

Max Messmer, Editor

Finding Commonalities in Difference

Success in any accounting and finance role requires the ability to work well with diverse groups of people throughout the company and the business community. Today's accountants are master collaborators; their work crosses departmental lines and even international

borders. It's likely you communicate daily with employees whose professional backgrounds, unique experiences, and individual work styles differ from your own.

When you are part of a cross-functional team, relationship building and effective communication become critical to the success of the project. Your career advancement depends on your ability to excel in these areas. Appreciating varying viewpoints and approaches among coworkers can increase your effectiveness—and boost your career.

Avoid assumptions

When you work with people from other departments, make sure you're not inadvertently stereotyping. For instance, you might assume that someone from marketing understands only how to promote products but not how to provide insight on de-

veloping cost standards for materials and labor. In doing so, you might be downplaying the advice of someone who, unbeknownst to you, holds a master's in business administration and a solid understanding of cost accounting issues in addition to his or her marketing degree. Underestimating an individual's value in a particular area isn't only unfair but may also lead to conflict on a project team.

Minimize miscommunication

The greater the number of people with whom you interact, the more important it is to be aware of potential differences in the way words and actions are interpreted. Otherwise successful professionals have been known to jeopardize their careers by unintentionally offending coworkers or business associates. Since it's difficult or impossible to know how someone you've just met will re-



spond in a given situation, always err on the side of formality instead of coming across as overly casual. Be polite and professional in your conversation and body language until you get to know the person better.

Careful listening is crucial. Remember that listening isn't a passive activity; it involves focusing entirely on the speaker and taking in each detail of what is said. Essential clues about the person and how he or she feels about a subject are often hidden within the turn of a phrase. Asking follow-up questions or restating a colleague's points can help avoid misunderstandings.

Build a personal connection

Don't underestimate the value of simply getting to know your colleagues better on a personal level.

You might invite coworkers with whom you don't normally socialize outside the office to join you for lunch. Also make the effort to interact with employees outside your immediate circle during company functions.

A word of caution: Taking the time to ask people about their assignments in a friendly way and learn more about their interests outside the office is generally reasonable behavior, but make sure you stop short of appearing to pry, especially if the individual appears uncomfortable with any of your inquiries. On the other hand, you don't need to be so afraid of offending someone that you remain distant. The more camaraderie you develop with colleagues, the easier it will be to work together in the future.

Take advantage of the team's differences

Your efforts to improve relationships are especially important in teams on which you participate. Even if a team has a common goal—evaluating the financial stability of an acquisition target or resolving an issue related to Sarbanes-Oxley compliance, for instance—varying perspectives can make it a challenge to reach consensus. While disagreement resulting from attitudes or approaches you may consider unconventional can make things difficult at times, working through these differences leads to new solutions and ideas your group may not have considered previously. Instead of mirroring group frustration when opposing ideas or seemingly unwise approaches are presented by a colleague, encourage the input. You can distinguish yourself by demonstrating to other members that a wide range of employee backgrounds adds fresh perspectives

to your brainstorming sessions and everyday discussions, which, in the end, improve the team's work product. Help them understand that if everyone you work with shared the same upbringing, experience, and viewpoints, there would be natural limits to innovation and creativity, making the work ultimately less interesting and satisfying.

When launching new initiatives, encourage all your fellow team members to share their background and areas of expertise. This will allow you—and others—to better understand the unique skills, talents, and viewpoints people bring to their work. On an individual basis, you might initiate a conversation by pointing out your own work experience and strengths before asking colleagues to share theirs so they don't feel their qualifications are under attack.

Interacting well with all types of colleagues is a basic requirement in business. Make an effort to get to know your coworkers, and take the necessary steps to show them appropriate respect. In the process, you'll find that others are more accepting of your own unique qualities and differences. ■

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