

(U) "Ask Zelda!": Not Speaking the Same Language

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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(U) The below article is unclassified in its entirety.



Dear Zelda,

Two members of my team speak native Spanish and are very close friends both inside and outside of the office. All throughout the day, they tend to speak Spanish to each other. Many of the conversations seem to be personal in nature. This makes me -- along with other members of the team -- a bit uncomfortable, especially when we hear our names mentioned. While we do appreciate cultural diversity, is there any leg to stand on when English should be spoken as a first language within the office? Are

there specific rules that isolate personal vs. professional conversations?

Signed,
One team. Divided

Dear Divided,

What an interesting issue! I can understand that your two team members (whom I'll refer to as Tía and María) probably feel very comfortable speaking in their native tongue all day, but it's a little rude to exclude the others.

I checked, and there is no ban on speaking in a foreign language at work. If there were, it would violate Title VII of the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**. However, the rules for personal vs. professional conversations are the same for Tía and María as they are for any employees: personal chit-chat should not interfere with getting their work done. If it is, you have a right to ask them to get back to work (assuming you are their supervisor).

Perhaps they are saying nice things about you. Try smiling and saying "gracias!" every time you hear your name mentioned. Even if they are saying "Joe is a real turkey," if you smile and thank them it will sufficiently unnerve them and they will probably stop talking about you -- at least in your presence. If you really want to freak them out (or maybe delight them), learn a few words in Spanish and memorize one useful sentence to say really well. It wouldn't hurt to learn more about their culture and language. You might be interested to note that supervisors at our Canadian counterpart are **required** to learn French if they supervise French-speaking employees (see **previous SIDtoday article**).

The real issue is whether their talking is disturbing others around them or affecting their productivity, not what language it is in. It sounds like the talking is disturbing others, so you/their supervisor should point that out and ask them to minimize or save their personal conversations for non-work hours. You could also mention, as an aside, that it's rather impolite to exclude others when they are obviously talking about them and mentioning their names. They may not realize their personal chit-

chat is viewed as offensive.

Buena suerte!*

Ledda

* "good luck" in Spanish
