



CULTURE AND DIVERSITY - QUICK TIPS

Leading a unit with members from a wide range of backgrounds can be both inspiring and challenging. Here are five quick tips for helping academic leaders meld an array of contributors from different cultures and backgrounds to create a healthy, welcoming, and productive work environment for all.

Help Bridge Cultural Gaps By Setting an Example

Your actions and words as a leader affect the perceptions and conduct of those in your unit towards one another. Leadership amplifies your conduct, and the model you provide will set the tone for the entire department.

- Comments or behavior rooted in preconceived ideas or stereotypes about groups of individuals can undermine the culture of a unit, and define whether it will be one that embraces differences as a path to strength or creates antagonisms.
- While humor can be a powerful tool for establishing rapport, it can also belittle and diminish others when wielded clumsily or thoughtlessly, or to perpetuate group labels or characterizations.
- Our understanding of the world is inevitably bound by the limitations of our own experience. Good leaders are never finished learning; culturally-competent leaders make an effort to expand the sphere of their understanding with open minds.

Learn and Follow Applicable Policies

The support you provide to those in your unit should be within the guidelines of your larger organization's policies. Those rules may be easy to learn, and far harder to enforce, particularly when they come into conflict with what members of your unit might have expected, based on cultural customs prevailing in their last workplace or university.

- For example, rules regarding parental leave differ around the globe. Know what the people in your unit can expect from your institution, and help them to understand local approaches and regulations. Whatever your views about those policies, your duty is to apply them even-handedly.
- Levels of formality in daily interactions vary depending on background, culture, and education. Expectations about how workplace interactions proceed are similarly diverse.
- Expectations around holidays also vary tremendously; help those who join your unit from differing backgrounds know what to expect in your environment, and share information about local customs and expectations.
- The intersection of many different religious customs, holidays and observances can be complicated. Know your institution's specific stance on these matters and be prepared to enforce and respect them even-handedly.

Promote Productivity Within Diverse Units

Efficient, productive teams that are highly diverse do not arise by accident. It takes patience and understanding to navigate the differences between and among cultures and backgrounds.

- Creating and maintaining an environment that promotes cooperation and learning starts with the leader. If you are impatient or dismissive of the misunderstandings that can arise from cultural misinterpretations, then you will foster a unit culture that is equally as impatient and dismissive.
- Try to frame clashes of culture as opportunities for members of the unit to expand their own perspectives. When disagreements or conflicts are seen as a chance for everyone to learn, rather creating winners and losers, your unit will meet and overcome challenges far more efficiently—and with less costly drama.





Seek Greater Mutual Understanding

Membership diversity does not automatically bring wider networks or resources to a unit. Without sensitivity to the expectations and assumptions of people from different backgrounds, diversity can lead to conflict and misunderstanding.

- Encourage dialogue that solicits and hears different perspectives respectfully. Emphasize the importance of using different perspectives to strengthen decisions and outcomes.
- Question assumptions underlying rejection of voices or perspectives not initially valued in discussions.
- Articulate clearly and reinforce in your unit your institution's conduct regulations and expectations. Standards of research integrity differ from region to region, so it is important to assure that those in your environment understand and adhere to the standards of *your* institution.
- A homogeneous unit may lack the perspective to approach challenges with sufficient creativity, while vast heterogeneity may pose challenges for finding methods to discover enough common ground to tackle challenges together efficiently. Seek balance and constructive engagement.

Create an Environment of Empathy and Curiosity

Building rapport is rooted in demonstrating an interest in the experiences and perspectives of others.

- Providing opportunities for social interactions at different degrees of formality can increase camaraderie within your unit while allowing individuals to choose to attend events that suit their comfort and preferences.
 - ◆ For example, some of your faculty and staff may be comfortable attending a casual get together for “happy hour,” but less-so going to a formal dinner hosted by the leader. Cultivating multiple options allows for different levels of sociability and comfort.
- If the day-to-day struggles of those with different backgrounds and life experiences from your own are unfamiliar to you, take the time to learn.
 - ◆ For example, if you have never worked abroad you may not appreciate the challenges of acquiring a work permit or visa. There may be challenges and stresses involved of which you are unaware.
 - ◆ If you are used to working in an environment where your culture is dominant or even officially endorsed by the state, seek perspectives that will help you understand what it is like when this is not the case for someone.
 - ◆ First generation academics face different issues than those who grew up expecting university educations.
- Seek to broaden your perspective. A new hire from another country may struggle to adapt. Ask how you can help or seek support for them from others who had similar experiences. Anticipate where you can help them with what may be challenging, and enlist the help of those who may have insights.
- Take time to learn about new members of your unit. No great collaboration was ever achieved without communication.

