SUPPORT NEW IMMIGRANTS AT WORK

By Yaldaz Sadakova

I recently watched U.K.-based CNN anchor Hala Gorani—born in the U.S. to Syrian parents and raised in Algeria and France—give a graduation speech at George Mason University. Part of it was about how her otherness has helped her produce award-winning Middle East coverage.

“The probability that [someone] with a name and background not-so-placeable accent like mine would be an asset on an American news network didn’t even seem possible,” she said. “But I realized soon that, not only was it possible, it’s what helped me become a better journalist.”

A diverse background can teach you to see things through a global lens and fix problems in unusual ways, because traditional solutions aren’t available to you. It may even spur you to work harder to compensate for lacking certain advantages.

To unlock the full potential of your foreign-born employees, you need to show cultural sensitivity—even if they’re new Canadians, which the government defines as people who have lived here for three or fewer years.

Here’s what you, as a manager, can do.

SHOW CURIOSITY – A number of immigrants come from cultures where it’s common for co-workers to strike up friendships outside the office. The reserved nature of many Canadian workplaces—where people keep to themselves and limit their interactions to office hours—could alienate newcomers, especially if they don’t have many friends here.

Check in with these workers daily. Ask about their personal lives. What are their hobbies outside of work? How do they find social life in a new country? Show genuine interest in their countries of origin: ask about local cuisines, or find out where to visit. You’ll learn things that’ll make communicating with them easier, and you’ll show you care.

SOLICIT OPINIONS – Your newcomer employees likely know Canadian work etiquette, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy for them to follow it. If they come from countries where questioning elders and those in authority is discouraged, they might find it difficult to say no or disagree with management.

Remind newcomers you’re open to different opinions. Constantly solicit their feedback and, whenever possible, incorporate it. If you don’t, explain why. And if they’re quiet during meetings, ask for their views.

Some newcomers were also raised in cultures favouring modesty, so they might feel uncomfortable asking for promotions. If you see promising employees who haven’t asked for new roles, don’t assume they’re not interested: ask them.

BE FLEXIBLE ABOUT TIME OFF – It’s not uncommon for new Canadians to have family literally around the world. A friend once told me, “Every time I go back to Serbia, I know it might be the last time I’ll see my mother.” And the stakes are even higher if newcomers’ loved ones live in dangerous, conflict-ridden regions.

Another problem with flying back home is that travel time and jet lag steal several days from the trip. So show understanding if these employees ask for, say, three weeks of uninterrupted vacation, even if they have to use unpaid days. Set expectations about getting work done before leaving or getting a backup.

Also, offer time off (unpaid, if need be) for occasions such as the Chinese New Year, Eid (a Muslim holiday marking Ramadan’s end) and Diwali (a Hindu holiday celebrating light over darkness).

SPEAK DIRECTLY – Some languages are more direct than English—requests aren’t preceded by “please” or “could you?” Be mindful of that if you have employees whose English isn’t yet advanced. When you approach them with “Can you do this when you get a chance?”, they may not understand the urgency of the request. Try, “Please do this now” instead, but make sure your tone is polite.

You might be asking, isn’t the onus on newcomers to adapt, given that they chose to move? Yes, it is. But remember: they’re already going through heart-wrenching adjustments outside of work, such as trying to bring their partners and kids here—a process that could take years due to bureaucratic backlogs. If you meet them halfway, they’ll integrate faster and perform better.

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