

COMMENTARY

Bridging the communications gap

Guest commentary by Nina Colburn

An old Paul Newman movie memorialized a classic line: “What we have here...is a failure to communicate.”

In the movie, the consequences of the alleged communication failure were tragic.

In real-life, communication failures usually have less-tragic consequences, but communication problems nevertheless complicate our workplace.

It’s tough enough when we’re all speaking the same language. But when we’re working to communicate across two languages, communication problems quickly multiply.

Managing the growing Hispanic workforce requires good and clear communication, but when we try to send messages to the workers in our own native way, the messages often miss the mark. Even worse, when we try to open up the communication lines to hear back from our Spanish-speaking workers, many times nothing happens at all.

The reasons for these kinds of communication problems go beyond language barriers. They stem from basic cultural differences.

American managers are very direct in their communications to workers. Facts predominate. The words are concise and to the point. “Here’s what I need. Here’s when I need it.”

In addition, American-born workers and bosses are very comfortable thinking into the future, sorting through issues that might occur sometime down the road. American workers are used to bringing up a variety of issues with their bosses face-to-face — issues about today’s work plan as well as potential issues with tomorrow’s work plan.

In Latin America, it’s totally different.

The Hispanic worker is much more used to communicating in a contextual manner, reacting to what is in front of him or her right now. The boss gives the order. The worker works on it. If a tool breaks, or a procedure fails, now is the time they are ready to talk about it.

But ask that worker to think about a new policy manual for the future or talk about a company benefits program for his or her long-term welfare and the eyes glaze over. It’s just not a place where the worker is used to going.

Dealing with this cultural difference in the Colorado workplace takes some getting used to and a little adapting, but there are ways to bridge the communication gap and perk up the company’s communication channels.

You just need to know a few things.

First, your bilingual foreman is the key to effective communications. Why? Because he or she is the person the workers expect to deal with problems and longer-term issues.

If the workers see a problem coming, they won’t feel comfortable discussing this with the big boss. But they may share it with the foreman, depending on the foreman’s ability to encourage input.

Going through the worker’s mind is something like the following: “I see a problem coming, but telling the boss isn’t my job. Besides, if I say anything, it won’t make any difference. Anyway, that’s what the foreman is for, not me.”

When you hire your foremen for Spanish-speaking workforces, ask him or her to sign an agreement on communication styles and policies that requires building an environment where

the workers are encouraged to speak up — both to the foreman on a daily basis and in group meetings with several layers of management on hand.

Second, acknowledge the Hispanic worker’s generally outstanding problem-solving skills and show them that their ideas are important to you and that you welcome and need their important contributions. Take advantage of contextual communications situations — talking about problems when they occur — to use their problem-solving skills, providing, of course, the solutions stay within OSHA guidelines and company policies.

Third, when you are around the workers, use a little of your own Spanish — no matter how limited — to ask some simple questions. You might ask what nationality he or she is and whether their family is here or back home. No matter how many mistakes you make, you are showing interest in your people and you are showing that you care about who they are and what they need.

Over time, the cultural styles can and will change throughout your Hispanic workforce. Your people will start speaking up. More-timely communication will flow up and down the line. When it does, you’ll be in a position to improve your company’s operations and results at every level.



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