

Understanding Your Hispanic Workforce

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Introduction

You have probably heard from other owners that having a Hispanic-based workforce is desirable because Hispanics are hard working and dependable. This does not come, however, from just hiring Hispanic workers. Instead, it is something that must be cultivated on a daily basis. It is necessary to create an appropriate worksite environment to utilize your workers' capabilities.

If you are inexperienced with hiring Hispanic workers, understanding the way people from other countries think and work requires some effort and patience. You may have heard many suggestions on how to deal with Hispanic workers, but if you are not experienced with the subtleties of Hispanic culture you will have to start from the beginning. Some questions may arise here. How could you get to know them better? Where do they come from? How can I understand them? Why are they here? How can I help them?

Although the migration and acculturation of people is a very complex subject that could be the subject of a whole book, this paper will guide you through some of the facts and practical issues that will help you to better know and understand your Hispanic workforce.

Remember that your workers come from a different culture and are accustomed to doing things in a different way than you are. This knowledge will help you to make more appropriate and better business decisions and, therefore, increase your productivity and stability at work. Also, behaviors and events that were confusing before will become easier to understand.

The Hispanic Workforce

Hispanic refers to people of any race who trace their roots to Spanish-speaking countries such as Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, or any country in Central or South America. The term is often interchangeable with Latino. You might find that some of your workers rather be referred to by their country of origin, such as Mexican, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, etc. Do not feel uncomfortable asking this. In fact, your workers will be more than happy to answer this because they will sense that you are showing interest in such a personal issue.

Hispanics share a language and some cultural values, but there are also differences in socioeconomic and cultural characteristics depending upon their country of origin. This is why you cannot assume that Hispanic people from different countries will get along just because they speak the same language.

Regionalism is a strong component of the Hispanic culture in Hispanic countries. Even within a country, marked differences among people who are from different areas can sometimes be observed. In fact, some people say that there are three different Mexicos: the North, the Central, and Southern Mexico. Do not be surprised if you have trouble when you have a crew of workers consisting of people from different countries or different regions. Be aware of how you form your work crews, especially if you are a small business owner or manager. Sadly, this regionalism brings a lack of unity among Hispanics and has been one of the main barriers to attaining political power and advancement of other groups in the United States.

Historical Remarks

Sometimes you as an owner or manager wonder why employees do not want to take on more responsibilities, or why your workers tell you they understand you when they do not, or why people do not look you in the eye when you talk to them, or maybe why they shake your hand very weakly. You also may have noticed lack of initiative in some of them. There are some historical circumstances that may help you to understand some of your workers' behaviors when at work.

Contrary to the United States, Mexico and most of the countries in Latin America were not formed by groups of immigrants or people who came to settle, work hard, compete, and start a new life. The Mexican, and some other cultures in Latin America, has been dominated by exploitative foreign powers where authoritarian repression was common. In these countries there was a stratified and vertical society, a society of privileges, not of merits. The way to get money, power, and prestige was not hard work, but contacts in Spain: the country that conquered most of Latin America.

This explains why the Hispanic culture has an autocratic leadership style where the subordinates always listen and want to please the boss at any cost. Unfortunately, your Hispanic workers are most likely people with a very low educational level who have generally been oppressed and belong to the lowest hierarchy of the society in their countries.

Hispanic workers will try to please their bosses and won't give you any feedback - the decisions must be made by the supervisor. In the Hispanic culture, there is no tradition of delegation, although younger Hispanic managers are starting to delegate and take more responsibilities. You will find a different management style between the young and the older personnel.

As for eye contact, workers do not look directly in your eyes as a show of respect. The supervisor assigns tasks and the workers perform them and constantly consult with the supervisor to avoid making a mistake.

Therefore, whenever you are trying to get a point across or want the workers to do something in your operation you have to assume that workers know nothing about this issue, be very specific and demonstrate what you want them to do. Ask the workers to show you and, if needed, go over with them again what was said. If the job gets done properly, try to reward them with compliments, such as "good job".

Why Do People Migrate?

Many people in the Northeast are proud of their roots. In fact it is not difficult to find Irish or Italian flags in certain areas of the country. A good friend used to say: "I'm half Italian, one-third Lithuanian, and one-third Polish." I do not know if she was aware that the total number was higher than one or it may be that she was also counting her clothes!

The point here is that the United States of America is such a diverse country formed by immigrants from all over the world. Just think about this. Many of your grandparents and/or great-grandparents came to this country looking for a better opportunity, and when they got here they faced similar barriers to those that the Hispanic workers you are hiring now face.

Now that we are entering into the 21st century, Hispanics are the biggest minority in this country. There are around 35 million Hispanics in the United States, and it is estimated that by the year 2050 one out of four Americans will be Hispanic. Mexico has been the traditional source of migrant workers to all areas of the U.S. economy. But due to deterioration in some of the other economies, along with social and political problems, you can also find people from Central and South America. During this paper, however, we will focus on the Mexican workers.

Most of the migrant Mexican workers in the United States are men between 25 and 34 years old, from very economically depressed areas. Even though the Mexican economy is among the top 12 largest economies of the world, people are forced to leave because they can find greater opportunities in the United States.

There are serious economic disparities among the population in Mexico; the wealth is not evenly distributed. It is sad but not uncommon to have on a corner a German luxury auto dealership and an Italian fashion designer store, while less than a mile away you can find people begging for money in a very economically depressed area. Some cities provide jobs and have experienced an economic bonanza from the industrialized world, while other cities have no place to look for a job or lack the most basic services.

Migrant workers have a low income, a low educational level, and little political influence in the United States, but their socio-economic level here is still higher than in Mexico. The Mexican states of Jalisco, Zacatecas, Oaxaca, Michoacan, and Guanajuato are traditionally places migrant workers come from.

Economic Issues

Economic issues are one of the biggest reasons for migration. Initially, people do not come here to stay permanently; they come to solve their immediate financial problems. They come to make money, save it, and send it home. The Central Mexican Bank (Banco de Mexico) reported that in 2003 the Hispanic workforce of Mexican origin in the United States sent \$13.26 billion back to Mexico. This is the second greatest source of money in Mexico, just below oil and above tourism. In fact, there are towns in Mexico that are fully supported by the remittances of the Mexican workers in the United States.

The goal for most of the migrant workers is to come and work for a few months or years and then go back to reunite with their families and significant others. Along with the family ties, this explains why your workers want to take one, two, three, or even more months off from work to go back to Mexico.

To avoid surprises with your workers' vacation plans, talk to them about this and plan in advance so you do not run into a shortage of labor whenever you need people in your operation. Since 9/11, going back and forth to

Mexico has become extremely expensive and very dangerous for some of your workers, although not all of them. It may seem very simple, but I have bumped into this issue in the past. It is a good idea to warn your workers that they need to have an official government-issued ID to board a plane, otherwise they will probably lose their plane tickets and will have to take the bus or not be able to visit at all. An ID such as *Matrícula Consular de Alta Seguridad* (High Security Consular Registration Document, or MCAS) would work for this purpose, as well as others. This is an official document expedited at any Mexican consulate in the United States. As such, it is the official record for Mexican individuals living abroad.

The registration of nationals through the consular offices is a practice recognized by the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. Mexican consulates have issued these certificates since 1871. The Mexican *matrícula consular* is also used as identification in different instances. For example, some police departments and local governments in the United States accept it as a valid ID. Additionally, some states have accepted the MCAS as one of the proofs of identity required to obtain a drivers license.

The *matricula* has become an important tool for opening financial institutions to the un-banked people. The positive impact of this access goes beyond simply being able to open a bank account. They also have positive implications for the day-to-day lives of U.S. communities by allowing economic transactions that would not occur otherwise. Another opportunity for you to help your workers is for you – or someone you have come into your business - to orient them on money management issues. This most likely will be translated into loyalty to the workplace since banking and saving money is important to them. People in their countries of origin might not have used the banking system because either they do not trust it or because of its inaccessibility.

Here in the United States being part of the banking system and building a credit record is

essential, although your workers are most likely unaware of this. In addition, wiring money to their countries has become cheaper than ever, around 7.5% of the total amount of the transaction. But workers still have to learn the system. People from your local bank may be able to help you with this.

Hispanic workers are very loyal but first you have to gain their trust. Once they trust you, the loyalty to you and to the workplace will come. But this trust must be earned. Because of trustworthiness, family and friends are often favored for taking a new position or a job opening.

Social Networks and Family

Family is a very important component in the Hispanic culture. The Mexican migration is greatly influenced by well-established Hispanic social networks. Most of the migrant workers do not get to the most recondite places in the United States without knowing that there is possible employment for them. Generally, new migrants follow relatives and friends who have migrated to those areas before them. This explains why you find small communities in the United States with people who come from the same town or area in Mexico.

The family is used for support, and it is the first priority to your workers- including the extended family. The importance of family is an historical issue since it was the only form of support when there was no body of law during the Spanish colonial era. To build better relationships and to make your workers feel comfortable, ask them about their families and ask them to share pictures of their families. Your workers will not be offended if you ask them about their families, and it will help you to get to know them at a more personal level.

Hispanic workers do not separate work from emotions. Make sure that you spend some time every day interacting with your workers in order to create an environment where workers can feel that they are an important part of the group. A good way to do so is to have lunch maybe once per week in the company's lunch room. I have

seen a president from a mushroom company do this and it is well received by the workers. Interacting with your workers is the only way to understand their culture.

It might sound ironic, but another social aspect of the Hispanic culture is related to teamwork. Your workers are not familiar with the concept of teamwork, but they want and prefer to work with people they like and will cooperate with each other to get the job done. Hispanic workers do not like to do things by themselves: they prefer shared responsibility. So, make small crews with an identified team-shared responsibility so whenever there is a mistake the whole team is accountable, not any one individual.

Remember that the Hispanic culture is a collectivist culture; therefore, people avoid individual competition and try to work in harmony. In addition, Hispanics prefer to work in a friendly environment rather than earning a little more money. Of course, if you can provide both of these, you will be creating a perfect scenario for the productivity of your company.

Some of the Basic Needs

Housing

You may or may not provide housing facilities to your workers. If you do, you might have noticed that sometimes there is lack of cleanliness in the housing facilities. This might be part of the culture component of masculinity versus femininity. The Mexican society is masculine biased. Gender roles are clearly assigned in this culture: the men go out and work to provide to their families, and the women stay home to take care of the family and clean the home. Some of your workers have probably never cleaned the house before, but I'm sure they can learn how to do this. Some people get scared of the way people live but I have seen barracks or houses of Mexican workers much cleaner than some college dorm rooms. So, if you provide housing it is important that you set rules for cleaning the house and keeping it safe from the very beginning. It is a matter of organization. Create a list and tell them what needs to get done and post it in a visible place. I

have observed this at one of the mushroom farms that provides housing to their workers and it is a very neat place. You should come to inspect the facility - it could save you a great deal of trouble the next time an inspector visits.

The next topic is the restroom and toilet paper. Several people have asked me about this, so I have decided to include it. Some of you wonder why you see soiled toilet paper on the floor around the toilet when you use the restroom in your company. In most areas of Mexico and some other countries there is a wastebasket with a plastic bag located next to the toilet. People have been educated to use these wastebaskets for disposing of the soiled paper. You have to use the wastebasket because if you flush the toilet paper there is a high risk to clog the toilet. This is due to the small diameter of the pipes and low water pressure in the waste system. Correcting this is simple: education. You have to tell and show your workers that the toilets here are capable of flushing anything away.

Food

You would never imagine the problems your workers face while acculturating to the food system in the United States. Some people do not eat, some people eat too much, and some migrants become depressed when they arrive here. People perceive the quality of the American food as different.

When new migrant employees arrive it is important to orient them so that they can go grocery shopping. Even though there are many grocery store chains in Mexico, some of your workers might come from rural areas where there are none. Therefore, to some of your workers and their families, the concept of a grocery store might be new. Education should take place here. Take some time and make a grocery store tour, tell them how to shop, help them to get the store savings card, and let them know the way things work.

Right now it is not difficult to find specialty stores in the communities where there is a big concentration of Hispanics. Even though these stores are generally overpriced, they are an

excellent resource for getting all the food your workers are accustomed to eating. Some of these shops may even deliver the goods to your door.

Conclusion

If you are new to hiring Hispanic workers, discuss with other managers or owners their experiences while working with Hispanics in their operation. You will find out that similar operations (apples orchards, landscaping business, etc.) face many of the same problems and issues. The Hispanic local service providers are another excellent resource that can help you and can provide support to your workers. Get in contact and work together with them. Sometimes these places are underused and they have excellent programs and goodies that you might be able to apply in your workplace to help your workers grow.

It may seem like we have covered a great deal, but we have just covered some basic cultural issues that can easily be applied on your daily operation and will help you to understand some of the cultural, social, and economical issues of your Hispanic workforce.

As you begin to overcome some of these barriers and cultural differences at work, you will find that your employees, in addition to being very dependable and hard working, can become extremely creative and capable of making decisions that will improve your operation. Your job as a manager will be easier once you are able to make decisions that help your workers feel part of a team.

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