MODULE
Interpersonal
LESSON
R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Cultural Sensitivity in the Workplace
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Overview

Purpose

To teach students the importance of cultural sensitivity in the workplace and in life. Students will learn that work is a place for all people and that insensitivity is not tolerated in an organization.

National Career Development Standards

**Standard 2:** Skills to interact positively with others.

**Standard 5:** Understanding the need for positive attitudes toward work and learning.

**Standard 10:** Understanding the interrelationship of life roles.

**Standard 11:** Understanding the continuous changes in male/female roles.

National Career Development Benchmarks

Students will be able to... 

**Benchmark 2.a.:** Demonstrate effective interpersonal skills.
**Benchmark 2.b.:** Demonstrate interpersonal skills required for working with and for others.
**Benchmark 2.c.:** Describe appropriate employer and employee interactions in various situations.
**Benchmark 2.d.:** Demonstrate how to express feelings, reactions, and ideas in an appropriate manner.
**Benchmark 5.e.:** Demonstrate positive work attitudes and behaviors.
**Benchmark 10.b.:** Describe factors that determine lifestyles (status, culture, values, occupational choices, work habits).
**Benchmark 11.a.:** Identify factors that have influenced the change in career patterns of women and men.
**Benchmark 11.b.:** Identify evidence of gender stereotyping and bias in educational programs and occupational settings.
**Benchmark 11.c.:** Demonstrate attitudes, behaviors, and skills that contribute to eliminating gender bias and stereotyping.
Think and Discuss

1. What is cultural sensitivity?

2. Why is it important to model cultural sensitivity in the workplace even though you may have differing opinions or beliefs?

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Teacher Preparation

Class Materials

Copy the following exercises for distribution to students:

- Exercise 1: *Cultural Sensitivity Pre-Quiz*, p. 7
- Exercise 4: *Cultural Sensitivity Exercise*, pp. 13-15
- Exercise 5: *Role-Play Scenarios*, pp. 18-19

Overhead templates for teacher use:

- Exercise 1: *Cultural Sensitivity Pre-Quiz*, p. 7
- Exercise 2: *Quote and Anecdotes of the Day*, pp. 9-10
- Exercise 4: *Cultural Sensitivity Exercise*, pp. 13-15
- Exercise 5: *Role-Play Scenarios*, pp. 18-19

Key Words

1. Cultural Sensitivity
2. Ethnicity
3. Gender
4. Animosity
Exercise 1: Pre-Quiz Directions & Answer Key

Teacher Directions

This exercise should take only 5 minutes with some discussion after each question. A teacher copy is provided with the answers.

Step 1: Have students take the 5-question Cultural Sensitivity quiz to check for understanding.

Step 2: Review the questions with students to correct misconceptions they may have about cultural sensitivity.

Step 3: Transition to the Quote and Anecdotes of the Day.

Answer Key

1. All are examples of cultural insensitivity
2. False
3. False
4. All are examples of peoples’ cultures
5. False
Exercise 1: Cultural Sensitivity Pre-Quiz

1. Which of the following are examples of cultural insensitivity in the workplace? (Circle all that apply)
   a. Discussing religion in the workplace
   b. Telling inappropriate jokes about different people and beliefs
   c. Participating in gossip about a fellow worker’s lifestyle
   d. Making fun of a culture’s holidays or customs
   e. Making inappropriate remarks about someone’s cultural dress or attire
   f. All of the above
   g. None of the above

2. You have the right to express your views about your cultural beliefs in the workplace whether others want to hear those views or not.
   True
   False

3. An employer has the right to ask you about your religious beliefs when you are being interviewed for a job.
   True
   False

4. What are some examples of someone’s culture? (Circle all that apply)
   a. Religion
   b. Gender
   c. Race
   d. Ethnicity
   e. Country
   f. School alma mater
   g. All of the above
   h. None of the above

5. Making fun of an individual’s religious or cultural beliefs in the workplace is not a big deal because humor is a powerful tool to help people get along.
   True
   False
Exercise 2: Quote and Anecdotes of the Day

Teacher Directions

Read the quote and anecdotes aloud. You may want to write the quote on the board to focus student thought on cultural sensitivity. Discuss the questions provided below with your students. This exercise should take 5 minutes.

Step 1: Have selected students read the quote aloud. Ask students the following question:

How does this quote relate to the importance of cultural sensitivity in the workplace?

Step 2: Have students read aloud the anecdotes from the executive and career counselor. Ask students the following questions:

Is it appropriate to make fun of people of other nationalities or races in the workplace? Why or why not?

What are the consequences of insensitivity in the workplace if we participate in such activities?

Step 3: Proceed to Exercise 3: Video Vignette: “R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Cultural Sensitivity in the Workplace.”
Quote 1

“Conquering any difficulty always gives one a secret joy, for it means pushing back a boundary-line and adding to one’s liberty.”

- Henri Frederic Amiel

Anecdote 1

“Email has become a method of exchanging jokes and humor in the workplace. As an employer, I have a rule. Email is not the forum for jokes and humor in the workplace. I take this seriously because of an incident that happened two years ago. An employee of mine believed he was the master of email jokes to his friends and he used much of his time surfing the internet to send inappropriate humor, specifically dealing with race, religion, gender, and country. One day he made a big mistake. He found several jokes about a group of people from another country. Many of these “jokes” related to the way this group speaks English, their work ethic, their religious beliefs, and their way of life. He decided to send it via email to a friend who worked next to him. As he selected his friend’s email address, he inadvertently selected our global email address. Every employee in my company received that email. Several of my employees are from this country. Needless to say, the individual no longer works for me. Remember, the workplace is not the forum to discuss one’s beliefs or opinions that may offend another’s culture.”

- Executive
Anecdote 2

“Every student, regardless of grade level or career interests, must become heavily involved with a certain activity if he/she wants to be a well-rounded and culturally sensitive person. This activity will help you study harder after school, perform better on your tests, help you make more friends, strengthen your language skills and most importantly, help you connect and relate to thousands of different people. What is this mysterious activity, you ask? TRAVEL! I’m not prescribing world travel, but if you can do it, great. I am prescribing traveling ANYWHERE you can. Get out of your hometown! Get out of your home state! If you live in Chicago, drive or take a bus to Indianapolis or Minneapolis. Spend the day seeing how folks there live and work and play. Ideally, if you can save some money each year, you will find that traveling to Maine, Texas, Oregon or Mississippi will introduce you to cultures and customs that are quite different from your own—and that is the point of a cultural sensitivity lesson. You become well-rounded in your knowledge of people and the world and in your ability to coexist with others. So make a resolution for next year; save a few dollars, get a friend involved (it’s always best to travel with a companion) and travel!”

- Career Counselor

Culture Defined

Culture can be defined as any rules, traditions, practices, and beliefs in which a group of people believe. For instance, if I attended the University of Notre Dame, I belong to a culture of alumni who experienced the rules, practices, traditions, and beliefs of the University of Notre Dame. Only those people who went to Notre Dame can understand the experiences that I gained by attending Notre Dame. This is culture. You will work with many different people in your lifetime. All of these people belong to differing cultures. It is imperative that you respect others’ cultures in the workplace. If you cannot do this, more than likely you will not stay employed for very long.
Exercise 3: Video Vignette: “R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Cultural Sensitivity in the Workplace”

Teacher Directions

*Play the video titled “R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Cultural Sensitivity in the Workplace.” Discussion should follow after the video vignette.*

**Step 1:** Review the video vignette before introducing the video to your class.

**Step 2:** Show the video and discuss with your class the message provided in the video.

**Step 3:** Transition to Exercise 4: Cultural Sensitivity Exercise.
Exercise 4: Cultural Sensitivity Exercise

Teacher Directions

Before you begin this exercise, familiarize yourself with the Cultural Sensitivity Exercise. This exercise should take 30 minutes to complete.

Rationale: Teach students that they will encounter many people in the workplace from different cultures, races, religions, and genders. Students should learn to be tolerant and sensitive to all people in the workplace because it contributes to their own richness and understanding of the world they live in.

Step 1: Arrange the students into 4 groups. Choose one student to be a “scribe” or someone who will write down and record some observations of the group activity.

Step 2: Assign each group one of the following four descriptions. Have them participate in their assigned role during the “holiday party.”

Step 3: Process the party with the scribe’s notes and observations.

Step 4: Proceed to Exercise 5: Cultural Sensitivity Role-Playing.
Orange Group

These students have a heritage that stems from the far away nation called “Orangia,” and they have ancestors who traveled many miles to settle in the U.S. Orangia has many unique customs, including one in which their ancestors spoke English but did not use any nouns in their language. Instead of nouns, they would use a “coughing sound” to refer to the person, place, or thing. For example, instead of saying “Billy went to the store yesterday,” they would say, “{COUGH} went to the {COUGH} yesterday.” Their country is poor and they do not have many tangible items because most of the residents are very poor. Since most people didn’t have objects, there was no need to name the items. Instead, they used the coughing sound to fill in the blank. The same holds true with names of people. They were so close and so friendly with each other, there was no need to give each other names. They used signs of affection, such as hugs to greet each other. Since they were always together, they never had a need to refer to someone by name; they just walked around their small town to find others. The country and one town was so small, they had no need to refer to places with words. The coughing sound was more than enough.

Green Group

These students hail from the tiny country called “Greenzil,” which is located in the South Pacific. One of their most unique customs originates from the fact that Greenzil is so warm and tropical, they never need to wear shoes. If they are not barefoot, they wear socks on their feet merely for protection, specifically on hot summer sand. Once in their history, some explorers traded shoes with their ancestors on the tiny island, but after the explorers left, the Greenzilians decided that the shoes made “Clappers.” Whenever a Greenzilian is happy to meet someone new, he or she will use a pair of shoes to make a loud, celebratory noise by “Clapping” the soles of the shoes together. This is a very loud and cheerful way of letting everyone around you know that you are meeting someone new. This custom came about when one of the earlier explorers got sand in his shoes from jumping off his boat onto the shore of Greenzilia. He took off his shoes and clapped the soles together to get the sand out. When the explorers gave the shoes to the Greenzilians as a gift, they immediately clapped their shoes together to acknowledge the gesture of their visitors. It became a custom for the Greenzilians as a reminder of the happy meeting they had with those explorers.
Purple Group

These students come from a very large country in the Northern Hemisphere. Their ancestors and relatives have emigrated to the U.S. from a country called “Purpleland.” Purpleland is very cold, with a lot of land but very few people. The most interesting custom of the Purplelanders is that they live without gloves for their hands. Even though it is very cold, they never wear gloves because they have a custom which involves a lot of hand shaking and hand holding. If gloves are worn, inside or outside, it is a sign of having something to hide or not wanting anyone to be near him or her. Instead of wearing gloves, they hold each others’ hands to keep warm. The Purplelanders are very friendly and nice. They like to hold the hands of their closest friends and relatives, but they also like to hold the hands of strangers as it is their way of showing openness, respect and an interest in getting to know others.

Pink Group

This group of students originates from a large city called “Pinkyopolis.” Pinkyopolis is in a small, crowded country. Pinkyopolis itself is rather populated; the U.S. city that would most closely resemble Pinkyopolis is New York City. Pinkyopolis residents are sort of shy and reserved. Their unique custom stems from an old-world tradition. 200 years ago, Pinkyopolis became so overcrowded with people that the only way they could all comfortably fit in a room of a house or a restaurant or a school and still be comfortable was if they stood back to back. Just imagine a restaurant with 20,000 people in it, and all of the Pinkyopolins standing face to face. It just doesn’t make sense. It would be rude to eat while staring at the face of another person. If they spoke while eating, it would get messy if someone was only inches from your face. So standing back to back was the best way of dealing with the over crowding problem. Whenever someone from Pinkyopolis is waiting for a bus, or standing in the checkout line at a store or even at a cocktail party, out of respect for space, they stand back to back with their friends, acquaintances, and guests.
Cultural Sensitivity Exercise

“The Holiday Party.” Now that the students are familiar with their “places of origin” and their heritage/traditions, let them know that they have all been invited to a party that their company is hosting for the celebration of a major holiday. There will be food, fun, dancing, and conversation. Everyone is invited. For many of the people at the party, they will be meeting each other for the first time and it will be their initial introduction to others from the places previously described.

The students’ objective: to be themselves and to use/demonstrate their main custom as much as possible. No matter what happens, students should not abandon their place of origin’s main custom as described above. It is their way of life and they must not give it up. The second half of the students’ mission is to find out all they can about the “other” customs. Ask questions of the people from the 3 groups that are “different” than theirs. Most importantly, watch how the students interact. Don’t give them any instructions, just let them mingle. The teacher and the “scribe” should be walking around and writing down observations.

Note the following:

How did the students from the different groups initially interact?

Was it an awkward process or a relatively smooth process?

Which “customs” seemed to get along or mingle easier than others?

Which “customs” seemed to have a lot of friction between them?

How did the students facilitate the process of “getting along”?

Did students make an attempt to learn about the different customs?

Did students make an attempt to coexist without trying to change the other customs?

Make sure that as much writing or note taking is done as possible, as this will be the cornerstone of the class’s discussions and processing.
Processing the Cultural Sensitivity Activity

Ask the students the questions from above and see how they respond. When each group has had an opportunity to answer the questions, the teacher and the scribe will then share their observations as “outsiders” to the party. Discuss any similarities or differences in the group observations when compared to those of the teacher’s and the scribe’s.

Next, remind the students that the overall moral of this activity is to accept the “different cultures, the various customs, and the unique heritage of each person.” The greatest amount of respect is shown to another person when we make an effort to learn about his/her heritage. Forcing our own heritage upon someone is not the goal of co-existence; rather listening, learning, and accepting is the goal.
Exercise 5: Cultural Sensitivity Role-Playing

Teacher Directions

Note: Please review the role-plays before introducing the scenarios to the students. Each role-play scenario has a guided question. Review these questions and use them as guiding questions during this exercise.

Step 1: Select 5 groups of 2 to 3 students for each of the 5 scenarios. Allow several minutes for students to develop their own take on each role-play.

Step 2: Have each group act out the role-play in class. Have students answer the questions related to each role-play. Use the following questions as guiding questions for this exercise.

Step 3: Proceed to Exercise 6: Wrap Up: “R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Cultural Sensitivity in the Workplace.”
Scenario 1:

Employee #1 is leaving work before a holiday and says “Merry Christmas!” to Employee #2. Employee #2 thinks to himself: “That’s strange. My family is Jewish, and my family doesn’t celebrate Christmas. I thought he knew that. Maybe he doesn’t respect me enough to care about my background; maybe he doesn’t respect my religion.” Employee #2 looks concerned.

**Questions for the students:**

What is one way of avoiding a situation like this? How can you be more culturally aware of a person’s religious holidays and observances?

Scenario 2:

Intern #1 brags about how he won the British Literature Appreciation Contest in college last week. Intern #2 is a Hispanic exchange student from Mexico who is still learning English as his second language.

**Questions for the students:**

Could this bragging behavior potentially make Intern #2 uncomfortable? How should Intern #1 approach the way he imparts his good news to others?

Scenario 3:

Intern #1 is overheard saying that he is traveling to Eastern Europe with his family for a long vacation. He is overheard talking about how his family is sparing no expense and is spending a lot of money to make sure everything they experience is first class. He says he thinks Eastern Europe is depressing, but he will go on the trip anyway because he loves his family. He says they are great to be with because they always pay so much attention to him and spoil him by buying him everything he wants.

**Question for students:**

What is culturally insensitive about what Intern #1 is saying?

**Possible answers:** Not only discussing family, discussing money, discussing regions of the world or countries—but also offering opinions of each so others can hear. Some listeners might not have families, money, or they might even hail from a region of the world he is discussing.
Scenario 4:

A corporate meeting is occurring with four individuals: one male boss and three male employees. One more employee is late and happens to be a female. The boss is upset that she is late for the meeting and tells the three other males in the room that women are no good in the workplace and always have excuses. The boss then starts telling blonde jokes while they are waiting for the employee to arrive. The female employee arrives late to the meeting and apologizes for her tardiness. She received a phone call that her sister’s husband has just been injured in a car accident, and she was calming her sister down.

Questions for students:

What should you tell the boss if you are one of the male employees? Is gender considered cultural? How would you feel if you were the boss? Does the boss have a right to display such animosity and bad humor toward women? What would you do as a male employee listening to your boss’s comments? Do we have a right to make quick judgments on people without knowing the facts? How does this scenario pertain to cultural sensitivity?

Scenario 5:

A group of employees are eating in the cafeteria. They notice one of their new colleagues eating a vegetarian meal. The employee belongs to a religion that does not eat meat and comes from another country. The group decides to make fun of this person by eating meat with their hands in front of the person and mocking what the person is eating. They make statements like, “Wow, this cow taste good! I want another steak.” In addition, they mock this person’s accent in their group, slightly loud enough so he can hear what they are saying.

Questions for students:

If you were someone watching this, what would you do? Would you confront the group? Would you tell the boss? Would you befriend the new employee? Does this happen in the workplace? Have you seen this in school?
Exercise 6: Wrap-Up: “R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Cultural Sensitivity in the Workplace”

Teacher Directions

**Step 1:** Have students answer and log in their journals their responses to the following questions:

1. What is cultural sensitivity?
2. Why is it important to model cultural sensitivity in the workplace even though you may have differing opinions or beliefs?

**Final Thoughts on Cultural Sensitivity**

*How does one . . .*

1. Learn about a person’s observation of religious holidays? Not by asking, “What is your religion?” Rather, “Which holiday has your family traditionally observed during the holiday season? Mine have always been Kwanza and Christmas."

2. Learn about someone’s ethnicity? Not by asking, “Where do you come from?” Rather, “My family’s heritage originates from Ireland. Would you like to share with me where your family originates?”

3. Learn about someone’s family? Not by asking, “How many brothers and sisters do you have?” Rather, “Tell me about your siblings.”

4. Learn about languages they speak? Not by asking, “How long have you been speaking English?” Rather, “How many languages do you speak in addition to English?”

*It is important to remember that being culturally sensitive means making an attempt to learn about a person’s unique cultural norms and traditions. It means never assuming something about him/her. It means never imposing your cultural norms onto another person. It means always respecting his/her cultural norms at all times. Believe it or not, a person’s culture includes how he and his father prepare for and watch the Super Bowl each year. So, be respectful and be open to learning!*