This Language Thing: The Pros & Cons of Speaking One’s Native Dialect at Work

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Case Scenario:

- UMMC Adult ED – 12 Filipino nurses comprise 20% of the 59 RNs in the department
- All Filipino nurses working night shift, mostly weekends
- Some shifts were mostly Filipinos
- Non-Filipino staff complained of Tagalog being spoken on the unit
- Patients complained about nurses speaking Tagalog in their presence
- AED leadership met to discuss how to address these issues
Issues:

• What is the impact on team dynamics?
• In a hospital that values diversity, are language differences supported?
• How far does freedom of speech extend into the workplace?
• Why would bilingual employees need to speak a language other than English at work?
Findings:

- There was a negative impact on team dynamics
- Team members were less trusting of each other
- Non-Tagalog speaking team members felt excluded because the majority of the conversations on the unit were in a language they could not understand
- Native Tagalog speaking team members just felt more comfortable conversing in their native language, but had no intention of making other team members feel left out or distrustful
- Patients were uncomfortable because they were not sure if their conditions were being discussed or that they were not receiving complete information
- UMMC Language Policy provided direction as to when and under what circumstances employees may speak their native language in the workplace.
Rationale for Behavior Change:

• As team members we should all be sensitive and courteous

• No team member should feel excluded

• There are places and times when it is completely appropriate for employees to speak in their native language

• For bilingual employees, the more they communicate in English, the more comfortable and effective they will be in their practice/job function

• All team members should respect one another’s cultural backgrounds and preferences
Plan to Sustain Change:

- Ongoing discussion/reflection
- Frequent follow-up and reminders
- Leadership support
- Open dialogue/discussion about issues in the team
- Broadening the discussion to other groups outside the department, i.e., Diversity Council, Staff Nurse Council, Employee Advisory Council
EEOC Guidelines on Discrimination Because of National Origin

EEOC identified 4 forms of national discrimination:

• Rules requiring employees to speak English at all times

• Refusal to hire an applicant because of their accent or manner of speaking

• Harassment in the form of ethnic slurs or physical conduct that result in a hostile work environment

• Singling out employees to provide employment verification

Section 1606.7 Speak-English-only rules

- A rule requiring English to be spoken at all times disadvantages an individual’s employment opportunities on the basis of national origin, which could result in a discriminatory working environment.

- An English-only policy that applies at certain times and for which an employer can demonstrate a business necessity, i.e., for customer/consumer satisfaction, conversations with co-workers, and safety-sensitive types of work is appropriate (this would include healthcare).

Code-Switching

- Recent studies indicate that language is not a matter of choice.
- Bilingual speakers may unconsciously switch between English and their native language when speaking with members of their cultural group.
- “Code-switching” is unconscious, and speakers will generally continue to speak in the same language most recently spoken.
- Because code-switching is not a choice, bilingual employees may face greater risk or reprimand for failure to comply with an English-only policy; thus, creating a disparate impact.

Impact on Team Dynamics

- Research indicates that employees “speaking in a foreign language can be disruptive, exclusionary, and downright rude”

- Research also shows that while having some employees speaking in a foreign language may not affect performance directly, it can have a debilitating effect on team morale

- Lastly, research shows that speaking a foreign language in the workplace may create an uncomfortable and divisive work environment

English-only workplaces can be lawful but may not be desirable. (2003, April 1). Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, E2.
Impact on Bilingual Staff

Bilingual UMMC staff report several behaviors that they find harmful and insulting, including:

• Having their sentences completed for them

• Being treated as if they are less educated or intelligent because of their accent

• Being criticized for speaking their native language to colleagues from their cultural group

• Being interrupted mid-sentence should they use the wrong form of an English word
Observations from the Front Lines

- Language is the symptom; poor workplace relationships are the disease
- Language comes under attack when it is behaviors that need to be addressed
- Maintaining an inclusive workplace requires involvement from everyone
- Diversity & Inclusion is a 2-way street!