

Considering Culture and Language Differences

Peruvian herders, Latino pickers, Asian fishermen, Anglo cowboys. The fundamental demographic shifts changing the face and fabric of America also have charted new courses for managers in western agriculture. The old techniques and languages do not seem to work as well with the more diverse agricultural workforce that agricultural employers in some states have only begun to know in recent years. Dealing with personnel issues and conflicts that are rooted in culture, values, or language differences requires new knowledge, skills, and flexibility for many agricultural managers.

Cultural Interpretations

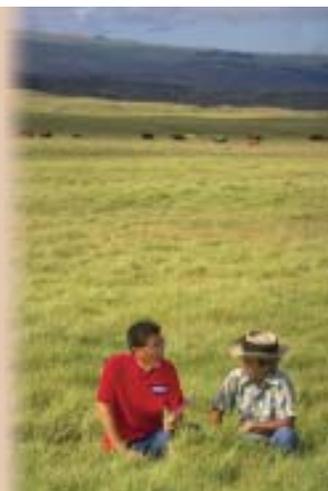
A grower's respect for employees of other cultures goes a long way toward making the association both productive and enjoyable. Many misunderstandings arise because people from different cultures interpret or react to certain situations very differently.

It is hard to know for sure how someone else will interpret a look in the eye, avoidance of eye contact, a handshake, hug, silence, or even a smile. These gestures are all open to interpretation. Looking some people in the eye may indicate listening; a pronounced facial expression may indicate understanding. To these people, averting eyes often suggests inattentiveness or insincerity. But to people from other traditions, direct eye contact and uncensored facial expressions may come off as distracting, aggressive, or even rude and disrespectful.

Silence generally means agreement in the dominant American culture, but it can mean many things to people other contexts — “No,” or “I don't have anything to add,” or “Don't pursue the subject,” “I am thinking,” or even “I disagree.” Some people avoid saying “no” in order to maintain harmony.

Jack Green manages a crew of Asian-born workers in his greenhouse. Last year, he developed a plan to reduce the number of hours needed to perform two of their most time-consuming production tasks. He knew he needed the cooperation of the crew members to make his idea work, so he called a meeting to explain the minor adjustments that they would have to make. Since no one expressed disagreement, the new plan was implemented. Or so Jack thought.

Within two weeks, it became evident the workers were still using the same procedures they had been using and not doing what they had apparently agreed to at the meeting. Jack felt angry that the team had gone back on its commitment.



In many cultures, saying no to a request or offer, no matter how unreasonable, is taboo. In others, “no” is never said to one in authority. Other expressions of disagreement may be used. The unaware manager who misses these signals, as Jack did, may feel that an agreement has taken place and is surprised when what “was promised” never happens. Silence may mean consent in some legal and social contexts but certainly not all.



A supervisor is angry because one of his Latino workers takes the day off each time his wife needs to go to a doctor's appointment. The boss cannot understand the need for the employee to do this because he knows the wife usually drives and takes care of shopping and other errands on her own.

How does each view the situation? The supervisor is irritated that the employee is not there when needed. In fact, the boss describes the employee as “irresponsible” for taking time off work. The employee feels that his boss is insensitive and punitive. Each, of course, sees the other through his own cultural prism.

What the supervisor does not realize is that in the employee's culture, the role of head of the family requires him to take his wife to such important appointments and that he was being quite responsible within the context of these values. Family responsibility and loyalty to kin are prime values within many cultures. The employee, on the other hand, does not appear to realize that according to his boss's cultural programming, work commitments take precedence over all non-emergency matters and that family members take care of such responsibilities on their own. The issue for the two of them is not who loves his family more, who is a better spouse, or who is a more committed worker, but how this can be worked out.



Susan is responsible for delivering supplies to five herders working for the family sheep operation. She sometimes finds herself gesturing a great deal in order to communicate. During one recent delivery, she indicated to a South American herder that he was doing well by giving him the “OK” gesture. The worker became visibly embarrassed and offended.

Body language, including gestures and physical distance, has important connotations in many cultures. Although body language is a natural and usually helpful adjunct to successful cross-cultural communication, some gestures may offend people from other cultures. As Susan later learned, the “OK” hand sign carries negative connotations in South America. Though most workers realize

that managers probably do not mean to be offensive when using such “loaded” signals, some culturally rooted associations with gestures still make people uncomfortable. Managers can avoid difficulty by being aware of and eliminating culturally sensitive gestures from their vocabulary of body language.

An owner, manager, or foreman who understands farm workers’ cultural backgrounds is better able to understand why his or her employees act, think, and speak the way they do and is better able to work with them for greater productivity.

Bridging a Language Barrier

More and more supervisors are faced with the challenge of communicating with employees who do not speak English easily. The first language of many agricultural production workers in western states today is Spanish. Growers unable to speak with their employees usually communicate through bilingual foremen or crew leaders. Non-supervisory workers, their family members, friends, and neighbors aid some growers.

A large and growing share of farm managers, however, have developed some facility with the Spanish language, and they often achieve operational and employee relations benefits by using it. Even if most communication is indirect, a primarily English speaker can convey respect, accessibility, and maybe some technical information by trying to speak in another’s language. A manager’s simple “Hello,” “Como esta?” “Goodbye,” “Please,” or “Thank you,” in a worker’s mother tongue sends the additional message that it is all right to try a different language and learn from mistakes. It also gives the worker a chance to teach something.

The overwhelming majorities of non-native and non-English speakers want to succeed, are intelligent and hard working, try to express themselves clearly, and want to understand what they are told. But English is a complex language, and many workers who did not grow up with it are intimidated by the difficulty of using it. People who do not have the ability to communicate easily often develop feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness that carry over to their work performance and personal lives. When agricultural managers help employees understand and be understood, they benefit more than their operations.

Simpler English

A most basic guideline in conversing with workers whose primary language is not English is to use simple vocabulary and sentence structure. Organizing thoughts before starting to speak and sticking to one subject at a time reduces cross-language difficulty. Concrete descriptions and straightforward, specific requests are more easily understood than abstractions and subtle manipulations. Instead of “I wanted to see if you could get here a little earlier tomorrow so we can get a good jump on things,” try “Can you come in at seven tomorrow so that we can meet the deadline?” Because jargon and slang tend to confuse, they