

## How to be a Latino-Ready, Latino-Friendly Employer - By Kelly McDonald

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Something important happened in 2003: For the first time in U.S. history, the Latino population exceeded the African-American population as the nation's largest minority. In fact, the United States has the second-largest Hispanic population in the world, following only Mexico (and beating Spain by several million). Hispanics already comprise 16 percent of hospitality workers nationwide - and by 2020, one in five U.S. residents will be Latino.

How will we tap into this unique workforce? We have to start speaking to its members in a language they can understand. Among Hispanic hospitality workers, 70 percent are foreign-born (primarily from Mexico), and 81 percent speak Spanish at home.

With numbers like these, an obvious recruiting strategy includes advertising in Spanish, and stations like Univision and Telemundo offer free exposure for open positions. But Spanish isn't the only 'language' at play here. Latinos - particularly those who are unacculturated\* - speak the languages of family, community and church (as Carlos Fuentes once wrote, 'In Mexico, even the Atheists are Catholic.'). A recruitment flyer placed in a church, therefore, has a certain degree of credibility. So does the recommendation of a parent, sibling or cousin. And if word-of-mouth advertising means a lot to society in general, it means everything in the Hispanic community. If you become known as a Latino-friendly employer, word will travel - fast.

Once you've attracted Hispanic employees, there are several things you can do to earn their loyalty (and their performance). First and foremost, provide company and safety information in Spanish - even for employees who profess a strong knowledge of English. The best way to demonstrate your respect is to care about someone's safety (not to mention minimizing mistakes, injuries and lawsuits). When possible, stick to show-and-tell training; many immigrants have less than a fifth grade education and don't read well in either language. But when you demonstrate a new task, try to imagine what it would be like to learn a new language, a new culture and a new job; just because you have to go over something more than once, it doesn't mean the employee is stupid.

In general, Hispanic employees want the same things we all want from employers: to be respected, recognized, rewarded and responded to.

**Respect.** Deliver on every promise, no matter how small, and be open to their suggestions and ideas. Demonstrate confidence in them and you will be rewarded with motivated performance.

**Recognition.** Just as public humiliation is reviled, public recognition is revered. Whenever possible, praise in front of others.

**Reward.** Even the smallest of tangible tokens if valuable: think movie passes or \$5 phone cards. Provide real opportunities for advancement (show them what's possible and give them the tools to get there). And consider compensation that doesn't cost you anything, like providing information. Your community may offer ESL training, childcare or medical services, among others. Helping to connect your employees to those services costs nothing, but it means everything.

**Respond.** Make sure that your 'open door policy' is sincere - and consider the cultural factors working against it. Latinos are likely to avoid confrontation in favor of politeness and respect for authority, and they may equate complaining with being a 'troublemaker.' When a problem is reported, respond right away; your lack of response will be interpreted as a dismissal.

There is one more 'R' that applies to your Hispanic employees: They want what they do to Reflect their cultures and traditions. Understand that there are differences: greetings are more enthusiastic; conversations are more social; the culture dictates politeness, always. Respect the differences. Celebrate them. They'll enrich your business and your life.

*\* 'Acculturation' is defined as the acquisition of a second culture while retaining one's first culture. 'Unacculturated' Latinos - who comprise most of the nation's Hispanic hospitality workers - prefer Spanish to English, uphold traditional values and put family above everyone else in their lives.*

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