



# Leading for Results

Taking the High Road While Improving the Bottom Line

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## Deciphering the needs of the multicultural Workforce.

Maybe once upon a time, managers and corporations in the U.S. could get away with treating people all the same way. Today, with the immigrant population nearing close to 12 percent of the U.S. population as a whole, business leaders can't get away with pretending that their employees and customers are clones of a "typical" U.S. citizen. Whether you lead a *Fortune 500* megacorporation or a local shoe store, you'll lose employees and customers if you ignore the fact that they represent dozens, if not hundreds, of cultures and nationalities. If the economy continues its recovery, you'll have to work harder to keep good customers and productive employees on your side. Paying attention to their unique cultural and ethnic needs will give you an extra edge over your competition.

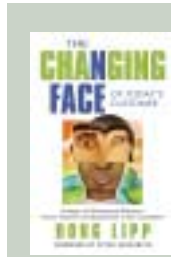
Doug Lipp, former head of training at the Walt Disney Studios, has been working with this issue throughout his career. He calls the phenomenon "backyard globalization" in *The Changing Face of Today's Customer* (Longstreet Press). Lipp spoke with *Leading for Results* to share some insights and advice on dealing with an international workforce and customer base.

### Flexibility, listening are critical

Leading an organization of individuals whose cultural and ethnic backgrounds vary requires, first and foremost, flexibility. "The companies that are successful in working across cultures are the ones that realize there's no one right recipe," Lipp tells LFR. Experimenting with different approaches, listening to people from other cultures, and understanding their motivations are crucial. Your employee-of-the-month program, with its picture of the winner displayed in a prominent location, may shock and alienate a worker from a culture where individual effort is less important than quiet, cooperative teamwork.

Here are some real-life examples, from Lipp's experience, of how an employer can find out what works—and what doesn't:

- **Enlist your workforce as a whole.** One company Lipp has worked with had a workforce of immigrants from several different foreign countries. Friction and misunderstandings soon developed among the groups. Lipp suggested holding "cultural theme weeks." Employees from each group would supply decorations reflecting their culture, host lunches featuring ethnic foods, and discuss their heritage. "After that, instead of having these little pockets of monocultural groups, they had people interacting with each other," Lipp says.



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- **Find yourself a cultural coach or guide.** In Southern California, a local YMCA had trouble responding to recent Chinese immigrants who were trying to negotiate the price of their memberships. "They [the staffers] were trying to be nice about it, and they were asking themselves, 'How do I say no politely?'" Lipp found a YMCA staff member who had a Chinese background, and he asked her to talk with her coworkers about how people in her culture generally do business. "She basically said, 'You're being too nice. This is part of my culture—we push you and you push back. Don't worry that you're going to offend people.'" With that knowledge, the staff knew they could stick by the posted price without alienating their customers.
- **Compare different approaches to the same problem.** One exercise for enhancing cultural literacy is an activity Lipp and a colleague ran for several years at a major company. The company brought its managers from around the world into headquarters for an annual program. On one day, Lipp and his colleague divided the managers into specific ethnic groups—Pakistanis, Italians, French, U.S. citizens—and gave them an assignment: Prepare a script of how to discuss a performance problem with a direct report. Americans would generally invite the employee to their office and say, "Thanks for your time; now here's what I want to talk to you about." Managers from other nations took a different tack. "They'll spend the first 15 minutes inquiring about the employee, his family, how things are going," before opening the subject of performance. Otherwise, says Lipp, the employees won't listen. "They'll think of the manager as a cold and calculated, uncaring person, regardless of what sort of pearls of wisdom they have to share." What American managers see as a waste of time, managers from other cultures view as a mandatory investment in the working relationship. The exercise reminds managers that they can be doing everything "right" from a U.S. perspective, yet still create problems by not understanding what's "right" in other cultures.

### Do the right thing

The question for managers today, Lipp suggests, is simple: "How do you reach out to a certain population that really deserves to be taken care of?" The payoff is greater than just finding a positive bottom line; it's but about helping people. "It's not necessarily about profit. It's about doing the right thing."

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