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Manage Your Multicultural Workforce

Building/Remodeling HR and Workforce Advice

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When it comes to diversity, experts suggest that builders are strides ahead of other Americans in terms of understanding and education. They have to be, as foreign-born workers are 6.5 percent more likely to work in construction than their native-born counterparts, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"On a construction job site alone you may find employees that come from a dozen different places," says Myelita Melton, president of Mooresville, N.C.-based SpeakEasy Communications, who specializes in diversity education within the construction industry.

Most of those places are probably Latin American countries, as Hispanic workers were landing two of every three new construction jobs in the United States as recently as 2006, according to the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, D.C. It reports that of approximately 19.6 million Hispanic workers currently employed in the U.S. labor market, 2.9 million work in construction, accounting for 25 percent of the industry's total employment.

With so many foreign-born hands measuring, hammering, cutting and carrying on their job sites, builders have a lot to learn when it comes to managing multicultural workers. They've got to educate themselves, train their employees and seize interpersonal opportunities that they may previously have skirted.

Understand the Impact

For builders, diversity creates both challenges and opportunities, observes Simma Lieberman, co-author of *Putting Diversity to Work: How to Successfully Lead a Diverse Workforce*. As president of Albany, Calif.-based Simma Lieberman Associates, she specializes in multicultural communication and says that few managers realize the impact of diversity on their organization.

"The more you understand about the people you work with, the easier it is to work with them," Lieberman says. "The easier it is to work with them, the faster you get the work

done. And the faster you get the work done, the more money you make. It all really does come down to the bottom line."

Indeed, when you have a diverse workforce, cultural clarity is key. Making sure that employees understand their jobs is paramount to their survival and your success, as communication impacts the accuracy of your work — and therefore its cost — as well as the wellbeing of workers, who must be able to grasp safety regulations and learn to use protective equipment on the job. "[Poor communication] could cost you clients, money and workers," Lieberman says.

Know Your Employees

Effectively managing multicultural workers begins with getting to know them, according to Melton.

Of course, getting to know them requires a lot more than shaking their hands. In the case of foreign-born workers, it means learning who they are and where they come from. Here are some suggestions for doing just that, according to Melton:

- Find out employees' nationalities
- Research their homeland's geography online
- Study their nation's history
- Learn some of their native recipes

When you learn something about employees' origins, share it with them. "It means a lot to people," Lieberman says. "It shows you care about them and that, in turn, makes them care more about you."

It's not enough to study someone's country, though. The best managers also honor their employees' culture. "In many cultures," Melton says, "the importance of the family completely supercedes *anything* that happens at work."

In order to honor workers' cultural values, consider granting them time off for their own national holidays and giving them unique, family-focused benefits, including flextime, dependent care support and family-friendly leave policies.

Communicate Clearly

Perhaps the most important ingredient in the recipe for effective diversity training is communication, according to Lieberman. "In the workplace, you have to be able to converse," she says. "You have to be able to ask each other for help and to use each other as resources."

To help facilitate better communication with foreign-born employees, consider these strategies:

- **Ask questions.** "Instead of asking, 'Do you understand me?' — a lot of cultures will say yes because they don't want to offend their boss — ask open-ended questions like, 'What do you think the best way to do this is?'" Lieberman says. Questions open lines of communication and encourage comprehension.
- **Offer English instruction.** Don't assume employees have the resources to learn English; instead, support them with on-the-job assistance. "Colleges often have English programs that they'll provide to employers at the work site," Melton says.

"They're often no cost or low-cost because they're subsidized by state tax dollars in the name of workforce development."

- **Study important words.** Learning should be a two-way street, according to Melton, who recommends memorizing industry-specific vocabulary in order to communicate important job specs and safety standards. "Focus completely on communication and let the fancy grammar part of it slide," she says. "When you've got somebody that's about to fall off a roof, communication is much more important than whether or not you've conjugated your verb correctly."
- **Hire a translator.** If you hire a translator to facilitate workforce communication, make sure he or she has the right industry education and background, says Melton. Often, a better option is to promote from within. "There may be one or two go-to guys that are essentially bilingual that your company can rely on for translation services on the job site, in addition to what their normal workload is," Melton suggests.

Regardless of the strategies you employ, keep respect top of mind when you're communicating with employees, regardless of where they're from or what language they speak. "Etiquette and good manners are a sign of good upbringing," Melton concludes. "Always speak to and acknowledge your employees. A simple 'hola' and 'como está' will go a long way towards building rapport."