

Tips and Resources for Effectively Working With Your Latino Employees

By Lisa Harris

In the Midwest, the Hispanic population is expected to increase 35 percent by the year 2025. Labor-intensive jobs are expected to experience a greater percentage increase of its Hispanic population.

Many public works agencies in Kansas have Latino employees, and some agencies struggle with communication with those employees, both in terms of language and cultural understanding. Patricia Smitherman has compiled the following tips that provide general cultural observations that may be helpful to you in working more effectively with your Latino employees, especially those who are new to the United States. Smitherman is president of Communicata Language Services, LLC (CLS), which provides language training services as well as cultural consulting and translation services.]

Check out these tips to better understand how to create an inclusive and supportive workplace that will enhance productivity and employee success.

What supervisors need to know about Hispanic workers

First, a disclaimer: Smitherman cautions that cultural information is always general and may not relate to every person in that social, ethnic or racial group.

Respect for authority. Questioning a



Generally speaking, loyalty and team goals are important to many Latinos, making them great team players.



superior would be seen as disrespectful by most Latinos, as would challenging or criticizing a manager, because that person by his or her position earns respect. Make sure any trainers you use are individuals your Latino employees respect. Also, Spanish-speaking workers want to be treated with respect themselves. If you treat your employees in a respectful and culturally sensitive way, you will inspire loyalty.

Importance of the family. Hispanics really live family values! Family often takes precedence over job and career. Employees may turn down a promotion that will change where they live or their work

hours because of family considerations. They may also go back to the home country for extended periods if there are health issues for family members there. This pattern is probably slowing because of border security and the difficulty of retuning to job and family in the U.S. If so, the affected employee may be under great stress but may not (because of a lack of English skills) let you know. To successfully manage the Latino workforce you will want to connect with your employees by asking about and getting to know about your employees' families.

Communicating on the job. Asking yes/no questions on the job can be misleading because Hispanics may smile and respond with an affirmative head nod just to be polite. Also, be careful of gestures as a means of communication. A male executive of large American corporation was sued for sexual harassment on the job by a female executive from Latin America. He used a common and acceptable gesture in the US to indicate "come here" which is offensive to many Spanish-speakers.

Fatalism. ¡Qué será, será! Many Spanish-speakers believe that there is not much control over a person's destiny. Therefore it is important to do safety training and insurance explanations in a way that connects on an emotional and personal level. Find an interpreter



for insurance open enrollment meetings, preferably not another employee. The employees' supervisor should watch this process to see if the Latino employees are responding positively to the interpreter or not.

Importance of the group. Latinos generally feel that the best interest of the group is more important than that of the individual. Because of this cultural tendency, loyalty and team goals are very important to Hispanics, making them great team members. This may make it difficult to get a valuable employee to agree to be promoted and thus be more powerful than others in their group or team. It is also unwise to try to promote competition on an individual basis because of the importance of the group.

What type of training works best?

A recent study by the National Concrete Pavement Technology Center, performed by CTRE and sponsored the Iowa DOT, tested a new approach for delivering training to road construction crews with Hispanic workers as well as their nonHispanic supervisors and coworkers in the state of Iowa. The research assessed the effects on communication, safety, work environment, and productivity as a result of the training. The training was found to be more effective than language training alone.

Contents of the course. The researchers created the "Toolbox Integration Course for Hispanic Workers and American Supervisors" (TICHA). TICHA offers the following features:

- Topics that go beyond language learning to address larger issues of cultural differences and safety.
- Survival phrases that immediately help participants communicate at the job site.
- Flashcards with pictures of vehicles and equipment and quick references, including English and Spanish spelling and pronunciation.
- A design that minimizes disruptions in the daily operations of work crews.
- Customizable material for specific projects and crew needs.

During daily operations throughout the construction season, contractors can use TICHA to train their workers once a

Multiple generations: Clash or asset?

In the February 2009 issue of the *APWA Reporter*, Rosemary Baltcha wrote an article about the different generations in the workforce today. She described some of their characteristics and some of the benefits and challenges of having generational diversity in the workplace. Baltcha is recently retired as personnel manager for Fresno County Public Works and Planning Department, and she is co-chair of APWA's Subcommittee on Generational Issues, along with our own Mike Fraser, public works director for Salina, Kansas.

Baltcha describes the characteristics of the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X individuals, and Generation Y Millennials and what motivates them at work. She describes how different generations can and should learn from each other, and how more seasoned supervisors need to work with the characteristics of younger workers, and embrace what they have to offer the organization, because they are our future.

To read the article, go to <http://www.apwa.net> and search for "Generational Issues: Do you have them?"

week for 30 minutes before the working day starts or during lunchtime. It is recommended that the course instructor be a worker in the crew, preferably a bilingual Hispanic worker and include a leader known as a "link" person who is trained in course goals and evaluation.

Key findings. The study found that:

- Eighty-three percent of construction personnel surveyed feel that "language" and "little time available" are the two primary barriers to training.
- The course focus should be integration instruction (cultural awareness, safety standards, improved relationships, and language instruction), rather than simply language training.
- Each session should last no longer than 45 minutes to avoid disrupting the day's operations.
- American supervisors prefer their workers to receive the training 30 minutes before the day's operations begin or during lunch time.
- During the initial sessions, American supervisors found TICHA useless while Hispanic workers looked forward to the course. However, by the end both American supervisors and Hispanic workers found the course extremely useful and rewarding.
- The classroom version of TICHA

should be taught immediately before the construction season begins to help the participants to retain the knowledge.

- The integration approach of TICHA has proven successful in achieving its goals.

For more information on this type of training, contact Ed Jaselskis at ejaselsk@iastate.edu.

English/Spanish resources

OSHA dictionary. OSHA has a Web page with frequently used construction industry terms in Spanish and English. Go to http://www.osha.gov/dcsp/compliance_assistance/spanish/osha_construction_terms_ensp_freq.html.

ARTBA resources. The American Road & Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA) has two publications to aid communication with Spanish speaking workers. The pocket-sized Spanish-English Dictionary, priced at \$13.00, has nearly 1,500 words and terms frequently used on construction job sites. A companion publication selling for \$28.00, Spanish-English Construction Communication contains thousands of words broken into lists of safety terms, related slang and common sentences tied to each phase of construction. More information or copies of both publications can be obtained by



contacting ARTBA at (888) 821-9653. The publications can also be purchased online at www.artbastore.org.

Culture lesson: Which term is proper: Latino or Hispanic?

This article uses both terms, but is one of them considered “correct?” A brief report from the Pew Hispanic Center offers some interesting background. Here’s one section:

Q. How do Hispanics themselves feel about the labels “Hispanic” and “Latino”?

A. The labels are not universally embraced by the community that has been labeled. A 2006 survey by the Pew Hispanic Center found that 48 percent of Latino adults generally describe themselves by their country of origin first; 26 percent generally use the terms Latino or Hispanic first; and 24 percent generally call themselves American on first reference. As for a preference between “Hispanic” and “Latino,” a 2008 Center survey found that 36 percent of respondents prefer the term “Hispanic,” 21 percent prefer the term “Latino” and the rest have no preference.

Sources

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