

In English or in Spanish, managers must...

Communicate carefully

BY SCOTT WAHLIN

One afternoon while sitting at my desk, I had an employee storm into my office waving a machete screaming, "I kill him! I kill him!" I said, "Wait a minute. Have you already killed him or are you going to kill him?"

Communicating with non-English speaking people can be challenging and create some tense moments. I would like to explore some strategies and philosophies when dealing with people I cannot talk to efficiently. Many of the points I will try to make here could relate just as easily to supervisory situations where all parties speak the same language. I feel confident with this statement because, as a supervisor, people who speak English frequently hear something other than what I said. My communication with them would probably have been enhanced had I assumed that they did not understand what I said.

"Tell me — I'll forget. Show me — I might remember. Involve me — I'll understand."

I am not sure where I heard this but I like it and use it.

A feeling of being in on things always seems to rate high on surveys of people who are asked what they like about their jobs. It is important to let your team know what you are planning, what projects will be implemented, and why, and to give them a clear explanation of why they are doing what they are doing.

A few years ago while training a non-English speaking employee to fertilize greens, I included an explanation of each of the various particles in the mix and what they did. I watched him do two greens then let him work on his own for a half hour. When I returned, he had several opened bags set aside. When I asked him about this, he reached into the bag and showed me a particle that he could not identify. It was muriate of potash and would have caused damage the way we were applying it.

I never expected to have a problem with this mix. I had explained the particles only because I thought it would motivate him to do a better job.

Everyone wants to be associated with ex-

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cellence. Some may have given up; others are pursuing excellence in other areas of their lives with such vigor that they do not have time for you. Most people can be appealed to on this level.

I read a story one time about a company president who attended a softball game involving many of his employees. He was shocked to find energy and enthusiasm in several people whom he had thought to be very subdued. For some reason, this enthusiasm was not evident in their work.

Our job as supervisors is to find out what motivates individual employees to pursue their duties with energetic enthusiasm. Certainly there are many possibilities but one that seems to work well with many non-English speaking people is an opportunity to learn and advance. Technical training in irrigation repair and maintenance, equipment maintenance or materials application can be an excellent place to start.

Offering to pay for English classes or even having them on the property can be helpful. I have seen this work at many clubs where the result was a core of stable, highly motivated team players who accepted personal ownership of their areas of responsibility. An added bonus is that newcomers and other crew members quickly realize that their fate and compensation is based on their performance and desire to get ahead.

I was interviewed one time by a man who was telling me about the crew at the



club he represented. He said that his club did not have any of "those Murielito-types" working there. I had had considerable success with new hires that had come to the U.S. via the boatlift and told this man that I would not be limited in my choice of candidates to work on the golf course.

It was my impression that this man did not like Hispanics.

When I went to his club for a subsequent interview and heard him speaking Spanish, I asked him if he learned to speak Spanish because he lives in South Florida. He said, "No, I'm Cuban."

I got the job. I am sure it would be better if I learned more Spanish but I really have not had the need. I write instructions on the bulletin board in English and somehow they are carried out. Others will translate what is written and even follow up to make sure the activity is going well. I hand out forms and other

items that need to be filled out by the employees and give them the option of taking them home. They do and bring them back filled out properly.

I have had a couple situations with governmental agencies that having non-English speaking employees has aggravated.

I fired one employee for misconduct after several oral and written warnings. He applied for unemployment compensation and got it. I appealed and got a hearing. At the hearing the lady in charge asked me how I communicated my concerns to the employee. I told her I used a translator. She asked me how I knew that the translator told the employee what I wanted. I asked her to ask the employee what the translator had said. The employee said the same thing I said. I still lost because at the time I could not have been sure what the translator was saying.

As an FTGA member, I should have

called Seay and Associates!

The other concern I have relates to HAZCOM training. My understanding is that inspectors will judge your compliance based on your employee's understanding of the program, not on our ability to keep records of meetings. Will the inspector be willing to conduct interviews in Spanish or trust a translator?

The Lord has seen fit to challenge us with an imperfect world. Just like most of these imperfect situations, there are good and bad aspects that are not apparent on the surface. I find living in an international city very exciting. (I don't have to look very hard to see my blond kids in a sea of soccer players.)

I have learned that although people are very different, they are very much the same. One thing though is for sure: Anyone willing to get in a boat and row ninety miles across the ocean to get here can work for me.

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