



Coast Guard HR Flag Voice 165

A MULTILINGUAL WORKPLACE?

Speak-English-Only Rules: What's the Issue?

What is the Coast Guard's policy on speaking languages other than English in the workplace? This question usually arises from one of two sources: either from an individual who has been told to speak only English in the workplace, or from the unit commander, who calls to see if they can legally initiate an English-only rule. Many of us have encountered situations where we did not understand the conversation of the people around us. This will continue to become a more likely occurrence as the Coast Guard continues to recruit from an increasingly multilingual talent pool -- and has the mission need for more multilingual people. Meanwhile, we quite naturally feel excluded and sometimes intimidated by those who converse in a language other than English. Our natural reaction is to insist that everyone speak English only.

Our advice is English-only rules are not be the best way to promote harmony, individual dignity, and respect for diversity.

The Rules....

For civilians, a rule requiring employees to speak only English at all times on the job may violate Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, unless an employer proves that speaking English is necessary for conducting business. If an employer believes the English-only rule is critical for business or mission purposes, employees have to be told when they must speak English and the consequences for violating the rule. Any negative employment decision based on breaking the English-only rule will be considered evidence of discrimination if the employee has not been informed of the rule. Though Title VII applies only to our civilian workforce, it is advisable to consider it in all instances when making a determination of when English must be spoken in the workplace. For more info see the EEOC website: <http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/fs-nator.html>.

Unit commanders are encouraged to permit workforce members to converse in their native language when it does not interfere with mission accomplishment (e.g., mess deck, recreational area, etc.). While it is almost virtually impossible to successfully bring a cutter into port without using a common language for commands, many missions including boardings and rescues at sea, are routinely conducted with the help of bilingual Coast Guard personnel. Our diverse workforce includes Spanish, Vietnamese, Russian, French, Chinese and other language speakers. The Commandant's diversity policy statement says, "Diversity is one of our greatest strengths." While an English-only rule for most units may be perceived as the most efficient and effective way for a crew to communicate orally, to maximize the positive climate and environment, the unit commander should take a personal approach and lead dialogue ensuring that all members have the opportunity to express their concerns. Open communication will increase understanding and appreciation by all of our people. The CO/OinC must ensure that misguided fears and misunderstandings do not compromise the cohesion and readiness of the unit/team. For instance, what are the consequences when crew members perceive others are using a different

language just to talk about them?

The Use of Language Skills

Smart Coast Guard people using their diverse language skills have been highly effective, especially in intelligence operations, assisting law enforcement action to find and board suspect vessels. For those who are asked to use their language abilities as interpreters or translators, this is often an additional, uncompensated duty. These members are usually expected to perform their duties in addition to their normal workload. Every year there are increasingly more opportunities (need) for people with diverse language abilities. Our role in international training and technical assistance is increasing annually, and could very well increase substantially after the events of 11 September.

Recently, operational commanders reported more than 2800 incidents in one year where bilingual skills were necessary in accomplishing the mission. The languages used included Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Spanish, with the majority of the cases needing Spanish interpreters. These skills are invaluable and must be positively and visibly encouraged. As Admiral Loy stated in his recent letter to all Unit Commanders, Commanding Officers, and Officers-in-Charge, "The demographics of our country continue to change rapidly. We cannot afford complacency if we are to attract and retain in service the best and brightest talent that our nation has to offer from every race, color, creed, and religion. The motto of our country must truly be our own: "E Pluribus Unum" (Out of many---one). Diversity has been and always will be the strength of our nation and our service."

I believe if we all act with a good dose of common sense, this will not be an issue.

Regards, FL Ames

[Flag Voice Contents](#)

This page is maintained by [HR Webmaster \(CG-1A\)](#)