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## Managing New Americans: Strategies for Making it Work

*By Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.*

It was a century ago that immigrants began to pour off the ships at Ellis Island to be met by hoteliers anxious to provide them shabby housing in exchange for inexpensive labor in their boarding houses and hotels. Fortunately, the record of diversity in the hospitality industry has improved since then. There still, however, are challenges as hundreds of individual properties and large chains continue to hire large numbers of immigrants throughout the state.



Managing employees of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds is at once fascinating, confusing, enriching, and frustrating. At times, managers have difficulty assessing if they have been understood while, at the same time, marveling at the work ethic, loyalty, and good-will of most immigrant employees.

Despite the complexity of managing a diverse work force, there are certain core strategies which will help even the most culturally-inexperienced manager communicate more effectively across cultural and language barriers. These strategies may, at first glance, seem like common sense, but, examined more closely, take on subtleties of application which reflect the heavily-nuanced world of cultural diversity.

### **Strategy I: Notice Differences Where They Exist**

Somewhere along the line, Americans came to believe that it is not acceptable to notice differences between groups of people. We were convinced that to notice that individuals have different values or different communication styles because ethnicity, race, or even gender was to denigrate them in some way. Perhaps this attitude grew out of the Civil Rights Movement when, I distinctly remember, the politically-correct phrase of the time was, "I never notice the color of a person skin." Of course we noticed the color of a person's skin -- that wasn't the point. The point was that we knew color told us nothing about a person's inborn abilities or personal worth.

The same applies to the cultural differences within your workforce. Yes, it is alright to notice differences and to take them into consideration when deciding how to meet that person's needs. What is not alright is to denigrate that person because of those cultural differences. Let's look, for example, at your Mexican immigrant work force. Of course

we can't generalize about every individual, but as a broad statement it is safe to say that Mexican culture tends to place great value on group loyalty. This is in contrast to the U.S. tendency to value individuality, individual achievement, and individual independence.

Taking this difference into consideration in your management style can be helpful.

Think, for example, about traditional motivation strategies -- they tend, I'm sure you would agree, to take the form of praising individuals for their achievements. Now, think about some of your immigrant employees. You have no doubt noticed that a significant percentage of them respond better to group credit and might even attempt to avoid what to them is the embarrassment of being called attention to as individuals.

By simply noticing that this group value exists -- while being careful not to generalize it to everyone -- you are well on your way to building a motivation strategy that is tailored to the particular cultures which constitute your work force. Worker-of-the-month programs complete with photo in the newsletter and carefully labeled parking space are a delight to employees from individualistic cultures like the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain. For those from the 70% of cultures which are group oriented including most of Asia, the Hispanic countries, and the Middle East, group credit or a note of praise discretely placed in their file would be far more appreciated and, in turn, far more motivating.

### **Strategy II: Look for Common Values**

All human beings -- regardless of culture, country of origin, ethnicity, race, or gender -- have a common need for four things: physical comfort and survival; security; social support; and, dignity. The trick is that these basic needs are met differently by people from different cultures.

Consider, for example, the desire for social support. The fifties may be gone, but the reality is that a nuclear family is still the norm in U.S. culture. One or two parents tend to live with a small number of children. No grandparents, uncles, or aunts are in sight.

Those of you who employ Mexican, Filipino, or Vietnamese employees know that other cultures have very different ideas of what constitutes family and social support. For them family extends far beyond Mom, Dad, and the classic 2.3 children.

In most of the world, social support is defined as an extended family complete with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and even cousins living in the same neighborhood if not the same house.

What does this mean for you as a manager? It means that there can be considerable confusion when you offer an incentive gathering for your staff and indicate that "immediate family" is welcome. Properties throughout the country have been embarrassed and disheartened when employees either bring unexpected guests to a restricted gathering or when staff do not attend an important function for fear of not having appropriate dress or even enough transportation.

How do you know if this is the case? Ask. Ask your staff what sort of a gathering would be best for them -- it might be a Saturday picnic in which everyone, including children, is welcome. If possible, honor these needs. After all, we all share the desire for family and

the social support that goes with it, we only differ in our idea of what constitutes a family unit.

### **Strategy III: Communicate Respect**

The example of an ill-designed company gathering brings us to our final strategy, the importance of communicating respect. It also brings us to a common misunderstanding about what it means to have a diverse work force. Many managers believe that managing a diverse workforce means that you must twist your organization into a pretzel to accommodate the needs of each employee.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Managing diversity means that you find the simplest, most conservative, ways to communicate respect for people's right to be who they are. In most cases, this respect is all your staff requires to feel valued, appreciated, and motivated.

Offering a family picnic instead of a cocktail party as mentioned above is one way in which respect -- in this case, respect for the extended family value -- can be shown.

Pronouncing people's names correctly, learning a few words of their languages, and knowing what countries people come from are other simple methods for showing respect for diverse values and cultures.

On the surface, these may seem so simple that they will have no effect, but the truth is that acts as effortless as using the last names of older immigrants or verbalizing your appreciation of the informal leadership that group oriented cultures tend to have, go far toward building the kind of cooperative and harmonious workforce that is your goal.

### **Taking It to Your Property**

Although estimates as to the number of immigrants entering the nation every year vary dramatically and ongoing changes in immigration legislation preclude getting a permanent fix on those figures, we do know that within eight years, according to the University of Texas, Texas will have no racial or ethnic majority. It will be a truly diverse state. We also know that Texas shares 80% of the nation's immigrants with California, New York, Florida, and Illinois. Clearly, even if the nation were to close its borders completely, which should not and will not happen, diversity will continue to be a constant theme, continuing challenge, and ongoing advantage for the state's hospitality and tourism industries.

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