

Current Educational & Cultural Challenges in Construction

As we look at the construction industry over the past 25 years, the commitment to training and education has not kept up with the ever-changing industry.

New materials and processes have been implemented at a rapid rate, but many contractors have not ensured that their laborers and leaders know everything they need to know for proper installations. Technology (BIM, LEED, Lean, Apps, etc.) has changed how construction is performed, and the contractual exposures of contractors have skyrocketed.

Just as the industry has changed over the years, so has the skill level of its workforce. In many states, laborers are now predominately Hispanic, a term created by the federal government to identify Latin American individuals and their descendants living in the U.S., regardless of race. These laborers come from a cluster of Latin American countries to perform the day-to-day, unskilled work on our jobsites.

But what exactly constitutes unskilled work? Does it not take skill to set up a scaffold; install flashing, windows, and shelf angles; pour concrete; and ensure that all aspects of the construction production are installed correctly?

The makeup of supervisory and project management teams has changed as well. Where once there were people who had worked in construction since childhood and had apprenticed under their fathers, now there are college graduates who have studied construction science in books and who are well-versed in theories. Yet, the practical experience (the sheer know-how of watching, doing and learning) has virtually vanished from the industry.

Older managers who have that practical knowledge and experience are moving on and retiring, and the industry has not addressed the passing down of their expertise and skill sets to the younger generation in a sustainable way.

All of these changes have affected the industry's culture. Just as any nation, religion or group develops its own culture based on the influences of its people, so has the construction industry.

To the detriment of the industry, we have spent the past few years perfecting the "faster and cheaper is better" model of construction, while paying little attention to effectively training and educating workers. As a result, "schedule" has reigned supreme, and the industry has paid the price for it. It is time to change.

CULTURE IMPACTS SAFETY OUTCOMES

The construction workforce is now characterized by a large, young and quickly growing Hispanic workforce and a sizeable, persistent difference in occupational fatalities between Hispanic and non-Hispanic construction workers.

One can assume that if a major segment of the workforce is not getting the message about how to perform their job functions safely, then those same workers are probably not getting the message about how to perform the work at all. Installation issues, rework, defects and delays are all potential consequences of having an untrained workforce impacted by language barriers, cultural differences and a lack of basic human management skills.

There are varying opinions about why the Hispanic construction worker has a higher propensity to injury than others in the industry. The most obvious reason is the language barrier. Yet, construction companies, Associated General Contractors of America and OSHA have invested tremendous amounts of time and money into translating materials into Spanish.

However, issues related to dialect, translation and literacy still hinder communication. Experts point to the learning styles of the various countries that are at the polar opposite of the U.S., rendering learning ineffective.

Some researchers believe that digging deeper to identify how humans behave and interact with one another is necessary to get to the root of the problem and to develop some real solutions that will save lives.

Others discuss the culture of jobsites that our superintendents create in the field. Given a supportive, communicative culture focused on safety, quality and productivity, would the Hispanic worker behave differently? Would he think before putting himself in harm's way and communicate safety issues before an accident occurs? Until these questions are studied, tested and evaluated, they remain unanswered.

The construction industry has attempted to address safety training and education for the workforce with inconsistent results. More workers are now taking the OSHA 10-hour construction safety training course than ever before, and as many as seven states have compulsory laws mandating that construction workers receive this training.

Furthermore, many owners and general contractors are mandating that their workforce be trained, but is the training really working? Are the ways that training is delivered and monitored effective? How do we avoid training simply for the sake of documentation? After all,



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the entire purpose of training is to expand the knowledge of the student, improve performance, and in this case, reduce the risk of accidents.

For OSHA training to be successful, we must consider the methods of delivery and ensure that workers do not just attend the training but connect the practical application of the training to their job performance.

THREE MAJOR FACTORS THAT MUST CHANGE

Three major factors must come into play when exploring how to effectively educate across cultures and, ultimately, improve overall performance on jobsites.

First, we must acknowledge that the Hispanic workforce is different from the American workforce. Second, we must address and meet the needs of this group by providing quality, measurable education and training that will protect our workers and will minimize the risk of loss from inexperience or misunderstanding.

Third, once we have properly and successfully addressed the training needs of the Hispanic workforce, we must ensure that our project leaders are educated and dedicated to creating a culture of success for everyone on the project.

Our supervisors and leaders must recognize the difference in cultures, must lead by their actions and their words and must buy into the proven fact that a safe job also minimizes quality issues and improves productivity—each and every time.

WHO WE COME FROM

Who we come from, how we were raised and where we were raised influence our behavior and our ability to learn and change. Geert Hofstede, the author of *Culture's Consequences*, has spent his life researching, defining and delving into the complex world of human behavior and its influences.

Hofstede (2001) defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.”

Culture usually refers to societies, but it can also be applied to any human collectivity or category, such as an organization, a gender, an ethnicity or a family. In the U.S., our society contains different cultural groups (African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, Caucasians, etc.). Yet, these groups share certain cultural traits simply by belonging to our society. So, within the confines of one geographical area, we have numerous cultures operating in unison.

A simplified definition of culture is “the way we do things around here.” Culture guides our communication, our values and the way we interact with others. There are inherent cultural differences based on how we were raised and the environment in which we grew up. As a result, an English-speaking American worker may react completely differently to a situation than a Hispanic worker in our country.

For example, two workers are using a bobcat to move materials on a construction site. A piece of debris from the site hits the windshield of the bobcat, causing the glass to break directly in the operator's line of vision.

The American worker: As the debris hits the windshield, his cultural norms indicate that he should stop the operation, turn the bobcat in for maintenance and get another one as soon as possible. He fills out maintenance requests and calls the shop.

The Hispanic worker: As the debris hits the windshield, a voice inside his head might say, “I am in big trouble. My boss will think I did not take care of this expensive equipment. If I stop working, I will get behind and then I will get fired. If I just work through the next shift, I can turn it in and maybe nobody will notice. I can work with this; it is not so bad. I will get my work done and everything will be okay.”

When we dig a bit deeper, we realize that human beings are pleasure seekers and pain avoiders. We do not like pain, and we do not like being yelled at, made an example of or taken out of our comfort zone.

If a Hispanic worker is told to finish a task as fast as he can and he does not have the right tools to perform the task, to avoid the pain of asking and the fear of being reprimanded, misunderstood or humiliated, he may go about performing the task to the best of his ability with what he has to work with. Unsafe? Perhaps. The most likely scenario? Absolutely.

THE CULTURE WE CREATE

Hofstede argued that people carry “mental programs” that are fashioned by their family life during early childhood and reinforced in school and organizations and that these mental programs make up each nation’s culture and values.

Hofstede analyzed the ways in which cultures differ from one another and developed a model, which he called the “Five Dimensions,” to identify areas where cultural clashes can cause problems in the workplace. They are:

Power Distance Index (PDI): Power distance is concerned with attitudes toward hierarchy; specifically, how much a particular culture values and respects authority. In other words, how much does a person or group expect and accept an unequal distribution of power?

Individualism (IDV): The degree to which individuals look after themselves or remain in the group. Collectivism is the polar opposite of individualism.

Masculinity (MAS): The emotional roles between genders (i.e., tough vs. tender societies).

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI): Uncertainty avoidance relates to how a culture and its members deal with and accept unstructured situations. This deals with how hard a society tries to control the uncontrollable.

Long-Term Orientation (LTO): The extent to which a culture programs its members to accept delayed gratification of material, social and emotional needs.

THE FIRST CRITICAL DIMENSION: PDI

Two of these five dimensions are important when exploring education across cultures. PDI, which indicates a person’s comfort and respect for authority, is the first important dimension.

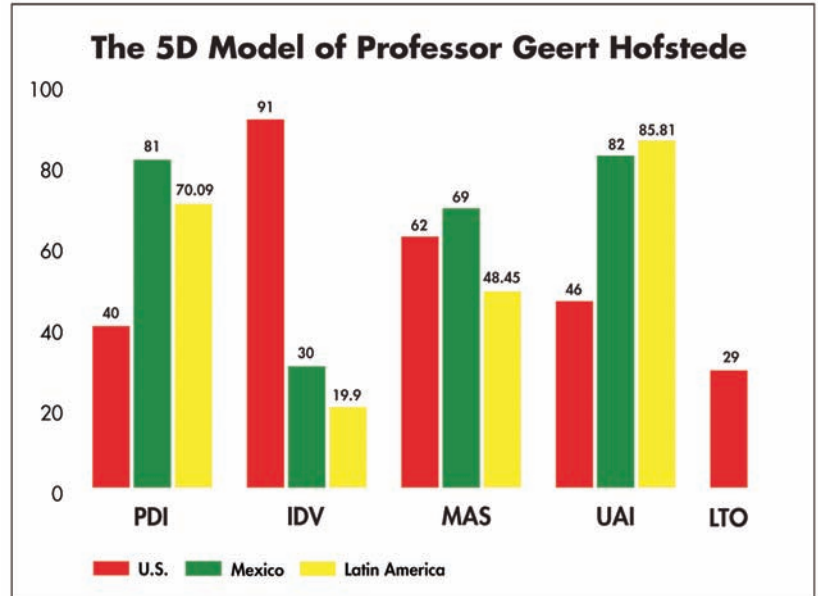
The higher the PDI value, the more deferential toward authority a person will be. As a result, a person will not question or verbalize a difference of opinion when it comes from an authority figure. While America has one of the lowest PDIs, Mexico and other Latin American countries have some of the highest.

PDI & Plane Crashes

Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Outliers* applies Hofstede’s research and explores “The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes.” Gladwell highlights the circumstances of two plane crashes—a Colombian flight (Avianca Flight 52) and a South Korean flight (Korean Air Flight 801)—and how the culture of the pilots and crews may have contributed to each disaster.

In his book, he focuses on how well the pilots communicated with each other and with their air traffic controllers. Gladwell argues that since both Colombia and South Korea rank toward the top of the PDI list, the subordinate members of their cockpit crews were unwilling or unable to speak up as assertively as they should have about safety concerns, which contributed to the crashes.

Figure 1
The 5D Model of
Professor Geert Hofstede



Source: www.geert-hofstede.com

PDI & Hispanic Construction Workers

Applying the same theory to the high propensity of the Hispanic construction workforce to sustain catastrophic injuries, we can assume that the Hispanic population is not comfortable speaking up when they are asked to perform unsafe acts and/or that they fear reporting safety issues on projects, both contributing factors of accidents.

Why would this be so? Because the Hispanic culture carries an ingrained respect for authority. Therefore, a Hispanic employee would not dare challenge a boss for fear of causing him to “lose face”—an attitude that discourages innovative thinking and taking initiative. As a result, American supervisors may make incorrect assumptions about their Hispanic employees—for example, that they are not trainable or lack initiative.

Regardless of how many hours of safety training Hispanic construction workers go through, the culture they come from—coupled with the culture created at the jobsite by the superintendent and management team—will play a monumental role in whether employees speak up before placing themselves in harm’s way.

Until we stop training for training’s sake and really train employees on cultural awareness—and train managers on how to create a culture that values open communication, honesty, safety, quality and productivity—we will continue to have significant safety issues.

THE SECOND CRITICAL DIMENSION: IDV

The second important cultural dimension is that of individualism vs. collectivism. Americans value individ-

ualism and rank the highest among nations for that value. Our entire concept of the American dream (achieving our goals and the proverbial “what’s in it for me”) plays an important role in America’s success.

The complete opposite is true of people from Latin American countries. The Hispanic workforce responds favorably to “what’s in it for us” vs. “what’s in it for me.” The Hispanic culture is about being part of something, a feeling of belonging, watching out for one another and working together for the good of everyone.

Imagine the confusion of a new immigrant from Mexico working on a construction jobsite where the supervisor creates a “what’s in it for me” culture and management gives bonuses based on schedule only. In addition, each subcontractor performs its own work for its own sake, instead of seeing the common goal of what is best for the project.

Training, education and incentives that are focused on the “what’s in it for me” mentality will not achieve the expected results and return on investment with Hispanic workers unless the inherent cultural issues are considered, addressed and accepted.

For companies with especially high numbers of Hispanic employees, their future success (possibly even their survival), depends on moving some of these employees into leadership roles. As always,

some leaders emerge naturally, but many contractors are making a concerted effort to educate and promote their Hispanic workforce.

THE CHILEAN MINERS’ EXPERIENCE WITH LEADERSHIP

During an [interview on CNN](#), Robert Sutton of Stanford University and author of *Good Boss, Bad Boss* explained why Chilean mine shift foreman Luis Urzua is the model of a good boss. “Urzua led with compassion, and he consistently put the needs of the miners ahead of himself. He cared about creating structure.”

Urzua created structure early on when the group had no idea whether they would be rescued. He scheduled times to eat and turned their vehicle headlights on for 12-hour increments so that the miners felt the structure of 12-hour days and 12-hour nights. (When people are under stress, a great leader creates predictability to calm the situation.)

Finally, Sutton observed that Urzua consistently celebrated small wins since it was impossible to control whether they would be rescued. Outlining the little steps (such as staying in shape and what would be eaten and when) created an achievable, manageable path toward rescue that the miners were able to embrace.

The Chilean miners’ experience stands out as a powerful example of how superintendents and PMs can

create a similar culture using the tools of 1) structure; 2) compassion; and 3) small, incremental, well-thought-out, well-communicated steps to achieve the daunting task of building an entire structure from scratch.

BEST PRACTICES IN WORKING WITH THE HISPANIC WORKFORCE

Our experience working with a predominately Hispanic workforce in El Paso, TX, provided the opportunity to look at many of the cultural issues that impact overall performance on construction sites. The following is a list of best practices that can improve communication, respect and leadership when interacting with a predominately Hispanic workforce.

Identify the group’s leader. The leader may be someone who speaks better English than the others. Typically, each work crew looks to someone who will explain and spend time translating, evaluating and representing the group.

To identify the leader, watch the group dynamics. After a daily huddle or a jobsite meeting, the group may linger and one person will be clarifying the supervisor’s expectations. That is the person you need to get to know and with whom you need to establish a rapport. Taking this step will be key to effective communication and earning the respect of the crew.

Walk the talk. The Hispanic culture is one of pride, loyalty and respect; yet, each of these must be earned. A superintendent who sits in the trailer all day and only comes out to bark orders and complain will not earn the respect of the Hispanic worker (or any worker, for that matter).

A superintendent who is present, visible and interested in the job as it is performed is the one who will reap the rewards of a loyal crew. A superintendent who is not afraid to get his/her hands dirty (and who will work side by side with the crew when necessary) will earn both respect and loyalty.

Include family. Americans tend to separate work and family life. Family, however, is of primary importance in the Hispanic culture, and this value can be exhibited at the workplace.

For example, a Hispanic worker may bring his family with him to pick up his paycheck. To engender trust and loyalty from this employee, his supervisor should take the time to meet and greet his family. And, the family should also be included in company safety initiatives.

Our company partnered with [Gaining Power Institute](#) to create a hands-on, daily wellness initiative that not only covered safety education, but also health, exercise and nutrition. Our employees involved their families right from the beginning and continue to share their “5 Minutes to Power” messages with their spouses and children.

Be sensitive to translations. Bilingual people are often used as translators on construction projects. This can work if your superintendents and PMs learn how to

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deal with issues that can cloud communication: dialect, lack of subject-matter knowledge and the accurate use of terms that can change the meaning of a message.

When hiring someone to verbally translate information or to translate written documents, make sure the translator speaks the same dialect as your audience. Also, be careful to select someone who has the right experience and the right relationship with the crew. Superintendents and PMs need to take the time to notice whether a 12-sentence translation has been turned into a few spoken words. Why? Because when this happens, the chances are high that your company's message has been "lost in translation."

Your jobsite management team must also understand that when a crew stands around after a meeting looking confused, they are signaling that your company's message was not accurately conveyed.

Be very careful with the question, "Do you understand?" Nine times out of ten, you will get an answer of "Si." This does not necessarily mean they understand. It may mean "Okay," or it may be said as an attempt to show respect. The best way to ensure that your company's message has been understood is to look for opportunities for the workers to demonstrate or repeat back the instructions.

A picture is worth a thousand words. Mockups, plans, demonstrations, examples and photos are excellent ways to enhance the communication process on a jobsite. Giving people the opportunity to observe the work being performed will be very beneficial in avoiding injuries and unnecessary rework.

Open your mind and spirit to learning. The world is not flat, and English is not the only language. (In fact, most Europeans speak a minimum of two languages.) Americans have long held the opinion that they only need to know English, an attitude that limits our view of the world and presents an ego-driven culture to everyone else.

So, open your mind and help your foremen, superintendents and PMs open theirs. Explore the opportunities for learning a new language and getting to know the people who work on your company's projects. It is not as

difficult as you think. It requires two things to learn a language: a willingness to try and to practice.

Educate and Empower Leaders: Our company has partnered with Branta Worldwide to embark on a comprehensive leadership training initiative for all of our foremen, superintendents and management team to learn about the importance of the culture we create on our jobsites.

Our goals are to reduce exposure to incidents and to improve quality and productivity in the process.

Finally, we all need to realize that our way is not the only way. The real meaning of a team environment and a culture of success is accepting and appreciating diversity, along with differing experiences and points of view. It helps to see diversity as a competitive advantage, instead of a hindrance. After all, diversity helped make America great for more than 200 years, and it is here to stay. ☺

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Please contribute in any capacity that fits into your life and set of demands, whether it is on the advisory committee, a subcommittee or contributing an article. For more information, [click here](#).

