



Building Supportive Working Environments for Employees from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds

Author

Dr. Nicole Olynk, Purdue University
David A Widmar, Purdue University

Reviewers

Dr. Diane Jackman, Eastern Illinois University
Dr. Maria Marshall, Purdue University
Gary Thome, Riverland Community College

Changing Landscape of U.S. Farm Labor

The total number of farms, as well as the total number of on-farm workers, has been steadily decreasing for some time. According to a recently updated briefing by Economic Research Service (ERS)/United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) hired farm workers comprise less than 1% of all US salary and wage workers. Approximately half of all laborers and supervisors are Hispanic, while managers are mostly non-Hispanic whites. According to demographics reported in the ERS/USDA briefing, 48% of farm laborers and supervisors are foreign-born, as are 17% of farm managers, and 44% of all hired farm workers. For comparison, it was reported that 16% of all U.S. wage and salary workers are foreign-born.

Today's farm managers are being asked to manage an increasing number of employees as farms grow and expand to include larger numbers of non-family employees and managers. Further, farm managers are often being called upon to manage individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, often being asked to incentivize and motivate people with, potentially, different goals and objectives than themselves.

Cultural Sensitivity

Farm managers are being asked to manage people from diverse backgrounds. Cultural sensitivity refers to being aware of and sensitive to the differences that may exist between cultures. One does not necessarily need to be very knowledgeable about another culture in order to be sensitive to differences in values, customs, and practices. Being sensitive does, however, entail an openness and/or willingness to understand the values and preferences of others without assigning a value judgment of better or worse than your own.

Who is Responsible?

For farm managers and employees who have limited experience in social settings with people from other cultures, practicing cultural sensitivity may be challenging. Communication is impacted as cultural norms and nonverbal communication impact people's ability to effectively communicate with each other. All parties involved have a responsibility to be sensitive to the differences that may exist between cultures. Being ignorant of specific differences does not preclude one's ability to be sensitive and nonjudgmental. The recognition that different cultures may have different expectations for what is proper or polite behavior in different situations is the first step towards facilitating positive interactions and effective communication across cultures.

Farm managers attempting to create comfortable working environments for their employees will need to put forth effort to facilitate effective communication with each of their employees. Additionally, effort will be required to

help employees interact efficiently with one another. Failure to be sensitive to cultural differences can cause hurt feelings or inadvertently insult employees, creating difficult interpersonal situations which may impact work on the farm. Avoiding the creation of situations in which employees feel uncomfortable or unwelcome is easier than trying to remedy a situation later.

Cultural sensitivity is everyone's responsibility. Nobody is expecting you to be an expert on cultural norms from across the globe, but in order to create a cohesive working environment everyone must be aware of potential cultural differences and the consequences of insensitive behavior.

Challenges: Cultural and Language Barriers

Communication across cultures is one thing. Communication across language barriers is another. Communicating with employees who do not speak the same language as you can be a very difficult task. Even more difficult is checking to see if what you did manage to say to each other was understood in the way you intended.

Long term solutions to language and communication barriers take time and effort to implement. It isn't uncommon for a farm to find itself in a situation where communicating with employees is a challenge that must be addressed today!

- Consider asking for professional outside help. Can you hire a translator for a farm meeting?
- Consider creative alternatives when seeking translators. Is there a local Spanish teacher you could ask to help facilitate communication? Is there a bilingual student who could assist?
- Can you translate written materials to allow employees to have references beyond translated spoken words in meeting? Managers must be sensitive to whether employees are literate before relying entirely on written materials, but providing some materials for reference may be useful.
- A picture often bridges the gap! Show employees what you mean; provide pictures when possible to illustrate expectations if you are unable to communicate them verbally.

Be careful that a session with a translator or meeting with a bilingual employee providing translation isn't relied upon as a one-shot solution. Longer term planning is required to facilitate meaningful communication between managers and employees. There are a number of ways to deal with language barriers on the farm in the long term.

- Managers can make an effort to learn the language of their employees. Commonly in U.S. agriculture, this means that managers and farm owners make an effort to learn Spanish.
 - Language skills may be picked up from employees on the farm, through formal classes, or various other avenues.
- English classes can be provided to willing employees by the farm.
 - Can the farm hire a teacher to hold classes for employees?
 - Get creative in considering options. For example, is there a college or university with a bilingual student willing to teach a class for a few employees on your farm? Is there a non-profit organization in your area that provides
- English as a Second Language (ELS) education at a minimal fee?

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Communication cannot be emphasized enough in its importance in creating an efficient and effective working environment on your farm. Recognize that there are cultural differences in expectations for communication, both in social settings, as well as at work.

In certain cultures contradicting a boss or senior employee's opinion is avoided. Therefore, if the boss speaks first, it will be extremely difficult to gather the opinions or input of less senior employees. Perhaps consider asking the less senior employees for their input first, asking employees individually to provide input, or making it explicit that all opinions are valued would be useful in facilitating open communication in such situations.

Uncomfortable or embarrassing situations may lead managers to avoid further communication with certain employees; but, using avoidance as a coping mechanism only furthers problems. It is not hard to imagine a situation in which employees from cultures different than the manager or boss are seldom greeted or interacted with outside of giving or receiving directions. While such behavior is not intended to create hard feelings, the lack of a greeting or acknowledgement of the person outside of giving orders will likely create hard feelings. These situations are common and difficult to correct once employees split into groups which stop communicating with each other.

Examples....Have You Experienced Similar Situations?

- Have you had someone engage in a conversation with you while making you uncomfortable by invading your personal space?
 - o Different cultures value varying degrees of personal space. Be aware if you are making others uncomfortable by invading their space. Or, be aware that others who are seemingly crowding you may simply have different cultural or social expectations for communication than your own.
- Greetings and Personal Contact: Different cultures have varying greetings, including shaking hands, hugging, or greeting verbally. Be aware that unfamiliar greetings may be uncomfortable for some people.
- Culturally significant milestones: You don't want to inadvertently offend your Latin American colleague or employee by declining an invitation to their daughter's Quinceañera, or 15th birthday party. This family milestone is typically seen as an event to strengthen and solidify personal as well as professional relationships. To decline lightheartedly would be considered a faux pas.
- In China it is customary for the host to treat a foreign guest to elaborate meals that may last upwards of three to four hours. It is customary for the host to pick up the bill and attempting to pay, as a guest in the country, would be seen as highly offensive.

When in Doubt...

The worst offense a manager can commit is failing to make an effort to reach out to someone and cutting off or limiting communication. While you might not know what is expected or appropriate, remaining ignorant and practicing avoidance is not acceptable. When in doubt, try the following:

- Visit with neighboring farms that may have more experience in managing employees from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Talk with local extension agents or other professionals.
- Read. Books and the internet can provide details on how cultural norms may differ from your own and can provide insight into the important holidays and social expectations, such as the examples mentioned above.
- Ask. When all else fails, ask your employee or colleague what is acceptable. While it might seem bizarre and awkward in the moment, your employee will appreciate your gesture and be more understanding and accept that you might not know. In the future, they might be more willing to explain these cultural norms up front. Additionally, this opens the door and can allow you to share expectations for employees of your business and communicate your own cultural norms.

Summary

Farm managers are increasingly expected to manage and direct employees from cultural backgrounds different than their own. Cultural sensitivity does not require a manager to know all there is about the cultures of their employees; however, it does require all team members to have an awareness of cultural differences and potential consequences of failing to acknowledge different values, cultural, and social practices. Language barriers can create major challenges to effective communication but farm managers can take steps to facilitate effective communication. Avoiding communication because it may be uncomfortable often perpetuates tense interpersonal relationships; managers must take action to facilitate positive interactions in the workplace to build a cohesive and effective team.