

## COMMENTARY

# Making the most of change with your Spanish-speaking workforce

Guest commentary by Nina Colburn

Change. It's the one constant in American business.

When a business starts to slow down, we seek out a "change agent" to shake things up. When we're hiring new managers, we attempt to assess how well candidates can "manage change." At our company retreats, we urge our people to "embrace change."

Yes, change is all around us, a positive element of the everyday business world here in the States.

So, why is it that the ever-growing number of Spanish-speaking employees in American businesses look at our infatuation with change with puzzlement? Why do they look askance at our appetite for ever-changing work environments and procedures?

The answer, of course, lies in our two different cultures.

The American culture embodies change as a part of the daily landscape and has for years.

In the Latin American culture, things don't need changing unless something breaks. The culture south of the border is rich in age-old traditions and rituals, a culture where things get done, but not in a hurry and not through wave after wave of evolving ideas and methods.

The indigenous people trace their historic roots all the way back to a theocratic society, where all authority was centralized in a priesthood and orders were handed down on penalty of death. Suggesting a change then had fatal consequences.

In addition, the fact that Mexico existed for 72 years with a one-party political system perpetuated an aversion to creating change. In those days, people did not speak out about change. People did not feel their ideas could make a difference. There was simply no payoff to advocating change.

With such a background, is there any way to help the Latino worker see change as a positive, as something that he or she can contribute to and benefit from?

There is, but it takes an understanding of how and when change happens in countries like Mexico.

As we said earlier, change happens in Mexico and other Latin American countries when something breaks or stops running. At that point, the need for change is obvious. At that point, the extraordinary talent Hispanic workers have to find novel solutions to problems takes over.

When you are contemplating a change with your Spanish-speaking employees, ask them for suggestions on how to solve a problem. Framed in this way, they will fully relate to it. Changing something to solve a problem makes perfect sense to your workers. Changing something just to change it does not.

Using the worker's innate problem-solving skills in this kind of context will generate all manner of ideas and suggestions and the worker will see the value he or she is bringing to you because he or she sees the problems you need to get solved.

All of this is not to suggest that Hispanic people and Hispanic cultures today are totally adverse to the propensity for change we see here. The widespread use of computers and the Free Trade Agreement make more and more Latino residents savvy to the modern, fast-paced business world. Yet, two realities exist in Mexico and other Latin countries, where the sight of a college student with laptop under his arm striding by an Indian sitting on a street corner selling handmade baskets is common.

These two realities can, and do, exist in the American workplace, too, where the Anglo manager seeks out change and the Spanish-speaking worker seeks out solutions to problems at hand.

Using the techniques I've outlined above and an increased awareness of this understandable duality will allow the smart manager to manage his or her business environment to the welfare of all.

Change will come — for you, for your workers and for your business. If your approach is on target, everyone can benefit from it.



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