



Quick E-Tips



INTERNATIONAL
ADVANTAGE

September 2007

We hope you enjoy this newsletter brought to you by International Advantage® LLC - *Leading Across Cultures™*. Every month we bring you tips to help your team and organization, especially those operating in culturally diverse environments, reach their business goals.

Topic of the month:

5 tips on communicating with employees who do not speak English

During a presentation this month I was asked for recommendations on this scenario:

"I work for an organization in the U.S. that hires employees to manufacture the company's products but who do not speak the company's primary language. I don't speak their language either and because of this, there isn't an easy exchange of information or ideas. Perhaps there are a few bilingual employees around, but they are not always around when I need them.

As a consequence of this language barrier, there is trouble exchanging even simple information, much less getting employees on board when rolling out new initiatives."

My response? Agreed...Reaching almost any objectives that requires the participation of those employees will be almost impossible without two-way communication!

Of course there is the question of whether to invest in language learning. I am a proponent of it in many situations, because it is so good for relationships. Language training gets people talking, raises awareness of cultural differences and contributes to a spirit of cooperation.

But since it can take months to years (depending on a variety of factors around language program and diligence) for a learner to use the foreign language in exchanging work-related information, what can you do now to communicate on day-to-day topics with those employees who do not speak your language? Here are a few ideas.

5 tips on communicating with employees who do not speak your language:

1. Have a bilingual facilitator lead regular sessions in the employees' language to determine what kind of communication is most needed from their perspective. This way, your efforts are sure to meet the needs of employees, as well as your own.
2. Respond as soon as possible to the recommendations that come out of that session in a company newsletter or memo, translated into the employees' language.

3. Translate as much company material as possible. This includes presentations, speeches, values, strategy, etc.
4. Hire a well-qualified human resources employee who is used consistently for the purpose of interpreting and translating. Only hire someone who engenders trust and articulate clear guidelines on confidentiality in various contexts that protect all parties.

Avoid pulling a non-official bilingual employee as an interpreter off the job to interpret for you, especially if what you need to communicate is sensitive or personal, like feedback on work performance or pay. (The interpreter should not be privy to such conversations unless their role justifies it.)

5. For non-sensitive communications when in a pinch, consider the option in using an interpretation service offered on demand via phone. I did a quick online search and found websites like “languageline.com” or the “translationagency.com” by typing in “language interpreting phone”.

Learning the language and hiring bilingual managers to work between language groups are your main strategies, but everyone can employ these techniques to improve the chances of keeping the lines of communication open.

Tap our expertise! Here are some relevant services we provide to clients, as it relates to this topic:

- Assess your current communication processes and make recommendations based on your current strategy and resources
- Facilitate a brainstorming session with leaders about communication strategies based on organizational priorities (to increase retention, improve quality, gather process improvement ideas, etc.)
- Assess employee satisfaction (in Spanish or English) and provide recommendations based on gaps between what you have and what you want
- Assess your current leaders in their cultural competence and provide resources where needed

+++++

On the Personal Side: Can't stand it when you don't understand people speaking a different language?

I have been in many companies where I hear this: “Employees should not be speaking [their native language] at work!” They go on to explain that they don't know what is being said and admit they wonder if they, themselves, are being talked about.

To that, I say that allowing employees the right to speak the language that is easiest to them is usually best. Take it from someone who has learned three languages fluently as an adult: until you become 100% bilingual, it is exhausting to speak your non-native language all day (not to mention difficult to truly express yourself).

There are exceptions, but to enforce a language rule for no specific reason usually smacks of heavy-handedness or paranoia.

To avoid this, work on your relationships with those individuals to ease your fear. Of course if it really bothers you, start learning the language and begin to engage with those individuals in their language.

Don't get me wrong, it is not polite to be in a group and speak a language that not everyone can understand. For example, if everyone standing in a group is bilingual except one, the group should speak the common language.

+++++

Want to print, forward or redistribute this Quick E-tip?

Please pass it on! If you use the "Forward" button at the very bottom of this page, the formatting will be retained for the recipient. In all cases, we simply request that you leave our name and contact information attached.

To your success around the globe,

Lisa

Lisa Koss, Principal Consultant
International Advantage® LLC - Leading Across Cultures ^(SM)
Consulting, Facilitation, Training
Phoenix, Arizona U.S.A.
Direct: +1 - 623-516-2482
www.intladvantage.com