

Immigrant Employees Must Adapt to Our “Common Sense”
by
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Nearly everything we know about the *common sense* of daily life has been learned and becomes habitual. We look both ways before crossing a street and have created such a habit in doing it that most of us look both ways even on one-way streets! It's habit in our culture for a welder to reach up and pull his goggles over his eyes. It's becoming habit for people to carry their disposable or sport water bottles with them in order to stay hydrated throughout a day of heavy activity. It's habit that we lock our doors. It's a habit to leave for work at the same time every day because we've timed the trip down to the minute. These and thousands of other “common sense” daily decisions and behaviors had to be learned, and, notably, were learned within the context of a culture.

So what does this mean in our multicultural workplaces? It means we can take nothing for granted when it comes to training and managing our multicultural workforce. Every time we become frustrated with an immigrant employee's lack of common sense, we must ask ourselves, does he or she really know why this is important to us or to our company? Is there any chance this employee has to learn something we take for granted?

Once we come to realize that the many minor frustrations we encounter with culturally different employees are a result of them not knowing our ways and our expectations and our “automatic-pilot” habits, the challenge becomes how to teach them appropriately and respectfully.

The first step in cross-cultural performance management is to diagnose the types of problems that exist. If you don't step back and analyze the whole picture, you'll find yourself putting out little fires one at a time without any over-all strategy to address the encompassing issues. Very likely, “common sense” mistakes that are made by your immigrant employees fall into just a few categories and can be dealt with as themes or trends, lending themselves to specific training topics and learning opportunities.

Next, ask yourself what you and your company leaders have done to educate your employees about “common sense” actions. Try questions such as: Have we assumed they knew more than they know and so we didn't bother to teach them what we believed everyone already knows? Have we explained why we want things a certain way? Have we prompted them to ask questions that may seem out of place?

Finally, consider that good performance management, regardless of culture, means staying on top of an employee's activities until the desired performance outcome has been achieved and, thereafter, reviewing the performance periodically to be sure that the improved performance is sustained. In addition, question whether or not your performance management strategy builds in the likelihood of success because it incorporates tools and systems that are key to creating positive change.

By addressing areas that may need change or improvement, we are not discounting the great value that our immigrant employees bring to our American workplaces. What would our companies be without them? Who would perform the labor they so willingly provide or the expertise we so clearly need? We do appreciate and reward their efforts. As they make adjustments to the American way of life and our not-so-common “common sense”, we can work better together to build the American dream.

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