

Tips on Working Effectively with a Multicultural Work Force

CATESOL EXCHANGE

Starting Your Employee Out on the Right Track

Orientation helps all employees whether they are foreign born or native. With foreign born employees you must take special care to explain both expressed guidelines and implied guidelines.

For example: Employees of a Silicon Valley company may wear sport shirts to work, which may appear very casual. In reality the company is formally structured and has a tight management chain of command. The new employee may see only the informal dress.

New employees should be told that it is appropriate to call people by their first name. Many Asian, European, and Latin American employees take offense at being called by their first names. It is as if you were addressed by a familiar nickname at work. Many new employees will understand the use of first names but will insist on adding *Miss* or *Mr.* to that first name. *Miss Carol* or *Mr. Sam* can be very irritating to the other employees.

You may also want to explain to Asian employees that eye contact is important when talking to someone. To an Asian, not making eye contact is a sign of respect. Americans would consider lack of eye contact to mean that the employee is hiding something.

There are many other suggestions that you can get from your multicultural employees that will help the new employees fit in comfortably. All employees can benefit by having clearly defined social parameters in the work setting.

Helpful On-the-Job Tips

Loudness

Many Americans feel that if they are not being understood they should speak louder to a foreign born employee. This creates a negative effect on that person. That worker may feel that his supervisor is angry with him.

Using Sarcasm

Avoid friendly sarcasm. For example: Your employee has just finished a lot of work. You say in a friendly way, "It looks like you haven't done anything all day." Most foreign born employees will take this as an insult, either because they don't use sarcasm in their culture or they take everything a person says literally.

Speaking

Speak slowly and clearly to your foreign born employee. You should maintain a natural intonation. It's best for the native speaker to repeat the exact sentence or word if repetition is requested. Include the foreign born employee in conversations. Give time for the employee to speak, ask questions, and reply. Allow the employee to finish speaking before you speak.

It is also helpful if you explain idioms or slang expressions when you use them. If you say, *Catch you later* or *Let's hit the books*, individuals from other countries may not understand. You may also make a small dictionary of company jargon.

Asking Questions

Avoid questions that can only be answered by *yes* or *no*. Too often employees are brought up not to say *no* to a person who is perceived as having higher status. If we understood their first language we would realize that there are different gradations of *yes*. For example: There is *yes, but not now* or *yes, but I do not want to do it*.

Avoiding *yes/no* questions will help the foreign born employee to become more expressive and specific. You may want to ask, for example, *Do you want to have lunch now or later?* This gives the worker a chance to elaborate more on the answer.

Assertiveness

Many foreign born employees feel that their job may be in jeopardy if they express their opinions. Supervisors should encourage these employees by showing them how to make suggestions. We once worked with an engineering department and had its students go to their supervisors and make one suggestion. A Latin American engineer was afraid to do that. She finally did make the suggestion and saved the company \$100,000.

Using Tag Questions

A tag question can be a negative confirmation of a statement. For example, the limited English speaker may interpret *The mail came, didn't it?* as *The mail didn't come*. Avoid using tag questions with your foreign born employee whenever possible.

Practice and Support

Give your foreign born employees a chance to practice and develop their English skills. Even though the employees may find it difficult to converse, supervisors should make a point of talking to them.

Be supportive if you find them making an effort to use and practice their English. Most employees will appreciate your correction if you let the employee finish what he or she has to say before offering correction. Never correct an employee's English in front of other employees. The key to helping is to be sincere when making corrections and be a careful listener.

Writing Clearly

Put instructions in their correct order. Do not change the order by using sequence words or phrases like *before*, or *don't . . . until*. For example: *Before you turn on the machine, look*, or *When you turn on the machine, look around*. In these examples, if your operator doesn't understand the key words, he hears the wrong sequence of order, which in this case would be very dangerous on the shop floor.

Testing

Write to the level of your employees. An easy test of reading, which only takes 10 minutes to administer, is the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT). Curriculum writers find this test valuable when writing manuals for lower level employees.

Upper Level Employees

Upper level foreign born employees, who studied English in their native country, do not usually have difficulty reading or writing English when they are at the intermediate level. Reading and writing a new language is much easier than learning to speak a new language. Technicians and professionals have usually mastered the technical jargon of their field but may have trouble with general oral communications or emergencies.

Defining the National Character

The Predeparture Handbook: For Foreign Students and Scholars Planning to Study in the United States (1985), published by the United States Information Agency, notes the following peculiarities among residents of the United States:

Americans are informal with each other, even when there is a great difference in age or social standing. This is not disrespectful or rude but an established aspect of the culture.

Americans are competitive, even in conversation. A quick, witty reply is a subtle form of competition natural to Americans.

Americans are obsessed with records of achievements: business charts line office walls; sports trophies are displayed.

Americans ask a lot of questions, some of them pointless, uninformed or intensely personal. They are expressing their genuine interest.

Americans are generally on time; they keep calendars and schedules. They may seem "in a hurry" or brusque. This is how they get many things done.

Silence makes Americans nervous. Small talk is preferred to a large conversation. ■

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Reference

Predeparture handbook: For foreign students and scholars planning to study in the United States. (1985). Manila: USIA Publications.