



# In Other Words

Hispanics may now or  
could eventually comprise  
a large portion of your crew.  
What are you doing to  
improve communication  
with them?

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR



**Scott Wicker never thought he would end up as an English teacher** while studying turf science at Rutgers University in the early 1990s. But that's what has happened to Wicker at Black Creek Club in Chattanooga, Tenn., where he's superintendent.

Wicker heads a 15-person crew at Black Creek, including nine Hispanic members who spoke little or no English when they joined the course during its construction last July. But that is changing.

In March, Wicker began teaching English to the Hispanic employees during work hours. They gather in the maintenance facility weekly for an hour-long lesson.

"It's going great," Wicker says. "We don't concentrate on grammar, spelling and formal stuff. I'm teaching them how to carry on a conversation in English."

Wicker realizes what other superintendents are starting to understand — that Hispanic and non-English-speaking employees are more prevalent than ever before. In fact, the nation's population of Hispanics has grown so fast that the 2000 census reveals their numbers nearly equal the number of blacks. Superintendents, recognizing that Hispanics could eventually comprise large portions of their crews, know they must improve communication with them.

The golf course maintenance industry is beginning a major transition in its labor makeup, says Arturo Castro, a Chicago-based communications and organizational consultant for companies that employ Hispanics. Natives of Mexico and Latin America are no longer only working on golf courses in Texas, California and Florida, which have employed them for several years. Hispanics are migrating further north and are working on courses in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois and other Midwestern and Eastern states.

"It's the trend in the industry," says Todd Towery, assistant superintendent at Southern Hills CC in Tulsa, Okla. "Hispanics are migrating north. They're everywhere."





Lincoln, Neb.-based Landscapes Unlimited hired Cesar Martinez last September to help the company's mostly American construction superintendents communicate better with its nearly 700 Hispanic workers, 70 percent of whom speak little or no English. "Part of my responsibility is to help identify the obstacles our Hispanic employees encounter daily and help them grow within our organization," Martinez says.

**Superintendent Scott Wicker turns English teacher once a week at Black Creek Club.**

### Learn their language

Some superintendents may resist learning Spanish to improve communication with Hispanics. They say: "Hispanics who work in America should learn English to communicate better with us."

### In Sync

**A**rturo Castro, a Chicago-based communications and organizational consultant for golf courses that employ Hispanics, says superintendents should implement these practices when employing Hispanics:

- All internal verbal and written communications should be translated. "If you don't do this, you're segregating Hispanics," Castro says. "If you do it, you're ensuring involvement."
- Clearly outline job descriptions. Make sure Hispanic employees realize they have a chance to be promoted.
- Provide performance reviews, including one formal review, one informal half-year review and two quarterly performance updates.

Use an outside translator — not an inside interpreter — when giving reviews. With an outside translator, information is kept private.

For more information on better communicating with Hispanics, contact Castro's Web site: [www.spanishsystems.com](http://www.spanishsystems.com).

That attitude is a mistake, Castro says. The language barrier must be addressed from both ends. Hispanic employees will respect a superintendent who tries to learn their language. That could translate into hard-working employees and improved retention.

Steve Campbell, director of agronomy at Las Campanas Sante Fe in Sante Fe, N.M., employs about 100 crew members at his two Jack Nicklaus-designed championship courses, and nearly 80 percent of them don't speak English. But Campbell says he has formed a strong bond with his Hispanic employees because he speaks their language. "They don't feel like outsiders," he adds.

Wicker took 16 hours of classes at a language school to learn Spanish. He says it was his duty to learn the language so he could improve communication with his Hispanic workers. "You can't approach them with a my-way-or-the-highway attitude," he says.

Towery's advice to superintendents and other English-speaking course workers is to learn three new Spanish words daily.

"It's an easy goal to set for yourself," maintains Towery, who also attended language school. "Grab a dictionary and write the words down on an index card. Carry the card in your pocket and study it during the day."

Experts say the best time to learn another language is between the ages of 3 and 5. So it's important that superintendents be patient when learning Spanish. More importantly, they must be patient with their Hispanic workers who are learning English.

Because much of his material is elementary, Wicker says he feels like he's teaching children when he's teaching English to his crew members. "You have to teach them like they are children, but you don't want them to feel like children," he stresses.

Wicker says he enjoys the sessions, as do his employees. They're spending time together and learning from each other.

"I'm learning as much as they do," Wicker says. "It's a good group, and we're enjoying ourselves."

Wicker urges superintendents with Hispanic employees to learn Spanish. "There's a Hispanic wave in the United States, and you had better be willing to adapt to it," he adds.

### Help them learn

It's important that golf courses make language classes available to Hispanic employees and encourage them to improve their skills. Las Campanas Sante Fe will pay for language classes for employees. "If we can get enough people to participate, we'll have them on site," Campbell says.

At Southern Hills, Towery stresses to employees the importance of learning a new language when conducting performance reviews with them. "I push them to better themselves by learning English or Spanish to communicate better with other employees," he says.

Martinez says Landscapes Unlimited implemented a program to help Spanish- and English-speaking employees under-

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stand each other's language as it relates to course construction. The program uses a large poster and audio cassette. The poster is a map of a course and features greens, fairways, tees and other areas identified in English and Spanish. The cassette includes construction-related phrases and words in both languages.

Many Hispanics who migrate to the United States have never seen a golf course, Campbell says. "They're great workers, but they have no conception of what you're trying to do," he adds.

While superintendents must train Hispanics how to use greens mowers and hole cutters, they learn quickly.

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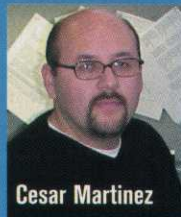


Superintendent Scott Wicker (left) says his bilingual assistant, José Perez, has been a big help in training Hispanic employees.

RANDY PARKER

## Striving for Unity at Landscapes Unlimited

Cesar Martinez was hired last September at Landscapes Unlimited in Lincoln, Neb., to help the company's mostly American construction superintendents communicate better with its nearly 700 Hispanic crew workers, 70 percent of whom speak little or no English. Martinez implemented a "belief system" to create



Cesar Martinez

unity for employees within the company. The system stresses:

**Respect** - Treat all employees with respect and recognize the talents they possess.

**Access** - Ensure that all employees have access to company information in a format and language that is appropriate for them.

**Education** - Provide all employees' ac-

cess to education and training in a bilingual setting to maintain the highest quality construction and customer service practices.

**Language** - Recognize that an individual's ability or inability to speak a second language is not a direct reflection of their intelligence or ability to perform their work.

**Inclusive** - Celebrate the traditions the employees share and value the differences they have to create an inclusive environment throughout the organization.

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"Training has been a lot easier than I anticipated," Wicker says, adding that his workers are quick learners.

Wicker and Campbell utilize veteran Hispanic employees who speak English and Spanish to help them train employees. While Wicker speaks decent Spanish, he'll be the first to admit he doesn't speak the language as fluently as his assistant, José Perez, who's from Cuba. "He has been a huge help," Wicker adds.

### Handle with care

While the superintendent is the boss and is expected to give orders, he shouldn't treat Hispanics as inferior because they're from other countries, Martinez states. Hispanics shouldn't be judged as less intelligent because they can't speak English.

If you treat Hispanics as less, you'll be doomed to fail, Wicker adds. "They're not going to respect you, and they're not going to want to be part of what you're doing."

It's important to let Hispanics know they're part of a team, Campbell stresses. "Most of them want to be good workers, and they want to fit in and be respected."

Campbell also stresses that superintendents strive to understand the Hispanic culture, not just the language. "I like the Hispanic culture — the traditions, clothes and music — and that helps me better relate to them," he says.

Superintendents should remember that Hispanics are not an assimilated group. While they hail from Mexico, Hispanics also come from many Latin American nations. "They come from different countries with unique cultures, histories and dialects in regard to the language they speak," Martinez says.

### The career path

Mexican and Latin American immigrants are unlike European immigrants, who came to America in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to establish new lives. Many Hispanics come to America temporarily to earn money and return home after a year.



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That doesn't mean that superintendents should treat such employees any less. In fact, if superintendents treat

Hispanic employees well and offer them pay raises and opportunities for advancement, there's a chance they will stay longer.

"You want to be seen as an employer that provides everything necessary for Hispanic employees to develop," Castro says. "Turn your course into a desirable place for them to work and make them feel like they're at home."

Considering that Hispanic employees are migratory, retaining them is vital, especially when they comprise a growing percentage of the labor pool. "That's beneficial because turnover is one of the biggest problems in this market," Wicker says.

One of the reasons Martinez was hired at Landscapes Unlimited was to help Hispanic workers advance. "Our organization's senior managers realize that the Hispanic work force is contributing dramatically to the company's success," he says.

Wicker says he would consider promoting a Hispanic employee to assistant superintendent. "I have Hispanic people here who are intelligent, reliable and want to excel."

Wicker believes his Hispanic workers respect him and appreciate his efforts to improve communication with them. His proof is that the Black Creek maintenance crew has had no turnover in almost a year. "That tells me that they like where they're working," Wicker says proudly. ■

**Bill Kubly (right), founder of Landscapes Unlimited, wants more Hispanic employees to advance in his company's ranks.**

## Learn More Words than 'Rápido'

Jennifer Thomas, founder of Spanish Training Services in Evanston, Ill., recognizes that several cultural barriers exist between English- and Spanish-speaking employees. But Thomas, whose business offers language and cross-cultural training services to the green industry, believes most of the barriers can be overcome.

For instance, Thomas says many Hispanic employees claim the only word their managers know and use in directing them is "rápido." Her solution is for managers to teach their crews basic English or learn a few phrases of Spanish themselves to communicate more effectively. "Communication equals productivity," she notes.

Another problem is that Hispanic employees often have strained relationships with equipment technicians, Thomas says. If a Hispanic employee breaks a piece of equipment, he's afraid to tell the technician and turn in the equipment in fear of being berated. "We don't yell at the technician, but the technician yells at us," Thomas says, repeating what many Hispanic employees have told her.

Her solution is for technicians to outline an area in the maintenance facility with masking tape where employees can turn in broken equipment and not confront technicians. "At least the equipment gets turned in," she says. Better training in using equip-

ment and a little sensitivity on behalf of technicians would also help matters, she notes.

Thomas' training program, "English for the Green Industry," includes workbooks, cassettes and picture flashcards as well as a facilitator's guide. In addition to vocabulary, many cultural misunderstandings are explained through case studies. She also offers a self-study, "Spanish for the Green Industry" (GCSAA counts it as three CEUs), includes a basic workbook, small flashcards, and a cassette.

Thomas is also the author of "Spanish for the Green Industry," a textbook that will debut next year in U.S. colleges.

For more information, contact Thomas at 800-491-0391.