

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



Jacobsen Landscape Design & Construction draws much of its Hispanic workforce from communities surrounding its Midland Park, NJ, headquarters.

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."

Apparently, that's just what has happened. The early core group of Mexican workers has, in turn, 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 working 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 teaches them English, so 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 covering 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 companies 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 helping people. We brought him in to communicate 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 bureaucracy they often find daunting: immigration paperwork, drivers' licenses, car loans, mortgages and others. Office Manager 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 acknowledgement."

Holidays. "We are aware of Mexican and other holidays, and we observe them," Jacobsen 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 bulletin board. They want the acknowledgement and want to see that you understand when their important times are. Our American holidays don't mean too much to them, other than a day off. When we offer recognition 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

Latin American holidays
 observed at Jacobsen Landscape:
 Mexican Independence, September 15
 Ecuadorian Independence, August 10
 Peruvian Independence Day, January 18
 (Mexico) la Virgen de Guadalupe, December 12
 (Ecuador) Batalla de Pichincha, May 24

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 positions. If we weren't good with our people, 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 developed 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 in Mendham, NJ.*