



Enhancing belonging and inclusion in the workplace with intention

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When thinking about Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) and Joint Occupational Health and Safety (JOHS) Committee duties, the average person most likely thinks about managing physical injuries and biological hazards. Chemical safety sheets might come to mind. If you are especially creative, you may think about ergonomics and safety inspections, or mental health in the workplace.

When pressed to list duties of JOHS Committee representatives, it is safe to say that many people would not immediately consider ensuring diversity and inclusion. However, these topics are becoming more prominent in the foreground of conversations, especially when related to psychological and mental health and safety in the workplace.

As an active member of our JOHS Committee at the non-profit community service organization Open Door Group, I participate in meetings on a monthly basis and contribute to the ongoing assessment of safety concerns, like those listed above.

I was given an opportunity through HSA to attend this year's Bottom Line Conference, hosted virtually by the Canadian Mental Health Association in early October. The conference theme, "Dismantling Barriers, Opening Doors: Inclusion at Work," explored how one's sense of belonging can affect workplace psychological health and safety. We heard from a variety of speakers at the conference, but the common lesson was that not feeling included at work could lead to negative mental health symptoms, burn-out, higher stress levels, and feelings of discomfort or a lack of safety at work.

Through a variety of workshops and presentations over the course of two days, I was given the opportunity to more deeply analyze my own workplace, and consider how to enhance a sense of belonging and inclusion within our team.

Diversity and inclusion have become particularly hot button topics over the last few years, both on JOHS committees and within the workplace in general. It is important to recognize that diversity is more than just a human resources issue that arises in hiring practices.

Every individual in the workplace comes from their own unique background and experiences the world uniquely. Inclusion means recognizing and respecting the differences in culture, gender expression, race, sexuality, physical health, mental health, and more. It also means learning to call out others when they are inappropriately harassing someone or being discriminatory.

It is important to note that recognizing differences in the workplace includes considering how these differences impact our positions in the workplace, as well as the differing power dynamics and barriers that can come from them. Even if working in similar positions, two people from different backgrounds can experience their jobs completely differently due to past experiences, as well as current barriers such as discrimination, negative bias, or social circumstances outside of work.

As a JOHS Committee representative, or simply an HSA member, it is important to consider your own practice and workplace: Is the team including everyone equally? Are you creating an environment where everyone can be the best versions of themselves and bring their whole selves to the workplace?

Common examples of discrimination and harassment can include inappropriate jokes in break/lunch rooms,

micro-aggressions, or the denial of experiences that are different from yours. It is important to examine the statements that you have heard before and just “let pass.” Even the smallest jokes and statements can build a team foundation that is exclusionary, and can lead to a workplace that allows harassment and bullying.

In my own practice as a member of the JOHS Committee, as well as in my work as a vocational counsellor in the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver, I have always valued the diverse group of people I work with, both as my coworkers and clients.

I continue to challenge myself and those within my workplace to embrace diversity and pursue additional training on topics such as decolonization, racism, LGBT2Q+ awareness, mental health, etc. I feel fortunate to be a member of a union that values these topics and has provided training in both decolonization and anti-racism this year, as well as mental health in the workplace.

The best tool to create a more inclusive workplace is to be educated and aware of the biases we carry, and to be intentional about breaking them down and making changes for the future, even if we have made mistakes in the past. If formal training is not a possibility in your workplace, there are endless resources online to pursue in your own time in order to educate yourself and examine your biases.

In addition to training, team members or JOSH Committee representatives can be intentional in our conversations and work with others, and put more effort into including folks we may have been unintentionally excluding or devaluing. Here are some easy ways to do this:

- Have a conversation with someone who you haven’t spoken with very often, and ask them questions about their experiences if they are willing to share.
- Ask people how they are doing, and genuinely mean it when you ask. Make sure to take the time to listen to their answer.

Embracing diversity and including everyone in the workplace is an important duty of everyone, not just members of the JOSH Committee. If we all take a little time to recognize the gaps in our own knowledge about those with different experiences, and spend just a few extra minutes to take the time to learn more, our workplaces would most likely feel a little safer and more cohesive.

Even though I am only one member of a larger team, I am proud of the work I am doing and look forward to continuing to embrace the wide variety of people I get to work with each day.

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