



## Talking with your work force

*How to bridge the communication gap.*

**W**orkers need training before they are

exposed to agricultural hazards, but for most of our work force, English is not their first language. Experts say that it takes about five to six years for someone learning a new language to reach professional-level, second-language proficiency and five to ten years for someone learning a new culture to reach second-culture proficiency. Our challenge is to bridge that five- to ten-year gap before an accident occurs.

### Training

Research at the Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center revealed that our Hispanic workers want their training on the worksite, either from their supervisors or a community health worker/promotora who is well trained on the particular workplace health issues (e.g., heat-related illness or pesticide safety). Hands-on training is preferred over written materials because the latter may be intimidating for those without reading proficiency in Spanish. Training should be provided by a native speaker in the language of the workers. The more interactive it is, the better.

Signage is fine, but it should be field tested with your audience. Case in point: We developed an illustration to show workers how pesticide residues could move from the workplace into their homes. Do you see a problem with the picture at right? Our community health workers who had been in this country for many years thought it was just fine. Only when it was tested in a worker camp with newly arriving migrants was a problem revealed—the dog! Dogs would never be allowed in the house in Mexico because they are considered unhygienic.

### Translations

If you use any text with pictures keep it short and simple. Avoid electronic translations. They don't work. Here is an example of what you could get:

*Original English message:* Always wash your pesticide-contaminated hands with soap and water before using the toilet, answering your cell phone, or eating.

*Electronic Spanish:* Siempre lávese las manos de plaguicidas contaminados con agua y jabón antes de usar el inodoro, en respuesta a su teléfono celular o comer.

*Back translation:* Always wash your hands of pesticide-contaminated water and soap before using the toilet, in response to your cell phone or eating.

Ask a professional bilingual translator to do your text, and test it for comprehension by asking your workers to first read it aloud, and then ask them to paraphrase the meaning. Finally, to avoid embarrassment, ask if they think others would understand.

### Cultural gaffes

With the best of intentions we unknowingly can be insulting. Here are some things to avoid with your more recently arrived workers from Mexico.

- Pointing at a person, finger snapping, whistling to get someone's attention, and extending our index and fifth digits (like horns) are considered insulting. If whistling is the only method in an emergency, explain to your work force that it is not meant as an insult.
- Looking a superior in the eye is considered confrontational or disrespectful. Avoidance of direct eye contact does not mean deceit or inattention; rather it is a sign of respect for the boss. Your workers are not hiding something, lying, being sneaky or inattentive, trying to cheat you, or lacking in self-esteem. It is merely that they respect you as the boss. You might have to explain to staff who are relatively new in our country that we are trained to look others in the eye and how not doing so is interpreted.
- A firm handshake is seen as aggressive. Their loose hand is not a sign of weakness but again one of respect.
- Readily admitting to a mistake or taking blame is considered a loss of face and personal honor. When something happens, you may not be able to get to the

bottom of it by usual questions. It must be indirect and depersonalized—not “Did you do x, y, or z,” but “How did the event happen?”

- Speaking in a loud voice can be interpreted as anger. If your normal voice is loud, you might have to explain that you aren't angry, that it's just your style.

- Your worker may feel put down if you ask, “Do you understand me?” This may be taken as a personal confrontation, and



**Can you spot the cultural gaffe in this graphic?**

that their ability to understand is in question. Better to say, “Is what I am saying clear?”

### Understand the culture

A better understanding of Mexican culture will help you to develop closer ties to your workers and communicate more effectively. The table “Cultural differences” gives some generalizations about our two cultures, which are not necessarily hard and fast rules but give us insight into our differences.

In Mexico, the family is first and foremost. The family is everything to a Mexican and comes before anything else. Ask your employees about their family members. Get to know them. When extending invitations, include them.

Greetings are important. Don't just say an empty, “How are you?” without waiting for an answer. Really ask every worker, and mean it.

If you have a request, instead of getting right to the point as we efficiency-concerned North Americans tend to do, start out with small talk about their day and their families.

Showing respect and interest in your workers and their families goes a long way to improving communications. Respect is everything to a Mexican person. We North Americans feel we must earn respect. For a Mexican, everyone deserves respect and is born with it. Only by behaving badly does one lose it. ●

### Further reading

*Uncomfortable Neighbors* by Jim Tiffany is a book in English and Spanish about cultural differences between Americans and Mexicans. For information, e-mail [elmundo1@nwi.net](mailto:elmundo1@nwi.net).

Another excellent resource is *Positive Practices in Farm Labor Management: Keeping Your Employees Happy and Your Production Profitable*, which is downloadable free from the California Institute for Rural Studies at [www.cirsinc.org/AgriculturalWorkerPublications.html](http://www.cirsinc.org/AgriculturalWorkerPublications.html). ●

### Cultural differences

North American	Latin America
Product-oriented	People-oriented
Hard working; values time	Hard working; values enjoying time
Decision making by lower and middle management	Decision making by top management
Direct communication: yes or no	Indirect communication: Preserves dignity of both parties. Saying no is difficult
Pride in competitiveness	Pride in cooperation
More willing to accept close supervision	Feels that close supervision shows lack of trust
Shifts to informal as soon as it's possible	Prefers formality until a real relationship exists

SOURCE: Tomas Schwabe, Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration.