Leadership and Diversity for Farm Managers and Front Line Supervisors – Retaining and Motivating Mexican Immigrant Farm Workers

Overview

A recent research paper completed last fall for a course in the MOL program explored emotional intelligence and its applications for farm managers who employ Mexican immigrant farm workers (hereafter referred to as farm workers). The purpose of this paper will be to further investigate the cultural values and norms that impact farm workers. Particular emphasis will be placed upon collectivism and familism, two values that, according to Chong & Baez (2005), play a significant role in how Latinos interact and perceive themselves and their role in the workplace. How these values can be integrated into mainstream farm labor practices will be explored, including defining leadership roles for farm managers and front-line supervisors that encompass a framework for the development of intercultural competencies. Practices and action tools that focus on cultural self awareness will be examined as a base from which cultural intelligence behaviors can be cultivated to accommodate marginalized immigrant farm workers.

Mexican immigrant farm workers are the primary workforce in agriculture with 6,561,866 workers dispersed throughout eight states in the west and southwest. 26.2% of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. are farm workers, up 22.3% from the pre-1970’s farm worker average of 3.9% (Gonzalez, 2002). Latinos of Mexican origin comprise nearly 67 percent of all U.S. Latinos; there are currently 16 million Latinos in the U.S. labor force
and by the year 2050 it is estimated that they will comprise over 25% of the entire U.S. population (Chong & Baez, 2005).

Stereotyping Mexican Immigrant Farm Workers

“We need to remember that the seemingly shifty immigrant or guest worker is a normal human being undergoing severe cultural stress” (Simons, Vazquez & Harris 1993 p. 147). This quote is a brutal reminder of the lack of regard meted out by a dominant White culture unconscious of their White privilege. Chong & Baez (2005) also suggest that underprivileged or undocumented immigrants are judged by mainstream individuals as fitting within a major stereotypical category. While they make the case that most Latinos in the U.S. are well educated and hold positions in both domestic and global organizations, it must be recognized that nearly a third of this total population are immigrant farm workers who also deserve to be the recipients of culturally appropriate practices in the work place (Gonzalez, 2002).

Many farm workers are migrant, following a cyclical crop calendar that may cover between 4-6 states in one growing season. These groups of people are more highly susceptible to culture shock that includes anxiety and depression from being separated from their families. In a culture where family is the number one priority, this can be a debilitating factor. Faced with greater economic hardships, language barriers and discrimination arising in part from less education and lower social status, the acculturation process becomes more critical to their ability to function optimally in the workplace (Hovey & King, 1996).
Organizational Flaws

Simons, et al (1993) touch on an issue that is particularly true in the farm labor sector; they describe a migrant work force that our society selfishly uses but doesn’t want to be accountable to or for. This attitude spirals into management with practices that penalize versus motivate. Because scarce effort has been devoted to obtaining culture specific knowledge and subsequent training, the prevailing dominant attitude that holds that the other culture is dishonest percolates into farm management where it is easier to hide exploitative practices. To further exacerbate the problem, farm workers often work in unsafe environments moving at a fast pace while using or operating dangerous equipment and tools (Hovey & Magana, 2002).

Farm workers must also deal with crew bosses and front line supervisors who may or may not treat them equitably depending upon their immigration status. Gender issues can also influence how workers are managed and especially if a front line supervisor is Latino and has Latinas as part of the crew. The Latino value of machismo, the expectation that men will assume the dominant position in relationships, can be used as a tool to oppress when there is no motivation to meaningfully apply it as a culture based value (Chong & Baez, 2005).

The majority of agricultural employers operate without HR departments and without orientation for farm managers and front line supervisors that would include culturally appropriate practices. Some use labor contracting firms to recruit, hire and oversee workers, while others do their own hiring and act as overseers and/or employ front line supervisors to manage production crews. Over time agricultural employers have become more sensitized to heightened regulatory demands due to immigration and
labor policies and de-sensitized to culture appropriate practices that foster motivation and retention for farm workers.

Cultural Values, Communication and Styles at Work

Chong & Baez (2005) have determined that the following Latino values, communication and work styles play an integral role in the workplace:

Cultural Values:

1. Time Orientation – A relaxed view of time that places more value on living in the now is preferable to thinking about the future; this can also translate into a fatalistic view of the world where one believes that they have no control over their future.

2. Personalismo – Encompasses the perceived intrinsic human qualities that signify another’s moral character. If a person expresses warmth and a genuine interest in connecting it is thought that this person has personalismo.

3. Simpatia – A similar empathic quality with the ability to engage in behaviors that enhance social relationships.

4. Respeto – Refers to the high regard given to those of elevated age and position in the hierarchical structure; this could be in a family unit, community or organization.

5. Power Distance – Another value associated with hierarchy that is expressed in terms of deferential treatment towards persons perceived as having power.

6. Collectivism – Relies on the group perspective over that of the individual and is especially important for maintaining harmony with family and peer group members.
7. Familism – Stresses the value of family and is also the number one value in the workplace.

8. Religion – Plays a profound role in a Latino’s life and can also contribute to a fatalistic view of life.

Communication Styles:

These values are applied moment to moment with communication styles that flow in direct and indirect patterns and are exhibited in the sharing of stories (self disclosure), and disagreements. Interpersonal distances, the role of silence (especially with authority figures), gestures as another expression of spoken language, the familiarity with touch, intense and prolonged eye contact that signals good intention and sincerity are all non verbal cues that carry as much meaning as the spoken word and can give valuable clues as to how a Latino views the matter being talked about. Chong and Baez (2005) refer to these patterns as “cultural scripts”, characterized by the values and behaviors of the culture that uses them. For instance the cultural norm of simpatia is linked to the values of respect and dignity for harmonious behavior that avoids conflict (Triandi, Marin, Lisanksy, & Betancourt, 1984).

Work Styles:

1. Work to Live – A primary focus for Latinos because of their commitment to family.

2. Goals – Viewed most often as a group initiative from the top down; if there is disagreement they will work hard to protect the relationship.

3. Forcefulness – A ‘foreign’ tactic that would not ever be used to gain professional advantage over the other.
4. Sense of Responsibility – A sense of duty that binds them and sees them through to the completion of a task. Personal sacrifices will often be made to deliver results in the workplace and this may involve the help of family members.

5. Risk – Tolerance for risk is low and will be undertaken with those they know and trust; this is rooted in collectivism and duty towards shared decision making.

6. Resourcefulness and resiliency – Traits from having lived in a less well developed country prepares them to deal with difficult and often dangerous situations.

7. Problem Solving – Slow and well thought out approaches characterize their problem solving approach coupled with the desire to get along with diverse groups of people.

8. Ethics – The desire to do the right thing due in part to a strong religious influence.

Supervision through a Culturally Competent Lens

Many of the styles described above are attributes that U.S. agricultural employers rely upon to accomplish highly intense production practices under often dangerous conditions. This section will examine through story and example how these styles and norms might be integrated into a farm labor plan that prepares for and allows for cultural difference through an informed gaze (Peterson, B. 2004).

Collectivism and familism are two values that play a significant role in how Latinos interact and perceive themselves and their roles in both life and work. The
harmony that collectivism embodies is essential to a Latino’s sense of belonging and self-worth. Familism is equally important as a value that holds that existence is shaped by the family and group. These two values ‘inform’ the other norms and subsequently work and communication styles are often viewed through these lens.

If a mainstream supervisor employs a more collaborative approach with his/her crew, this may cause confusion as generally the relationship between a Latino and his/her supervisor is more hierarchical in nature (as reflected in the norms of power distance and respeto). Latinos may view their supervisor more in terms of a facilitator when directions are being given. If the supervisor is Latino and his/her style is to retain ownership of the decision making, the farm owner needs to understand this within their cultural context so that the supervisor does not use it as negative leverage upon the farm worker, but as a culturally appropriate approach. For example, if a task seems impossible or unreasonable, out of respect to their supervisor, they will perform this task without asking questions. The primary role of the supervisor is to build a harmonious relationship (collectivism) with the farm workers by becoming actively interested in their concerns while encouraging their ability to perform the work (simpatia). This involves asking as many questions as needed to encourage understanding. This will open the door to dialogue because sharing is so important for Latinos as part of their collectivist value system (Chong & Baez, 2005).

Farm work is a profession where commitment is measured strictly in terms of physical presence at work, and the worker is required to “...devote as much time to work as the work... demand”(s) (Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher & Pruitt, p 49, 2002). Although Rapoport et al discuss the above in terms of the gendered assumption of an ideal worker
(man), both men and women are equally bound by this assumption (practice) in farm labor. A farm supervisor has additional responsibilities in this setting; he/she must be able to contain their workers needs and to be a primary source of motivation, absent the support mechanisms provided by a more formal organizational structure. Reciprocal respect and expressing appreciation for their accomplishments are integral factors in motivating and retaining farm workers. If a supervisor exhibits negative behaviors that diminish respect, then the cultural norm of power distance will keep the workers from sharing ideas. Power distance does not always indicate the level of respect that workers have for their supervisor (Chong & Baez, 2005).

Familism is a cultural difference that if interpreted appropriately can lead to deeper commitment at work. In a Latino’s life it is extremely important to achieve a balance between work and family with equal emphasis placed on meeting the expectations of both supervisor and family (Chong & Baez, 2005). A supervisor will need to recognize that the time spent attending to family matters is a deeply held value rooted in collectivism and if honored as such, will have positive implications in the farm worker’s environment.

In the work environment, farm workers need to experience a sense of shared purpose, establishing community as they pursue their tasks. This relational aspect of how they experience their world is again, rooted in collectivism and there are no sharply defined lines between social and work interaction as there are in mainstream culture. With an immigrant culture especially, collectivism becomes essential to their sense of belonging and a supervisor needs to consider how to apply this optimally in a farm labor plan.
There is a farm in the Salinas Valley area of California where teams of 6-8 farm workers direct their portion of the harvest; for example each team is given guidelines on the operational aspects of their duties, but it is up to the team to police themselves, i.e. if someone is not performing adequately, the group will ask that worker to leave (without consultation with their supervisor). This is a good example of applying a culturally appropriate practice that honors a Latino’s collectivist value system.

Supervisors and particularly mainstream supervisors need to be aware of the role that religion plays in the life of a farm worker. Religion has the power to impact work behaviors because from God they receive everything that matters (Alcalay, Sabogal, & Grible, 1992). They are very sensitive to divine approval or disapproval concerning their families, work and health, so it is not uncommon for them to fervently celebrate religious holidays and feast days and to not show up for work on these days!

Two other characteristics that merit mention are the traits of resourcefulness and resiliency; in a farm environment where equipment may or may not always be reliable, these are essential traits. For example, while the author was visiting a farm in Guatemala a piece of equipment broke down. The operator began to work on it and within minutes another crew member joined him; within five minutes almost the entire crew had gathered around to offer input; within a half hour the piece of machinery was running again and everyone had resumed their regular work. There was no time wasted calling a repair man, nor even a thought to do. This is a universal farm scenario that continues to be re-enacted in this country with farm workers.

Enough cannot be said about the role of collectivism in Latino culture; it is a strong motivator which when linked to their sense of duty and responsibility, sees them
through to a committed completion of their tasks. Supervisors are called upon to recognize and appreciate in every moment a job well done. This is a reflection upon the worker’s family, their community (in their home country) and their fellow workers. Effectiveness will multiply when supervisors recognize and reward this group initiative. For farm supervisors who are generally engaged with their crews, Chong & Baez (2005) recount an inspiring story of a bank manager in a growing commercial district, who at certain times during the day when the lines were endless, would come up behind the tellers and say, “Muchachos (a generic term for both boys and girls), let’s shorten this line.” Then he would seat himself behind a booth until the lines were back to normal. The energy and group initiative increased one hundred fold during these times (Chong & Baez, 2005 p 94).

Developing a Framework for Intercultural Competencies

Because farm managers and front line supervisors are dealing with a dynamic labor force made up primarily of seasonal migrant workers, they have a particular challenge to ‘anchor’ immigrant farm workers for brief and intense bursts of time, especially for crops that are time sensitive (may only be picked at a certain period of ripeness for a certain length of time to meet optimal quality and price conditions). The behaviors that supervisors exhibit towards an often literally moving work force are integral to the workers ability to adapt not only to the complexities of a foreign culture, but to the job they are being asked to perform.

Dan Goleman, who has done pioneering work in the field of emotional intelligence, emphasizes that it is how well we handle ourselves that leads to our ability to positively influence and handle others (Goleman, D. 1998). Emotional competence is
a necessary precursor to cultural competence; from the place of self awareness and navigating one’s own internal environment, comes the ability to move into cultural self awareness. Peterson’s intra personal space of responding appropriately to others is central to building a set of behaviors and skills that can accommodate the “culture based values and attitudes of the culture being interacted with” (Peterson, 2004 p 89).

For change to occur, a framework that combines humanistic values with culture specific knowledge would be integral to a gradual process that begins by viewing farm workers as human capital. The following outline for a basic ‘toolkit’ used in the absence of a more formal orientation for farm managers and front line supervisors would serve as a starting place for practices that foster cultural self awareness and culturally appropriate behaviors.

Cultural Competency Toolkit

Cultural Self Awareness:

1. What values do you most strongly identify with, within your culture; for example: loyalty, family, respect, ambition, family, friendship, duty, health, respect for authority, religion, harmony in relationship etc.
2. Explain why these values are important to you.

Culture ‘Other’ Awareness

3. If you were looking for work in a foreign country, how would you prioritize the following needs: sleep, housing, food, an interpreter, transportation, communication (ability to call family etc.), stable income?
4. Prioritize the same list for your group of workers based upon what you know about them collectively.
Action Tools for Cultural Difference

(For non-Latino supervisors, a handbook would be developed containing a summary of cultural norms, communication and work styles to help better understand attitudes that can improve motivation and harmonious working relations. This handbook would be used as a guide with the following exercises and practices.)

5. Make a list of positive (culture friendly) work practices that could be incorporated immediately into your daily work plan.

6. Make a list of those that will take longer to put into practice and create a time frame for execution.

7. Memorize each farm workers name.

8. If you do not speak Spanish fluently, know key words that will help workers understand how to do their jobs most effectively; for example, names of equipment, crop and tools used for harvesting. Use Spanish action verbs that explain how the work is to be done.

9. Translate work procedures into Spanish to ensure full understanding.

10. Use an indirect approach when ‘testing’ understanding; for example ask what their opinion is about the task and refrain from asking a direct question such as, “What does this procedure mean?”

11. Practice reading non-verbal cues as an indicator of worker satisfaction and, understanding of the work to be performed. (Handbook)
12. Respectfully mirror these cues to show that you understand; for example mirror behavior and speech patterns, gestures, eye contact and interpersonal distance.

13. Listen!

14. Check in with yourself to see how you are doing.
   a. Make a list of what you are doing well.
   b. Make a list of where you would like to see improvement.

15. Create rapport by showing that you care about the relationship a farm worker has with you and with the other workers.

16. Structure performance expectations around relationship building; remember that shared values contribute to a sense of belonging.

17. ‘Muchachos’ attitude – During peak productions periods, work alongside the workers.

18. Include religious holidays on the farm calendar; make plans for replacement workers and/or for a reduced work schedule and/or workers.


Although not complete in the sense of acquiring skills and behaviors along a continuum as Bennett & Bennett’s (2004) DMIS model provides, if practiced intentionally this toolkit could gradually create a shift towards culturally appropriate attitudes and behaviors of managers and front line supervisors. Numbers 14-18 would include supplemental material on emotional intelligence practices to augment culturally appropriate behaviors and responses.
Pilot Project

This tool kit will be further developed and introduced as a pilot project with a large stone fruit operation in southeastern Washington State that employs 900 seasonal workers and 900 full time employees. Farm manager and front line supervisor cultural and emotional intelligence self awareness assessments will guide the formation of a mental framework that can be gradually integrated into daily labor practices. These assessments will be conducted using scenarios that test knowledge and capacity for behavioral change. A field worker survey will also be conducted to gain a more in depth understanding of how a Latino immigrant worker culture affects their motivation and job retention.

Leadership Roles

Agriculture is made up of a complex web of large and small scale producers, commodity organizations, farm bureaus, and land grant institutions that support education for research and practical applications for farming practices. Within this network there is continuing education available for agricultural employers that include human risk. As farm labor practices come under more scrutiny in the debate over immigration reform, this is an opportune time to introduce cultural differences as part of the dialogue and to encourage education on developing both emotional and intercultural competencies for practical applications on the farm.
References


