

Safety, Seguridad, Sécurité: Training a Multicultural Workforce

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Introduction

The importance of training a multicultural workforce effectively is escalating as globalization leads to outsourcing and migration. Professionals in all fields have more opportunities to work with an employee population which is linguistically and culturally diverse. Multiple languages are heard and used in many work environments.

What is the significance of a multicultural workforce in the context of training? How can we work with this audience to achieve the desired results?

This paper will discuss a few cultural factors that may affect attitudes and behaviors in safety and several best practices in training a multicultural workforce to ensure understanding and compliance.

Culture and Safety

In the safety, health, and environmental (SH&E) arena, effective training is critical to avoid illness, injury, or fatality. In the United States, construction, agriculture, and healthcare are among the industries with the highest work-related injury rates. These industries also happen to be some of the industries with the highest percentage of employees whose native language is not English. For example, even though health care professionals like physicians may be highly educated, they may lack conversational English skills (Hall et al. 2004, 122). This highlights the importance of effective safety training of a diverse audience.

Since every individual is different, it can be dangerous to base a trainer's interface with the audience on cultural stereotypes. Still, certain cultural factors may directly affect an employee's attitudes and behaviors relating to SH&E.

Power Distance

The influence of organizational factors on SH&E may carry over from an employee's country of origin. For example, companies in some countries may exercise a high degree of supervision, whereas companies in other countries may emphasize employee empowerment (Hsu, Lee, Wu, and Takano 2008, 24). Attitudes toward hierarchy, authority, and decision making may differ (Brett, Behfar, and Kern 2006, 88) and hinder emergency response or accident reporting.

Risk Perception

Research has shown that risk behavior is predicted by risk perception, and risk perception may vary across cultures (Lam 2005, 187); therefore, at-risk behavior can be expected to vary as well.

Hygiene Practices

Variations may be due to differences in the availability of public utilities, public health education, or social norms. An individual who has moved to a different country may retain old habits for some time. The desire to acculturate also varies.

For these reasons, it is vital when training a multicultural work force to communicate policies and expectations early and clearly.

Avoiding Cultural Pitfalls and Enhancing Learning

Best practices provide guidance to avoid common pitfalls, motivate trainees, and enhance learning.

Respect the Trainees

Trainers' instructional strategies are based in part on what they know about the background of their trainees, such as age group, gender, education, and occupation. With a multicultural audience, it is necessary to pay attention to several subtleties.

Treat everybody equally. This may sound basic, but when trainers detect a regional or "foreign" accent ("foreign" depending on where the training is conducted), they may break this rule inadvertently. Be careful not to ask questions such as "What is your nationality?" or react adversely to the person's accent or language style. When people are treated differently, they may feel they are being discriminated against. Besides, nationality is not the same as ethnicity or country of origin. Wait for a suitable time during a conversation and tactfully ask something like "Where did you grow up?" Also, keep in mind that many second-generation immigrants are influenced by the culture of their parents' country of origin.

Prior experience of discrimination, socially or professionally, may affect an individual's views toward training, which is another reason why actual and perceived equal treatment is important to help trainees build their self-confidence and enjoy the learning experience.

Immigrants who are working at entry level in their new country may have held supervisory positions in their home country. Regardless of their previous work experience, some may not be technologically savvy due to lack of access in their country of origin. Take care not to talk down to trainees because they hold entry-level positions or if they do not know how to operate certain equipment.

With a heterogeneous group of trainees who speak different native languages, a trainer should use the language that has been chosen as the teaching medium. In other words, do not speak to a few individuals in a language that others present do not understand. If it is necessary to explain particular concepts to a number of attendees using their native language, arrange a time to do so outside the scheduled training event.

Apply Cultural Intelligence

Cultural intelligence reflects an outsider's ability "to interpret someone's unfamiliar and ambiguous gestures in just the way that person's compatriots and colleagues would, even to mirror them" (Earley and Mosakowski 2004, 139). To adapt to varying cultural beliefs and

practices that are unfamiliar, trainers must understand their own cultural biases and respect others' viewpoints.

When training a multicultural group, keep an open mind. A trainer should put himself or herself in another's shoes, which may require doing homework to discover what those shoes are like. For example, while it is common in the United States to address one's boss and colleagues by their first name, this practice may be considered disrespectful in another country. Americans who work for multinational corporations and conduct training in other countries should address their colleagues by their formal titles when they are in those countries.

One way to build rapport is to show respect by mirroring the customs and gestures of people from a different culture. This enhances the trainer-trainee relationship. Some customs and expressions are recognized and interpreted in the same way by multiple cultures. Explore common ground and use it to facilitate understanding.

Speak and Write Simply

In general use short sentences and simple words to express ideas. Keep in mind, though, that one-syllable words can be easily misheard and misinterpreted. SH&E trainers may need to expand the basic vocabulary to include technical terms. Be sure to explain those terms.

Communication tools have been developed to help non-native English speakers communicate effectively. One commercially available tool employs approximately 1,500 English words in simple, standard grammatical structure. The creator of this tool advocates against using humor with non-native English speakers; however, appropriate use of humorous stories in training helps retention. Be careful to avoid humor, metaphor, abbreviation, or anything that may confuse or insult the audience.

Ensure Proper Translations

Some government agencies and commercial vendors make warnings, posters, and training materials available in several languages. Translation services are also readily available. Software programs can generate translations as well. Yet a poor translation of safety materials can cause serious consequences.

The problem with translations is that words have nuances and are prone to misinterpretation. Complex languages complicate matters. For instance, some English words have more than one meaning, and different words may have the same pronunciation. Some terms in one language have no equivalent terms in another language.

Use the correct words in the right context and confirm cultural appropriateness. Translated materials should be complete, accurate, coherent, and grammatically correct. One way to verify accuracy and coherence is backward translation: After a document has been translated into a second language, it is translated back into the first language and compared with the original document to determine if the purpose and meaning are still intact.

Consider the literacy level of the trainees when translating written materials. In many countries, certain industries such as construction or agriculture have a large number of workers who are illiterate. In these instances, consider using more symbols and graphics instead of text.

Use Non-Verbal Techniques with Discretion

Although visual aids are helpful in overcoming language barriers, symbols and colors have different meanings in different cultures. As an example, Americans like to present a clock as a

gift, perhaps as a symbol of structure or framework, but to the Chinese, the phrase “giving a clock” means watching the recipient die!

Even safety symbols adopted by international standards for risk communication could be interpreted differently in different cultures (Smith-Jackson and Essuman-Johnson 2002, 46). Some cultures are more attuned to using symbols in SH&E than others. For instance, one of the guiding principles for the development of the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labeling of Chemicals (GHS) is to have an internationally comprehensible system. However, implementing GHS in different countries may require cultural adjustments. For instance, researchers have found that Japanese subjects were unable to recognize some of the GHS pictographic labels (Hara et al 2007, 266).

Consider whether a symbol is easily understood and achieves the intended meaning. Instead of using only a pictogram, add text in the trainee’s language. If it is not possible to find the right symbol to convey a specific meaning for one hazard, consider delivering a message about overall risks, provided that such a message complies with regulations.

Similarly, when using eye contact, facial expressions, body language, or other non-verbal techniques, ascertain that they are not objectionable to or interpreted differently by individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds.

Employ Suitable Instructional and Communication Strategies

Training in some countries is based heavily on lecture. Trainees from such countries may be unfamiliar with other instructional strategies, such as role-play or group discussion. Their cultural orientation toward reticence and formality and their concern with losing face create barriers to learning. Explain the process to them in a positive and encouraging manner. Promote a supportive learning climate. Allow them plenty of time to adjust to the new learning experience.

Modify communication style and pattern according to trainees’ customs and traditions. For example, people tend to speak louder in some cultures than others. Preferences in direct versus indirect communication may differ—an important consideration when giving or soliciting feedback.

If the audience includes individuals who do not have a good command of the language used in training, speak slowly and convey one message at a time. Repeat as necessary. Avoid colloquial expressions and jargon. In a mixed audience where some are proficient in the language and others are not, schedule extra time afterward to work with those who may not fully comprehend the materials presented, so those who have a better understanding are not bored.

People who are not fluent speakers in a certain language may have an easier time communicating in writing in that language. They may also prefer face-to-face conversations over phone conversations—some words are easily misheard over the phone, so speaking slowly and clearly is crucial.

Check for Comprehension

As always, encourage participation, solicit questions from trainees, and ask them questions. Some trainees may be culturally predisposed not to ask for help. People who are not fluent in a language may be afraid of asking questions, of not being understood if they speak, or of making mistakes, so help them by building trust and encouraging feedback. For trainees who come from a culture where collectivism prevails, consider using a trained peer from the same culture as their role model.

Check for comprehension at regular intervals. Note that some trainees may nod or say “yes” to indicate that they are listening, not necessarily that they understand.

When selecting a testing method or deciding on the use of computer-based training or testing, consider whether the trainees’ language ability or computer literacy might affect training or test results. Provide an opportunity to perform a practice test if possible.

Deep-rooted traditions may inhibit some trainees from implementing what they have learned if it is drastically different from their culture. After the training, follow up with encouragement, support, and reinforcement.

Conclusion

Training a multicultural work force is a challenge that requires SH&E trainers to overcome the barriers of linguistic diversity and cultural differences. It is also an opportunity for trainers to expand their horizons and help their employers or clients take advantage of the globalization of work. To achieve these purposes, trainers should enhance their cultural intelligence and apply culturally sensitive communication and facilitation skills.

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