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— People Speaking Different Languages 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

People speaking different languages at work can be one of the most contentious issues to address. If you want to avoid insult, indignation (even banner headlines) consider simple and common sense approaches to handle this sometimes, delicate issue.

This is one of the most contentious issues at some workplaces. Let's face it, for some bizarre reason, when people are speaking in a language other than English, we believe they are talking about us. How we've come to think that others have nothing better to do than talk about us, I'll never know. We're not that important!

Of course, then there's the argument to be made, that it's just plain rude to talk in a language that excludes certain people, when the common language is English (which is the language of business and the workplace in most of English-speaking Canada. The same would apply for the French language in French-speaking Canada). Fair enough, but like so many things in life, it's not always that straight forward.

Sometimes this issue comes up when I'm giving a presentation. If it does, I ask people to raise their hands if they like to travel. While it's not for everyone, many people in a room will raise their hand. Then I ask, even after a great adventure in travel, how many people like to come back home? Not everyone wants to come home, but most of the people who raised their hand in the first place, keep their hand up. Yeah, it's nice to come home. There's a warm feeling most times

when you don't have to live out of suitcase and where you get your favourite chair and your own bed. It's comfortable.

Well, when I talk to people who have English as a second language, I am told of the comfort of speaking in the language of their birth. They don't have to be thinking all the time. They don't have to worry about slipping up, or using the correct tense. They don't have to concentrate on the words of some people who speak very fast. In other words, there's a comfort.

Speaking your first language is like coming home. It's comfortable.

Most people I speak with never even think they are being rude. Most of them don't really notice the reaction of others, or are not aware that others think they are rude. Some people just naturally slip into the language and while the English-only people take great exception to it, the person speaking the other language didn't really notice they were speaking their first language. This doesn't apply to everyone, but it's very common.

Here's what I suggest:

Don't make language an issue unless it really is becoming an issue. If people are occasionally speaking in a language other than English, let's say on a break or just between two people, don't make a fuss.

If for operational or safety reasons, or just ensuring everyone is on the same page, then let everyone know that, with some rare exceptions, English should be spoken during business hours. Don't be rigid. Let people tell you what those exceptions might be. I'm sure, somewhere in there, the issue of "on my own time" will come up. People will ask if they can speak in another language on their coffee or meal breaks. This is where you want to have a respectful (and I mean respectful) conversation about people's feelings on the subject.

For those who feel it's rude, you don't want to be attacking your co-workers. This conversation is about a vital part of who they are – their first language. Let them know that you feel excluded or ostracized. Maybe they don't mean it, or even think about it, but that's how you feel (or whatever you truly feel). Then, make sure the persons speaking a different language get their say. You may be surprised what they tell you. But if it's a respectful conversation, then you can talk about what each person should do in the future to get along. You may agree there are times when the common language of English is not always necessary and you may agree to hand signals or something friendly, to let others know you feel excluded (I don't know – make something up).

If it comes down to an issue of a person's break and they say they want to truly take a break, even from having to always concentrate on English, then I wouldn't push the "English-only" thing during all breaks. People are expected to get along at work. They are not expected to be friends with everyone and they don't have to make everyone feel great. English for operational purposes: fine. English on their own time, after a person has been told it might cause concerns: not so fine.

But the point is, have a respectful conversation. Decide where the boundaries are. Let everyone express their feelings. Don't be rigid. Language is one of the dividers all over the world. And yet it is one of the unifiers when people from various places find they can speak a common language. It's a good thing to have people in your workplace who speak more than one language. Just find the way for better harmony on this issue.

What do you think?

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