How to build the Hispanic relationship

Doing a few little things for your Hispanic workers will keep them happy...and coming back

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

A number of forward-looking companies are building on the fact that Hispanics come from another culture and have different motivations. The business rewards are many: less turnover, more motivation and productivity, and upward professional development of talented Hispanic people. There's also the human reward like the satisfaction of being in a personal relationship with your workforce, plus the day-to-day satisfaction of working with a happier group of employees.

One such company is Jacobsen Landscape Design & Construction in Midland Park, NJ. The 22-year old firm employs 50 to 60 employees in peak season. About 80% of their field workforce comes from nearby Hispanic communities — the people are either citizens, green-carded or temporary. “If I didn’t have these guys, I wouldn’t be in business,” says president Glenn Jacobsen. “There is no local Anglo labor force here. I realized that pretty early on, and I established a relationship with some Mexicans. That was the beginning.

“I help people,” Jacobsen continues. “That’s my philosophy. If they’re going to work for me and be committed, we’ll help them as much as we can. Like anyone else, they appreciate that kind of treatment. And if they can help me, it’s a two-way win.”

Apparantly, that’s just what has happened. The early core group of Mexican workers has, in tum, greatly assisted his business. Many of them are still with the firm — in any given year, nearly all of his Hispanic labor force comes back after the winter lay-off — and they’ve brought their relatives and friends to apply for positions as well.

Relationship builders

What accounts for their loyalty? Jacobsen Landscape does a number of specific things that “build the relationship” with the Hispanic labor force. Fairness. “Whether you’re Hispanic or any other nationality, the key is treating people fairly to get their respect,” Jacobsen says. “If you’re fair to people, they’re fair to you. And if you take advantage of people, they’re going to take advantage of you.

Fairness doesn’t apply just to your Hispanic workers — it’s a whole philosophy of business. I deal with my clients and my other employees that way.”

Respect their family orientation. “This is something you do on a personal level every day — asking about their families and so on. The family unit is very important in Hispanic cultures. I learned that early on with the Mexicans, but I also know that it holds true with most of the South Ameri-

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can countries. I have a lot of respect for that," he adds. "In turn, they helped me
with hiring because they felt that this was a
good place for their friends and relatives to
work. Some were not treated fairly work-
ing elsewhere in the industry, and being
treated well here impressed them.

Recognize the nationality. "We've found
that it makes sense to keep people from
the same country within a crew," Jacobsen
notes. "They do have different cultures and
different ways of doing things, so if you
keep them together, they seem to develop
better rapport."

Career and personal enrichment. "I have
quite a few foremen who have come from
this group — it's something that happens
naturally. If they're here long enough, and
if I see that they have skills and the desire to
stay, I encourage them to move up. A lot
are bilingual," he adds. "We're hooked in
with a private language company that
becomes. I'm subsidizing
their development." It's another example
of the company's "Benefit them, benefits
us" philosophy. The four-month language
program includes a code of conduct cover-
ing attendance, completion of homework
and passing grades. Students who keep to
the code receive a bonus.

Sessions with a consultant. "The idea to
help with their immigration paperwork
was something that Angelo Miño pointed
out to us," Jacobsen reports. "Angelo is a
consultant who helps Green Industry com-
panies with their Hispanic work forces. I
met him at a trade show and we hit it off
immediately because we think along
pretty similar lines about the value of help-
ing people. We brought him in to com-
municate with our people last December,
and we're going to have him back at least
once or twice this year." (See sidebar.)

Personal assistance. Jacobsen helps its
immigrant laborers with the kinds of bu-
reaucracy they often find daunting: immi-
gration paperwork, drivers' licenses, car
loans, mortgages and others. Office Man-
ger Donna Deluccia draws a lot of that
responsibility.

Cultural exchange. The company has
now sponsored two annual exchanges of
culture based around Thanksgiving Day.
"It wasn't my idea — it came from one of
the guys," admits Jacobsen. "I wanted to
have a celebration at Thanksgiving, instead
of at Christmas, because by then many
people are back home already. But one of
my Hispanic people said, 'Can we add a
Mexican feast?' I agreed. They prepared
the Mexican feast, and I reimbursed them
and gave them time off to do it. We did an
American Thanksgiving (meaning turkey
and mashed potatoes), and they prepared a
Mexican feast based on roasted sheep and
rice. The whole production force was
there. It was a pretty successful event —
the people really do like that form of ac-
knowledgement."

Holidays. "We are aware of Mexican and
other holidays, and we observe them," Jacob-
sen explains. "That's showing respect for
their heritage. We don't give days off — it's
really just a matter of posting it on the bul-
letin board. They want the acknowledgement
and want to see that you understand
when their important times are. Our Ameri-
can holidays don't mean too much to them,
other than a day off. When we offer recogni-
tion of their own holidays, it goes a long way."

How Jacobsen wins
Has the company's philosophy solved its
hiring problems in a painfully tight labor
market? Yes, but not entirely. Jacobsen
still has labor and hiring issues. "I don't
know if I will ever get to the point where I
won't," he says. Most of his pain comes
from success — because the company is
growing so rapidly.

"We had over 20% growth last year.
With that, you need to have a good supply
of people. We're at a pretty strong hiring
level, and every year we seem to get better.
But the company's growing so rapidly, it's
tough to have the people ready for the pos-
tions. If we weren't good with our peo-
live, we'd never be able to support that
kind of growth. For example, 95% of the
people we laid off for the winter last year
came back in the spring. I think that's a
pretty good ratio, and a good indicator that
things are working. We're proud of it."

What about other sources of labor?
The company may eventually have to turn
to the Federal H2B program for more
workers, despite the well-known hassle
factor. And Jacobsen has recently devel-
oped a rapport with the local Ecuadorian
community in New Jersey — again, the
fruit of the fairness policy.

They had an Ecuadorian group come in
last year for the first time. "I asked them to
bring more guys in this year, and they
have," says the company president. "Once
you're fair, they usually bring in friends
and relatives!"

— The author is a contributing editor based
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