

How to be Successful in the Workplace

Whenever you are entering a new workplace, it is very likely that you will experience apprehension, excitement, fear and potential misunderstandings. These feelings may be even stronger if you are a minority joining a work team. Misunderstandings can result from individual communication differences, cultural differences, workplace norms (written and unwritten) or other workplace variances. Interviews with members of all groups reveal surprisingly similar strategies for dealing with issues. These are some of the key strategies that others have used to achieve success in the workplace:

A. Get Support and Feedback

1. *Find a mentor or friend in the organization who can help orient and guide you in the organization.* Use that person as a resource. Ask for information about the informal norms, history, and practices of the organization.
2. *Welcome and ask for feedback.* Feedback is a gift. Ask, "How do I need to improve?" and "How can I advance further in the organization?"
3. *Recognize that because of your group identity, you have something distinctive and important to offer.* Be a resource in your organization to a mentor, a friend, or your boss, and share aspects of your group tendencies that can be helpful in the workplace.
4. *Speak up and ask questions about what you don't know.* Don't sit back and do nothing because of insecurity or attempt to do a job without clear guidelines.
5. *Join a support group.* Find others who are in a similar circumstance and share and strategies and "war stories". Use the emotional support from your group, and act from that strength.
6. *Stress what you have in common with coworkers and managers.* Emphasize your desire to be part of the department. Be productive and improve the organization's effectiveness. Think in terms of "we," not "me and them."
7. *Try to find the humor in common work experiences.* Laughter is therapeutic when shared. Explain your group's style of humor if it is different from that of other groups.
8. *Let others know of your accomplishments.* Document them in writing, if necessary. This is important, even though it may be uncomfortable for you, so bear the discomfort.

B. Deal with Problems in the Workplace through the Existing Channels

1. *Realize that not every slight or misunderstanding is necessarily racist, sexist, or discriminatory.* Slight and misunderstandings may be a result of another person's personality, a norm of the organization, or a reaction to something you have done. See if there is a pattern to the behavior, and check your perceptions with others whom you trust.
2. *Recognize clearly sexist, racist, and other discriminatory or stereotypic remarks or behavior.* Control your rage, and state that you don't appreciate the remark or that you don't agree with it. Stand up for other groups that are stereotyped, as well

- as your own. Do this in a way that does not personally attack the other person. Know the legal and organizational rights that protect you in the workplace. These policies are in place to protect all employees from discrimination or abuse.
3. *Never assume that the workplace is completely hostile.* There are people out there of whom you are unaware who can help you and who want you to succeed. When you are in the midst of a stressful situation, it can feel as if there are no sources of support.
 4. *Don't allow yourself always to be the representative or spokesperson of your group or cause.* Don't be drawn into always speaking on behalf of your cultural group. Let people see you as an individual too.

C. Continue Professional and Personal Development

1. Try to perfect your English. Remember that proficiency in written and verbal skills is a career booster. Tell others about your efforts.
2. Ask for what you want or need to be more effective in your job. If you need more resources, additional training, more or less feedback, or an opportunity for advancement, tell your boss. Don't expect that your boss will automatically know what you want and that she or he will take care of it. Take responsibility for identifying these areas and making your needs known.
3. Be aware of your own stereotypes of others. Recognize the diversity within your organization. Don't exclude others from your network. Acknowledge the support of others.
4. Understand the organizational structure, hierarchy and chain of command. Each organization has a protocol for how to communicate with others in the organization, especially those at different managerial levels.
5. Gain visibility in organizational life. Be active in organizational committees and functions.
6. When you move up in the organization, keep a connection to others in your group. Don't forget your sources of support. Be a mentor to others coming up.
7. Try to understand and learn from the perspectives of others in the organization, just as you want others to understand and learn from you.
8. Have a vision for yourself. Look at role models from your group and from others. Others in your group have made it in the workplace.

If you feel isolated and need some support to devise a professional or personal strategy for dealing with these issues, consider making an appointment with one of the counselors at the Vanderbilt Work/Life Connections-EAP. This is a confidential service for faculty and staff.

For an appointment or more information, call 936-1327.

Adapted and modified by Helena X. Guo, MD, Ph.D., M.Ed.
Edited by Jim Kendall, LCSW

*From Voices of Diversity: Real People Talk About Problems and Solutions in A
Workplace Where Everyone Is Not Alike by Renee Blank, Sandra Slipp. New York:
Amacom, c1994*