

Title:

Managing Millions of "Invisible" Workers: Employing Spanish-Speaking Immigrants (Part II)

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915

Summary:

Looking at the soul of the immigrant worker and organizational culture: How US companies employing native Spanish-speaking workers may increase employee commitment, productivity, and their bottom line.

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Article Body:

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Can employers see beyond recent immigration issues to tap into the needs of the Spanish-speaking workers and find mutual economic opportunity? Success will require much more than translating worker manuals into Spanish or providing English-as-Second-Language courses. In order for companies to positively affect their bottom line, they need to understand how to effectively relate to their Spanish-speaking staff and create organizational cultures that are fully inclusive. As is often the case, many aspects of cultural identity or societal prejudice are unconscious or assumed without question. It is therefore important to call employers' attention to organizational assumptions and societal concerns that are likely to have a negative impact on the motivation and commitment of a large number of employees and, in turn, on the bottom line.

There are many social variables that affect native Spanish-speaking workers. Consider the generation gaps that exist between older Spanish-speaking workers and those who may have come here as children with their parents. Consider how the different schedules required by employers here make it so families do not share as many meals together. Familial relationships, patterns, and roles are all changed as a result of immigrating to a different country.

Realize that Spanish-speaking people in the U.S. have to turn more often to formal social services than they would in their home country because they do not have the extended network of family and long-term family friends to rely upon. This is humiliating for many of them.

Another issue to be aware of relates to personal pride leading to covering up a lack of English understanding or compensating for illiteracy. There are safety implications involved as well as consequences attached to lower productivity and employee satisfaction.

For native Spanish speakers, English is much less nuanced and not nearly as rich as Spanish for conveying vivid images, strong emotions, or stories. It is critical to consider this when translating materials since literal translations rarely communicate concepts and may lose readers' attention. They may figure they have a better chance of success through trial and error rather than reading a manual of instructions, which has safety and accuracy repercussions. Supervision that occurs in very dry, impersonal language will be less likely to connect, motivate, and influence Spanish-speaking employees' behavior.

For companies that experience some or the majority of these problems in their organizations, it is not a hopeless situation. With focused attention on what has worked well, companies will often find low cost or no-cost solutions to address inequities, dismantle cultural barriers, and increase the productivity, retention, and contributions of native Spanish-speaking employees. The same activities will also make organizational culture stronger, more fruitful, and more appealing to employees over all. It will take effort, commitment, and a genuine willingness of leadership to change the status quo.

Successful companies use their vision, mission and values to guide decision-making and to inspire workers' commitment and loyalty. Evidence shows that companies that live their values build bottom line success--cultural capital is the new competitive edge.

As intercultural employers, companies can identify employees' personal values, their perception of the current organizational values and the ones they desire to see operating in the workplace. This will help the organization identify opportunities and obstacles to the creation of an inclusive organizational culture that takes into consideration the values and aspirations of immigrant workers. Doing so will address how Spanish-speaking employees are often left out of the decision-making process and only receive directives based on decisions that have been made without their participation.

When organizational values are collectively identified and shared, they not only provide guidelines for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, but also direction for decision making. More importantly, they support the organization in creating a future that responds to the needs and wants of the workforce. When selecting core organizational values, businesses may consider safety and

innovation, or may focus on relational values such as trust and openness, and/or operational values like cost reduction or productivity. These values will guide the selection of corporate strategies that best accomplish the mission and purpose of the business, and will be integrated into the human resources systems and operational processes, so as to institutionalize the cultural transformation.

The next step is to identify behaviors that support the chosen values. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a powerful technique that can be used for this task and for creating a positive future. AI focuses on what is working rather than dwelling on what should be fixed. It is a distinction that separates organizations which go in circles around constraints and wonder why they cannot move forward, while others build upon a continuously more inclusive core of strengths. AI affirms and builds on what is positive and strong in the organizational culture and focuses people's energies by involving them in the process of defining the future of their organization.

If immigrant workers are going to be fulfilled, motivated and productive, they need to live their values in the workplace, and feel they are valued and appreciated. They must be involved and experience that their contributions matter. Thus far Spanish-speaking workers have been an underdeveloped resource, and as the United States grapples with the details of immigration policy, employers would be wise to reassess their largest capital cost of labor through identifying ways in which these employees can reach their full potential, and thus contribute more effectively to output and the bottom line. Ideally, we will collectively do the same to provide efficient avenues for productive citizenship as well.