

## **Education Across Cultures**

**Grace Herrera, Senior Risk  
Safety & Learning Manager – CF Jordan**

**Patricia Kagerer, CSP, ARM, CRIS  
Vice President, Risk and Safety Department – CF Jordan**

### **The Current Educational and Cultural Challenges in Construction**

As we look at the construction industry over the last 25 years, the commitment to training and education has not kept up with the needs and the ever-growing changes within the industry. New materials and processes are implemented at a rapid rate, but are companies ensuring that their laborers and their leaders know everything they need to know for proper installation? Probably not. Technology, BIM, LEED, Lean, Applications, and so on, are changing how construction is performed and the contractual exposure like never before.

Just as the industry has grown and changed over the years, so has the skill level of our workforce. Laborers are now predominately Hispanic, coming from a cluster of Latin American countries to perform the day-to-day, unskilled work on our jobsites. The term Hispanic was created by the United States Government over 25 years ago to identify Latin American individuals and their descendants living in the United States, regardless of race. But what exactly defines unskilled work? Where do we draw the line? Does it not take skill to set up a scaffold; install flashing, windows, and shelf angles; pour concrete; and make sure all aspects of the construction production are installed correctly?

The supervision and project management team has morphed into a completely different set of skills as well. Where the industry was once composed of people who had worked in construction since childhood and apprenticed under their fathers, the industry is now composed of college graduates who have studied construction science in books, who have degrees, and who are well versed in the theory of the construction process. Yet the practical experience, the sheer know-how of watching, doing, and learning the right way of installation, oversight, and so on, have virtually vanished from the industry. Our older managers with that practical knowledge and experience are moving on and retiring, and the industry may not have addressed the passing down of their

expertise, knowledge, and skill set to the younger generation in a way that will sustain the industry of the future.

All of these changes have affected the culture of the industry. Just as any nation, religion, or group develops its own culture based on the influences of its people, so has the construction industry. To the detriment of the industry, we have spent the past years perfecting the "faster and cheaper is better" model of construction, while paying little attention to effectively training and educating our workers. As a result, schedule has reigned king, and the industry has paid the price for it. It is time for a change.

### Culture Impacts Successful Training Outcomes

*"We are much more likely to act our way into new ways of thinking than to think our way into new ways of acting." Karl Wick*

The lifeblood of the construction industry workforce is the Hispanic workforce. Yet, at present, the plight of the Hispanic worker is a difficult one. For example, the construction workforce is now characterized by a large, young, and quickly growing Hispanic workforce and a sizeable, persistent difference in occupational fatalities between Hispanic and non-Hispanic construction workers. Protecting the safety and health of Hispanic workers is a critical challenge stemming from communication, education, and culture. One can make the basic assumption that if the primary workforce in an industry is not getting the message on how to perform their job functions safely, then the workers may not be getting the message on how to perform the work at all. Installation issues, rework, defects, and delays are all potential consequences of having an untrained workforce impacted by language barriers, cultural aspects, and basic human management skills.

There are varying opinions tied to why the Hispanic construction worker has a higher propensity to injury than others in the industry. The most obvious argument is related to the language barrier. Construction companies, the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC), and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) have invested tremendous amounts of time and money into translating materials into Spanish, which will help. However, there are issues related to dialect, translation, and literacy in any language that will still hinder the transfer of communication. Others point to learning styles of the various countries that are polar opposite to those of the United States, rendering learning ineffective. Some researchers believe that digging deeper to identify culture, communication, behavior, and the attitudes that influence how humans behave and interact with one another is necessary to really get to the root of the problem and come up with some real solutions that may just save lives. Still, others discuss the culture of the jobsites that our superintendents are creating in the field. Given a supportive, communicative culture focused on safety, quality, and productivity, would the Hispanic worker behave differently? Will he think before putting himself in harms' way and communicate safety issues before an accident occurs? These are the questions. Until these questions are studied, tried,

and evaluated, they remain unanswered. Therefore, safety professionals may not be as successful as anticipated by using traditional methods of training to save and protect our workforce.

The construction industry has attempted to address safety training and education for the workforce with inconsistent results. More workers are now receiving OSHA 10-hour training than ever before. As many as seven states have compulsory laws mandating that construction workers receive 10-hour OSHA training. Furthermore, many owners and general contractors are mandating that the workforce be trained, but is the training really working? Are the ways the training is delivered and monitored effective? How do we avoid training for the sake of documentation? After all, the entire purpose of training is to expand the knowledge of the student, improve performance, and in this case, keep employees safe while reducing the risk of accidents. For the 10-hour OSHA training to be successful, we must consider the methods of delivery and ensure that the employees are not just attending the training but are connecting the practical application of the training to their job performance.

### Cultural Influence

There are two major cultural influences in play when exploring how to effectively educate across cultures in the construction industry and ultimately improve overall performance of a construction jobsite. First and foremost, we must be cognizant of the fact that the Hispanic workforce is different from the American workforce, and we must address and meet the needs of the group by providing quality, measurable education and training that will protect the worker and minimize the risk of loss from inexperience or misunderstanding. Secondly, once we have properly and successfully addressed the training needs of the Hispanic workforce, we must ensure that the leaders on our projects are educated and on board with creating a culture of success for everyone on the project. The supervisors and leaders must recognize the difference in cultures, must lead by their actions and their words, and must buy into the proven fact that a safe job also minimizes quality issues and improves schedule and productivity – each and every time.

### Where We Come From

The reality is that where we come from, how we are raised, and where we are raised influence our behavior and our ability to learn and change. Geert Hofstede, the author of *Cultural Consequences*, has spent his life researching, defining, and delving into the complex world of human behavior and how it is influenced by where we come from. Hofstede defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from one another.”<sup>1</sup> Culture usually refers to societies but also can be applied to any human collectivity or category, such as an organization, an entire gender, an ethnicity, or a family. In the United States, a society itself can contain a different cultural group: Hispanics, Asians, and Caucasians, yet they share certain cultural traits that are familiar with one another simply by belonging to that society. So within the confines of one geographical area, we have numerous cultures operating in unison.

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<sup>1</sup> Hofstede, G. 2001, *Cultural consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organization Across Nations California*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

A simplified definition of culture is “the way we do things around here.” Culture guides our communication and our values and the way we interact with others. There are inherent cultural differences based on how we are raised and the environment we grow up in. As a result, an American, English-speaking worker may react completely differently to a situation than a Hispanic laborer working in the United States.

For example: Two workers are using a bobcat to move materials on a construction site. A piece of debris from the site hits the windshield of the bobcat, causing the glass to break directly in the vision line of the operator.

**The American Worker:** As the debris hits the windshield, his cultural norms indicate that he should stop the operation, turn the bobcat in for maintenance, and get another bobcat as soon as possible. He fills out maintenance requests and calls the shop.

**The Hispanic Worker:** As the debris breaks the windshield, the voice inside his head tells him, “I’m in big trouble. My boss is going to think I did not take care of this expensive equipment. If I stop working, I am going to get behind, and then I will get fired. If I just work through the next shift, I can turn it in and maybe nobody will notice. I can work with this; it is not so bad. I will get my work done, and everything will be OK.”

Human beings are very complicated and yet, there are some basic things that make us simpler than we originally think. Do humans act and behave and follow a certain leader out of respect and authority? At first blush, the answer is Yes. Dig a bit deeper, and we realize that human beings are pleasure seekers and pain avoiders. We don’t like pain, we don’t like being yelled at, made an example of, or taken out of our comfort zone. As a result, if a superintendent thinks that time spent planning a meeting is time wasted, then the workers will simply not have the meeting. If a Hispanic worker is told to finish a task as fast as he can, and he does not have the right tools to perform the task, to avoid the pain of asking and the fear of being reprimanded, misunderstood, or humiliated, he will go about performing the task to the best of his ability with what he has to work with. Unsafe? Perhaps. Most likely scenario? Absolutely.

### The Culture We Create

Hofstede developed an enormous database for analyzing the ways in which cultures differ from one another. (The database is called “Hofstede’s Dimensions”).<sup>2</sup> He argued that people carry “mental programs” that are developed in family life during early childhood and reinforced in

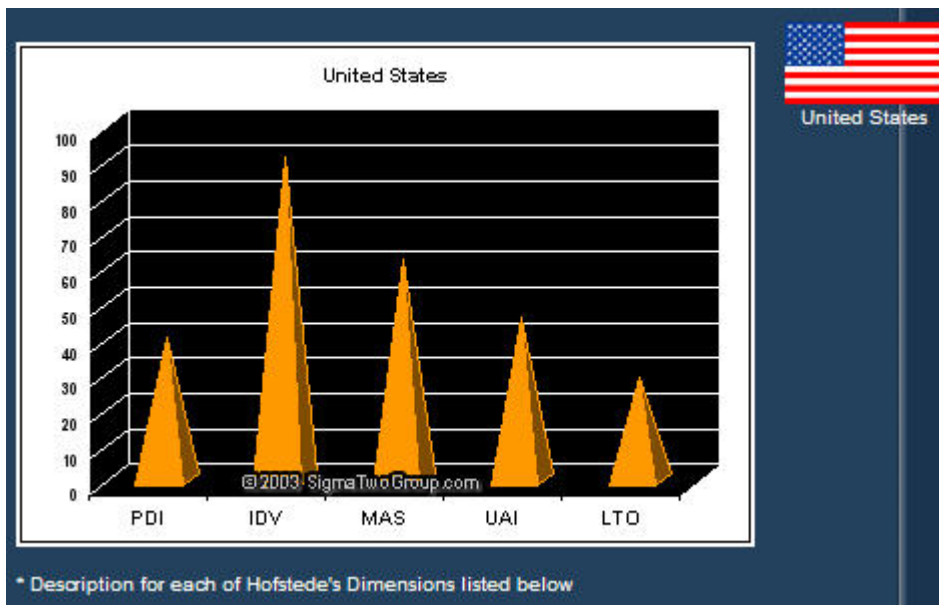
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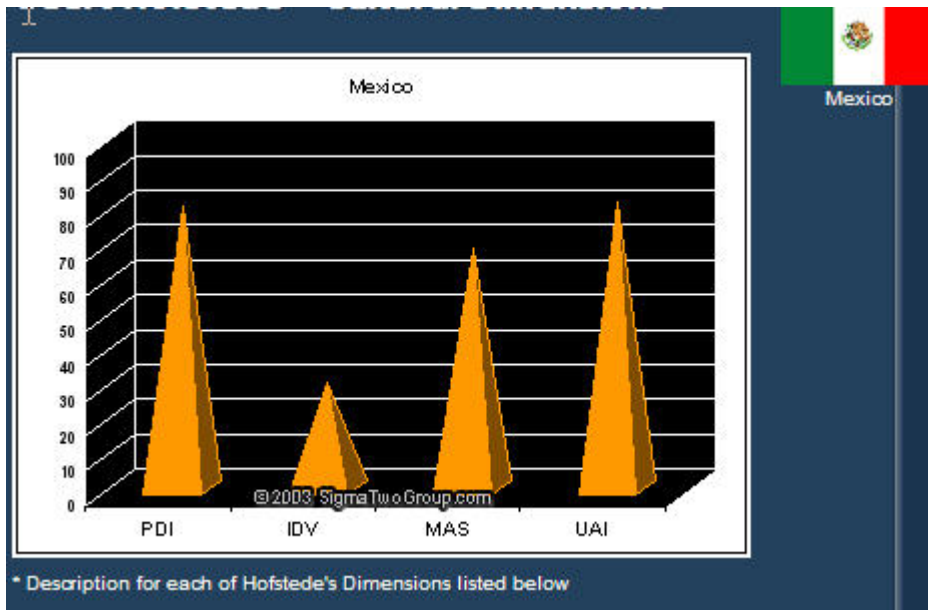
school and organizations, and that make up our national cultures. They are most clearly seen in the different values in people from different countries. Hofstede came up with five dimensions where countries' cultures differ and identified areas where this culture clash can cause problems in the organizational work construct. The five dimensions are as follows:

1. **Power Distance Index (PDI):** Power distance is concerned with attitudes toward hierarchy, specifically with how much a particular culture values and respects authority. In other words, how much does a person or group expect and accept unequal distribution of power?
2. **Uncertainty Avoidance:** Relates to how a culture and its members deal with and accept unstructured situations. This deals with how hard a society tries to control the uncontrollable.
3. **Individualism/Collectivism:** The degree to which individuals look after themselves or remain in the group. Collectivism is the polar opposite of individualism.
4. **Masculinity/Femininity:** The emotional roles between genders (i.e., tough vs. tender societies).
5. **Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation:** The extent to which a culture programs its members to accept delayed gratification of material, social, and emotional needs.

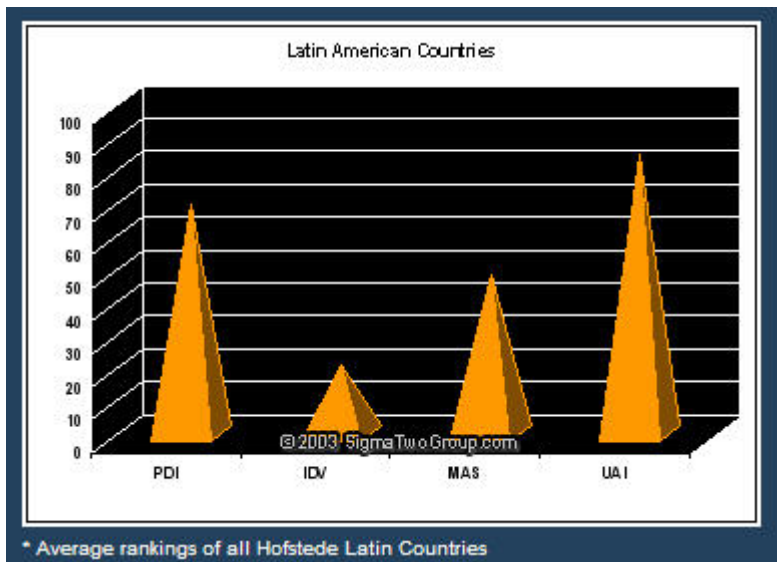
Two of these five dimensions are very important when exploring education across cultures. The Power Distance Index (PDI), which indicates a person's comfort and respect for authority, is the first important dimension. The higher the PDI value, the more deferential towards authority a person will be. As a result, a person will not question or verbalize a difference of opinion when it comes from an authority figure. While America has one of the lowest PDIs, Latin American countries and Mexico have one of the highest.



**Exhibit 1. Power Distance Index (PDI) for the United States** (Source: Hofstede 2001)



**Exhibit 2. Power Distance Index (PDI) for Mexico** (Source: Hofstede 2001)



**Exhibit 3. Power Distance Index (PDI) for Latin American countries** (Source: Hofstede 2001)

Author Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Outliers*, applies Hofstede's research and explores the "The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes." Gladwell highlights the circumstances of two plane crashes—a Colombian flight (Avianca Flight 52) and a South Korean flight (Korean Air Flight 801)—and how the culture of the pilots may have contributed to each disaster. He focuses on how well the pilots communicated with each other and with air traffic control. Gladwell argues that,

since both Colombia and South Korea rank towards the top of the PDI list, the subordinate members of their cockpit crews were unable or unwilling to speak up as assertively as they should have about safety concerns, which directly contributed to the crashes.

Applying the same theory to the high propensity for the construction Hispanic workforce population to sustain catastrophic injuries, we can assess that perhaps the Hispanic population is not comfortable speaking up when they are asked to perform unsafe acts or when they fear reporting unsafe issues on projects, both contributing factors of accidents. The Hispanic culture carries an ingrained respect for authority; therefore, a Hispanic employee would dare not challenge a boss for fear of causing him to “lose face.” This attitude discourages innovative thinking and initiative. As a result, American supervisors often make incorrect assumptions about Hispanic employees, such as they are not trainable or they lack initiative.

Regardless of how many hours of safety training a Hispanic construction worker goes through, the culture he comes from, coupled with the culture created at the project by the superintendent and management team, will play a monumental role in whether or not an employee will speak up before placing himself in harms’ way. Until we stop training for training’s sake and really train employees on cultural awareness and train managers on how to create a culture that values open communication, honesty, safety, quality, and productivity, we will continue to have issues.

The second cultural dimension of importance is that of individualism versus collectivism. Americans value individualism and rank the highest score among nations for the value of individualism. Our entire concept of the American dream, achieving our goals, and the proverbial “what’s in it for me,” is the foundation for America’s roots. The complete opposite is true of people from Latin American countries. As a result, the Hispanic workforce responds favorably to what’s in it for us versus what’s in it for me. The Hispanic culture is about being part of something, a feeling of belonging, watching out for one another, and working together for the good of everyone. Imagine the confusion of a new immigrant from Mexico working on a construction site where the supervisor is out for himself, his schedule. Each subcontractor performs his own work for the sake of himself instead of seeing the common goal of what is best for the project.

Training, education, and incentives that are focused on the “what’s in it for me” mentality will simply not achieve the expected results and return on investments unless the inherent cultural issues – where we come from and how we lead our jobs - are considered, addressed, and accepted as an important aspect of training considerations for the construction industry as a whole.

For companies with especially high numbers of Hispanic employees, their future success, possibly even their survival, depends on moving some of these employees into leadership roles. As always, some leaders emerge naturally, but many companies are realizing that making a concerted effort to educate and promote their Hispanic workforce is critical.

### Best Practices in Working with the Hispanic Workforce

Our experience working with a predominately Hispanic workforce in El Paso, Texas, provided the opportunity to take a look at many of the cultural issues that impact overall performance on construction sites. The following is a list of best practices that can improve communication, respect, and leadership abilities when leading a predominately Hispanic workforce.

**Identify the leader of the group.** The leader may be someone who speaks better English than others. Typically, each work crew looks to someone who will explain and spend time translating, evaluating, and representing the group. Regardless of whether the person has a title, that person will emerge. To identify the leader, simply watch the dynamics of the group. After a daily huddle or a jobsite meeting, the group may linger, and one person will be clarifying the expectations of the supervisor; that is the person you need to get to know and establish rapport. This will be your key element to effective communication and earning the respect of the crew.

**Walk the Talk.** The Hispanic culture is one of pride, loyalty, and respect, yet each of these must be earned. A superintendent who sits in the trailer all day and comes out to bark orders and complain is not going to earn the respect of the Hispanic worker or any worker for that matter. A superintendent who is present, visible, and interested in the job as it is being performed is the one who will reap the rewards of a loyal crew. A superintendent who is not afraid to get his hands dirty, who will work side by side with the crew when necessary, will go a long way in earning the respect and loyalty of the crew.

**Include Family.** Americans tend to separate work and family life. Family, however, is of primary importance in the Hispanic culture, and this may be felt at the workplace. For example, a Hispanic worker may bring his family with him to pick up his paycheck. To engender trust and loyalty from this employee, his supervisor should take the time to meet and greet his family. The family should also be included in safety initiatives as well. We partnered with GPI (Gaining Power Institute) to create a hands-on daily wellness initiative that not only covers safety education, but health, exercise, and nutrition education as well. Our employees involved their families right away and continue to share their “5 Minutes to Power” messages with their spouses and children.

**Be Aware of Translations.** Bilingual people are often used as translators on a project. This can work if you are aware of any potential issues that may result. Bilingual people need to deal with a number of issues that can cloud communication. Dialect, lack of knowledge of the subject matter, and accurate use of terms can change the meaning of a message. Be careful to select someone who has the right experience and the right relationship with the crew to be successful. Take notice if a three-sentence translation turns into a few spoken words; chances are your message was lost in translation. Also be aware when a crew stands around after a meeting looking confused. This means your message was not accurately conveyed. Finally, be very careful with the question, “Do you understand?” Nine times out of ten, you will get an answer of “Si”



(Spanish word for “yes”). This does not mean they understand. It may mean “OK” or it may be said as an attempt to show respect. The best way to assure your message is understood is to look for opportunities for the workers to show you and repeat back the instructions.

When hiring a translator to translate written documents or to verbally translate information, be sure they speak the same dialogue as your audience.

**A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words.** Mock-ups, plans, demonstrations, examples, and pictures are excellent ways to enhance the communication process on a jobsite. Giving people the opportunity to observe the work being performed will be very beneficial to avoid injuries and unnecessary rework.

**Open Your Mind and Spirit to Learning.** The world is not flat. English is not the only language in the world. Most Europeans speak a minimum of two languages. Americans have long stood by the opinion that they only need to learn English. This limits our view of the world and presents an ego-driven culture to the rest of the world. Open your mind. Explore the opportunity of learning a new language and getting to know the people on your project each and every day. It is not as difficult as you think, and it requires two things to learn a language: a willingness to try and practice.

**Educate and Empower Leaders.** We partnered with Branta Worldwide ([www.branta.com](http://www.branta.com)) to embark on a comprehensive leadership training initiative for all of our foremen, superintendents, and management team to learn about the importance of the culture we create, not only to reduce exposure to incidents but also to improve quality and productivity in the process.

Finally, realize that your way is not the only way. The real meaning of a team environment and a culture of success is accepting and appreciating diversity and differing experience and points of view. View diversity as a competitive advantage instead of a hindrance. It is here to stay, and it is what has made America the land of greatness for over 200 years.

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