

How to Develop a Language Competence Strategy

By Leslie Aguilar



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This is the second article in a two-part series. The first, [Language Competence – The Forgotten Twin](#), explored the impact of language diversity in the workplace and society, defined Linguistic Competence (also called Language Competence), and examined why it is important to have a strategic plan.

An effective Language Competence Strategy will help you achieve business goals, tap the potential of multiple language skills, and minimize tensions and communication

breakdowns.

In this article, *How to Develop a Language Competence Strategy*, we'll look at concrete ways to implement a strategic plan in your organization. Here is a six-step road map.

1) Tie your language strategy to your business goals.

Just like any Diversity & Inclusion strategy, your Language Competence Strategy should be tied to larger organizational goals. So start with the big picture – the business goal you are seeking to achieve – and ensure your language strategy supports it.

Examples:

- ... increase your customer base,
- ... enhance the customer experience,
- ... increase efficiency and safety on the manufacturing floor,
- ... strengthen police-community relations,
- ... expand your business internationally.

Ensure your strategy is two-fold – leveraging the opportunities AND managing stresses or obstacles presented by language differences. Identify an individual or department to oversee your strategy.

2) Assess your workplace and marketplace.

When it comes to language strategy, one size does not fit all. Consider language proficiency, languages spoken, and language isolation/support. (*Note: We are using English as the predominant language in this article. For organizations/regions with another predominant language, the concepts still apply although the languages will be different.*)

English Language Proficiency: There are three language proficiency groups, each with distinct needs:

- (1) No English and limited English proficient (LEP) employees,
- (2) Bilingual employees who speak both/multiple languages at varying levels, and

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(3) English-only employees.

Each has different needs, and strategy will be different for each group.

Languages Spoken: According to the U.S. Census, over 60 million people (21% of the U.S. population) speak a language other than English at home. The top five languages spoken in the U.S. are English, Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. These vary greatly by region. Determine your predominant language groups among employees and customers (current and potential).

Language Isolation/Support:

A bilingual IT professional from China may be isolated from other Chinese-speaking employees and have no language support structures available. Compare this to a department with a large number of Spanish-speaking employees. Within this group you may have LEP employees as well as bilingual employees and supervisors who are able to assist with language comprehension. So, the language needs are different AND the existing support systems may be different.

As you assess, get a 360° view. Who else in your organization and community can help you get a better picture of language needs and possible solutions? Involve employee resource groups, focus groups, staff members who are already addressing language issues in marketing, customer service, recruitment, talent development, and teams. What about universities, business chambers, cultural organizations, or the census bureau? Gather data related to all three proficiency groups. And avoid this common mistake – gathering information only in English, which inhibits input from LEP individuals.

3) Refine your strategy for each language group.

Based on your business goal(s) and what you learn from your assessment, map out your focus areas.

Customer or Community Focus:

If you are in healthcare, the justice system, K-12 education, and certain other agencies and industries, you may be required by federal, state or local law, and/or by industry guidelines to provide language access for consumers. Even if you are not required to lower language barriers, business goals – such as increasing customer satisfaction or expanding your customer base – may lead you to focus on customer or community language needs.

Employee Focus:

Common initiatives for employees of limited English proficiency (LEP) are focused on lowering language barriers and are designed to ...

... ensure communication between employees and with management,
... train employees effectively,

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... ensure employee safety (decrease employee accidents),
... engage employees in problem-solving and idea generation,
... provide job-specific English language learning.

Strategies targeted for bilingual employees are designed to ...

... leverage employee language skills to better serve customers,
... attract and retain staff with needed language skills,
... identify and develop internal bilingual talent,
... reduce turnover among bilingual staff.

The English-only group requires an entirely different system of support. Strategies often focus on ...

... resources to communicate with other-language employees and customers,
... job-specific language instruction, such as workplace Spanish for supervisors,
... enhancing Global English skills and other-language skills for global leadership development.

And, of course, your strategy may overlap groups, such as coaching work teams when tensions arise over language differences.

A common question is: “For which languages do we translate or provide services?”

The answer? It depends on your goal. Most often, organizations focus on the top languages in their employee, customer, and community demographics. On the other hand, one small nation, whose economic goal was to attract business from neighboring countries, implemented a strategy to increase competency in their neighbors' languages, which differed from their local language populations. In some urgent or critical cases, such as 9-1-1 services, an organization may attempt to accommodate all languages through the use of phone, SKYPE, and in-person interpreter banks.

4) Benchmark best practices.

If you are within an industry or government service that mandates language access for LEP consumers, here is the good news – guidelines and best practices are readily available. Other organizations can benefit from these as well. However, to find best practices that exceed basic language access requirements, you will have to be more creative:

- Pay attention to competitors and how they attract, hire, train, communicate with, and develop employees across language differences.
- Compare how you reward and compensate employees for language skills. *(Note: Some bilingual employees feel they are penalized for their language abilities, e.g., expected to translate for others while meeting their own work quotas, restricted to departments or branches that need their language skills, denied promotions or high visibility opportunities based on their accents.)*

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- Check with local universities and community institutions to see what language classes and industry services are offered.
- Notice what leading organizations do to assist other-language customers such as in-language signage, advertising, product information, labels, web sites, bilingual employees, interpreters, etc. You will find examples everywhere – on airlines, in home improvement stores, attractions and theme parks, hospitals, on the web, at call centers, etc.
- You may also have best practices within pockets of your own organization that can be used in other areas.

5) Create your action plan.

Now it's time to fill in the details. Map out steps to carry you towards your goal(s). Determine changes needed in policy, practices, procedures, and dedicated resources. Apply what you can from your benchmarking of companies, government, industry associations and regulatory bodies. Continue to tap internal resources such as employee resource groups. Incorporate successful best practices already occurring on a small scale within your workplace. (See Strategy/Action Plan example.)

6) Re-assess.

Your language strategy isn't a one-time exercise. Rather it is a framework that allows you to pro-actively think about, educate yourself and others, and make effective decisions based on an ever-evolving workplace and marketplace. Organizational needs change. So should your strategy. Even when you have long-standing language practices in place, revisit your Language Competence Strategy. Are your efforts supporting your current business goals? How can you share knowledge and resources across your language support network? How will you ensure that your current efforts are attuned with changing demographics and needs?

Closing thoughts

Your Language Competence Strategy will be unique depending on your business goals, the distinct language groups in your workforce and customer base, and where you are on your journey towards cultural and linguistic competence. As you build cultural competence within your organization, remember its overlooked twin – language. Your Language Competence Strategy will equip you to minimize language barriers while increasing operational efficiency as well as your ability to attract and retain skilled employees and loyal customers to your organization.

STRATEGY / ACTION PLAN EXAMPLE



“Overcoming Language Barriers: Solutions for Law Enforcement”
Strategies for Your Agency to Ensure Language Access

- Determine the languages spoken in your jurisdiction by collecting demographic data from local and federal sources.
- Undergo a planning process to develop a language access policy and protocol guidance.
- Educate all agency personnel about language access and how to utilize agency language assistance services.
- Recruit bilingual personnel and offer a base pay increase for staff who pass a proficiency exam.
- Provide bilingual personnel with police interpreter training. Encourage officers and civilian staff to use their language skills.
- Train staff on how to effectively work with “ad hoc,” volunteer, and professional interpreters during an interaction with an LEP individual.
- Deploy bilingual personnel to areas with high numbers of LEP residents.
- Use bilingual civilian staff to conduct community outreach and build relationships between your department and immigrant and LEP residents.
- Translate signage and documents that communicate vital information to the public into the most prevalent languages spoken by LEP community members.
- Notify the public about your agency’s language access policy and language assistance resources.
- Pool resources and leverage assets with other agencies and services in your city or county.

Source: “Overcoming Language Barriers: Solutions for Law Enforcement.”
Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice / Vera Institute
of Justice, 2007.

http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/Publications/vera_translating_justice_final.pdf Accessed June 3, 2014.