

# DON'T BE CAUGHT OFF GUARD BY cultural issues

Your Hispanic employees' attitudes and approaches to work can create some on-the-job challenges. BY **BARBARA MULHERN**

PICTURE YOURSELF IN this situation: You have an all-Hispanic or nearly all-Hispanic crew. One of the crewmembers isn't pulling his weight. But you don't find out about it until you personally visit one of his job sites — or, you don't find out about it at all.

"We'll put these guys (Hispanic workers) together on crews," says Maria Anaya, a bilingual Latina woman who serves as a liaison between Spanish-speaking workers and management at Kujawa Enterprises Inc. (KEI) in Oak Creek, WI.

"They'll never come to us and say: 'He's not doing what he needs to be doing,'" Anaya says. "Instead, another guy will pick up the slack. It's almost a code of honor among the crews. We have to go out and watch them to see who's working and who isn't."

Understanding your Hispanic workers' cultures not only will improve relationships; it also makes good business sense.

## Potential barriers

Here are some additional cultural issues you may come across that can be barriers to effective communication and/or safe work practices:


➤ **Risk-taking.** Risk-taking is viewed as the norm in certain countries such as Mexico, particularly among young Hispanic males. In one incident in California, a 19-year-old Mexican native who had been doing landscaping

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When training your Hispanic workers, closely watch their facial expressions to see if they really understand. Then have them repeat back to you what they just learned.

## HISPANIC EMPLOYEES



Maria Anaya assists Tom Jurasinski, a manager at Kujawa Enterprises, Inc. (KEI), with some documents needing to be explained to employee Abel Chairez. Anaya understands the cultural issues that could inhibit effective communication between KEI management and the company's native Spanish-speaking workers.

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decided the work wasn't as "daring" as climbing trees. One day, while scaling a 50-ft. palm tree, a weave of dead fronds came loose, pinning him to the safety belt that held him to the tree. His friends, who watched him being asphyxiated, told the media the reason he liked climbing trees was to show everyone how "brave" he was.

► **Pleasing the boss.** Many Hispanic workers have a strong desire to please the boss, which can be good and bad. "They will go above and beyond what they need to do. They are always afraid of not having a job. If there's a massive branch that needs to be cut, they'll cut it down no matter what it takes — even if it's not safe," Anaya says.

► **Lack of direct eye contact.** Direct eye contact with a person "in authority" is considered disrespectful in many Hispanic cultures. One problem this can cause is if a supervisor is leading a training session, without direct eye contact he might not be able to tell whether the trainees understood what he said.

► **Fear of institutions.** This might include a fear of doctors, police, emer-

gency rescue personnel and the government in general. In the case of workers from Mexico, Anaya says, because government "is threatening to them there, they come here having that same fear. They assume that our government will be exactly the same."

### Family first

One major issue within Hispanic cultures that you can use to your advantage in communicating with your workers is a strong emphasis on "family." Whenever possible, frame messages to your Hispanic workers in terms of family.

For example, if you are trying to get them to wear their safety glasses, instead of saying: "Wear your safety glasses so you don't lose an eye," instead say: "Wear your safety glasses so you will be able to see your children grow up." Or, instead of saying: "If you don't use fall protection equipment, you could fall out of that tree and die," say: "If you fall out of that tree and break your back, who will provide for your family in the future?"

Also, instead of telling them: "We don't want you to get injured," say: "We

want you go home uninjured to your family every night."

Finally, take a few minutes to ask your Hispanic workers how their spouses or children are doing when you greet them at the start of the workday. Even if you only know a little Spanish, make the effort to use a few Spanish words when you ask this — and be sure to greet them by name.

### 5 management tips:

► **Understand your role.** Your Hispanic workers are likely to nod their heads "yes" indicating they understand — even when they don't. This is part of the strong desire to please the boss. One way to work around this is to carefully watch their facial expressions. Then have them either repeat back to you or demonstrate to you what they just learned.

► **Work hard to build trust.** Regularly praise your workers for jobs well done. Recognize them in front of their peers. "We try to build trust with them first. Communication gets better with trust," Anaya says. "We welcome them,

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## HISPANIC EMPLOYEES

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try to get to know them, and make them feel like they are part of our company right away.”

› **Respect your workers’ cultures.** Celebrate holidays such as Cinco de Mayo (the Fifth of May — a holiday celebrated in Mexico that commemorates the 1862 victory by Mexican forces

over French soldiers). Have your native Mexican workers bring in food to share from their culture.

› **Train your workers on the importance of emergency personnel.** Help them so they are not afraid to seek assistance from firefighters, police or emergency medical technicians (EMTs) when needed. In one instance in Wisconsin,

two Hispanic workers drowned after a canoe capsized on a golf course pond. Although EMTs arrived several minutes after receiving the call, co-workers initially sent them to the wrong side of the pond. Investigators believed that part of the problem was the Hispanic co-workers’ fears of talking with uniformed officers and rescue personnel.

› **Have a bilingual supervisor accompany ill or injured workers to the doctor.**

This is important so the supervisor can help translate English into Spanish and so the supervisor can tell the doctor about your company’s light-duty program. However, it is also important to help allay your Hispanic workers’ fears. *LM*

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