

Overcoming the Language Barrier

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Dealing with the language barrier is usually the first major challenge that agricultural and horticultural business managers must address when hiring and managing Hispanic workers. This challenge begins during the interview process and continues through the training, supervising, and managing of the workers. Since the language barrier severely limits a dairy manager's ability to successfully employ Hispanic workers, they must work aggressively to overcome it.

Many alternatives are available to dairy managers to minimize or eliminate the negative impacts caused by a language barrier between themselves and their workers. These alternatives range from the manager learning Spanish to the Hispanic employee learning English. In addition, some businesses have been able to sufficiently manage their Hispanic employees through an interpreter.

Managing the Language Barrier Alternatives

There are several alternatives to minimize or even eliminate the language barrier between agricultural and horticultural managers and their employees. While each alternative offers some advantages, managers will find that the most effective way

to minimize the language barrier is to implement a combination of the following approaches. Furthermore, a sincere commitment to eliminate the language barrier is absolutely needed. This commitment will provide the motivation to learn the language, the encouragement of the Hispanic workers to learn English, or to continue using an interpreter.

Owner / manager learns Spanish

The most effective way of eliminating the language barrier between a manager and his or her employees is for the manager to learn Spanish. This alternative puts the manager in control of his or her situation. It enables the manager to more effectively interview, train, and reward employees. The manager can be more confident that all of the employees are receiving the same information, being trained correctly, and doing the various tasks correctly.

Managers who learn Spanish find it easier to train workers to do various tasks throughout the agricultural business. For example, over the last several years, most dairy managers in the Northeast have typically hired Hispanic workers only to milk their cows. Despite the willingness and desire that many workers had to work more, the only task that they had been trained to do

was milk the cows. Since the language barrier made training a very difficult task for the manager, the Hispanic workers were often not trained to do other tasks. This greatly minimized the manager's ability to hire and place the best workers given their abilities.

Many managers have commented that Hispanic workers "should learn English." Well, the fact that an English-speaking manager learns Spanish in order to be a more effective manager does not preclude Hispanic workers from learning English. In fact, just the opposite is often true. Once a manager shows an interest and a willingness to speak in Spanish to their employees, the employees are usually much more willing to talk with the manager in English. Furthermore, the mere fact that the employee's manager has enough interest in them to try to learn their language and to get to know them individually builds a better employee/manager relationship.

Another challenge that agricultural and horticultural businesses often face when hiring Hispanic workers is a more rapid turnover rate. This higher turnover rate limits the effectiveness of relying on the workers to learn English. However, if the manager learns enough Spanish to effectively manage his or her employees, the negative impacts of a higher turnover rate will be minimized. The manager will be more capable of hiring and training the new employees how to do the various tasks in and around their business.

What level of Spanish should you try to learn?

Learning enough Spanish to successfully manage Hispanic workers should be every manager's goal, at a minimum. The level of Spanish needed by managers depends on the approach they are taking to managing the language barrier in their business, ranging from hiring an interpreter to employees and managers each learning some of their new language. They may simply need to learn a few greetings and phrases or they may need to become fully fluent in the language.

Many agricultural business managers have considered the task of learning Spanish as too overwhelming. Learning the Spanish language (or any language) clearly can be a difficult challenge if one approaches it from a perspective that they need to become nearly fluent in the new language in order for them to use it to successfully manage their Hispanic workers. This will often lead to a feeling of frustration as they try to learn or sometimes just think about learning Spanish.

Other managers have taken a dramatically different perspective. They have approached the idea of learning Spanish one day at a time or even one word at a time. This perspective essentially breaks down the huge challenge of learning Spanish into manageable and doable steps. Simply learning a few words or short sentences to greet your Hispanic employees will open the door to more opportunities to learn new words and phrases. Each new word or phrase that managers learn

takes them another step closer to improving their language skills and their ability to successfully manage their Hispanic workers.

Differences between dialects and countries

Several different dialects of the Spanish language exist across the Spanish-speaking world and many regional differences exist within and across these dialects. While the different dialects and the regional differences present a few challenges to an agricultural or horticultural manager, they will not limit their ability to effectively communicate with their employees. Instead, the differences may create only minor and momentary uncertainty as to what was actually said. In other circumstances, the difference will stimulate a good-hearted laugh.

These dialects are similar to the differences that exist between people in different regions of the United States. For example, people growing up and living in New England speak differently than people from the deep south, upper mid-west or the west coast. Even with these differences, people in the United States can understand and communicate with each other.

Even though the differences across regions and counties can be easily handled, it is wise for agricultural and horticultural employers in the United States who are thinking about learning Spanish to start with Spanish that is similar to their employees. Most likely, that will be Latin American Spanish. This

will not eliminate all confusion stemming from different dialects and regional difference; however, it will clearly help to minimize the problems.

Alternatives to learning Spanish

The options available to an agricultural or horticultural manager to learn Spanish are very numerous. Some alternatives will be better suited for some managers and not others. Depending on the time, financial resources, and educational goals of the individual managers, they will find certain alternatives more effective and more appropriate for their circumstances.

Specialized Spanish classes for your industry offer one of the best ways to become more familiar with specialized Spanish terms for your industry. For example, faculty or staff of the cooperative extension systems in Michigan, Cornell and Pennsylvania has offered “Spanish for Dairymen” courses. These courses enabled the participating dairymen to learn key terms and phrases that they could use right away and it gave them a foundation to build upon. However, the major disadvantage of this option is that this type of specialized course is not offered many times in convenient locations across the state or region.

Community Colleges and Universities offer regularly scheduled courses that can be helpful to a beginner. Traditional Spanish classes at community colleges and local universities are often focused

on learning grammar first and conversation second. A better alternative would be to attend one of their “Conversational Spanish” classes. This type of class is rooted in the idea that learning a new language requires conversation and practice

Self-paced learning tools can be very helpful to a manager who is limited with constraints on time being away from his or her business. They can listen to audio tapes in the tractor cab, read through a Spanish dairy magazine during dinner, listen and watch Spanish dairy training video tapes or use an interactive computer based language training program. All of these self-paced learning tools are effective ways of building their foundation of understanding and expanding their exposure to the Spanish language. However, these self-paced learning tools will usually be more advantageous to managers who have had some additional exposure to the language, even if it is only with his or her workers.

Immersion programs offer the most effective way to build new language skills very quickly. These programs are offered in Mexico, Guatemala, and other Latin American countries. They generally include six to eight hours of training for five days per week and last for two to eight weeks. Course packages usually include room and board with a host family and weekend sightseeing excursions to nearby attractions. Fees for the program are relatively inexpensive, but a big time commitment is required and often makes this alternative impractical for

some agricultural and horticultural managers.

Another “immersion like” course is offered through Berlitz Language Centers. They are located mostly in or near large metropolitan areas throughout the Northeast and across the United States and offer intensive language training that mimics the benefits of actually attending an immersion program in a foreign country. While the location generally makes attending this program more convenient, the fee is much more expensive than the traditional immersion program in Latin American countries.

Regardless of the methods or tools that managers use to learn Spanish, the best way of really building and sustaining their language skills is through practice. **Practicing with Hispanic employees** will lead to a continuous learning opportunity and will help managers learn more Spanish. Furthermore, they will become better managers of their employees because a better working relationship will likely result from improved communication

Employees learn English

Many Hispanic employees are interested in learning English. If given the opportunity, they will take advantage of it. Ideally, managers should make arrangements for a tutor to teach English to the worker right on the farm. This will help him or her to be more comfortable in trying to speak to the manager in English, further improving the communication between them. In

addition, helping Hispanic workers to learn English will help them to become better acclimated to the local area.

Managers should not rely solely on their employee's ability to understand and speak English for all of the communication that needs to take place. There are many important tasks and procedures that require the employee's full understanding in order to accomplish correctly and safely. English classes for the Hispanic employees will ultimately benefit the fledging Spanish-speaking manager by ultimately resulting in conversations between managers and employees that are conducted in a mixture of English and Spanish.

Hiring an interpreter

Hiring an interpreter to translate the conversation between a manager and his or her employees can be very effective, if the interpreter is conveniently available when needed for meetings, training sessions and emergency situations. However, relying on an interpreter for all of the communication between managers and employees create tough predicaments that are difficult to work through if the manager can't speak Spanish and the employee can speak English.

Managers should use care in selecting an interpreter. The ideal person would be one familiar with the operation of the manager's business. They would understand specific industry terms and could effectively translate information

from the manager to the employees. Finally, the manager should avoid hiring a family member or close friend of employees. Their relationship can make it difficult for them to translate, in both directions, the specific details of the conversation.

Summary

Agricultural and horticultural businesses that employ Hispanic workers must minimize and even eliminate the language barrier from their organization in order to improve their organizational effectiveness, productive efficiency, employee safety, profitability and long-term sustainability. Many excellent alternatives are available to help managers accomplish this task. Through a committed effort to learn Spanish and to work proactively with their employees, they will be successful managers of successful businesses long into the future.