeatedly or to dismiss input from others.

If you bring up toxic behavior, stick to the facts, relate the behavior to the effect it had on you and make proactive suggestions. People often aren't aware of the toxicity of their behavior. Change may be slow and people may be resistant, but you can try to ease the way. Practice neutral replies. Take a moment to breathe so you can regulate your response.

> *"Be comfortable with the uncomfortable."*

Keep an open mind about new ideas, but don't agree to do anything you'd prefer to refuse. Dismissing a co-worker's ideas can permanently damage your relationship. Instead, be diplomatic. Try to reject the concept, not the person who offers it.Proposing other solutions is more productive than simply saying no. If you turn something down, offer some insights into your decision.Instead of bluntly saying no, you can qualify a negative response by adjusting deadlines or suggesting other resources.If you make a request that others turn down, approach the topic at another time or ask for alternative resources or further information. Being told no in a professional context is never personal.

Build meaningful relationships to improve communication, collaboration and inclusivity.

If you stay present and accessible as a leader, you'll help your team members feel more connected and engaged. Informal meetings that transcend office hierarchies let you connect directly with people. If you can't hold in-person sessions, consider videos and virtual Q&A sessions as alternatives. If you know you won't be accessible for a period of time, communicate your plans clearly before you leave.

> *"When you work with people you know, like and trust, youre more productive and feel more valued in the organization. But finding that person or group of people can be tricky. Its not only about stepping out of your comfort zone but also about creating a space for these professional friendships to form."*

Establishing a culture of trust requires time and effort. Leave your office regularly to interact with your colleagues, and use shared informal spaces. Lead by example, and invite your employees to invest time together in community or social projects. Celebrations are another positive way to connect.Demonstrate your competence by staying on top of industry news and trends. Be generous in contributing your skills.

Be present when you interact with people; don't yield to distractions. To facilitate change, make sure people feel heard and included, and ensure everyone has the tools and training to handle those changes.Involving

trusted employees as change ambassadors can support the case for change.Give your employees meaningful projects that demonstrate trust.

If you are an employee, highlight your skills and experience by requesting relevant projects for yourself. Maintain a positive attitude, ask open-ended questions about your role in the change process and clarify any areas of uncertainty rather than making assumptions.

Humanize your workplace by committing to change. Have everyone pledge to participate in creating a more collaborative, inclusive environment, then enjoy the rewards of increased productivity and enhanced performance that this corporate culture will bring.

About the Author

Multigenerational workplace expert **Alissa Carpenter** owns Everything's Not OK and That's OK, where she provides training, consulting and speaking services.

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