

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



are best avoided. Phrasing statements positively and using active rather than passive verbs reduces room for misinterpretation. “Please return those tools to the shed,” instead of “Those tools need to be put back.”

A calm and respectful tone is always welcome. Emphasize key words when communicating with a non-native speaker, but consistent use of oversimplified, grammatically incorrect English may insult the listener’s intelligence. Visual aids can give the worker more ways to understand. Pictures, charts, and diagrams are all good bridge-builders. So is the written word. Writing down instructions or key ideas from meetings and phone calls gives employees greater opportunity to fully grasp the information.

Assessing How Well You Are Understood

Supervisors are often frustrated when workers indicate they understand instructions, when in truth they do not. Why don’t they just say so? Because they do not want to look foolish or insulting by implying that the instructions have not been explained well enough. They also may worry that, even if explained again, they still will not understand. If employees nod and smile at appropriate times and appear focused, there is a good chance they really understand. If they giggle at serious information and offer no interruptions or questions, it is safe to assume that they do not. A few techniques can reduce the guesswork, with English and non-English speakers alike:

- Observe the employee’s performance after the communication. If a procedure is done correctly the first time, the instructions were probably understood.
- Let employees ask questions individually and in private. Doing so can spare them loss of face from publicly admitting they do not understand.
- Allow enough time during and after the conversation for non-native speakers to formulate their questions. Come back to field questions after a day or so.
- Ask questions that would reveal comprehension, and phrase them positively. (e.g., “What part of the job do you think will take longest? “Do you understand?” rather than “You don’t understand, do you?”)

Helping Employees Get across Their Points

Understanding what workers are trying to say is just as critical as helping them get a message from someone else. The following ideas may prove helpful:

- Share responsibility for a communication that does not work at first. Say something such as, “It sure is noisy here,” or “I’m sorry it’s taking me so long to understand,” to take pressure off the speaker.
- Invite the employee to slow down and collect his or her thoughts.
- Repeat what the speaker said in your own words and ask if you have heard correctly.

- If spoken communication is not working well, ask the employee to write part or all of the message.
- Watch the speaker's lips.
- Observe body language.

Supervising across language barriers is not easy, but no one has to accept it as insurmountable. Build bridges by using clear English, checking comprehension, working to understand all workers, and encouraging efforts to speak English. Doing these things builds essential communication skills that ultimately strengthen the operation.

Cultural differences are often subtle and loaded with nuances that are difficult to grasp. While most managers have to make some adjustments to deal well with people from other cultures, they need not and cannot change their essential personalities and own cultural values. Overriding rules-of-thumb for managers in today's diverse American landscape are:

- Try to remain aware of the natural tendency toward ethnocentrism — an orientation presuming that all people share one's own cultural values and perspectives.
- Don't expect that workers from other backgrounds want to or can assimilate into the dominant culture.

Staff Meetings

Meetings of supervisory staff, work crews, another defined group, or all employees are good for providing information with a more personal touch than written form and for taking up matters on which multiple people can contribute to discussion. Farm and ranch operators use them for such purposes as reporting on the status of the business, formulating business goals and plans, making major personnel decisions, and coping with specific operational problems. Field supervisors and foremen commonly make announcements, provide safety training, and discuss other operational matters at less formal "tailgate" meetings.

Meetings can be scheduled on a regular or as needed basis, depending on business size, seasonal needs, and managerial preference. Having a regular time for more formal meetings, for example the first Thursday morning of each month or annually just before harvest, allows people to plan for and around the meetings. Additional sessions can be arranged, of course, in times of major change or crisis. A meeting of the management team could take place over coffee in the staff room, kitchen, or shop. Production crews might get together at the start of a day in the location where the work takes place or in a building where equipment is stored.