

Considering Culture and Language Differences

Peruvian herders, Latino pickers, Asian fishermen, Anglo cowboys. The fundamental demographic shifts changing the face and fabric of America also have charted new courses for managers in western agriculture. The old techniques and languages do not seem to work as well with the more diverse agricultural workforce that agricultural employers in some states have only begun to know in recent years. Dealing with personnel issues and conflicts that are rooted in culture, values, or language differences requires new knowledge, skills, and flexibility for many agricultural managers.

Cultural Interpretations

A grower's respect for employees of other cultures goes a long way toward making the association both productive and enjoyable. Many misunderstandings arise because people from different cultures interpret or react to certain situations very differently.

It is hard to know for sure how someone else will interpret a look in the eye, avoidance of eye contact, a handshake, hug, silence, or even a smile. These gestures are all open to interpretation. Looking some people in the eye may indicate listening; a pronounced facial expression may indicate understanding. To these people, averting eyes often suggests inattentiveness or insincerity. But to people from other traditions, direct eye contact and uncensored facial expressions may come off as distracting, aggressive, or even rude and disrespectful.

Silence generally means agreement in the dominant American culture, but it can mean many things to people other contexts — “No,” or “I don't have anything to add,” or “Don't pursue the subject,” “I am thinking,” or even “I disagree.” Some people avoid saying “no” in order to maintain harmony.

Jack Green manages a crew of Asian-born workers in his greenhouse. Last year, he developed a plan to reduce the number of hours needed to perform two of their most time-consuming production tasks. He knew he needed the cooperation of the crew members to make his idea work, so he called a meeting to explain the minor adjustments that they would have to make. Since no one expressed disagreement, the new plan was implemented. Or so Jack thought.

Within two weeks, it became evident the workers were still using the same procedures they had been using and not doing what they had apparently agreed to at the meeting. Jack felt angry that the team had gone back on its commitment.

