Common Issues Surrounding Ethnicity in the Workforce

Ethnic consciousness, like race consciousness, is informed by how aware members of the respective group and members of the larger society are of the ethnic differences that influence human interaction. Gold (2007) acknowledges that there are both popular and social scientific understandings of classification and membership. In spite of the social basis for ethnicity, as it is with race, there are still powerful consequences with society at large, and within the workforce in particular. Race and ethnicity, as both group and individual identities, influence patterns of social conflict and the degree of opportunity available to various races and ethnicities.

There are four common issues relevant to ethnic differences that have negative effects on ethnic minorities in the workforce. The first is language, which can hinder effective communication between management and employee group, management and consumer groups, employee groups in general, and employee and consumer groups. Perceived levels of social integration and communication skills can accelerate the frequency and intensity of conflict in the workplace. There is a growing insistence to require English as the official national language in the United States, which goes against the ideal that all races and ethnicities can come, and ideally be accepted on their own terms, and their cultures, traditions, and languages are accepted as part of their identity. For many of them, English is a second or third

language, and for some in the workforce, this may lead to misunderstandings and mistakes. Additionally, these communication problems may create an atmosphere for stereotyping ethnic group members as lacking intelligence and being incompetent.

In the workplace, employees who speak a language other than English may be considered irritating to others outside of the ethnic group. The very same people who would adamantly refuse to use racial slurs are comfortable with expressing anger toward coworkers who don't speak English fluently. Supervisors and managers should take the initiative to provide support for minority members who struggle with the English language by making inquiries as to whether the employee is interested in improving their English speaking skills and providing information, services, and financial support if feasible to connect employees to available resources. If the employee expresses no desire to learn and speak the language more fluently, accept their decision and clearly explain any possible negative consequences that could affect potential advancement. Employers should be familiar with the EEOC guideline regarding the kind of nondiscriminatory working atmosphere that must be provided for all employees.

Another issue related to language is accents that effect communication in the workplace. Dictionary.com defines an **accent** as a mode of pronunciation, such as pitch or tone, emphasis pattern, or intonation and characteristic of speech by a particular person, group, or locality. Unfortunately, an accent has been used as a reason for lower scores on evaluations and performance reviews in the workplace (Esty, Griffin, & Hirsch, 1995). Accents have also been used as criteria for determining the intelligence of a speaker and have been the cause of hostility and ridicule directed toward those who speak with an accent. When an employee has an accent that inhibits his or her ability to effectively fulfill the requirements of the job description, then action must be taken. The first step is to communicate clearly to the employee how problems are arising as a result of his or her accent. At this juncture, several alternatives could be explored, such as changing the person's responsibilities and/or providing him or her with training to reduce the accent.

Ethnic jokes and ridicule are a common type of humor that can have negative effects on minority ethnic workforce groups. There are as many ethnic jokes as there are ethnic groups; many jokes are the same, substituting different ethnic groups around the punch line. It is also common for employees to make fun of mannerisms and accents, clothing, and hair styles of coworkers who are from different ethnic groups. Ethnic jokes may be considered harmless in some company cultures and be overlooked or excused. However, just as racial and sexual humor are considered offensive and should not be tolerated in the workplace, so too should ethnic jokes; ridicule of members of an ethnic group should not be tolerated. Often, the most effective method to combat offensive humor is to stand up and speak out against it.

Finally, stereotypes are the most pervasive problem ethnic minorities confront in the workplace. Stereotypes are usually distortions about various characteristics of a specific group. Of course, people often assume that every person within a particular ethnic group possesses these characteristics. For example, tall males from any ethnicity or race are often stereotyped by others as being proficient in basketball. African American men and women are often stereotyped as being good singers and dancers. Additionally, many African American men and women report firsthand experience of colleagues expressing genuine surprise at their ability to excel in the workplace, academia conflicting with the stereotypes. The most difficult aspect of stereotypes is they're deeply ingrained in American culture. Stereotypes are so pervasive that they are generally accepted without question. One strategy to deal with ethnic stereotypes is to point it out and initiate a strategy for inquiry to determine its validity in the current case. It is important to consider claims of discrimination, prejudice, and racism on a case-by-case basis by resisting the urge to consider the claims of one group over another.

Employee Efforts Supporting the Inclusion of Ethnicity in the Workforce

As stated previously, ethnic jokes and humor can have negative effects on ethnic groups. According to Esty et al. (1995), in order to prevent ethnic stereotyping from occurring in the workplace, employees must

be made aware that stereotypes fade away over time with daily contact with ethnic groups (p. 100). Employees must also be willing to:

- Speak up and out against ethnic insults and typecasting in the workplace when they occur and
- Ask international employees questions about their culture rather than make incorrect statements about it. International employees welcome the opportunity to share information about their culture with colleagues (p. 100).