

Awareness Training Program for Residential Construction Supervisors Working with Multicultural Populations

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Introduction

Supervisors play an important role within the construction site due to their role as a liaison between the company's interests and the workers' needs (Flin and Yule 47; Dingsdag, et al. 631; Jaselskis, et al. 604; Sawacha, et al. 312). Currently, construction supervisors are faced with a multicultural employee population. They need to improve their cultural sensitivity to motivate and influence their work groups to reach organizational goals (Menzel and Gutierrez 6). Supervisors who are committed to safety, encourage workers' open communication and engagement them in safe behaviors (Gillen, et al. 249; Burt, et al. 82). Hence, supervisors need to be effective leaders in the workplace because their style of leadership affects the organization performance. Supervisors' leadership style may have a significant influence on their subordinates' behaviors and attitudes (Michael, et al. 173) as well as the safety and health conditions at the workplace (Gillen, et al. 251; Flin and Yule 47). In addition, lack of effective communication, inability to resolve conflict or to interpret non-verbal signals between supervisors and team members, among others, might be inadequate for the purposes of effective safety and health communication (O'Driscoll and Beehr 143; O'Connor, et al. 273; Trajkovski and Loosemore 450). It is well-known that on construction sites supervisors are the most noticeable leaders with enough authority and power to influence workers' behaviors (Dingsdag, et al 231).

The objective of this study was to design a training program for residential construction supervisors to improve social dynamics at the workplace through: (1) Adopting leadership skills regarding communication and ability to motivate others, to work with Hispanic and Non-Hispanic work crews and (2) Interacting and communicating appropriately with multicultural workers. This paper focuses on the design of cultural and linguistically appropriate training modules for Hispanic and Non-Hispanic construction supervisors, the implementation of a participatory approach to the training program via focus groups and interviews with residential construction supervisors and workers, and most importantly, on the systematic evaluation of the training program among construction supervisors in the residential sector.

Hispanic Workers' Health and Safety Conditions at the Workplace

In the United States, the largest and fastest-growing minority group is Hispanics, who reached 46.9 million in 2008 and by 2010 the Hispanic origin population became the second-largest

race/ethnic group (Bureau of Labor Statistics). In 2008, the construction industry employed the highest percentage of foreign-born workers, about 2.5 million; and 25% of all construction workers were workers of Hispanic descent, many of whom were Spanish-dominant and some bilingual (Pew Hispanic Center ; CPWR). On the other hand, construction labor is one of the most hazardous activities, due to a dynamic process in which workers are exposed to several hazards at the same time, with an elevated risk of fatal accidents. Between 1992 and 2000, the number of construction workers died of occupational injuries in the US among was 9,957 in whom 1,501 were identified as of Hispanic origin (Dong et al. 1225). Five leading events are tied to fatal occupational injuries in construction: fall to a lower level, high way collision, contact with electric current, struck-by an object, and pedestrian or non-passenger struck-by a vehicle (Dong, et al. 1223). Hispanic construction workers face significantly higher risks in the workplace than non-Hispanic construction workers, even within specific high-risk occupations.(Dong, et al. 1223)

Role of Supervisors in the Construction Industry

Supervisors play an important role in the construction industry with responsibilities ranging from administrative tasks to monitoring job and workers performance. They need to balance between the company interests and needs of the workers. Supervisors have to attend many different demands at the construction site such as quality, productivity, budget, health and safety, job and personal related workers requirements and their time is always scarce (Seppala 318). In addition, construction workforce has become diverse in terms of cultural backgrounds, thereby supervisors face with employees population made up of diverse values, beliefs and behaviors. Consequently, supervisors need to know how to response to different cultures in the construction site, and, of course, how to promote the safety and health attitudes in the workplace. In this environment, current supervisor needs to improve their abilities to understand workers' feelings, read non-verbal communication, listen with completely receptiveness and response workers needs in a respectful way according to the diversity on the workplace (Enshassi and Burgess 96; Kealey and Protheroe 296; Gillen, et al. 249; Trajkovski and Loosemore 451). An organizational aspect referred to by workers is supervisors get monetary benefits when the project is finished before the deadline. However when projects are delayed or the budget is increased the supervisor's job is put at risk. Therefore, supervisors could unwittingly promote unsafe or inappropriate work practices and create in workers a lack of respect for work hazards.

Supervisors' Training in the Construction Industry

Learning to be effective supervisors implies more challenges and more responsibilities. Some practices attribute to effective supervisors are paying attention to monitoring worker performance, giving workers feedback and spending time communicating with workers about non-work related topics (Matilla et al. 85). Although construction is one of the most dangerous and labor-intensive industries, inadequate attention is given to improving supervisors' managerial skills to keep effective relationships in the workplace between workers and supervisors. Most training programs are mainly concerned with health and safety aspects rather than interpersonal relationships at the workplace (O'Connor, et al. 274)

Culturally Appropriate Approaches

The existence of working environments where workers come together from different countries and languages, bring both opportunities and challenges to achieve and maintain decent levels of productivity, quality, and workers' safety and health. For instance, misunderstandings caused by the different communication styles can lead to a loss in the pace of work, quality or jeopardize the workers' safety and health conditions. In a multicultural environment rules, regulations, policies,

leadership styles, orders, or signals at the workplace can be interpreted in a different way by employees according to their previous experiences, values and behaviors.

In recent years, researchers have sought intervention strategies that reflect values, attitudes, expectations, behaviors, norms and preferences of the group who are intervening with the aim of increasing participation as well as retention and increasing program effectiveness (Marin and Vanoss-Marin 18; Marín 150; Woodruff, et al. 362; Villarruel, et al.24; Whittemore 158). Such strategies, called culturally appropriate, have been applied in research with Hispanic population in areas such as public health, mental health, marketing, religiosity and collaborative learning in education (Brown, et al. 259; Palmer, et al. 488; Hall, et al. 1195; Interian, et al. 67; Babamoto, et al. 113). Programs to prevent or reduce consumption of alcohol, smoking, substance abuse, violence, AIDS and HIV infections, diabetes, infant mortality, asthma, cancer, depression, traumatized children and so forth, have implemented culturally appropriate or relevant community interventions in order to improve recruitment, participation, acceptability, knowledge, sustainability, etc. (Marin and Vanoss-Marin 42; Mauldon, et al. 754; Hall, 1197; Interian, et al. 70).

The Hispanic Culture

Cultures tend to be defined by their values, and values differ remarkably between cultures (Hofstede 13). Hispanics often have value systems that are different from each other subgroups and from those of American families. In the United States, culture is the predominant identification among Hispanics mainly by use of the Spanish language (Dana 176) as well as strong ties to their country of origin related to national traditions and extended families. General values and traditions attributed to Hispanics include family (familiarism), respect, power distance, *simpatia*, and gender role among others (Marin and Vanoss-Marin 11; Sue 798; Dana 187).

Family or familiarism describes the importance of the family over the individual and very strong family ties. It has been considered the most important cultural value for Hispanics, as well as a protective factor against physical and emotional stress. *Respect* refers to a sense of formality when addressing people in a position of authority, people they don't know well, and elder people. *Personalism* describes the importance given to person-to- person contact or "face- to-face" interaction, as well as warm relationships. *Power distance* is defined as the interpersonal power or influence that exists between two individuals due to difference in inherent traits or acquired characteristics such as money, education, etc. Hispanics are considered a high power-distance culture in which conformity and obedience are valued. This is manifested, for example, as a general fear of disagreeing with those in power. *Simpatia* emphasizes the need for keeping behaviors that promote smooth and pleasant social relationships as a general tendency to avoid conflicts and achieve harmony in interpersonal relations. *Personal space* refers to the amount of physical space considered appropriate between people when they are interacting. Hispanics prefer to stand closer to others and may often identify further apart as a cold and distance treatment. *Time orientation* is related to the way people value the usage of time. Hispanics tend to have a more flexible attitude toward time and to give more importance to past and present rather than future. *Gender role* is related to the division of roles and gender-related behaviors between both men and women. Traditionally, Hispanic men have assumed the role of being strong, in control, and the breadwinner for their families. All these values and traditions influence the Hispanic populations' behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and needs; and may influence the way how health, healing, wellness belief systems, illness, injuries, disease, and their causes are perceived different from other cultures.

Respect at the Workplace

At the workplace, workers are particularly vulnerable to experiencing situations where cultural differences are misunderstood or not respected by supervisors. These situations may range from differences related to difficulty in understanding hazards exposure, controls and deficient interpersonal relationships. Some quotes regarding to workers' perception of supervisors' behaviors from focus groups conducted with construction workers by highlighting the importance of respect with communicating and dealing with Hispanics:

- *“I think that the company should educate supervisors. Teaching them that this (the worker) is not your son, he is an employee, he is not your child so he doesn't do what you want, he will do the job on the day.”*
- *“Some American supervisors are disrespectful and they see Hispanic workers as trash...”*
- *What is happening with the Hispanic supervisors is that they want that you work all day long without breaks, while the white (non-Hispanic supervisor) doesn't put pressure on the Hispanic workers.*
- *“They should be humanitarian [supervisors]. First, he should feel as if he were at the same level as the employee, even when the supervisor is in a higher position. Obviously, he needs to know that he is working with a human being like he is. There are cases that may occur where there are supervisors who do not think so and push you causing you to make mistakes”*
- *“Supervisors should be aware [regarding risks at the workplace] and experienced [in the construction industry] because some companies hired inexperienced supervisors.”*

Methods

Unfortunately, examples of leadership and culturally adapted training programs in the construction industry are limited. A search was done to review the research on leadership and culturally appropriate training focusing on results that may be relevant to improve managerial skills and behaviors in middle managers and supervisors. Some of these materials were adapted some were designed from scratch. In our design and development criteria we considered adult and popular education guidelines and focused on the 'culture' of the residential construction sector.

Designing Training Modules¹

A training program is proposed to provide basic human relationship skills for construction supervisors. The training program seeks developing an effective tool that would improve the current construction supervisors' leadership and cultural skills. The training program would reduce the cultural gap between multicultural workers and supervisors in order to assist construction supervisors in becoming more prepared to interact appropriately with others who may not share thoughts and perspectives due to their cultural background. The curriculum was based on a literature review regarding training programs for managerial levels working with multicultural forces. The modules were focused not on providing information about different cultures or becoming a cultural expert; instead, they were intended to encourage construction supervisors to be aware of differences and similarities, avoiding stereotyping, recognizing, and finding ways to communicate that fit the situation in a respectful work environment.

¹ The training modules will be presented at the June Professional Development Conference session, and are not included in this paper.

The curriculum described in this project is divided into five modules: four standard modules focus on fostering interpersonal relationship with people from other cultural backgrounds and the last one designed to delve into the Hispanic culture, which may be adapted according with the main population at the worksite.

Supervisor Leadership (Module 1). This step looks for creating a supervisors' learning need through increasing awareness toward their characteristics and duties, their role at the construction site, identifying their expectations, and exploring how they may improve their skills; for example, for reaching employability status. At the same time, an examination of their personal values and beliefs and their influence on workers beliefs and practice is proposed. The followings are contents suggested:

- Supervisors' roles and responsibilities at the workplace
- Supervisors' skills and abilities
- Expectations and needs
- Personal and professional development
- Own values, perspectives and worksite view
- Self-awareness

Working with a Multicultural Teamwork (Module 2). This module looks for understanding, accepting and valuing cultural differences at the workplace. It should be general in approach rather than directed towards a specific culture in order to give a broad idea of differences and similarities across cultures. Cultural influences, lifestyles, and assumptions that affect their relationships are analyzed. Suggested contents are:

- Cultural diversity and how does it affect the worksite
- Cultural differentials and similarities in culture, attitudes, value and belief systems, characteristics, behaviors, traditions. (How others see Americans, how others see Non-Americans)
- Stereotyping

Effective Communication at the Workplace (Module 3). Most communication in the construction industry takes place orally. In an environment with different languages and barriers, the possibility of ambiguity and misunderstanding become greater, this can slow down the work process and put workers at risk. Communication is considered an important skill for developing leaderships, and topics in this module are:

- Learn to listen
- Language barriers
- Verbal and non-verbal communication
- Techniques to provide feedback
- Values in communication (power distance, respect, empathy, trust)

Effective Construction Supervisor (Module 4). This module focuses on the application of previously gained knowledge, as well as achieving supervisors' commitment to promote tangible changes in the workplace.

- Explore ways to improve Communication and Problem Solving
- Identify barriers for workers participation
- Motivate others
- Promote a respectful workplace

The Hispanic Culture (Module 5). This is a floating module will be adapted to each target population in order to give a deep analysis to the main characteristics of the group and identify effective manners to deal with each one. In this context we developed the module focusing on the Hispanic Culture.

- Who are Hispanics and Latinos?
- Hispanic values and beliefs
- Hispanic cultural characteristics that influence health and safety beliefs, and attitudes
- Strategies to reduce language barriers

In order to conduct the training, a variety of techniques have been reported in the literature. Some techniques used by multinational corporations in training managerial levels in order to increase the effectiveness of training programs are the following (Cooper et al. 436; Gannon and Poon 441; Jarrel 141; Inglis 477; Harvey 401):

Case studies. A case study is considering a situation that includes enough detail to assess the problems involved and determine possible solutions. It requires trainees to analyze character, context, actions, and possible outcomes. A case study aims to reacting to a real-world situation and dealing with a concrete problem typical of those encountered in cross-cultural or ethnically diverse situations.

Role playing. Role playing is a universal training method in which people are exposed with some situation in a real or artificial environment and assigned to different roles. It gives an opportunity to see the field situation from perspectives other than those they might be taking in reality and increasing sensitivity to the experiences of other person's situation.

Simulations. Simulation games are more elaborate than role playing. It is a structured training activity with specially created conditions, which aim to reproduce a particular situation. A simulation game might concentrate on communication, feedback, leadership and team skills while another will cover problem solving, decision making, etc.

Videotapes. Video tapes, films, and other visual training aids are techniques in conjunction with lectures or discussions. Use of interactive videos and simulations are suggested because it is possible to have a high frequency or repetitions to better understand material and training elements could be viewed in private. Multiple models may be used to represent different cultures or cultural clusters and material can be edited to adapt to different populations.

Implications in the Field of Worker Health and Safety

Improving the psychosocial work environment is critical in promoting safety & health in the work place. By creating awareness among supervisors of the implications of dealing with multicultural workforces we could embrace them to better understand other cultures, values and perspectives. When individuals feel accepted, respected and included within an organization they can become more productive, effective, and healthier workers. Supervisors are perhaps the most critical agents in achieving this change within the construction culture.

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