

## Language Job Aid – A guide to language in the workplace

### UTHealth Houston Standards of Conduct

UTHealth Houston is committed to providing a working and learning environment that is inclusive and respectful of everyone's differences, including cultural differences.

UTHealth Houston recognizes that language is closely tied to one's cultural and ethnic identities.

Pursuant to our institution's Standards of Conduct, [HOOP Policy 109](#), all university community members are required to speak professionally and respectfully at all times, regardless of the language spoken. That said, there are instances where speaking a common language may be requested. Guiding principles to keep in mind are inclusivity and ensuring that individuals who need to be aware of work-related conversations are included in those conversations.

Below are some scenarios to assist with situations that may arise involving language in the workplace. Managers and employees who have questions on this subject are urged to contact Employee Relations or University Relations & Equal Opportunity to discuss.

#### Scenario 1

Josh is a new employee in the lab. Josh notices that his coworkers, who are also fluent in English, often communicate in Chinese. Josh does not speak Chinese. Josh expresses concern to Lisa, the manager, about feeling left out of lab conversations, lunch conversations and the lab members' group chat.

**Question: What should Lisa do? Can Lisa require the workers to speak English?**

**Answer:** Josh has expressed concern to Lisa about both work-related and potentially personal conversations. Lisa should gather more information from Josh and his coworkers. If Josh's coworkers are engaging in conversation that he does not understand regarding lab work he is involved in, Lisa can require that a common language, in this case English, be spoken in these instances. If Josh's co-workers are speaking to each other regarding lab work that Josh is not involved in, Lisa cannot require that Josh's co-workers speak in a language that Josh also understands. Josh's co-workers may have personal conversations that are professional and respectful in Chinese.

#### Scenario 2

Robert and Alicia currently work in cubicles in an open setting environment. The team recently had a team meeting where Nicole presented on project management systems. Afterward, Robert and Alicia are in their work area talking in Spanish to each other.

Nicole sits near Robert and Alicia and can hear their conversation; however, Nicole cannot understand their conversation because she does not speak Spanish.

Nicole assumes Robert and Alicia are talking negatively about her presentation and feels it is not fair that they are allowed to speak Spanish when the majority of the people in the office only speak English. Nicole perceives her other coworkers feel the same way. Nicole complains to management about this.

**Question: How could management respond to Nicole's concerns? Should management require all workers to speak English in the office if it would promote harmony among the team?**

**Answer:** Management cannot require Robert and Alicia to only speak English in this situation. However, if management determines that Robert and Alicia were making derogatory comments about Nicole, management can address that behavior under the conduct policy, and counsel Robert and Alicia about appropriate workplace conduct.

#### **Scenario 4**

Courtney and Stephanie are working in a clinic and are discussing patient information in French. Donna is nearby and will relieve Courtney when Courtney goes on lunch break. Donna does not speak French. Courtney is about to take a break and is going to handoff the patient to Donna who does not speak French and did not understand anything Courtney told Stephanie. When Courtney meets with Donna to do the handoff, she explains everything in English to Donna and goes on break.

**Question: Should Courtney and Stephanie be allowed to speak French to each other when discussing patient information?**

**Answer:** It depends. In this scenario, Courtney relayed the necessary patient information to Donna in the language that Donna understands, allowing Donna to safely perform her duties. It is acceptable for Courtney to relay patient information to Stephanie in French since both parties understand the language. However, in emergencies, Courtney and Stephanie could be asked to speak in English when discussing patient information to ensure business efficiency and patient safety.

#### **Contact Us**

If you have any questions or concerns, please call the University Relations & Equal Opportunity team at 713-500-CALL (2255) or email [call@uth.tmc.edu](mailto:call@uth.tmc.edu).