

Effectively Communicating with The Hispanic Workforce

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The Argument for Training and Developing the Construction Hispanic Labor Force

Research shows that the biggest cost on industrial construction project is skilled labor.¹ Research also supports the need for a well-trained, highly motivated and experienced work force. The construction industry, in the last 25 years, has cut corners by cutting training budgets, and continuing to attempt to do more with less. The construction industry reports a lack of skilled workers while apprenticeship programs report a drop-out rate between 40 and 70% due to many issues such as language barriers, lack of transportation, financial burdens and long-term commitment. As the industry experiences this downturn and braces itself for the next economic uptick, now is the time to consider how to improve and enhance opportunities and communication strategies for the Hispanic workforce to promote necessary change in our industry. While the manufacturing industry has spent the past 25 years developing quality, lean, and six sigma processes to improve overall performance and minimize waste, including injuries, the construction industry is barely in the infancy stage of considering new processes. With the downturn in the economy, the construction workers will be moving on to other industries and fewer people will be looking at construction as a viable option in trade and vocational schools. The last two years is an example of how quickly things can change for one industry. Where a shortage of labor force was once an issue in the construction industry, we are now experiencing widespread unemployment. Many Hispanic workers lost their jobs. The downturn in the economy provides an opportunity for the construction industry to take a step back and assess just how effective the historically haphazard approach to recruiting, training and educating a

¹ Skipper, C., Brandenburg, S., Bell, L. "Stochastic Manpower Requirements Model: Research Needed to Address Craft Labor Issues" (retrieved March 2010)
(http://academiceventplanner.com/LEAD2009/papers/Skipper_Brandenburg_Bell.pdf)

workforce has been for us over the years. The industry should use the downturn in the economy wisely to brainstorm, prepare and develop new and innovative ways of training and developing our workforce as well as attracting a sustainable presence in our workforce for the future when the economy picks up.

In light of demographic changes in the United States, the construction industry is characterized by a large, young, and quickly growing Hispanic workforce, coupled with a sizeable and persistent difference in occupational fatalities between Hispanic and non-Hispanic construction workers. Protecting the safety and health of Hispanic workers is a critical challenge facing the construction industry. Hispanics continue to have a higher exposure to accidents and fatalities in the construction industry. There needs to be a cultural shift at the highest level of the organization to both support and encourage more companies to initiate diversity programs and to improve and enhance communication and training efforts. Communication, cultural aspects and basic human management skills are areas we explore in order to understand the challenge and explore best practices for the industry.

Barriers to communication do not only impact the incident rate of organizations, but they invariably impact the profitability, performance and quality of the work performed. One can make the basic assumption that if the primary workforce in an industry is not getting the message on how to perform their job functions safely, it is not too far-fetched to assume that the workers may not be getting the message on how to perform the work at all. Installation issues, rework, defects and delays are all potential consequences of having an untrained workforce impacted by language barriers. While Hispanics perform a large percentage of the construction work in many of our states, there is little or no path for them to get to the next level. Furthermore, the training and education techniques currently utilized by safety professionals are not working. Hispanics continue to have a higher exposure to accidents and fatalities in the construction industry.

The Many Phases of Culture

In his book, *Cultural Consequences*, Geert Hofstede defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from one another.”² The mind stands for the heart, mind, and hands or thinking, feeling and acting with consequences for beliefs, attitudes and skills. Culture usually refers to societies but can also be applied to any human collectivity or category such as an organization, an entire gender, an ethnicity or a family. In the United States, a society itself can contain a number of different cultural groups—Hispanics, Asians, Caucasians—yet they share certain cultural traits that are familiar with one another simply by belonging to that society. So within the confines of one geographical area, we have numerous cultures operating in unison.

² Hofstede, G. 2001. *Cultural Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organization Across Nations* California; Sage Publications.

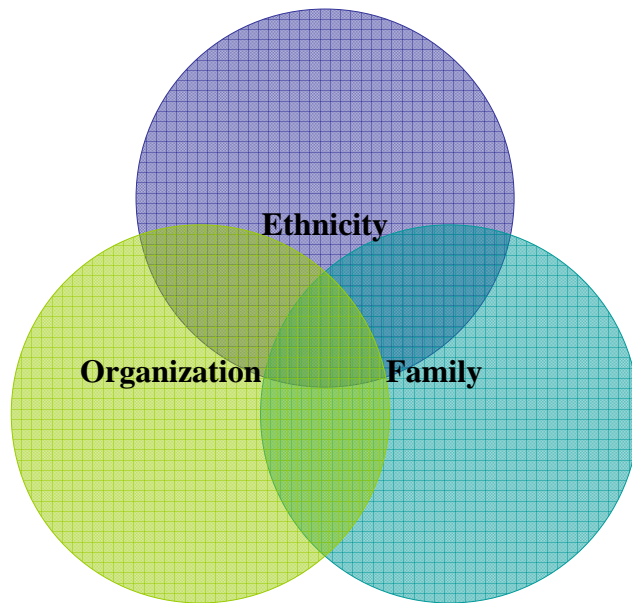


Figure 1. Culture Influences

A construction project is a myriad of cultural relationships coming together for a common goal—to build a building. There are a plethora of different parties, each with different interests and opinions as to how to accomplish the goal. The workforce has different leaders. The subcontractor’s foreman, the general contractor’s foreman and superintendent, and often the owner and its consultants, architects and engineers may all have opinions and a voice in how things should be done. As a contractually driven industry, the construction industry has created a “what’s in it for me” mentality. This can result in a confusing situation for the Hispanic worker. Each day they may have a “new boss” and a new set of priorities as they move from job to job. The work they perform is transient, moving from jobsite to jobsite. Unfortunately the expectations from one jobsite to the next can be as different as day and night.

A simplified definition of culture is “the way we do things around here.” Culture guides our communication and our values and the way we interact with others. There are inherent cultural differences based on how we are raised and the environment we grow up in. An American, English-speaking worker may react completely differently to a situation than a Hispanic laborer working in the United States. For example:

The two workers are using a bobcat to move materials on a construction site. A piece of debris from the site hits the windshield of the bobcat, causing the glass to break directly in the vision line of the operator.

The American Worker: As the debris hits the windshield, his cultural norms indicate that he should stop the operation, turn the bobcat in for maintenance, and get another bobcat as soon as possible. He fills out maintenance requests and calls the shop.

The Hispanic Worker: As the debris breaks the windshield, the voice inside his head tells him “I’m in big trouble. My boss is going to think I did not take care of this expensive equipment. If I stop working I am going to get behind and then I will get fired. If I just work through the next shift I can turn it in, and maybe nobody will notice. I can work with this, it is not so bad. I will get my work done and everything will be OK.”

Why is it that a construction company can build two seemingly identical jobs yet have completely different challenges and results on each project? Why does one job come in on time, on budget, on schedule with zero deficiencies and a stellar safety performance, and another can be plagued with delays, challenges, accidents, rework and money issues? Often, construction professionals will describe a job as “taking on a life of its own” or “derailing.” Could it be that the job itself takes on its own persona, its own culture? Culture is most often used to identify a specific group of people having similar traits and actions. These traits, beliefs and actions are what create the culture in the first place. If a project is run with one purpose and one goal—for example, keep to the schedule at any cost—the project is much more likely to have accidents, safety violations, rework and, ironically, delays. If a project is run with a culture of balance where people are encouraged to work smart, with logic, proper tools, planning and dialogue, process and procedures, then the project will most likely be more successful. Who determines how the project is run? Who sets the tone and the culture of the project? The superintendent does. As the old saying goes, “You get what you expect.” If a superintendent values time, planning, safety, meetings, dialogue and training, then that is what the jobsite team members will focus on. If the superintendent values production and schedule and focuses and rewards only that, then that is what the focus will be for the project team.

Human beings are very complicated; yet, there are some basic things that make us more simplistic than we originally think. Do humans act and behave and follow a certain leader out of respect and authority? At first blush, the answer is Yes. Dig a bit deeper and we realize that human beings are pleasure-seekers and pain-avoiders. We don’t like pain’ we don’t like being yelled at, made an example of, or taken out of our comfort zone. As a result, if a superintendent thinks that time spent on a planning meeting is time wasted, then the workers will simply not have the meeting. If a Hispanic worker is told to finish a task as fast as he can and he does not have the right tools to perform the task, to avoid the pain of asking, and the fear of being reprimanded, misunderstood or humiliated, he will go about performing the task to the best of his ability with what he has to work with. Unsafe? Perhaps. Most likely scenario? Absolutely.

Trends in Construction Labor Force

In the last decade, the Hispanic/Latino population in the United States has grown by 58% to more than 35 million, or 12.5% of the population. Latino workers now make up the largest labor force compared to any other minority group in the U.S.A. Many of the immigrants from Latin America receive higher education, yet a large number of Latino immigrants are filling unskilled labor positions. The construction-industry Latino workforce has grown dramatically over the years. According to the Milken Institute, one million new immigrants are expected annually in the next

decade, most of who will come from Latin America. By 2050, Latinos are expected to represent 25% of the population, or 96 million people.³

There are varying opinions tied to why the Hispanic construction worker has a higher propensity for injury than others in the industry. The most obvious argument is related to the language barrier. Construction companies, the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) have all invested tremendous amounts of time and money into translating materials into Spanish, which will help. However, there are issues related to dialect, translation and literacy in any language that will still hinder the transfer of communication. Others point to learning styles of the various countries that are polar opposite to those of the United States, rendering learning ineffective. Some researchers believe that digging deeper to identify cultural, communication, behavior, and attitudes that play a monumental role in how humans behave and interact with one another is necessary to actually get to the root of the problem and come up with some real solutions that may just save lives. Still others discuss the culture of the jobsites that our superintendents are creating in the field. Given a supportive, communicative culture focused on safety, quality and productivity, would the Hispanic worker behave differently? Will he think before putting himself in harm's way and communicate safety issues before an accident occurs? These are the questions. Until those questions are studied, tried and evaluated, they remain unanswered. As a result, safety professionals may not be as successful as anticipated by using traditional methods of training to save and protect our workforce. What we will attempt to do in the rest of this paper is to explore the different issues that make up the Hispanic culture and look for ways to improve communication and create a culture at jobsites where the Hispanic worker can thrive and avoid accidents.

Does Culture Play a Role in Accidents?

Hofstede developed an enormous database for analyzing the ways in which cultures differ from one another. (The database is called "Hofstede's Dimensions").⁴ He argued that people carry "mental programs" that are developed in family life during early childhood, reinforced in school and organizations and make up our national cultures. They are most clearly seen in the different values in people from different countries. Hofstede came up with five dimensions where a country's culture differs and identified areas where this culture class can cause problems in the organizational work construct.

The five dimensions are as follows:

Power Distance Index (PDI): Concerned with attitudes toward hierarchy, specifically with and how much a particular culture values and respect authority. In other words, how much does a person or group expect and accept unequal distribution of power.

Uncertainty Avoidance: Relates to how a culture and its members deal with and accept unstructured situations. This deals with how hard a society tries to control the uncontrollable.

Individualism/Collectivism: The degree to which individuals are supposed to look after themselves or remain in the group: Collectivism is the polar opposite of individualism.

Masculinity/Femininity: The emotional roles between genders; tough vs. tender societies.

³ HR.com. 2007. "Culture and Your Hispanic Workforce: Cross-cultural Communication Skills" (retrieved March 2010).

⁴ (Hofstede xx)

Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation: The extent to which a culture programs its members to accept delayed gratification of material social and emotional needs.

In the book *Outliers*,⁵ Malcolm Gladwell reviewed the causes of plane crashes and offered up Hofstede’s ethnicity research as a potential cause for the accidents. According to the book, plane crashes are much more likely to be the result of an accumulation of minor difficulties and seemingly trivial malfunctions. It’s true of virtually all industrial accidents including the near meltdown at Pennsylvania’s Three Mile Island nuclear station incident (no single big thing went wrong at Three Mile island, rather 5 completely unrelated events occurred in sequence each of which had it happened in isolation would have caused no more than a hiccup in the plant’s ordinary operation.)

Perhaps the most fascinating section of Malcolm Gladwell’s book, *Outliers: The Story of Success* is the chapter called “The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes.” Gladwell explores two plane crashes—one Colombian (Avianca Flight 52) and another, South Korean (Korean Air Flight 801)—and how the culture of the pilots perhaps contributed to each disaster. He focuses on how well the pilots communicated with each other and with air traffic control. Poor communication in these examples, he argues, has to do with something called a culture’s Power Distance Index (PDI)—the term and concept come from psychologist Geert Hofstede—which is a measurement of “how much a particular culture values and respects authority,” as Gladwell defines it. Countries with a high PDI generally value being more deferential towards authority, and thus not contradicting a superior. Gladwell argues that since both Colombia and South Korea rank towards the top of the PDI list, the subordinate members of their cockpit crews were unable or unwilling to speak up as assertively as they should have about safety concerns. If you compare PDIs by country to the ranking of plane crashes by country, they match up very closely:

Top 5 Highest Pilot PDIs by Country	The 5 Lowest Pilot PDIs by Country
1. Brazil	1. US
2. South Korea	2. Ireland
3. Morocco	3. South Africa
4. Mexico	4. Australia
5. Philippines	5. New Zealand

Figure 2. Highest and Lowest Pilot Power Distance Indexes by Country

Planes crash, he says, because of a combination of bad weather, tired crews, minor technical malfunctions, and an average of seven consecutive human errors. Gladwell argues that cultures which have a high respect for authority tend to produce crews who rarely question their superiors, even when they can clearly see those in charge have made serious or even grave mistakes. Dispersed throughout are transcripts of eerie black box recordings; the copilots clearly know the plane is on a dangerous course, but avoid confronting the captain. This is result of “mitigated speech,” a term used by linguists to describe to any attempt to downplay or sugarcoat the

⁵ Gladwell, M. 2008. *Outliers: The Story of Success*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008.

meaning of what is being said. We mitigate when we're being polite or when we're ashamed or embarrassed or when we're being deferential to authority. This type of behavior can be fatal when dealing with life-or-death situations such as flying a plane or perhaps avoiding a construction accident.

According to Sydney Dekker,⁶ author of *The Field Guide to Human Error Investigations*, accidents are a result of many causes or failures that work like a crack in a windshield. They quickly multiply and fan out. He contends that there is no such thing as root or primary cause. When you find the root cause, it simply means you quit looking. A large number of contributory factors result in accidents. The more investigators dig, the more they will understand why people did what they did, based on the tools, the tasks, the environment, and their past experience (culture). The further we dig, the more we see that blame and trying to find or blame one cause or one person just does not work.

While many are struggling with finding the cause of the higher incident rate in construction fatalities in the Hispanic population, we must realistically evaluate the many "cracks in the windshield" that may be causing the trend. Assuming that it is related to lack of skill or language barrier alone is a recipe for failure.

Assuming that construction accidents are a result of an accumulation of minor difficulties and a series of human interactions, the following is a list of some of the things that may be a contributing factor in the trend:

- Language barrier
- Power Distance Index (PDI): American superintendent vs. Hispanic laborer
- Mitigated speech
- Lack of knowledge of how to properly perform the task
- Expectation of trading off safety for schedule
- Fear
- Improper tools available
- Established culture of the jobsite
- Ego of the person who refuses to ask for direction or help

All of these issues may contribute to the higher incident rate among Hispanic employees. This is what we need to look for. We need to dig deeper. It is simply not enough to stop at employee error and call it a day.

The Hispanic Culture Defined

The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" tend to be used interchangeably in the United States for people with origins in Spanish-speaking countries. Latino, from American Spanish, is used in some cases as an abbreviation for Latino Americano or "Latin American." The term "Latin American" was used for the first time in the nineteenth century when the French occupied Mexico (1862-1867), leading to the Second Mexican Empire, and wanted to be included in what is considered Spanish America. The 1970 Census was the first time that a "Hispanic" identifier was used and data collected with the question. The definition of "Hispanic" has been modified in each successive census. The 2000 Census asked if the person was "Spanish/Hispanic/Latino."⁷

⁶ Dekker, S. 2002. *The Field Guide to Human Error Investigation* Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company.

⁷ Wikipedia (retrieved March 2010)

According to Rogelio Hernandez Flores,⁸ the Hispanic worker experience of work structure differs from the work structure of the United States. The work structure that stems from colonial times in Mexico and Latin America assigns liability, decisionmaking and accountability based on the knowledge and work experience the employee acquires. There are three levels from the bottom up: apprentice, officer and master. A new employee is considered an apprentice. He should receive lecture and theory, be shown how to do the work, and be expected to follow orders. He is not expected to figure out how to do the work, and he is certainly not expected to make decisions. Learning is based on practice and memorization. As his experience grows, he can advance to the officer level. The officer level would allow for limited responsibility and accountability, yet delegation is still very minimal. Through study and practice, he would then one day grow into the master position, where he would have full decisionmaking authority and be recognized as an expert.

Notice the stark contrast to the American way of management. Americans are empowered to make decisions, learn by experiment and delegate authority. Yet the Hispanic apprentice worker will not attempt to make a decision. He looks to his officer or master to do so. He does not delegate authority or feel empowered to make decisions. This is a distinct difference that managers overseeing a Hispanic workforce must acknowledge in order to lead the right way.

The Hispanic culture tends to be more hierarchical than the U.S. Unskilled laborers in Mexico, for example, are not generally taught that they can grow within the company, even if they show leadership and improve their skills. The Latino culture carries an engrained respect for authority, and an employee would dare not challenge a boss for fear of causing him to “lose face.” Such an attitude discourages innovative thinking and initiative. As a result, American supervisors often make incorrect assumptions, such as Mexican employees do not have good ideas or are not able to show initiative. These immigrants are simply socialized to carry out orders.

For companies with especially high numbers of Hispanic employees, their future success, possibly even their survival, depends on moving some of these employees into leadership roles. As always, some leaders emerge naturally, but many companies are realizing that making a concerted effort to educate and promote their Latino workers is critical. This might involve gearing training programs to meet the needs of these employees.⁹

Best Practices in Working with the Hispanic Workforce

When managing a group of Hispanic workers the following best practices will help in your success.

Identify the Leader of the Group. The leader may be someone who speaks better English than others. Typically, each work crew looks to someone who will explain and spend time translating, evaluating and representing the group. Regardless of whether the person has a title, such a person will emerge. To identify the leader, simply watch the dynamics of the group. After a daily huddle or a jobsite meeting, the group may linger, and one person will clarify the expectations of the supervisor. That is the person you need to get to know and with whom to establish rapport. This will be your key element to effective communication and earning the respect of the crew.

⁸ *Intercultural Diversity: An Integrated Approach to Cultural Diversity in the Workplace*. Denver, Colorado

⁹ HR.com

Walk the Talk. The Hispanic culture is one of pride, loyalty and respect. Yet each of these must be earned. A superintendent who sits in the trailer all day and comes out to bark orders and complain is not going to earn the respect of the Hispanic worker or any worker for that matter. A superintendent who is present, visible, and interested in the job as it is being performed is the one who will reap the rewards of a loyal crew. A superintendent who is not afraid to get his hands dirty; who will work side by side with the crew when necessary, will go a long way in earning the respect and loyalty of the crew.

Include Family. Americans tend to separate work and family life. Family, however, is of primary importance for Latinos and this may be felt at the workplace. For example, a Mexican worker may come into the workplace on his day off to pick up his paycheck with his wife and children in tow. While most Americans would considerate it more appropriate for the family to wait in the car, the Mexican employee would more naturally bring his family into the office. His supervisor may be across the room and immersed in his work, yet the employee would be pleased for the boss to make it a point to greet him and to meet his family. Taking time for personal interaction will help to engender more trust and loyalty from this employee. It can also help to break down the stereotype that Latinos hold that Americans are cold and have little regard for common courtesies.¹⁰

Be Aware of Translations. Bilingual people are often used as translators on a project. This can work if you are aware of any potential issues that may result. Bilingual people need to deal with a number of issues that can cloud communication. Dialect, lack of knowledge of the subject matter and accurate use of terms can change the meaning of a message. Be careful to select someone who has the right experience and the right relationship with the crew to be successful. Take notice: If a three-sentence translation turns into a few spoken words, chances are your message is lost in translation. Also be aware when a crew stands around after a meeting looking confused. This means your message was not accurately conveyed. Finally, be very careful with the question, “Do you understand?” Nine times out of ten you will get an answer of “Si” (Spanish word for “yes”). This does not mean they understand. It may mean “OK” or it may be said as an attempt to show respect. The best way to assure your message is understood is to look for opportunities for the workers to show you and repeat back the instructions.

When hiring a translator to translate written documents or to verbally translate information, be sure they speak the same dialect of your audience.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words. Mock-ups, plans, demonstrations, examples and pictures are all excellent ways to enhance the communication process on a jobsite. Giving people the opportunity to observe the work being performed will be very beneficial and avoid injuries and unnecessary rework.

Open Your Mind and Spirit to Learning. The world is not flat. English is not the only language in the world. Most Europeans speak a minimum of two languages. Americans have long stood by the opinion that they only need to learn English. This limits our view of the world and presents as an ego-driven culture to the rest of the world. Open your mind. Explore the opportunity of learning a new language and getting to know the people on your project each and every day. It is not as difficult as you think, and it requires two things to learn a language: A willingness to try and practice.

¹⁰ HR.com.

Finally, realize that your way is not the only way. The real meaning of a team environment and a culture of success is accepting and appreciating diversity and differing experience and points of view. View diversity as a competitive advantage instead of a hindrance. It is here to stay, and it is what has made America the land of greatness for over 200 years.

Bibliography