

Managing Diversity for Safety, Health & Environmental Excellence

**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 which may have been born outside the U.S. and who are trying to incorporate into our culture and way of life. You can observe the same phenomenon if you walk into your children's schools, the waiting room at your doctor's office or simply walking around town to our restaurants, stores or shopping malls. 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 that provides new opportunities -- 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 broad range of attitudes, beliefs, and values that challenge, or even impede your HS&E efforts. In our experience at Topf, 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, the rules, 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. These benefits go beyond the safety issues into areas like moral, productivity and other essential elements in running and managing a profitable organization.

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 and life styles. 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. In addition, some of your workers may not be comfortable to discussing their concern or ideas openly with their “bosses” or even coworkers for fears that it may be misinterpreted, disrespectful or putting their jobs in jeopardy. Some may even feel like “second class citizens” whose jobs are to do what they are told without questioning.

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. Through the Topf process, additional input comes from a series of structured interviews with a cross-section of the population by interviewers who understand diversity and can reach people in a non-threatening and respectful way. 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, regional areas in their countries, 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, language or nationality. 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 common 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, one that is commonly misunderstood, in your efforts to manage and benefit from diversity. Nuances of meaning can be lost, often a literal translation leads to misunderstandings 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 (who are familiar with the terminology and concepts used in safety programs) for safety training sessions, and using specialized MSDS and labeling programs that focus on images or pictographs rather than words.

Language comprehension is such an important factor that we need to expand on that a little more. Many times a supervisor or manager feels that if the can communicate socially with an employee, they are proficient in the English language. Nothing can be further from the truth. An understanding or even speaking everyday language does not mean that a person is fully capable to comprehend other concepts, such as safety, health an environment. There are techniques that we teach supervisors to assess the level of understanding that person possess in a language other than his native. This is especially critical when communicating important information regarding safety, health and environmental issues.

When a person hears instructions in a language other than his native language, they automatically translate the information in their mind, until their comprehension is so complete that they can think and process information on either language. In our daily communications we

take for granted certain idioms or slang words that are part of our daily vocabulary. The problem arises that many times a literal translation of those words into other languages has a totally different meaning and result in misunderstandings that could be meaningful at times. A thorough understanding of language issues is of utmost important in dealing with a diverse workforce, especially on issues like safety, health and the environment.

How do you know if you've succeeded in the effort of dealing with diversity in the areas of safety, health and the environment? There are a number of measures and they can include:

- Prevention of or a reduction in injuries, illnesses, and environmental incidents
- Increasing atmosphere of respect among all employees
- Improve communications at all levels
- An increase in overall morale in your department
- 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 without fear of repercussions
- Improved efficiency
- 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, cultures and beliefs within a diverse culture as we become "better people". The more we understand our differences, the more we can see our similarities and common goals and desires.

Safety, health, and the environment provide an exceptional vehicle for unity building in any organization.