Your Passport to Professionalism: Module 9

Professional Culture: Difference in the Workplace
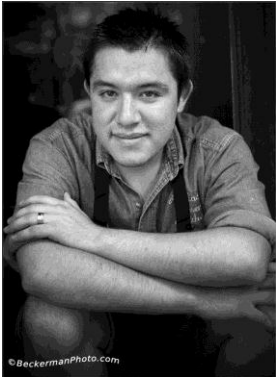
Step 1—Learn

Introduction

Have you ever felt like you are talking to a brick wall? That experience is usually based on differences between the message sender and receiver, and there are many areas of differences to consider. They include differences in culture, perception, socio-economic status, language use, stereotypes, communication styles, nonverbal communication, values, and approaches to problem-solving.

We all make automatic assumptions about others by creating stories in our head based on little to no actual information. We hold views and standards that are based on our own group. That is called ethnocentrism. When we overgeneralize about a person based on his or her identity group without seeing the person as an individual, we stereotype them. We all prejudge others based on limited knowledge, understanding, and contact. And we carry out our prejudices through actions and words that discriminate against others.

The series of reflections that follow are designed to sensitize you to some of the ways that your reactions to differences - between you and your co-workers, customers, and supervisors - can hinder your success on the job. First you'll think about your perceptions, and then you'll consider those of others. To earn your stamp, you'll discuss with a supervisor how these ideas play out in your work environment.

Whom do you see?

Often we make decisions—positive and negative— about people before we even talk to them. Based on what you see in the pictures, what do you think are some stereotypes that people might make about these people in the pictures — who they are or what they are like. Would you want to meet them? Spend time with them? Work with them? Go to social events with them?

What are some stereotypes that people might make about these individuals?		Based on those stereotypes how might it change the way people work with them?

On what basis did you come up with an impression of the people in these pictures? Do you see how much visual impressions can influence your initial opinion about others? Though we might not have the same impressions, we're all very adept at coming up with opinions about people based on their looks. In other words, we all stereotype others.

What impression are you trying to make?

Students dress very informally on campus, but you are a representative of the organization when you are at work. Your boss wants you to project the appropriate message. We all dress according to the culture we affiliate with. Maybe you dress like others on your team, in your club, in the lab, or reflecting your hobbies. Sometimes those cultures clash with what is expected on the job. It's interesting that bosses are often surprised at what students choose to wear, and students are surprised at what bothers bosses.

Here are some comments from employers from a recent survey:
- "He looks like he just woke up: hair a mess, unshaven, and wearing old clothes."
- "She shows way too much skin: low cut blouse, very short skirt…it's actually embarrassing."
- "Evidently all he owns are t-shirts and holey shorts. An ironed button shirt and slacks are all I ask."
- "I know the popular style is to wear tight clothing, but I don't want to see every wrinkle or bulge beneath their clothes."
- "He needs to shower before work."
- "I can smell her perfume all the way across the room and in my office."

Many students just dress the way they like. But stop and think about what your boss wants. Be aware of the work culture around appearance.

"Business casual (see photo above right)" is appropriate for most organizational settings. Some organizations are much more formal. Many are less formal. If you ever have to ask yourself "Is this OK to wear in the office?" then it's probably not. Be sure to dress the part and keep your boss happy. Remember, how you dress projects culture. It's rare that you will go wrong dressing on the conservative side. High fashion can get you in trouble.

Stop and Think:
- Your outward appearance projects an inner reality. What image do you try to project by your outward appearance?

- Who is likely to get the wrong impression from your outward persona? In what ways would their opinion be incorrect?

- What criteria do you want people to use to judge you?

To keep your stereotypes from getting in the way of dealings with customers or with co-workers, use this simple ICE method of checking your stereotypes.

1. **I**dentify your perception/stereotype about the person.

2. **C**heck to see if it is actually true by interacting honestly and openly with the person.

3. **E**valuate your first response for a more accepting response.