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"Know Your Neighbor: Fostering Positive Relationships"

Every time I walked across the retail store's glittery tile floor it felt as if I was stepping onto another planet. The repetitive playlist of Radio Disney songs combined with the neon overload of the shop's color palette made me feel like I was stuck in a weird pre-teen purgatory. However, out of all the elements that made up the store, it was my co-workers that contributed the most to my unease (and of no fault of their own). Although everyone was welcoming to me, it was hard to reciprocate the friendliness beyond the occasional smile and burst of laughter at a joke here and there. I was the youngest member on the team, so it was often difficult for me to relate to my coworker's stories or discussions that revolved around anything from college woes to raising a family. I had already passed the "breaking in" phase of my job, and I did not want my work environment to feel any more uncomfortable than it had to; thus, I decided to stop isolating myself so that I could begin to get to know my coworkers.

A crucial skill needed to get know someone else is the ability to actively listen to them. Before I commented or contributed to the discussion my colleagues were having I made sure I would listen carefully to what they had to say. If I were to think about what I was going to say before I allowed my coworkers to share their opinions this would defeat the entire purpose of having a conversation as I would only be absorbed in my own opinions. Not to mention, one can learn a lot about a person such as their personality, and ideals through simple conversations.

Moreover, shared experiences or struggles from attending the same school or working at the same place can be bonded over and used to foster communication. Although I had nothing in common with 95% of my fellow sales associates, I used shared woes and momentary joys that accompanied our job as a tool to propel conversation. I ended up bonding with a few of my coworkers over everything from mannequin fashion fails to crazy holiday shoppers. Everyday discussions like these build trust which promotes openness. I felt like I could rely on my coworkers and vice versa after we talked a bit, so eventually we revealed a bit about ourselves and our backgrounds. For instance, I discovered that one girl I thought was only a year older than me was in her junior year of college!

Undoubtedly, understanding fosters tolerance and acceptance which provide the foundation for cooperation and communication. When people understand each other they can better empathize with one another which helps to produce positive relationships. This in turn reduces the chance for conflict that may arise due to perceiving differences as threatening. A lack of understanding may cause someone to produce false assumptions of another person. One of my managers was originally off put by how quiet I was while I was off put by how vocal she was, so I assumed that she did not like me and vice versa. After talking to her for a while I realized that I was wrong, and that she was just trying to figure me out while she discovered that I had just been through a tragedy which partly contributed to my timidity. Thus, we were able to empathize with one another's motives and dissipate any tension that existed.

Ultimately, for one to work with and foster a positive relationship with individuals they do not have anything in common with it is crucial for them to still interact with the other party either through active listening or by utilizing shared experiences as common ground. Audre Lorde said that, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences." Isolation is not conducive to solving any problem and will only result in more tension, and may even breed ill will. Understanding is the only way to squash negative preconceived notions to promote unity.