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DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

open a dialogue. engage your team.

CONVERSATIONS TOOLKIT

LeadingAge®
Minnesota

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Engaging Your Team Members in Diversity and Inclusion Conversations Toolkit

It is a simple fact that our workforce and the people we serve are becoming more diverse. Research has demonstrated that organizations that embrace a diverse workforce do better financially, recruiting and retaining top talent, score higher in staff satisfaction, and provide better customer service. Diverse team members also offer varied perspectives that can increase creativity and improve decision-making in your organization.

A May 2020 McKinsey report frames the urgent need for this work: *"Hiring diverse talent isn't enough—it's the experience they have in the workplace that shapes whether they remain and thrive."*

In fact, RealTime Talent states, "Perhaps the greatest impact we can have on our economic outlook and talent shortage is to eliminate disparities in employment by race and ethnicity. If we are able to reduce unemployment rates for people of color and indigenous persons to 3% (the same rate as the native-born non-Hispanic White population), we would add about 65,000 employees to Minnesota companies by 2025."

Diversity and Inclusion efforts are not only important to the success and health of an organization – they are important to the individual members of your workforce. Inclusion is about people feeling sense of belonging, connectiveness and community in the workplace. Staff who feel supported, engaged, and part of a team are more likely to succeed and stay within your organization.

With this Conversation Toolkit we hope to help your organization open a dialogue about Diversity and Inclusion. It contains the following tools:

- **Honest Conversation Tips**
- **Conversation Starters**
- **Conversation Format: Learning Circle**
- **Conversation Format: Town Hall Forum**

At LeadingAge Minnesota, we have talked about the importance of "being comfortable with the uncomfortable." Sometimes these conversations can feel uncomfortable. That's ok. With time, open and honest conversation about how your staff are experiencing your work environment can enhance your culture, strengthen your workforce, and improve your service.

Thank you for your dedication to Diversity and Inclusion!

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HONEST CONVERSATION TIPS

Open and honest conversation is important when it comes to creating an environment to discuss diversity and inclusion. It is critical to create a safe space where staff feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Below are some tips to help you be a more effective listener and communicator, and to create an open environment for honest conversations.

Verbal Communication: Use **positive words**. Word choice provides a platform to form an opinion. Choosing positive words can help to inform positive thought. Positive thoughts and feelings translate into positive nonverbal communication, which is noted below. *For more on this, read Focus on the Good Stuff by Mike Robbins (pp. 117 – 122).*

Repeat what you've heard back to the staff member. This will help to ensure you have accurately interpreted what the staff member is saying and will positively build your relationship as staff know they have been understood. *For more on this, and other emotional intelligence tools, read Coaching for Emotional Intelligence (pp. 28-29) or the article Being Smart Only Takes You So Far, both by Bob Wall.*

Nonverbal Communication: Evidence suggests that nonverbal communication is far more important than verbal communication. This means if you say one thing, but nonverbally show another, your team members may not believe what you are saying. It is important that you demonstrate honest and positive nonverbal messages in your communications. *For more on this, read Body Language for Leaders, by Carol Kinsey Goman.*

WHAT IS INCLUDED IN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION?

- **Gestures**
  - Do you talk with your hands?
  - Are you fidgeting?
  - Is your cellphone in hand?
- **Facial expression**
  - Do you smile?
  - Does your expression show worry or stress?
  - Are you rolling your eyes or making another inappropriate facial expression?
- **Posture**
  - Are you slouching?
  - Are you too close or too far from others in your meeting?
  - Are your arms crossed?
- **Eye contact**
  - Do you make eye contact as you pass others in the hallway?
  - Are you overly absorbed in more important things as you walk to your next meeting?
  - Are you engaging in eye contact when others speak to you?
- **Voice – pitch, tone, volume, speed**
  - Do you greet people when you walk past?
  - Does your voice communicate confidence and kindness?
  - Are you making others feel rushed by speaking too quickly?

Bob Wall, in his book Coaching for Emotional Intelligence, suggests looking in a mirror as you speak. What does your facial expression convey when you are talking to someone? What does your facial expression convey when it is at rest? There are exercises that can be done to lift your face and help you to smile more in conversation (p. 27). And, bonus – research shows that when you smile, your body releases hormones that make you happier! Besides feeling a little silly, what's there to lose?

Listening

Empathy is a key component to listening, according to author Bob Wall, Coaching for Emotional Intelligence. Listening to a staff member requires you to pay close attention to both "***what* people say, and *how* they say it"** (pp. 23-24). As the listener, you need to pay close attention to the non-verbals that your staff member is displaying during your interaction. Demonstrating empathy will build a positive foundation between you and other staff.

- **Screen out the background noise**. Make sure you can give your full attention to the speaker.
- **Keep an open mind**. Staff have lots of ideas! It is important to consider input, even if the suggestion is something your organization has tried before or something that is really *out there*. The already-tried idea may be worth reconsidering or trying in a slightly different way. The *out-there* idea may work well if scaled back or tweaked.
- **Don't interrupt but do engage** in the conversation. Don't take over the conversation with your own ideas but do participate in the conversation so that the staff members know you are engaged.
- **Reschedule** if you need more time. We work in busy environments that are full of interruptions. If you cannot give your full attention, make sure the staff member knows their idea is important to you and follow up with them when distractions are lessened.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Need help starting the conversation? Consider asking these open-ended questions to spark honest discussion with your staff. It may feel rehearsed at first, but with practice, the conversations will begin to feel organic. We also introduce provide different formats in which these conversations can take place.

The key is having a safe environment. Does the culture within your organization allow staff to feel safe during honest conversations? Do they see change based on their feedback? Do supervisors react positively and engage in conversation? You'll be amazed what you learn from staff in an open environment! *For more discussion questions, see this list of* Diversity Discussion Starters*.*

Initial Questions:
- How would you describe the place you were born?
- Where would you live if you could live anywhere? Why?
- What languages are spoken in your family?
- What special family tradition do you look forward to?
- What is your most vivid childhood memory?
- What is one thing your parents taught you?

Follow-up Questions:
- What similarities do we share?
- What differences did you hear?
- What surprised you about this conversation?
- Did you learn anything new?
- Did this conversation dispel any assumptions you previously held?
- Was this conversation easy or difficult? Why?

Exploratory Questions:
- What unique skill or talent do you bring to work?
- Do you feel that your unique attributes are valued at work?
- Do you feel like you can be yourself at work?
- Are there aspects of your personality that you feel you need to hide at work? Why?
- Are there parts of yourself that you wish you could express at work? Consider your cultural, spiritual, or emotional.

Organizational Questions:
- Do we have an inclusive environment at work? Why or why not?
- Do you ever feel left out at work? What circumstances cause you to feel left out?
- Are there obstacles to career progression at work? What are they and how can we fix them?
- Do you feel that you have sufficient support to develop your skills and progress your career?
- Do you face any unique challenges at work you'd like others to know about?
- Are there role models or mentors at work that you can relate to?
- Have you faced or witnessed prejudice or discrimination in your work setting? Describe what happened.
- Do you feel like leaders here represent your perspective?

Recognition

It's important to provide positive feedback after a staff member has had the courage to show vulnerability in these difficult conversations. You can respond to comments by saying:

"Thank you for sharing."
"That was really brave."
"I appreciate your courage."
"You shared an important perspective."

Oops…Did You Say the Wrong Thing?

Offering an environment for safe conversations about diversity and inclusion can mean that you or another staff member may the wrong thing. In fact, it's bound to happen! What do you do when the mishap occurs?

1. Acknowledge it and be accountable! If you say something that has hurt someone else, or you realize was insensitive or inappropriate, be sure to acknowledge it. You might start with, *"I said XYZ, but I recognize that was wrong."* Take a moment to reflect on what you've said. Take ownership for your mistake and take action to correct it.

2. Allow for staff to express feelings. Each individual has their own response to these conversations, and all feelings are valid. Anger, sadness, laughter, or other reactions are all normal. It is important that staff have the space to express those feelings without judgement.

3. Apologize. Be sure to apologize to staff who were hurt by your comment. Take a moment to consider the best way to apologize. Individually? To a larger team? Consider consulting with someone else before apologizing to get an outside perspective.

CONVERSATION FORMAT: LEARNING CIRCLES
A TOOL FOR PROMOTING DISCUSSION & INTERACTIVE LEARNING

Audience: Staff (departmental or interdepartmental), family members, or residents. It is ideal to have 10 – 15 participants.

Goal: To provide an opportunity for feedback or team problem solving.

Rules of a Learning Circle**:**

1. Anyone can call a Learning Circle.
2. There is no hierarchy in a learning circle – *everyone is equal*.
3. Participants sit in a circle. Remove tables or other barriers if possible.
4. One person is chosen to be the convener.
5. The convener poses the question or issue. *Hint: Sometimes it may be helpful to start with an easy question to get things going, such as "What is your favorite color and why?"*
6. A volunteer in the circle responds with his or her thoughts about the topic.
7. The person sitting to the right or left of the first respondent speaks next, followed one by one around the circle until everyone has spoken on the subject *without interruption.*
8. No interruptions should be made to the person speaking. Eliminating cross-talk is difficult, but important!
9. Participants may choose to pass rather than speak.
10. After everyone in the circle has taken a turn, the convener goes back to those who passed and allows each another opportunity to respond.
11. After everyone has had a chance to speak, the floor is opened for general discussion.
12. The convener closes the circle with a summary of what has been learned, suggested, or what next steps will be.
13. Ask participants to evaluate their experience in the Learning Circle.

For more information about Learning Circles, visit Pioneer Network's Resource Library.

CONVERSATION FORMAT: TOWN HALL FORUM

Audience: All staff. Led by the senior leader or members of the leadership team. Content may align with other team meetings, reinforcing your organization's goals and values.

Time of Meetings: If your organization is open 24 hours, plan to host a swing of all staff meetings – meaning at least one per shift. It cannot be assumed that a staff member who works an overnight shift will attend a meeting at 2 p.m.

A Town Hall Forum may meet any number of objectives, and could include opportunities:
- To invite face-to-face interaction between the senior leader and staff at all levels.
- To address concerns or discuss suggestions from staff.
- To demonstrate your organization's mission and values – lead by example.
- To provide major organization updates that require clear and consistent communication.
- To provide updates on any external changes (regulatory, industry changes).
- To explain any changes in policies or expectations.
- To celebrate accomplishments and create a sense of team.
- To preview what staff can expect in the short term.
- To inspire, recognize, or reward team members.

Staff Suggestions: A Town Hall meeting is a great opportunity to address suggestions or questions from your staff feedback tools (satisfaction surveys, suggestion boxes). It is highly important to let staff know what you have heard from them, and to highlight how you have addressed those concerns. For example, did you change your orientation process due to feedback you received from a new staff member? Share that! Providing feedback will instill confidence that the leadership team listens to staff, and that staff are empowered to impact change. You may also wish to leave time for Q&A.

Evaluate the meeting: Were staff engaged? Did they participate when asked? Did they receive value for their time? Evaluations can be formal or informal but should always be short. Consider asking consistent evaluation questions at each meeting to gauge results over time.

Publish Minutes or a Summary: Ensure that all staff have access to the information provided at the Town Hall Forum, even if they were unable to attend.

For more information about Town Hall Forums, see Hardwiring Excellence by Quint Studer.