



By Mac McIntire

## How to Overcome Language and Cultural Barriers in the Workplace

*One of the great values of acceptance of diversity in the workplace is to create a work environment of inclusion so all employees can reach their full potential. Managers have a responsibility to affirmatively determine where language and cultural differences in the workplace are acceptable and where they are not.*

In today's diverse workforce the odds are you will have employees who work for you who don't speak your language. Language barriers make it difficult to share your expectations or give feedback to those with whom you cannot communicate effectively.

How can you raise the productive output of your employees if you cannot communicate what you want? Or, worse yet, how can you correct your employees' performance or behavior if the worker cannot understand what you are saying?

### Issue of Concern

The language barrier between employees and managers is a concern that is raised regularly by participants in my management seminars. In addition to the obvious difficulties of managing someone with whom one cannot communicate, there also is concern that some poor performing employees use the language barrier to their advantage to avoid having to change their behavior. Rather than a true barrier, they try to manipulate their manager by claiming a failure to communicate. They pretend not to understand when the manager tells them what to do so they won't have to do it. They nod their head and say yes when they really mean no. They use their cultural differences to justify why they don't have to behave or act the way the manager wishes.

One of the problems with a diverse workforce is sometimes you don't know whether the differences are real or manipulative. The difficulty for managers is to know which elements of cultural diversity

one should reasonably accommodate and on which diversity issues the employees should rightly be expected to adapt to the culture of the workplace. The same is true of language barriers. Should you translate your written and spoken instructions into the language of your employees, or should you expect your employees to improve their language capabilities in the predominant language of the workplace so they can perform well? Should you, as the manager, change the way you manage, or should your employees change the way they work?

The answer to this dilemma lies in whether there is a *real* communication or culture barrier or whether the employee is using their language and cultural differences as a *manipulative* means to lessen their workload.

Listed below are several techniques you can use for communicating with your diverse employees depending on whether the barrier is a real language or cultural barrier versus an attempt at manipulation.

### Dealing with a Real Language Barrier

I'm often shocked at how many workers in American companies speak very poor English even though they've lived in the United States for many years.

I was struggling to communicate with a restaurant employee the other day who spoke very little English. He was complaining about being stuck in a low paying job. When I asked him how long he had been in the United States, he told me he'd lived here 27

years. I have to admit I had little sympathy for him regarding his work situation. I know he could have improved his employment situation if he had improved his language skills in those 27 years.

Contrast this with another employee I met in one of my management training seminars. She introduced herself to the group by saying she had only been in the United States for five years and had come to this country unable to speak one word of English.

I was shocked because she spoke fluent English without a hint of an accent. I asked her how it was possible she could speak English so fluently in only five years. She said she learned to speak English by watching the PBS television show *Sesame Street* three times a day. Although she certainly could have been a prodigy, this told me that it is possible to learn the predominant language of the workplace if one has the desire.

Not all of your employees will have the desire or the ability to learn as quickly as the woman in my seminar. Here are a few things you can do for those employees who are less prodigious in learning the prevailing language of your work area:

- **Translate all relevant documents** into the primary language of your employees. There are several free websites that translate text from one language to another. However, you have to be careful since the translation is not always in the exact same dialect as that of your employees. Additionally, sometimes the meaning of a word used in written translation does not always

correspond to the meaning you wish to convey in your work documents.

- **Use an interpreter** whenever you give instructions or provide feedback to your employees. Often there is someone in your organization who speaks both languages fluently enough to convey your message to your employees. Find someone in whom you trust to translate your instructions and feedback properly.

- **Provide language classes** for your employees on the basic language requirements for your business. Teach them work words, phrases, warnings, and other critical communication elements that are necessary for them to perform to your performance standards. Teach the basics first. Give all of your employees a “survival” crash course in the predominant language of your workplace. Later, if you have the desire and the resources, you can provide additional opportunities for your employees to learn the language skills they need in order to “thrive” in the workplace.

- **Use both telling and showing methods of training.** Simplify your training methods, particularly those that rely heavily on telling versus showing. Demonstrate what you want and then have the employees perform the function as you observe their performance. Re-demonstrate as often as needed until the employees can perform the task successfully.

- **Use visual methods of communication** more than audio. You should show more than tell. Explain it with pictures as much as possible. Take a lesson from the airlines in how they convey their safety instructions. Use pictures in your instruction manuals rather than words. Almost every step in every process can be described in picture format. Give your employees signs, cue cards or other methods to help them learn.

- **Use repetition.** As with any new concept, most people don't learn something the first time they hear it. Employees need to hear the same message over and over before they fully grasp it. Don't expect people to learn anything after being told once. This is true of all of your employees, whether they have a language barrier or not.

- **Never raise your voice or over-enunciate your words.** Talk slower, not louder. Speak clearly, not forcefully. People of a different language and culture can hear fine. They probably also are intelligent enough to grasp what you are saying if you intelligently deliver your message without talking down to them. Don't speak “Pidgin English.” Speak correct English the correct way, just more clearly. People cannot learn the language right if you don't speak it right.

- **Use simpler words with fewer syllables.** Be aware of the complexities of your words. Use more common words that convey your message in simpler terms. Again, don't talk down; just use less complex vocabulary.

- **Learn the basics of your employee's language.** If you want to communicate effectively and build rapport with your employees, you should consider learning a few words and phrases in their language. Nothing sends the message that you value the diversity of your employees more than your willingness to learn from them. Have them teach you how to say hello, goodbye, please, thank you, and other important pleasantries you can use in your interactions with them.

### **Real Cultural Barrier**

I once had an employee from a different culture who irritated me because she never corrected me when she knew I was wrong. Having an open and honest workplace is an important value of

mine and I try to create a work environment where my employees feel free to disagree with me or challenge my thinking. This is the only way I can improve. Consequently, I expect each of my employees to confront me when they think I am wrong. But this one employee would never do it.

I coached and counseled this employee several times for not being honest in giving me feedback. She responded to my reproof by saying she never would give me feedback, regardless of my expectation or counsel to her. This just irritated me more.

Finally one day she came back from a three-day “vacation”. She immediately entered my office and told me she needed to explain where she had been for three days. She then proceeded to inform me that she had been performing a cultural ritual where she washed the feet of her father, husband and her two sons as part of a three-day ceremony honoring them. She told me that in her culture a woman never disagrees with an elder, a male or a superior. She then pointed out that I was all three. She then emphatically declared again that she would never disagree with me regardless of my desire for her to do so. She asked me to please accept her culture and stop expecting her to argue with me. So I changed my expectation – for her.

Here are some helpful hints for determining which cultural barriers can be accommodated in the workplace and which cannot:

- **Determine whether a specific behavior or attribute is a requirement of the job.** There are some cultural differences in your employees that you just have to accept and not try to change if you want your employees to perform well. However, there also are some cultural issues that are relevant to your business and to which employees of a different culture will have to adapt to if they are going to succeed in the work culture. Your job as the manager is to determine which cultural

differences are acceptable, and which are not, in order to create a productive work environment. You must decide whether certain attitudes, behaviors, characteristics or attributes are absolutely essential to succeed at work, or whether an employee could succeed equally well without those qualities if those qualities are not prevalent in that employee's native culture. For example, I have a Native American casino client that requires employees to give eye contact to the guests. Yet looking people in the eye is contrary to the culture of the tribe that owns the casino. This is an obvious case of the need for a policy decision regarding cultural diversity on this issue.

- **Identify whether or not you can reasonably accommodate the cultural difference.** Some cultural differences, such as an employee's willingness to confront her boss, can be accommodated by slightly altering the expectation or changing the circumstances of the situation. For example, some Asian cultures do not condone direct confrontation in the workplace, but it is acceptable to confront a colleague or boss in a non-work setting, such as in a restaurant, bar or on the golf course. Some cultures are not responsive to stern feedback, but they are receptive to less direct insinuations regarding their performance. If you ask your employees they will tell you how best to communicate with them without violating their cultural norms.

- **Determine how best to accommodate the cultural difference.** Some cultures are group-centric rather than individually focused. In such cases praising an individual for their effort, rather than recognizing the entire group, can create contention among the group and embarrassment for the individual, thereby decreasing the employee's performance instead of enhancing

it. Likewise, giving someone negative feedback in public, even if it is not severe, can have a detrimental effect on employees of certain cultures. Being sensitive to and aware of the unique cultural differences of your employees will help you determine where you need to alter your management style or practices.

- **Learn about other cultures.** There are numerous excellent books and articles on cultural diversity in your local bookstore or library. The internet is a valuable tool of unlimited resources explaining the differences in cultures. There is no excuse for not understanding the cultural issues of your employees when you have so much information literally at your fingertips.

- **Ask your employees for insight** into how best to manage them. If you show an open and honest willingness to learn and to adjust your management practices, most of your employees will tell you how to accommodate their cultural needs if you ask them.

#### **Use of a Language or Cultural Barrier in Order to Manipulate**

Some employees who don't speak your language fluently, but do speak it well enough, act as if they don't understand your expectations when they really do. Some employees nod their heads yes when they really mean no. They feign acceptance to placate you, then later, when confronted for their poor performance, they say they didn't understand what you said. Some employees hide behind their culture when, in reality, they just don't want to do what you say.

Unfortunately, there are some employees who use language or cultural barriers to manipulate the situation to their advantage. These employees need to be confronted and held accountable just like any other manipulative employee. Here is what you can do with them:

- **Determine whether the behavior is real or manipulative.** The first time you are faced with what appears to be an off-purpose behavior it is difficult to know whether it is a sincere discrepancy or an attempt at manipulation. For example, when an employee cries or gets angry during a counseling session, you may wonder whether the emotion is real or manipulative. The truth is, you don't know whether a behavior is real or manipulative the *first time* it happens.

Whenever an employee of a different language or culture does not understand your instructions or feedback, accept the misunderstanding as real – the first time. The second time you have to confront an employee for the same violation, you also might accept the failure as real confusion. But the more the “confusion” or “misunderstanding” continues, the more you should question whether the behavior is an attempt at manipulation. Continued excuses of non-understanding or needing to be told again and again are almost always indicators of manipulation. The longer an off-purpose behavior persists, the more manipulative it is.

- **Confront the manipulation** directly. Inform the employee that you believe they actually understand more than what they are trying to lead you to believe. If you're concerned about whether the employee will truly understand you when you confront their manipulation, have an interpreter and/or witness in the room during the counseling session. Tell them clearly what your expectations will be of them in the future since you know they actually understand more than what they say they do.

- **Accept a yes response as a yes.** If you believe an employee is nodding their head yes or saying yes only to placate or manipulate you, then you need to

tell the employee you will accept their head nod as a yes in the future and will hold them accountable for their yes response. Tell them yes means yes and no means no. Explain that if they are not truthful, you will hold them to what they say as if it *were* true. You will accept their yes as an affirmative response and expect their behavior to follow affirmatively.

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- **Don't accept non-understanding as non-understanding.** Again, if you are sure the employee is using their supposed lack of understanding as a manipulation, then don't accept the non-understanding as non-understanding. Confront those who only pretend to not understand. Tell them (using an interpreter if necessary) that you believe they *do* understand you and you will hold them accountable for what you *know* they understand.

### **Conclusion**

One of the great values of acceptance of diversity in the workplace is to create a work environment of inclusion, rather than exclusion, so all employees can reach their full potential. Managers have a responsibility to affirmatively determine where language and cultural differences in the workplace are acceptable and where they are not. More important, within the stewardship of management is the need to work with, through, or around these differences to help employees achieve their highest potential. To reach this potential some employees also may need to be directly confronted when they try to manipulate the system using their language or cultural diversity. §

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