

Cultural Diversity: Make It Work for You

**Luis Gonzalez, MBA
Topf Initiatives**

Take a good look around your plant or facility. If yours is like most American workplaces these days, you're looking at a mini United Nations -- people from vastly different cultures, many who may have been born outside the U.S. You can observe the same phenomenon if you walk into your children's schools, or look around the waiting room at your doctor's office. A robust influx of newcomers to our shores is changing the American landscape, both at work and throughout our society.

It's an exciting development -- new people bring new ideas, new sounds, new friendships, new beliefs, and even new tastes (have you noticed the many ethnic foods on your grocery store shelves lately?). But as you strive to develop and implement a strong health, safety, and environmental program, the differences among these employees can sometimes be daunting. These differences can bring a range of attitudes, beliefs, and values that challenge, or even impede your HS&E efforts. In our experience, we've found that quite the opposite can be true: *The diversity within your workforce can be harnessed to your advantage, with a stronger safety process, and a more unified workforce to show for it.*

Essential to any effective safety initiative is a workforce that understands the risks, sees the steps management is taking, and comprehends its own responsibility in preventing accidents, injuries, and environmental incidents. Taken together, these things contribute to achieving a common vision. Whether that vision is identified as "zero accidents," "accident elimination," "no one hurt," etc. the point is the same. We've learned that visualizing and striving toward a common goal can be an enormously unifying experience for employees, especially those who have little else in common in terms of background and shared cultural ties.

The first step in turning cultural diversity into a tool to improve safety is a thorough cultural assessment. This is a step that necessarily precedes any safety or environmental program development. When your workers look and sound different from one another, use the assessment questionnaire to gain a deeper understanding of their backgrounds, values, and beliefs, and how these affect their work style. For example, through our experience we have learned that often, people who hail from some South American countries possess a degree of fatalism not typical of North Americans. Similarly, some Mediterranean and Mid-Eastern peoples exhibit a riskier approach to life and work -- one we might call "macho." Believing their safety is in the hands of God, they assign responsibility outside of themselves and may therefore ignore hazards. It's an attitude that can result in shortcuts that appear more "manly" than taking the slow, safe way. Depending on their cultural patterns, some workers may refuse help because it suggests weakness.

Use this type of information to determine what is influencing a worker's thinking and/or behavior, and design interventions accordingly. Depending on your situation, you may wish to consult with a diversity expert to assist in the development and interpretation of the questionnaire. Ideally, it should yield valuable data you can use to train supervisors, and to structure employee training and communications. It's useful, as well, to involve some of your ethnically diverse employees in the design of the questionnaire. Additional input comes from a series of structured interviews with a cross-section of the population. The data help support the information gained through assessment questionnaires.

Remember that diversity goes well beyond national origin. All employees arrive at your gate molded by a unique combination of influences -- parents and family, socio-economic background, education, religion, sports, the military, etc. Their approach to risk-taking, tendency to comply with rules, and degree of concern for their co-workers varies greatly as a result of these factors, not merely cultural background. Your assessment document must capture these differences as well.

Once the assessment is complete, the really hard work begins: designing and implementing programs that bring your workforce -- despite its diversity -- together in common purpose. If you've been successful, the differences that once separated the employees fade from importance and are replaced by a shared vision regarding safety, health, and environmental responsibility, as well as goals and strategies for prevention. Profoundly diverse individuals with different values, beliefs, and backgrounds are unified in their belief in the importance of accident, injury, and incident prevention.

Language is another key factor in your efforts to manage and benefit from diversity. Nuances of meaning can be lost, and interpretations can vary greatly based on a slight difference in translation or understanding. It's essential that, as a manager, you provide the necessary tools to bridge the language barrier. That can include providing translators for safety training sessions, and using specialized MSDS and labeling programs that focus on images or pictographs rather than words.

How do you know if you've succeeded in this effort? There are a number of measures and they can include:

- Prevention of or a reduction in injuries, illnesses, and environmental incidents
- The absence of degrading or condescending comments regarding cultural differences
- A greater willingness for employees to gently point out unsafe acts to one another, no matter who the person is
- A willingness to participate on task teams to identify and resolve HS&E issues, and
- A more cooperative attitude between employees and managers in areas regarding, but not limited to safety.

The notion of the melting pot has lost favor in recent years. As a society, our aim is no longer that diverse individuals lose their distinctions and become "one people." Rather, we are working toward a common vision of tolerance and acceptance as we retain our distinct character within a diverse culture. Safety, health, and the environment provide an exceptional vehicle for unity-building in any organization.