



LANGUAGE: INTER-CULTURAL DETONATOR IN A DIVERSE ENVIRONMENT

SURVEY RESULTS SHOW LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES ARE THE MOST INFLAMMATORY ASPECT OF WORKING IN A MULTI-CULTURAL OFFICE. THIS ARTICLE SUGGESTS EFFECTIVE WAYS TO DE-FUSE THE SITUATION

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Picture a management retreat going beautifully — staff members actively participating, working harmoniously together, jointly solving problems. Then "Mount St. Helens" erupts suddenly. A cooperative environment goes up in smoke. People who had been laughing together moments before begin shouting, arguing and blaming. The cause of this huge emotional eruption? Language.

Language — the use of symbols to communicate — sets humans apart from the rest of the animal world. It also sets us apart from one another. In helping organizations deal with cultural diversity, one of the most inflammatory issues is that of language. Complaints heard all around...

- ❖ About staff speaking languages other than English on the job
- ❖ From bilingual staff who are repeatedly taken away from their regular work to translate or interpret
- ❖ From clients/customers who have difficulty understanding the heavily accented English of employees
- ❖ From staff regarding double standards — they are hired because of their bilingual ability, yet held back because their English is not good enough or because they speak their native language to other employees, not just to customers
- ❖ Concerning the difficulty in supervising or training staff who don't completely understand English.

IDENTITY

Language is more than just a means of communicating. The language we speak gives

us our identity and often defines our nationality. The lessons of history prove this point. For example, the Pilgrims had found freedom from religious persecution in Holland, yet they felt compelled to leave for America because they did not want their children to grow up speaking Dutch.

We see this issue debated around the world. Minority ethnic groups in many countries are demanding that they be educated in their native languages. Closer to home, conflicts about bilingual education rage on in school districts all over our country.

TERRITORY

But language is more than identity. It also represents turf. My territory, my barrio, my country, is defined by the dominant language spoken there. Hence, the fights in many communities over English-only laws or the heated debates about bilingual ballots and driver's tests. These arguments signal much deeper issues than the rules and regulations being debated. Power and esteem are at stake.

INFLUENCE

Finally, being able to communicate gives us one of our most powerful means of control in the world. It is our prime means of influencing events and people. We see its impact daily when we explain procedures to a subordinate, order food in a restaurant, or get directions when we're lost

When we can't communicate or find it difficult to get our message across, we feel our control slipping away. The less control we feel, the greater our frustration and stress. And that frustration is generally directed toward those we don't understand.

YOUR TRANSFER TO BRAZIL

Let's take a look at the issue from a little different perspective. Imagine that you've just been transferred to a division in one of your company's manufacturing plants in Brazil. Wow! Images of Carnival, Ipanema, Sugar Loaf and the Amazon flash through your mind. When reality sets in, you realize you don't speak Portuguese. But you think there must be people there who speak English... there are always people who speak English you think.

You take a crash course in Portuguese, enough to get the basics though you're still far from fluent. When you get there, you find that there are many bilingual supervisors and a few U.S. transplants working at your new location. You breathe a sigh of relief. Ask yourself what language would you use when...

- ❖ Talking with your bilingual supervisor?
- ❖ Having a meeting with other American managers?
- ❖ Eating lunch with another U.S.-born colleague?
- ❖ Conferencing with British, American or Canadian business associates?
- ❖ Phoning home to talk with your spouse or children?

Wouldn't it feel awkward not to use English in those situations? Yet, we take offense when others speak their native languages around us, especially at work.

To de-fuse this potentially destructive issue, we must first examine and question the

most automatic assumptions we make when confronted with a diversity of languages in the workplace.

ASSUMPTIONS THAT GET US IN TROUBLE

"They're talking about me."

When you hear a group of staff members speaking a language other than English, you may jump to the conclusion that you are the topic of conversation. In fact, they may be talking about their families, a work problem, or the weather. If they were speaking English, but you couldn't overhear what they were saying, would you still assume that they were talking about you?

"They don't want to learn English."

Huge enrollments and long waiting lists at Adult Education Classes tell us that newcomers to this society DO want to learn English. (Evans Adult School in Downtown Los Angeles has English classes 24 hours a day, and still has a waiting list).

However, making a living and taking care of family may use up all the hours in the day. At a subsistence level, spending two to three hours in the evening at school may be a lower priority than taking a second job. It is clear to everyone in this society that English is the language of power and that to advance in this culture, one must learn English. How long that takes — a few months, years, or a generation, depends to a great deal on economic circumstances.

"They know English — they Just don't want to use it."

Even when someone is learning a new language, they may be reticent to use it until they feel more proficient. How easy is it for you to use your high school Spanish or French when travelling? Most of us feel self-conscious and unsure of ourselves when beginning to use a new language. In addition, many newcomers to the U.S. come from cultures where social class distinctions make it difficult to initiate conversations or converse at all with someone who they believe to be above them in society's pecking order.

A TWO-WAY STREET

Rethinking our assumptions and walking in another person's shoes helps us to come to a more neutral position on the language clashes we experience.

Resolving this issue is a two-way street. Every nation needs a common language as a unifying element. Newcomers do need to make an attempt to learn English.

On the other hand, those who are native-born Americans or longtime residents can help the process of acculturation by showing understanding and openness to those who haven't yet acquired language proficiency. In the meantime, we still need to find a way to communicate effectively. Here are a few techniques that could work in your organization.

1. USE INTERPRETERS AND TRANSLATORS

One way to make this possible is to use a rotating interpreter bank where all employees who speak another language are included on a master list from which interpreters are called on a rotating basis. This means that the same people are not overburdened with this extra job duty. In some companies individuals who are willing to serve as interpreters are given a pay differential to compensate them for their extra service to the

firm.

2. HELP STAFF TO • LEARN ENGLISH

Many organizations make it easier for employees to learn English by providing on-site instruction after work. Some subsidize tuition for English classes or make arrangements with local community colleges or adult schools. For more advanced students, accent reduction classes can also be provided for staff who deal with the public, on the phone, or for those who make presentations as part of their work.

3. TEAM BUILD AROUND LANGUAGE • DIFFERENCES

Use language differences as an opportunity to strengthen your work group's feeling of teamness. Have employees share their perceptions as well as their needs in relation to language differences. Speakers of other languages need to hear the reactions of co-workers who may be feeling left out or talked about, while English-only speakers need to understand the comfort that others find in speaking in their native tongues. Open-ended statements such as the following are often helpful in getting the discussion started and in keeping it focused:

- "When someone doesn't understand me, I wish they would..."
- "I speak my native language to others at work because..."
- "One thing that is frustrating for me in communicating across a language barrier is..."

These discussions can lessen tensions by helping staff understand each other's situations. Insights gained improve relationships and can lead to creative problem solving.

4. CLARIFY THE LANGUAGE POLICY • AT WORK

Let people know the rules about language — what's permitted and what's off limits. Some legal precedents have been set recently regarding this issue, so be careful about respecting the rights of employees when they are on their own time (e.g.: breaks and lunch).

When all is said (or not said) and done, remember, there is a form of communication that supersedes all tongues. This is the language of attitude. As we approach one another in our multicultural world, the message our attitude sends speaks volumes. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said. "I can't hear what you're saying because who you are rings so loudly in my ears.

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