Working with people from other cultures can be a new experience for many people. It can be very rewarding and it can also have its challenges. Here are some useful tips that might make it easier.
Culture is often compared to an iceberg.

There are certain aspects that are visible and more easily recognised or understood, but, what we see is only a small part of what makes up the whole person. There are many underlying beliefs and attitudes that have been developed over a lifetime. These differ from culture to culture and from person to person. However, we are usually able to recognise and understand them more easily in people from our own culture than in people from other cultures.

Have a look at the table below and decide which are more common in Australia: the left or the right-hand side?

### Which are more common in Australia?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To address your boss with Mr. or Mrs.</th>
<th>To address your boss by their first name.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At morning tea break, to sit at your desk and revise notes.</td>
<td>At morning tea break, to chat with work colleagues about sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a discussion, wait until you are asked to give your opinion.</td>
<td>In a discussion, give your opinion at any appropriate time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In conversation, generally use a serious tone.</td>
<td>In conversation, generally use a jocular tone?</td>
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For many migrants, the responses on the left-hand side would be more appropriate for workplaces in their countries, whereas in Australia we generally take the more informal and less serious approach. These aren’t particularly complex examples. Learning what’s culturally appropriate in a new country can be difficult, so if something’s not quite right, perhaps ask yourself – ‘Is there a cultural explanation?’

**What are some of the typical cultural differences you may come across?**

### Responding to people of different hierarchy and gender in the workplace

In Australia it’s generally accepted to treat people with equal respect, regardless of their position and gender, and generally there is no need for formal salutations. In some cultures however, it is very important to distinguish between people of different status. For example it may be a new experience having a younger person or female as a supervisor.
‘Yes’ doesn’t always mean yes
In some cultures it is not appropriate to say no and this can lead to misunderstandings.

A good starting point is to think ‘equity’
Don’t presume superiority. Take them and their knowledge and culture seriously. They may have had a very different upbringing to your own. It doesn’t necessarily mean one way is better than the other – just different. We have to be careful not to feel that our culture is the best and natural way of doing things.

Make allowances for people still establishing themselves
For example, these situations may cause difficulties:

This job is shift work so you need to start at 7:00 am.

Can you come back in to help out with the dinner shift tonight?

A student doesn’t get paid for work experience, and some migrants, especially refugees, may be on welfare until they get a job. Also, they may not have their Australian driver’s licence or car yet and have to rely on public transport. So, bus times and costs may restrict some migrants.
Look inward.
It doesn’t always have to be about ‘them’ assimilating to ‘our’ culture.

After all, around ¼ of the Australian population were born overseas and almost ½ have at least one parent born overseas, so learning how to embrace diversity and difference is important in the workplace of today.

Avoid stereotyping and generalisations
It’s easy to make ‘sweeping’ generalisations about people from different nationalities, especially if we’ve had a bad experience. It can be damaging to assume that all members of a cultural group are the same. Just as all Australians don’t behave and respond the same way, so too with people from other cultures.

Understanding workplace concepts that are different or unfamiliar
For example: WHS, legal obligations, workers’ rights and responsibilities, ways to address problems and resolve conflicts, worker’s input being valued and expected are concepts that are addressed differently in different countries.

Lack of previous opportunities in schooling, job training and employment
Refugees in particular, may have had their schooling and working lives disrupted. The ability may be there, but they may not have had the opportunities, so, they may be on a steep learning curve.
Coping with the stresses of settling into their new country
Trying to establish a new life in a new country can be very challenging, especially if the migrant’s country is very different to Australia and they’re still trying to learn the language. New settlers, and especially refugees, have so much to learn about living in Australia and so many things to organise and sort out. It takes time.

Humour and body language can be misinterpreted.
For example:

Eye contact may be important in Australian culture, but in some cultures it is a sign of disrespect or aggressiveness.

The ‘thumbs up’ and ‘everything’s okay’ signs can mean quite different things in other places.

How to deal with cultural difference
• Work together to find alternatives.
• Be prepared to problem-solve issues rather than set up barriers.
• Communicate with other work colleagues and the migrant worker.
• Create opportunities to learn about migrants and their countries. For example, organise a social function, like a morning tea and give them an opportunity to tell their colleagues a little about themselves.