

## LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING HISPANICS IN THE WORKPLACE

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### NEWSLETTER ARTICLES

#### Hispanics in the Workplace - Developing Working Relationships - Volume 2 Edition 32

*In the 21st century, how does the modern American culture forge and develop relationships? Many of us develop friendships through our work and in our communities through our children's school friends. Our kids help us to increase our social circles by meeting others through parent-teacher meetings, car pooling, soccer games, and countless other extra curricular activities.*

In the American culture, there is a certain degree of structured etiquette and decorum that is rigidly observed especially; during the initial meetings. After formally introducing ourselves, one of the first questions we ask is; "what do you do?" We may try to network for business opportunities or connections. The conversations inevitably lead towards our work activities. We go to great lengths in describing the companies we work for; the products we sell, or the services we provide.

In our social interactions we know how to keep the conversations "pleasant and painless". We are keenly aware of the accepted topics and their limitations. Even after we've made gains in our friendships, our relationships with others are carefully controlled so as not to offend or say something that is not politically correct.

In the American culture, the overall objective of this protocol is so that we can have the freedom to choose whether to keep the friendship at arm's length as an acquaintance or, to raise the level of interaction and become friends.

Forging relationships in the Hispanic culture is far less rigid and less structured. Even during initial meetings, Hispanics will ask each other questions that Americans would never dare ask so early in the game. Hispanics will ask each other how much they paid for their homes or even how much money they earn. While Americans take their time deciding whether the friendship is worth going to the next level of intimacy, Hispanics take a much more direct route. In Hispanic circles, even the conversations become much more personal and intimate within a few minutes after initial introductions.

Hispanics take far less time in making decisions to take on new friendships because their relationship antennae are finely tuned with greater reception capabilities. They are extremely sensitive to the level of genuine "interpersonal intensity". They can differentiate between honesty and false praise faster than a New York minute! Their conversations are often structured around family issues. Also, their level of human contact and degree of personal involvement with each other and their community is quite significant.

For Hispanics, heart issues are far more important than head issues. In other words; appealing to the emotions is far more powerful than appealing to logic. When relating to Hispanics in the workplace, it's essential to keep this in mind. If you want to be an effective leader in motivating Hispanics in the workplace, it is important to realize that "genuine intensity" is crucial.

You, the leader, must use a different set of social rules in order to create trusting and lasting working relationships. You do this by skipping over the decorum and structure that is prevalent in American social interactions and by concentrating on developing your ability to project your individual level of genuine intensity. This means that you motivate by learning to communicate on a consistent basis and by developing a relationship that says: "I care about you"!

#### Hispanics in the Workplace -The Hispanic Concept of Leadership - Volume 2 Edition 31

*Recently, I asked an English speaking supervisor to describe his most pressing challenge in a workplace that has an overwhelmingly large Hispanic workforce. He immediately answered with one word; "communications". I asked him to provide an example of this. "My job is to keep downtime to a minimum and production to a maximum" he replied. "I don't speak Spanish" he said. "Whenever I need to move a few of my people from one production line to another, it's often a chaotic process".*

He went on to explain that the inability to communicate in a common language forces you to use crude communication techniques that at times may appear to be somewhat rude. You use hand signals and wide motions in order to catch the employee's attention. As you maintain intense eye contact, you point to an area where you would like them to start working. You learn to use a series of hand signals

and facial expressions in order to communicate your intentions and keep the production line moving.

The supervisor expressed that resorting to these primitive communication techniques leaves an unwanted and wrong impression in the minds of the non-English speaking Hispanic employees. "That's not what I'm about" he explained. "It's very frustrating because it's not the way I'm used to communicating with other human beings".

No doubt, this is a difficult situation that every English speaking supervisor faces in the production area. It's not easy to nurture and motivate your team members under these unnatural communication conditions.

It's therefore doubly important for the supervisor to make every attempt to relay his/her true intentions and communication style to the non-English speaking Hispanic employees. One way to achieve this is by regularly providing the Hispanic employees with a brief, well written update, on the general requirements of the production area. This should be translated into simple Spanish. The purpose of this communication is to clearly explain your appreciation, expectations and production goals.

It would also be a good idea to explain that your communication gestures in the production area should in no way be construed as your personal communication style. While you are in no certain terms, apologizing for your behavior, you are definitely stating that this is the best and only way that you can communicate under these difficult circumstances.

By communicating this you will achieve two major outcomes. First, the non-English speaking Hispanic employees will appreciate your sensitivity in taking the time and personal effort to convey this crucial information. Second, you will earn the respect of your team members by breaking through the language barrier.

### **Hispanics in the Workplace -The Hispanic Concept of Leadership - Volume 2 Edition 30**

*As a leader, it is vital that you devote a significant portion of your efforts in earning the most valuable commodities of leadership from your front line Hispanic employees - trust and respect. For first generation Hispanics, these qualities are perceived in a more traditional manner.*

In the corporate world of management where there is a certain amount of competition and turf protection, trust and respect may take on different meanings. Team members may feel compelled to trust and respect the power that the position or title commands and; not necessarily the person. At times, there may be an element of fear that motivates the team members to trust and respect the authority of their team leaders.

In the front line world of Hispanics in the workplace, the leadership qualities of trust and respect conjure up a different image. They envision these traits on a more ideal and noble level. It's interesting to note that the word for trust in Spanish is "confianza". It also means "confidence". Not the confidence that stems from self-assurance or assertiveness but; from the positive environment that the team leader creates in both the workplace and in the individual.

Hispanics in the workplace want a leader that validates their contributions. In exchange for their hard work, they want a leader that has the strength of character that will shield them and protect them. Most of all, Hispanics in the workplace want a leader who they feel is a "good, kind and caring person".

There was time when loyalty was the most important assurance that an employee could give to his/her organization. In exchange for unquestionable loyalty, the company would provide long term, job security. Today, in corporate America, the concept of loyalty as well as virtues we once considered valuable, are now referred to as "old fashioned" and not in sync with the values, needs and demands of our modern, high tech age.

This however, is not the case with Hispanics in the workplace. In fact, Hispanic employees will go out of their way to show that they still cling to these time-honored virtues. When they seek employment, they are in it for the long haul. The traditional values of loyalty, trust, respect and honor are deeply ingrained into their culture.

Hispanics in the workplace have a clear vision of what they want and expect in a leader. They look to you for these qualities. By showing your own personal brand of compassionate leadership on a consistent basis, you will do much to earn their unwavering trust and respect.

### **Hispanics in the Workplace -leader or friend? - Volume 2 Edition 29**

*A while back, I was conducting a leadership skills workshop for the English speaking managers and supervisors of a construction company. I was struck by both, the honesty and sheer frustration of one of the team leaders. He said that he felt discouraged because his front line Hispanic team members didn't treat him with the respect he deserved. I asked him to tell us about some of the main aspects of his everyday workplace activities and; more importantly, to describe how he interacts with his non-English speaking Hispanic team members.*

His answer was truly memorable. "I work alongside my Hispanic employees" he claimed proudly. "When they dig trenches, I'm right there with them. They know that I can work just as hard as they do." As he continued to share his situation with us, it became obvious that he felt disappointed and frustrated. He hesitantly admitted that "in spite of all my efforts, I know they sometimes joke about me in Spanish. Some of my team members don't even know my name."

First, as a group, we congratulated this young man for his brutal honesty. After hearing his particular challenge, I told him that although his heart was in the right place, the process he was following was not conducive to effectively managing or leading his team members. It's certainly admirable that this supervisor wanted to bond with his team members. It's definitely a good idea to always work on gaining the employees' trust. However; by offering himself as "one of the boys" he gave up whatever authority his job title carried. On the way to

becoming a friend to his crew, he lost the ability to lead them. In fact, it wasn't long before some of his team members were actually telling this supervisor what to do.

For the participants in the workshop, this was a stark example of a leadership process going off the rails. The root of the problem was that this supervisor felt inadequate in not being able to communicate in Spanish with the employees. In order to gain their buy-in, he overcompensated by becoming their good friend and "buddy" and by working with them in the trenches. Unfortunately, this does not mix well. You are either a leader or team member, but certainly not both!

As much as we would like to break through the cultural and language barriers, it's important not to lose sight of our responsibilities and roles as leaders. Front line Hispanics in the workplace look for leaders they can respect and admire. They are not in the corporate competition game. They have a high regard for leaders who are decisive and deliberate in their actions. They expect leaders to maintain a 'professional distance'. This means that you understand that there is a fine balance between earning the respect of the employees while taking an active interest in their growth and development. To the Hispanic employees it means that leaders are a source of accurate information as well as someone who supports them when the chips are down.

### Hispanics in the Workplace - Gossip at Work - Volume 2 Edition 28

*Chismes (pronounced cheese – mess) is the Spanish word for gossip. Although gossip or the "rumor mill" is alive and well in many workplaces, it is often more prevalent and much more widespread with individuals who work in close proximity. A production line is an ideal environment for "chismes" to take root and spread. When you're working shoulder to shoulder with other employees, performing repetitive tasks for many hours each day, you have an available audience to make your work day more tolerable and interesting. It's a natural inclination for employees to want to share not only their personal stories but; those of others as well.*

There is nothing wrong with friendly conversations while keeping the production line moving. The problem however; is when the conversations become malicious. Hispanics in the workplace often complain about the widespread and constant level of chismes they are subjected to. They explain that when you work in close circles, it isn't long before your life becomes an open book. People start to make false and sometimes dangerous assumptions about other individuals.

I have once heard that the effect of chismes hurts many people. First, it hurts the person who is speaking negatively about others because it almost always backfires. The immediate response is "who said this?" or "where did you hear it?" When the truth comes out, it is the speaker of chismes who loses credibility, trust and respect.

Secondly, it hurts the person who is listening because by believing the gossip, the listener may be strongly inclined to spread it to others. By doing so, the listener places him/herself in the same vulnerable position as the one who originally delivered the gossip. Once this process is repeated by others, the "rumor mill" spreads like a wildfire.

Finally it hurts the individual who is being targeted or talked about because it may very well ruin his/her credibility or reputation.

It is an excellent idea for team leaders to find an opportunity to speak to the front line employees about chismes. This issue should be presented and addressed in a mature and effective manner. No doubt, there will be some individuals who will be embarrassed by the sheer mention of the word 'chismes'. It's important however; for you to be direct, respectful and to the point by stating unequivocally that chismes will not be tolerated!

Hispanics in the workplace would welcome your intervention in helping to reduce and eventually eliminate the negative effects of chismes. It is an almost impossible task for the individual employees to put an end to it because it is so pervasive and it is also coming from many different sources. By simply acknowledging that you are aware of this negative and often destructive activity, you will do much to make the perpetrators of chismes realize that this behavior will not be tolerated.

### Hispanics in the Workplace - Desire and Achievement - Vol 2, Issue 27

*Non English speaking, first generation Hispanics in the workplace have a strong desire to have a working knowledge of the English language. They hope that one day they'll be able to turn on the TV and understand the news in English. They wish they could walk into a department store and ask the salesperson for assistance in English. On one occasion, they expressed to me that if they could speak English, they would even enjoy practicing their English conversational skills on the telephone with telemarketing sales callers.*

*Yet the stark reality is; that it's not uncommon to find Hispanics who have been living in the United States for many years and; they are still unable to speak English.*

The fear of failure and lack of confidence in their own abilities often prevents first generation Hispanics from learning a new language. The wish to learn may remain static unless acted upon by a strong desire to take the plunge. The desire to learn needs to be put into motion with a systematic plan otherwise; it is just a wish that remains "parked" in the longing stage. This is where you, the leader, can offer a gentle push and a healthy dose of encouragement along the way.

There are many determined Hispanic employees who have persevered and attained the ability to communicate in English. Even though they may speak on a fundamental level, they feel that they've gained a powerful sense of freedom and personal accomplishment.

Many years ago, I was teaching English as A Second Language to a group of Hispanic assembly line workers. I noticed that one individual

would never take notes or participate in the learning activities. After a few classes, I learned that he was functionally illiterate. I was amazed that despite this handicap, the job performance did not suffer and he found ways to get his teammates to complete whatever paperwork needed to be done.

With the production manager's approval, I decided to tactfully approach this person. I asked if he would consider working with me, one-on-one, for thirty minutes before each class. I assured him that his privacy would be protected. The plan was to teach him the alphabet, as well as basic English reading and writing. He agreed. With a little encouragement from me and a great deal of drive on his part, he was able to read and write at the class level within a few short months. The results were astounding! He had accomplished a personal victory. Nothing could compare with the feeling of achieving this personal milestone.

The point of this real life story is that we as leaders in the workplace are in the privileged position to significantly help others. With a little sensitivity and much encouragement, it is very possible to bring out in others what they never thought they could achieve.

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#### **Hispanics in the Workplace - ANNIVERSARY ISSUE - October, 2007 - Vol 2, Issue 26**

*There is a Seinfeld episode where Elaine seems to be completely stressed out and on the verge of panic as she rushes to make her manicure appointment. It's obvious that this particular beauty salon, owned by Korean immigrants, is quite a popular and busy place. When Elaine finally arrives, she apologizes profusely to the manager for being late. The beauticians are busy attending other patrons as they listen to Elaine's sincere apologies. The owner reassures Elaine, telling her not to worry and to take a seat. Elaine appears relieved and gratified with the response. However, immediately after, the owner starts speaking in Korean to her other associates and they break out in a burst of hearty laughter.*

*Elaine isn't quite sure what to make of this and she suspects that they're making disparaging remarks about her. Even though Elaine doesn't understand a word the Korean staff are saying, her unease grows.*

*How does Elaine know? What proof does she have that others are speaking negatively about her? This lesson is priceless! It teaches us that regardless of our inability to speak a language, we can still detect when the words spoken DO NOT match the actions observed.*

Non-English speaking Hispanics in the workplace often perceive similar situations with their English speaking managers and supervisors. When an individual does not speak the dominant language, other senses are heightened. It's as if an emergency antenna is raised in order to translate the speaker's mood, body language and intonation of the words. The non-native speaker attempts to digest all the visuals and sensory inputs that occur during a dialogue or interaction and earnestly attempts to formulate a meaningful interpretation of the event.

The challenge for the non-English speaking Hispanic observer is to come up with an accurate interpretation of the event. Without a basic understanding of the language, it's very difficult to fit the pieces together. When you have reason to suspect that you are the subject of discussion and; you have no idea what is being said about you, it's extremely difficult not to feel a little insecure and confused.

Unfortunately, the language and cultural barrier can contribute to miscommunications in the workplace. There is no doubt that most Hispanics in the workplace believe that the inability to speak English is a definite handicap. They feel that they are missing a crucial link and attempt to overcompensate by their industrious attitude towards work.

A misunderstood look, expression or a gesture by a manager or supervisor may be interpreted by the front line employee as an expression of dissatisfaction or incompetence. It is therefore very important for you, the leader to do everything in your power to make your non verbal communications as clear as possible. Even then, it's worthwhile to devise a system to check for understanding.

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