



# 10. TEN

## Knowing That Similar Words or Actions Can Have a Different Impact on People at Work

There are many workplace challenges facing Canadians. From observations while working in the field of workplace and community human rights over many years, Stephen Hammond has chosen what he considers the top 10. This video transcript is intended to start a dialogue. If you feel it may help your workplace or your association, please use it. Print out the text, have a discussion, and try to come to resolutions that can be helpful to your group. The best way to deal with workplace challenges is to talk about them in a respectful way. If you would like to access the video that goes with the transcript, it can be purchased at [HumanRightsTrainingStore.com](http://HumanRightsTrainingStore.com)

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**I**f you like the idea of acknowledging and at times, celebrating our differences, then why do some differences get us into trouble? Often people will look at things in different ways at work and that can cause problems. Do you have to avoid “sex, politics and religion”? Find out how differences can be resolved.

I like the idea of acknowledging and at times, celebrating our differences. However, there are times our differences get us into trouble. I’m referring to the different ways we look at things in the workplace.

There’s a saying that you never discuss sex, politics or religion. If that works for you, then by all means, follow that advice. Others, however, seem to thrive on those conversations and at the workplace they are able to make lots of jokes about those same three subjects. If you’ve got a receptive crowd then who am I to interfere and suggest someone should stop making the comments or jokes?

The problem is that lots of us will go along to get along. We don’t want to rock the boat, or be seen as spoiling someone else’s fun, so we don’t speak up and ask colleagues to stay away from subjects that offend or make them feel uncomfortable. Explicit sexual jokes or insensitive comments about race or religion are bound to bother a number of reasonable people, so don’t make it seem that they are the problem. There are plenty of things to talk and laugh about – it doesn’t have to include items that make people cringe.

Sometimes we get mixed messages. Let’s say a First Nations colleague is always making jokes that poke fun at his heritage. We sometimes think that we can do the same. Sometimes it works, but many times it doesn’t. Years ago I was watching 60 Minutes on CBS. Comedian Chris Rock was

asked in an interview by the late Ed Bradley, why he could use the “n” word and others who are not African American can’t. Rock said something like this, “I have a GED, not Ph.D. and even I can figure out there are certain things I can say about myself that you can’t.” I think of this as similar to the old American Express commercials: Membership has its Privileges. When you’re part of a group, there are certain things you can say while others can’t. While we’re a strange species with some weird rules, I think this one is understandable. When it gets people confused, remember we don’t all have the membership to make all the comments.

By the way, for purposes of your workplace, I suggest telling people not to make jokes or comments that others will not find welcoming. In other words, Chris Rock can say those things for a comedy show that people pay to attend. But at the workplace, it’s best to stay away from those words – membership or not.

Then there’s the issue of how people will accept certain words or actions from one person, but not from another. Let’s say a man and a woman at work are mildly flirtatious and say things that are funny or fun. Yet when another man tries to converse in the same manner with that woman, she is not appreciative at all. In fact she might think of it as sexual Harassment.

If there is an argument to be made that no one should be flirting in that way at work, then perhaps our flirtatious couple should be spoken to. However, if that’s not really the problem, because it is truly harmless and no one is bothered by it, then it’s the third person who needs to be spoken to. He needs to be told that we are allowed to have various forms of relationships with colleagues at work. Some are strictly professional. Others are more friendly at work. Others involve people becoming good friends outside of work and others still may lead to a life long partnership or marriage. But beyond the professional relationship, everything else is strictly optional.

That is sometimes hard to hear, because our ego might be greatly bruised, but when it applies to us, we’ve got to hear the truth. People are going to accept certain conversations with one person that they will not with another.

This “different” impact will apply to jokes and a wide variety of comments. Don’t assume that just because one person wants to hear certain comments, others will feel the same way.

What do you think?

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