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Language diversity in the workplace can spur creativity and innovation

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*Our first language shapes how we think. Each one of us carries unique knowledge and different ways of dealing with complex problems. Bringing together people from diverse language backgrounds can spur creativity and innovation in the workplace. **Teresa Almeida** presents four actions to create a more inclusive work environment for people of all mother tongues.*

In our team of 11 people, we discovered we collectively speak 12 different languages, but have always communicated in English. English has become the **corporate language for many global firms**, as it is the ubiquitous lingua franca of international business. However, it is important to remember that our first language, and the cultural bonds it brings, shape our identity and our interactions with others.

Talking about language

Language is a crucial aspect of our lives. The words we use reflect facts, ideas and events that are understood because of a shared knowledge of the world forming a **guide to our social reality**. Our mother tongue, the primary language we learn in childhood, has a profound impact on our self-identity and culture. Furthermore, research has shown that our mother tongue **shapes how we think**, including our perceptions of time and space. For example, English speakers see the future as “ahead” and the past “behind”, while in Mandarin time takes a vertical dimension with past as “up” and future as “down”. In a study of English and Mandarin speakers, **Boroditsky (2001)** found that Mandarin speakers were faster to confirm that March comes earlier than April after seeing a vertical array of objects than if they saw a horizontal one, while the reverse was true for English speakers.

Learning a new language can bring a new worldview and perceptions of the reality around us. **Bylund & Athanasopoulos (2017)** conducted a study on the mental representations of time among Spanish, Swedish and Spanish-Swedish bilingual speakers. Swedish (and also English) speakers primarily think of time as “long” and “short”, while Spanish speakers view it as “big” or “small”. The results showed that bilingual speakers were flexible in their thinking, switching between different views of time when prompted in either Spanish or Swedish. As one of the authors **concluded**, this highlights that bilingualism can be beneficial for faster learning and multi-tasking.

Language diversity at work

Language diversity also matters for team performance. Employees who speak multiple languages are better equipped to work with clients or partners from different countries and backgrounds and can better understand their perspective. Language diversity can also spur **creativity** and **innovation**, as individuals with different linguistic backgrounds bring unique knowledge to solving complex problems.

However, there are also pitfalls of working in multi-language teams. Fluency in the common language, often English, can **distort power relations**, where more confident speakers dominate discussions and teams lose out on the unique contributions and perspectives of those who are less confident or less proficient in a language (Janssens & Brett, 2006). Linguistic misunderstandings and varying levels of fluency can also influence trust, crucial for the well-functioning of teams. Those with lower proficiency worry (often with reason) that difficulty in communicating is mistaken for a lack of technical and professional abilities, and language barriers can lead to the **fundamental attribution error**, when a person is seen as less dependable due to a linguistic misunderstanding on what was asked or discussed.

So, how can teams make the most of language diversity to improve creativity? Here are four actions to experiment with in the workplace and create a more inclusive environment for individuals of all mother tongues.

1. Encourage language experimentation

Encourage employees to experiment with different languages, even if they're not fluent. As the studies on bilingualism suggest, doing so can spark creativity and new ways of thinking. Moreover, **learning a foreign language** can preserve healthy brain function and enhance cognitive function.

As a team, you could set a collective goal to learn a new language through an app like **Duolingo** and share your progress, challenges and experiences.

2. Reduce jargon and colloquialisms

Expressions and idioms in each language might not resonate across cultures, and when it comes to the workplace, English-centric business jargon is everywhere, “go the extra mile”, “up in the air”, “learn the ropes”, etc. Jargon is **commonly used**, consciously or unconsciously to signify that someone “fits in”, and can make people feel excluded, frustrated and increase confusion especially across languages.

To reduce misunderstandings and increase inclusivity, try to use clear language that is understandable to all. Using simple and clear language in broad-reaching communications like internal newsletters or events can be especially beneficial as it sets the tone for everyone else. Doing so can improve the **effectiveness of communications** and increase attention to your message, regardless of language barriers.

3. Promote cross-cultural understanding

Create opportunities for employees to learn about and appreciate each other’s language and cultures. Celebrating cultural events and holidays to promote culture **can go a long way** in building trust and psychological safety. As a starting point, celebrate **International Mother Language Day** and learn more about multilingualism and your colleagues mother tongues.

4. Foster a supportive environment

Encourage open and respectful communications, where everyone’s contributions are valued and language barriers are not a hindrance to their participation in team activities.

One common source of anxiety is pronouncing someone's name when it is unfamiliar. As Ruchika Tulshyan suggests in her article: [If You Don't Know How to Say Someone's Name, Just Ask](#), instead of fumbling, it is better to ask someone for the correct pronunciation. Importantly, make sure you actively listen to their answer, so the process is as anxiety-free as possible for everyone. Repeat their name once, or twice at a maximum to doublecheck you've got the pronunciation right, or make a note to yourself so you won't draw out the process when you meet them again. Taking time to learn someone's name conveys respect and encourages others to do the same in the future.

Language is a powerful tool, and by embracing language diversity in the workplace, teams can unlock new perspectives, foster creativity, and build stronger relationships.



Notes:

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About the author



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