

## UNDERSTANDING HISPANIC EMPLOYEES

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Today's green industry workforce looks much differently than it did 10 years ago. I think it's safe to say it will look even more diverse 10 years from now. Almost all individuals who are involved in either the green industry or the construction industry are utilizing Latin workers or have plans on hiring Latin workers. For the most part, Mexican workers comprise the majority of the Latin workforce working in the United States. I receive calls on a weekly basis from owners or foremen either complaining or wondering about certain behaviors or actions observed in their Latin workers. Believe me, I don't profess to be a "knowing it all" Mexican psychologist or sociologist; however, I have worked with Mexican workers for over 15 years; I am married to a Mexican American; and I have enveloped the Mexican traditions (very necessary to stay in good standing with Mexican in-laws)! Furthermore, I have worked with Mexican individuals in Mexico from the lowest denominator to the highest level. When I receive a question that stumps me (which is most all of the time), I consult with experts in Mexico who have experience in cultural behavior.

Why even address these issues? I believe that understanding a different culture can identify certain actions and responses. By understanding your workforce, the employer can make better decisions rather than reacting to your employee's actions.

Listed below are the 10 most common stumbling blocks employers have when working with Mexican labor and some suggestions, or at least insight, to help solve these problems:

1. You hire a Mexican worker. As you are interviewing him or her, you notice they do not look you in the eye. You become suspicious that these potential workers are not telling the truth.

Answer: The common myth among people in the United States is that this is customary in Mexico and most Mexican workers do not look their supervisors in the eye out of respect. The fact of the matter is that this action is really an environmental response. The greatest percentage of migrant workers in the United States are considered "Camposinos." This term is used in Mexico to describe workers or individuals who have grown up in rural areas of Mexico. Camposinos, or country workers, usually have the least amount of education and life experiences. In fact, some of these individuals' contact is limited to family members only. The lack of eye contact can be explained due to shyness or lack of confidence of the particular worker. As your relationship grows with each worker, you will notice eye contact to begin to increase as each worker's confidence and trust grow with their supervisor.

2. While visiting your company restroom, you notice soiled toilet paper scattered or piled around the commode.

Answer: This is definitely a cultural difference. Don't worry, this can be corrected in time. In Mexico, most bathrooms provide a small wastebasket with a plastic liner next to the commode. Why? In Mexico and other third world countries, the sewer or waste pipes leading from the building are usually very small in diameter compared with U.S standards. In addition, the water pressure or volume generated is also less and toilets are much more prone to clogging. Furthermore, most sewage is emptied directly into rivers and spillways. Individuals are taught at an early age to dispose their toilet tissue into the basket provided. Companies can provide wastebaskets or show workers that their toilets have plenty of horsepower to flush anything away!

3. You send the workers out with equipment and they return at the end of the day. The following morning, you notice that one piece of equipment has been damaged or is not working. No one notified you of equipment being damaged or not working properly. Furthermore, you are quite agitated because now the equipment must be taken out of service and worked on vs. the equipment being serviced at the time of the breakdown.

Answer: This has nothing to do with culture. First of all, landscape mechanical equipment is pretty much foreign to most Mexican individuals. The Camposino feels he or she may be blamed for doing something wrong if a particular piece of equipment is not working properly. This problem will take some time to fix. Continual training and encouragement will remove this problem. You will notice that workers who have come from higher economic backgrounds in Mexico will not exhibit these same responses.

4. You have a very dependable worker who has suddenly and unexpectedly not shown up for work. Upon speaking with other workers, you find that this person has returned to Mexico because of a health problem. As an employer, you are furious because you were not notified. You would have been more than happy to provide medical aid for your valuable employee.

Answer: This problem is a little more complex than some of the rest but is a common occurrence, nonetheless. There are two main reasons for the worker wishing to return to Mexico. First, many times in Mexico the Camposino has only had access to one doctor his entire life. In fact, that same doctor probably delivered that person at birth. The thing you must realize is that in rural Mexico relationships are the most important aspects in every day life. The patient/doctor relationship is an extremely important bond in rural Mexico. Allowing a different doctor to treat their particular illness or affliction is in direct conflict with Mexican culture. According to a series of manuals published by the National Alliance for Hispanic Health, Hispanic families traditionally emphasize interdependence over independence. In other words, when a family member is injured or ill, he or she is normally expected to consult with other family members

and, therefore, more likely to play a part in the decision making of the treatment of the patient. In rural Mexico, a trip to the doctor means more than just the patient in the treatment room...sometimes the extended family as well. If worker x is treated for an illness in the United States, this act alone is perceived as a shunning of their culture and potentially puts the worker at conflict with his or her family. The second reason is the language barrier. If the worker does not speak or understand English, this alone can potentially cause the worker to seek medical treatment in Mexico rather than in the United States.

5. You inform one worker to perform a task that only requires one worker. You find out later that the one worker picked another worker off the crew to help him complete the task.

Answer: I'm not sure where this action originates, but I can tell you in all my travels in Mexico, which have been very extensive, I see this all across Mexico. I always called it the "two-side effect". A poor country such as Mexico has a different value system. Working in cooperation with another worker is more desirable than competing against another. This is just the social make-up of the society. In the United States (at least in my generation), we were taught at an early age to strive to be the best. Individual excellence is rewarded. Mexico is the complete opposite. For example, the school system in Mexico from elementary to college emphasizes cooperation and interdependence as a group. The class will work together on a project. Individuals who shun working with the group are ostracized and are not rewarded for their efforts. Everything revolves around working as a team. If the team has an individual who is lagging behind, the group will stay behind to pick this person up and not leave him behind. Furthermore, failure as a group is more acceptable versus individual failure. It's important to be very careful when reprimanding an individual, especially in front of his peers. When you understand this concept about Mexico, you begin to really understand Mexico. How do you change the "two-side effect?" Constant teaching and reminders. You will not change it overnight. When workers feel more confident and trust in their employers, the Mexican worker will want to win his employer's praise.

6. You have a number of Mexican immigrants you would like to promote to a higher position, perhaps to a foreman. When you approach the individual, they decline immediately. You don't understand why since you are offering an increase in salary.

Answer: This is another complex problem that does not relate to all Mexican workers. Again, the U.S. employer must realize that the majority of Mexican immigrants who have made their way to the United States represent the lower end of the Mexican "caste" system. Now before I receive menacing calls from all of the college graduate Mexicans, I want to point out that I am stating the "majority" of Mexican immigrants. Furthermore, Mexican Americans who are born in America, these answers do not relate to you. This problem can be traced back to the social hierarchy. Often, a worker will not assume greater responsibility and

authority because it will risk his relationship with the group. This is a common problem when a company has a workforce that is made up of all relatives. On the other hand, if you bring in a Mexican worker who is not related to become a foreman or supervisor, he may be rejected and the clan will do everything in their power to discredit the new foreman. U.S. employers have to be especially aware of these dynamics! As I stated in the beginning, this is a complex problem and many issues must be considered. Often the leader of a group may not be the brightest or most experienced individual, rather the toughest one – the enforcer in the group who can keep everyone in line. This type of leader can be an effective foreman, however, you risk losing opinion and consensus of the group. Often a company will have a young foreman who speaks really good English but have a number of immigrant workers who are much older. You may think your young foreman is towing the line but in reality, often the eldest worker who has the most respect is, in effect, the foreman. I see this often in many green industry and construction work groups. The poor young foreman is forced to take the title because he is the only one who can translate. He has to walk a thin line not to appear he is working as an individual or disrespecting his elders.

7. You have Mexican workers who do excellent work but almost every other week and sometimes more often, they drink too much and either don't come in to work or they do come to work and you must send them home.

Answer: Alcohol plays a big part in Mexican culture. Not only do Mexicans enjoy a large number of holidays in which they celebrate, but also it is customary to celebrate all family birthdays. Obviously, this gives opportunity to drink alcohol. No one person or group of people is immune to the effects of alcohol; however, one thing you should consider is that many of the Mexican immigrants have a greater percentage of native Indian heritage. What is the significance of this? This means that many Mexicans do not have the enzymes within the bloodstream that effectively break down alcohol. Native American Indians have the same problem. Basically, in a nutshell, these people are alcoholics before they take their first drink. What can you do as an employer to minimize alcohol abuse? The first step is to show genuine concern over the employee's long-term health. This will be a tough problem to tackle as it is considered "macho" to consume large amounts of alcohol. One solution is to consider the holidays important to the crew. Let the workforce decide which holidays they will celebrate. As a supervisor, you can schedule the necessary days off in order to decrease the missed days due to alcohol abuse. Some companies maintain a zero tolerance attitude and this curbs any potential problem. From a safety and liability standpoint, companies have to remain firm. On the other hand, it is sometimes helpful to acknowledge that alcohol abuse is a sickness and sometimes help is needed.

8. You have a Mexican crew that is primarily one extended family. Everyone is related to one another in some way, whether by blood relation or marriage. Whenever you hire a new worker who is not related to this family, the new worker gets run out of town!

Answer: This is one of the biggest dangers to hiring all family members. When you have a problem with one worker, you really have a problem with the entire group. Remember we discussed how the group stays together and pulls the weakest one along? This is not a Mexican cultural problem. You would have the same problem if you hired an all-Caucasian family for your workforce. Whenever you hire all family, you will have problems. Problems from home come to work with the workers and vice versa. I recommend making sure your workforce is diverse and not all related. Oftentimes, when you hire a new worker who is not related to the other workers, he will be asked to slow his work down in order to make sure the others are not made to look bad. Again, let me repeat, this is not a Mexican cultural problem, it's a management problem. Family workforces can pretty much dictate how your business is run, how productive it is, and even how profitable it can be. Be careful when you hire an entire family. Your problems are only beginning!

9. Whenever the Mexican crew has a disagreement with management, they organize a sit down strike until things are resolved.

Answer: Ever heard the old saying "all for one and one for all"? This is very common in Mexico. In fact, sit-downs are very popular with college students as well as groups dissenting with rule of law in Mexico. The thing you should determine is if the entire group feels the same way about something. Often only a few people have a gripe with management but are able to convince the entire group to go along. You definitely need to know your employees. A good foreman will sniff out potential problems before it comes to a sit-down. Merely dismissing the group's claims will only cause more grief in the future. You do need to listen to their objectives and come to an agreeable solution. Often, many of these situations are a result of poor communication and misunderstandings.

10. You have a crew consisting of different nationalities and they don't seem to get along. You assumed that if they were all Hispanic, there should not be any problems.

Answer: Wrong again! You need to be very aware of the types of groups you place together. Rule number 1: try to keep Mexicans and Puerto Ricans away from each other. I have no scientific evidence to back my opinion on other than 15 years experience. Also, workers from Argentina and workers from Mexico have some bad blood between them. Why? I have no clue. Perhaps a bad call during a World Cup match? Again, I refer back to my 15 years experience.

I realize this only scrapes the surface. It is important to acknowledge our differences between the two cultures. This is not a passing fad, so we might as well accept the future. To begin to understand our differences and attempt to gain a better insight to different backgrounds will invariably allow us to make better decisions as employers.