

Supervising across



language barriers

The key to communication is mutual respect, enthusiasm and effort—on the part of both the employee and the supervisor.

■ As the country's workforce changes, supervisors must more frequently communicate with employees who do not speak English easily.

That challenge can be frustrating, but not impossible. In her book "Bridging Cultural Barriers for Corporate Success," Sondra Thiederman offers practical ideas for improving communication with workers whose English is limited.

Using her tips, supervisors can identify where communication bridges need to be built, understand how to build them, and help "ESL employees" (English/Second Language) better communicate.

The majority of non-native English speakers want to succeed, the author says, and are intelligent and hard-working enough to do so. But English is a complex

language, and many ESL workers are intimidated by its difficulty. When people cannot make themselves easily understood, they may quickly begin to feel inadequate and powerless.

A patient, thoughtful supervisor can help prevent or relieve such feelings. ESL workers invariably want to express themselves clearly and be fully understood as much as anyone. They also want to understand their supervisor.

You can help ESL workers, Thiederman says, by using simple words and sentence structure. Other suggestions:

- Stick to one subject at a time.
- Be concrete and ask specifically for what is wanted.
- Avoid jargon.
- Phrase statements positively.
- Use active rather than passive voice.
- Speak slowly and distinctly. Enunciate clearly.
- Keep the tone calm and respectful.

Visual aids can give the worker more ways to understand. Written words, pictures, charts and diagrams are all good bridge-builders. Writing down instructions or key ideas from meetings and phone calls

gives ESL employees a better chance to grasp information.

Occasionally, ESL employees may indicate they understand when they don't. They don't want to look foolish, or imply that the supervisor didn't explain well enough. They may also worry that, even if things are explained again, they still will not understand.

One way to know if employees really understand is if their eyes are focused on you and they nod and smile appropriately. A sign of not understanding is if there are no interruptions or questions, or if they smile or giggle inappropriately. (Such laughter rarely means disrespect; more frequently, it indicates embarrassment.)

Workers should be asked to repeat instructions in their own words. Ask them to demonstrate their understanding, and follow up by observing their behavior.

Invite all employees to ask questions in private, to spare some employees from losing face in public. Also, allow enough time for them to formulate their questions.

Here are some additional tips on helping ESL employees get their point across:

1) Share responsibility for poor communication. Say something like "I'm sorry it's taking me so long to understand."

2) Listen to the whole statement before deciding whether you understand.

3) Repeat what the worker said in your own words and ask if you have heard correctly.

4) If you are not communicating well, encourage ESL workers to write messages down or to spell difficult words.

5) Watch the speaker's lips. Observe body language.

Don't be afraid to learn a few words of their language. And when you speak, don't worry about making mistakes. You'll be giving the ESL employee the chance to teach you something.

Finally, encourage ESL employees to speak English. Smile and look enthusiastic when speaking. If they seem embarrassed at their difficulties, look away for a moment to let them gather composure. Challenge them to express themselves beyond "yes" and "no." Even if they laugh at their own mistakes, don't laugh at them.

—Adapted from the University of California's Agricultural Personnel Management Program newsletter, Labor Management Decisions, summer, 1992 issue.