I hope you can advise me on the etiquette regarding speaking one's non-English native language at work.

I have three co-workers in my group whose native language is Russian, and they've always had occasional conversations in Russian. Our office has an open floor plan, however, and now two of these workers sit next to each other (and me). All of the frequent conversation between them is in Russian. I find this behavior distracting and excluding, but I'm not sure if it is actually a breach of business courtesy. Can you tell me if it is, and suggest a kind way of addressing it?

The key to your question is the part where you describe the situation as being "distracting and excluding." Feeling distracted is a business issue, while feeling excluded is a personal issue. Let's tackle them one at a time:

First, all business communications and conversations should always be conducted in a language everyone can understand. Your company is responsible for establishing a policy about which language is to be used for business conversation and communication in the workplace.

The language issue aside, any non-work-related conversations in an open floor plan are

distracting, and should be kept to an absolute minimum if conducted at all. The best way to deal with this situation is, again, for management to institute policies that clearly spell out what is and isn't acceptable conversation in the open floor plan area.

If people wish to have a discussion—either business or personal—they should move to a conference room or some other place where they won't bother those around them. If your company has no such policy, propose one to your manager. Better yet, if other employees feel the way you do, invite them to present the idea with you.

From the personal point of view, exclusionary conversations are unacceptable in the workplace. A language barrier isn't the only way to make someone feel excluded. Whenever people whisper to each other, they send out the same exclusionary message.

If two people wish to have a personal conversation, instead of whispering or conversing in another language that others don't understand, they should immediately move to a private place. Your co-workers are definitely pushing the bounds of considerate behavior in this regard, but you need to decide if the issue is important enough to you to say something to them.

Instead of asking them to speak English, maybe you could simply ask them to move to another area if they want to have a personal conversation, so you can concentrate on your work. This way, it's all about being considerate—rather than becoming an issue of language.

Source: Post, Peter. "Etiquette at Work." Boston Globe 29 May 2005.

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