

COMMENTARY

Dealing with cultural issues of job status and job hierarchies

Guest commentary by Nina Colburn

With an increasing number of Spanish-speaking workers in the Colorado workforce, the ability to communicate effectively with them becomes a powerful tool to increase profits and productivity.

Unfortunately, most managers and business owners don't know how to use available tools to make the most of their Spanish-speaking workforce. The result is high turnover, low productivity and missed growth opportunities.

There's a wide range of cultural differences at work here — at least 10 by my count — and each one creates a different set of problems for Anglo managers and Hispanic workers.

Let's look at just one of these differences and explore what's behind it and ways a manager or owner can overcome it.

I call this cultural difference: "Job Status and Job Hierarchies."

Let's examine what it's all about.

Here in the states, we see ourselves as members of an egalitarian middle class. We practice delegation of authority at various levels. Equality is our preferred social mode, even within a hierarchical structure.

It's next to natural for us to interact with the workers around us on a very straightforward manner. We don't worry about the other person's family history or economic background. We just tell that person what's on our mind and expect an equally straightforward response back.

We're even comfortable talking in direct language to a

CEO or a board member and we understand that, in most cases, it is perfectly acceptable — even preferred — by the person we are talking to.

But in Latin America, things are totally different.

Latin American workers, and this includes bilingual foremen or team leaders, have an ingrained deference to authority. They believe that upper management makes the decisions and workers carry them out. If the workers have opinions, they keep them to themselves and maybe share opinions with a few co-workers. They would never think of floating ideas or issues upwards. There is little or no delegation of authority. Job levels are distinct and adhere to a strict management hierarchy.

Picture the problem, then, when these two different mindsets meet in a workplace here in Colorado. Take, for example, a large staff or team meeting, where you are expecting to hear what is on the minds of your workers, yet there is nothing but deadly silence.

Nobody is going to speak up or say anything. Why? Because to speak out in this setting betrays the loyalty of the group or, even worse, makes the bilingual foreman look bad. Even good suggestions to improve work flow and practices will remain unspoken because the Latino workers believe it is the job of the foreman to make suggestions and not them.

Sure, we as owners and managers can ignore the differences and can even expect the new workers from Latin America to adapt to American work practices. Yet, even when we factor in people's desire to adapt to new work practices, years of cultural

programming are formidable barriers to overcome.

So, how can the progressive manager or owner begin to break down these barriers?

Here are a few simple suggestions:

Before your workers can open up to you, you must open up to them. Even if you feel you don't have the time, you need to make this a priority. Begin building a bond with your workers or foremen by sharing something about yourself and by asking them about family members or personal concerns.

Share with the bilingual foreman that you want to open up communications among the workforce. Ask for his personal help, remembering how important relationships are in the Latino culture. Then provide him and his workers with cultural and team-building training, preferably in Spanish.

Issues involving hierarchy and status are just one group of cultural barriers that keep too many companies from achieving their full potential.

Fortunately, help is out there to break down those barriers. Find it and use it!



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