

MANAGING

A CULTURALLY DIVERSE WORKFORCE

While the rest of the nation is awakening to the realization that the United States has a diversified population, California has been living with diversity for many years. You need to look no further than a recent factoid shown on CNN: *California's Department of Motor Vehicles issues written driving tests in 35 languages.* The mix and introduction of cultures certainly has added to the energy and flavor of the California experience, but it presents its own set of challenges for owners and managers of businesses.



Ethnic diversity is not a recent phenomenon in the nursery industry. What has changed is the magnitude of the numbers, our social conscience, and litigation.

For business owners and managers who seek to respond to the issues of ethnic diversity, it is not enough to try. Intentions don't count. You must deliver. Society seeking pluralism, has become much less tolerant of those who commit an infraction of the law.

How do you manage this challenge? Most nurseries are small businesses that cannot afford to be singularly focused on this issue and few are fortunate enough to have specialists dedicated to the human resource



by George Samuel Oki & G. Douglas Lipp

function. Simply put, the answer is, "mutual respect and understanding." Achieving mutual respect and understanding is where the real investment begins. Results will not happen overnight; and if you already work in an atmosphere of mistrust, it will compound the effort and the time needed.

In Shakespeare's world, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." That is not the case when dealing with multiple cultures. We'd all like to believe that people are people. But we are all influenced by the beliefs and values of the culture in which we have been raised.



For example, a manager of a fleet of vehicles, instructed his crew to care for the company vehicles just as they would their own cars.

The expected result was to see clean and well maintained vehicles — wrong! He didn't understand until he noticed the condition of some of their own personal vehicles. We often assume that our own set of expectations and standards are universal. In reality, they may not necessarily be in sync with others.

An example of cultural miscommunication can arise from something as simple as a smile.

Smiling, for an American, means a sign of friendliness.



But in some Asian cultures, it may signal embarrassment. In dealing with another culture, it is better to assume differences rather than similarities.

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CULTURAL DIVERSITY
continues from page 7

The reality is that each individual, each culture and each company has different standards and expectations. It is unreasonable to expect to be able to custom tailor a program for each individual and still have time to produce and ship your crop, plus manage the business side. But if you fail to address the differences in your workforce, it could cause the loss of everything you've worked for in your lifetime.

Where is the glue that allows a manager to create the needed motivation for mutual respect and understanding within a diverse workforce?



In the nursery industry, we have a built-in commonality. For us, the tie that binds us is the company's business success. The business culture must become part of every employee's culture. The company's culture must be the common place where each person is comfortable operating. The company's mission must be clearly recognized. Expectations, intentions and goals of the company's management must be

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clearly communicated. These expectations and intentions must be consistent and

reasonable. An understanding of how the expectations and intentions are related to the company's mission must be clear. The success or failure in achieving the company's mission needs to be directly tied to the individual.

Also, it is desirable to predetermine how the expectation, intentions and goals of the company's management are perceived by the various cultures represented in your workforce. It is critical to determine the best way to communicate your goals so that they will be understood and carried out by your employees.

For example, giving feedback and recognition as a motivational tool can often backfire and cause disruption in multicultural work teams. Some employees may appreciate being publicly recognized as outstanding performers. However, this same approach may humiliate or demoralize other employees. Although your intentions are good, they can be perceived negatively if the receiving party has different expectations of "appropriate" behavior. Managing a multicultural workforce and corporate missions, are completely separate topics but they must go hand in hand.

Effectively managing a multicultural workforce first requires a clear mission statement. Without this basic sense of purpose it is difficult to clearly communicate

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and establish the common ground that becomes the foundation and meeting place for the diversity of mores, expectations and standards prevalent in the California workplace today.

Progressive Californians are recognizing cultural diversity as a business resource. If managed effectively, cultural diversity can provide a wealth of knowledge and experience which ultimately will lead to unique approaches that provide a competitive business advantage. ■



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