



HOW TO GET AHEAD IN A MULTICULTURAL WORKPLACE

Five skill sets that we've found talented migrant professionals appreciate and benefit from in building their career success

1. Decode the norms of communicating, relating and behaving that characterise the Australian professional workplace.
2. Learn about the hidden rules of success and apply them to consistently create the impression you want.
3. Recognise the strengths of your background and learn how to leverage them in your current context.
4. Develop practical skills for managing everyday teamwork and meetings in ways that display your talent and showcase your leadership.
5. Identify the most effective techniques for influencing your stakeholders in positive, career-enhancing ways.

Frustration and distress

"My manager says I need to speak up more but how am I supposed to do that?" "In meetings I only say something if I can agree. If I disagree, I say nothing." "I've been told I'm too emotional. But if you believe something, surely you need to show how strongly you feel?" "I've been on this committee for three years now. We meet once a month for several hours but I've never contributed anything." "I get anxious ahead of the meetings I attend. I'm constantly looking for a space where I can come in. But there's never any space!" "Some clients have complained about my emails. It seems they think I'm rude! I feel shocked and upset." "I've been in the team longer than anyone else but my manager keeps saying I'm not ready for promotion. I think she doesn't like me."

These impassioned and heartfelt comments were made by participants on a mid-level leadership program in a large organisation. While they were all very different people, working in different kinds of roles, they shared one thing in common. They were all first generation migrants to Australia. They come from a wide range of countries and all are skilled and experienced. But they feel their careers are in danger of stalling. They feel frustrated and wonder if 'the system' is biased against them.

Today's workplace demographics

Australia is one of the most culturally diverse societies. One in two Australians was born overseas or has a parent born elsewhere, and census data show there are more than 300 different ethnic groups. The top four countries of birth of Australia's annual migrant intake are (in rank order) India, China, the UK and the Philippines. Every workplace today is multicultural! In fact, whatever your own ethnicity, you most likely work with colleagues who have cultural backgrounds very different from yours.

Yet, as you may have noticed, employees who came here as migrants are underrepresented at senior levels, despite their qualifications and skills. There is a pattern across sectors of strong representation in entry level positions but relatively few advancing after that. Many migrants describe a sense of invisible barriers that seem to prevent getting ahead. Too often careers plateau and talent goes untapped.

Source of the problem

UGM research shows that professionals not born in Australia can face multiple problems, as they try to adjust to quite different, culture-based, expectations and assumptions about their role, as well as different ways of structuring ideas both in talk and writing. Inevitably, an organisation's culture reflects the cultural values and priorities of the nation itself. Where English-speaking countries are concerned,

this means a strong emphasis on individualism, equality and how these two are expressed in an assertive communication style, underpinned by a very linear approach to what is deemed 'logical'. The trouble is these preferences are at odds with those that dominate across most other geographies.

We have all been profoundly shaped by our cultural identity and by the ways of thinking prioritised in our first language. These deep aspects of identity are not easily set aside when someone comes to work, as if 'culture' could just be hung up on a peg like a coat and collected later on the way home.

Each person in a team may try to do what they intuitively feel is appropriate to the situation. But, because they may be drawing on different cultural assumptions and expectations about how to behave, they can end up feeling at cross-purposes. In this way, diverging interpretive frames can produce frustration, resentment and negative evaluations on all sides. The trouble is management techniques and communication skills developed for the relatively homogeneous workforce of the past generally fail to deliver positive results today.

Why it matters

For reasons of equity and fairness, this matters. But in addition, there is overwhelming evidence that diverse teams at every level (including executive) are more innovative than *either* talented individuals working alone *or* teams where everyone is pretty much the same. Diversity outperforms sameness.

But the research, we must stress, is also clear about why this desirable dividend so often remains just a dream. If employees lack the insight and skills to manage their differences well, then the much touted 'diversity dividend' stays locked up. Indeed, it can even contribute to frustration and resentment.

The way forward

The way forward requires building an inclusive culture at all levels and within each team. Managers need the insight and practical skills to help them bring out the best in their increasingly diverse teams and tap into this potential source of innovation.

For their part, as we've found in our work over many years, employees not born in Australia welcome having Australian workplace culture 'decoded' in ways that make sense. This means learning how to effectively manage the impression of ourselves that we convey to others. Is it what we intended? Does it serve our best interests? How can we come across as we'd like, while remaining true to our own identity?

It's about a commitment to supporting the success of all employees, whatever their background. The aim is to ensure that everyone feels they belong, can contribute their best work and get ahead.