

COMMUNICATION ISSUES IN A MULTILINGUAL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT: INSIGHTS FROM MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the conclusions and implications of the research study based on responses from a sample of 20 manufacturing leader-managers working in the states of California or Florida. This research also presents recommendations for further action followed by a summary of findings. Organizational policies and procedures are in place to ensure standards are implemented for an efficient and safe work environment for all employees. It is expected that employees understand such processes so they can meet the goals of the organizations. Organizations that embrace diversity are able to bring unique talents and ideas that will serve clients' needs. However, when language presents a barrier to communication, then management has to weigh whether it is placing itself in a position to do more harm than good for employees involved. Two questions were fundamental to the research: (1) How do leader-managers share and transfer organizational knowledge to a linguistically diverse manufacturing workforce to prevent workplace injuries in their organization? (2) What are perceived challenges in sharing and transferring organizational knowledge in a linguistically diverse manufacturing work force to prevent workplace injuries in their organization?

JEL: D8, D83

KEYWORDS: Communication, Leadership, Organizational Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Organizations with a workforce that speak different languages can present challenges to the organization. The main difficulty particularly for management is the ability to communicate effectively with its employees. Organizations may see that having a diverse workforce with linguistic abilities could serve as an advantage to a global economy; however, literature presented asserted that linguistic diversity added complexity within an organization. For example, employees with limited English skills in organizations “places a significant expanded challenge on management, especially regarding communication” (Solomon as cited in Pierce, 2003, p. 41).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to contribute to the linguistic diversity literature by exploring lived experiences of a small sample of leader-managers in manufacturing environments. Twenty leader-managers from seven manufacturing organizations contributed to the study. Organizations and the location of the manufacturing sites are not referenced due to confidentiality.

Research identified the estimated total economic costs in 2004 of occupational deaths and injuries were \$142.2 billion, with 120 million days of total time lost; 4,952 employees died and 3.7 million employees were disabled while on the job (National Safety Council, 2006, p. 1). Loh and Richardson (2004) stated, “In manufacturing, foreign-born workers’ share of employment increased by 22 percent, from 13 percent in 1996 to 16 percent in 2001, but their share of workplace fatalities increased by 46 percent over the same period, from 9 to 14 percent” (p. 47).

The study included a review of the literature related to the phenomenon of sharing and transferring knowledge in a linguistically diverse environment, and the growth of linguistic diversity within the workplace. The increase of workplace injuries was presented as relational to the increase of employees with no or limited English proficiencies. Organizational literature was used to integrate the safety system as part of the organization's system and leaders' responsibility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology research study was to explore how leader-managers share and transfer organizational knowledge in linguistically diverse manufacturing organizations to prevent workplace injuries. The increase of linguistic diversity in the workplace and the increase in the number of employees with limited English skills, or English as a Second Language (ESL), have been linked with a disproportionate rise in the number of workplace injuries (Brooks, 2003; Kalaroa, 2004). The study used the modified Van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994) to explore the lived experiences of 20 California or Florida leader-managers about how they share and transfer organizational knowledge in linguistically diverse manufacturing organizations to prevent workplace injuries.

The literature review revealed research focused on the relationship between language and safety did not exist (Trajkovski & Loosemore, 2006). In addition, the lack of recognition by leaders or their decisions not to confront the existence of various languages in the workplace has resulted in language barriers within organizations (Kalaroa, 2004). With the lack of initiative from leaders to resolve problems associated with or caused by language barriers and unsafe working environment has been created within some organizations (Dutton, 1998, Kalaroa).

The safety system excellence model presented in the literature review identified leadership as an essential input (Blair, 2003). The role of leadership within organizations drives values, behavioral reinforcement, communication, accountability, and management credibility (McCarroll, 2004; Blair, 2003). The Hersey Blanchard model was used to emphasize leader-managers need to be adaptable and flexible to meet the changing needs of the employees and the various situations.

Twenty leader-managers from seven manufacturing organizations contributed to the study. The result of this study showed that no formalized program exists within the participants' organizations and that leader-managers are left to their own demise to create a means to address linguistic diversity within the workplace. Leader-managers may benefit by developing and implementing formalized communication strategies to address better the challenges in linguistically diverse manufacturing environments. In addition, leader-managers may benefit by understanding that cultural differences, motives, and needs behind specific behaviors can possibly enhance communication and team building within an organization, and can possibly facilitate the management of linguistically diverse workplaces (Parvis, 2003).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

As part of her dissertation, Dr. Jett conducted extensive research and data collection. Dr. Escobedo reviewed this study as part of his faculty affiliation with the University of Phoenix. The methodology used employed NVivo© qualitative data analysis software to ascertain themes, issues, and relationships of data obtained during the data collection process. The study included horizontalization, a reduction of the horizons, and a review of the common themes which evolved as a result of the analysis of the data. Direct quotes of participants were used to illustrate the themes in order to establish perceptions of the organizational culture, and the day-to-day impact of linguistic diversity.

The synthesis of the meanings and essence of the lived experiences identified by the participants presented that current systems or lack of systems in place to facilitate the sharing and transferring of

knowledge, and challenges of leader-managers when sharing and transferring knowledge in linguistically diverse manufacturing environments exist. The participants' experiences of linguistic diversity did conform to the assertions and claims presented in the review of relevant literature. Leader-managers within organizations have been challenged with facing workplace injuries within linguistically diverse environments.

Participants identified that current systems within their organizations do not formally address challenges presented when sharing and transferring knowledge in a linguistically diverse environment. Informal practices are developed by leader-managers within specific departments to execute operating plans developed annually and to meet established objectives in a changing environment. These practices can vary within the same organization, as well as within a department. The variance was noted by dissimilar responses in this study from participants within the same organization.

The overarching theme presented a gap in linguistically diverse manufacturing environments. As presented in the literature review, the overall result has been little or no guidelines for organizations, possibly leaving leader-managers to their own demise.

RESULTS

This qualitative phenomenological study explored and captured the lived experiences of a small sample of leader-managers working in various linguistically diverse manufacturing environments in California and Florida. The primary intent was to contribute to the safety literature in the manufacturing sector to prevent workplace injuries. The central phenomenon, sharing and transferring organizational knowledge, was defined as moving knowledge from one individual to another through communication or across organizational boundaries to provide sustainable competitive advantage throughout an organization (Ichijo & Nonaka, 2007, p. 289).

The manufacturing industry has a large percentage of employees who are English as Second Language workers, as identified in the literature review. The study revealed that sharing and transferring organizational knowledge in a linguistically diverse environment continues to be challenging in today's manufacturing environments, and continues not to be addressed formally by manufacturing organizations as revealed by participants of this study. A majority of participants have informally developed systems to address language barriers within their sphere of influence. For example, some of these systems include spending additional time observing employees, or requesting other employees, peers or leader-managers who can translate.

A large majority of participants agreed to using various languages in manufacturing environments, and translating various manuals to different languages. For example, Participant 256 stated, "...if language is a barrier then the only way you can communicate is to use language that somebody understands." This viewpoint is a significant finding primarily because Pierce (2003) identified that of the four strategies organizations implement to address the challenge of safety in the linguistically diverse workplace, implementing a systematic approach of inclusion was not commonly used. Most organizations focused on one of the following: (1) Do not address issue, or use sign-type language; (2) Learn to speak a different language, and hire only workers who speak that language; or (3) Reduce the number of non-English speaking employees and replace only with English-speaking. Additionally, Davenport and Prusak (1998), and Pelinka (2007) identified that the complexity of sharing and transferring knowledge within organizations can be reduced when there is a focus on a common language.

Table 1 presents the participants responses about methods of sharing and transferring safety communication. Participant unanimously identified meetings and training as a means of safety communication, emerging as the primary theme. Forty-five per cent of responses drove the theme as

using signage to facilitate communication. Approximately 10% of the responses identified the use of translators. For example, other peers or resources to facilitate sharing and transferring of information related to challenges within a linguistically diverse environment.

Table 1: Methods of Sharing and Transferring Safety Communication

Emerging Themes/Textual Descriptors	Frequency Of Response	% Of Respondents Endorsing Themes	Significant Minority	Secondary Theme	Primary Theme
Meetings and Training	21	100			✓
Signage	10	45		✓	
Translators	2	10	✓		
Incentives and Recognition	4	15	✓		

This table shows the frequency of responses and the percentage of respondents endorsing emerging themes and textual descriptors. A primary theme was supported by 65 percent or more of the participants. A secondary theme consisted of responses between 35 percent and 64 percent affirmed by participants. A significant minority theme had less than 35 percent response rate by participants.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

While all aspects of manufacturing, such as productivity, quality, rewards and recognition, are important, safety is emphasized as being most critical by leader-managers. In addition, the results of the study revealed that participants believe employees in manufacturing environments want their needs to be addressed and a safe place to work. However, participants identified that current systems within their organizations do not formally address challenges presented when sharing and transferring knowledge in a linguistically diverse environment.

Based on findings in this study, leader-managers need to address formally how knowledge is shared and transferred within the work environment. Leader-managers need to develop and implement communication strategies to address the challenges and gaps in linguistically diverse manufacturing environments. Leader-managers, senior and middle managers, and safety professionals need to work with Human Resource Departments to align on a specific approach for their organizations to mitigate legal issues, and address safety concerns. Dunlap (2004) emphasized it is the organizational culture which drives what is expected in health and safety, and to make changes or develop a safety culture the organizational culture must be aligned.

In addition, leader-managers within organization need to be adaptable and flexible to meet the changing needs of the employees and the organization's environment. Leader-managers should establish safety expectations, provide engineering support, set exemplary behavior, educate employees, enable employees, encourage employees, and evaluate effectiveness (Blair, 2003). The lack of ownership by leaders could possibly lead to the lack of literature on this subject, and the gaps that exist in the manufacturing environment. Not addressing the phenomenon of linguistic diversity cannot only increase workplace injuries (Brooks, 2003; Kalaroa, 2004), but also can stagnate the organization and its resources if language barriers affect communication (Roberson & Stevens, 2006).

This article recommends actions that leadership can take to improve safety in a linguistically diverse manufacturing environment. While all aspects of manufacturing, such as productivity, quality, rewards and recognition, are important, safety is emphasized as being most critical by leader-managers.

Leadership within an organization drives values, behavioral reinforcement, communication, accountability and management credibility (McCarroll, 2004; Blair, 2003). In addition, leadership is highlighted as an essential input in the safety system excellence model presented by Blair (2003). Participants of this study identified that employees in manufacturing environments expect their needs to be addressed by leader-managers.

Kalaroa (2004) identified cultural differences as a possible prevention that would keep employees from questioning authority or the unsafe acts of their coworkers, or unsafe work practices of organizations or leaders within their organization. In addition, Trajkovski and Loosemore (2006) stated, "People who speak different languages will therefore be more likely to view the world differently" (p. 2). Leader-managers should recognize and understand cultural differences, motives, and needs behind specific behaviors. Parvis (2003) identified this level of understanding by leader-managers could possibly enhance communication and team building within an organization, and facilitate the management of linguistically diverse workplaces.

Limitations

Limitations of this qualitative phenomenological research study were that data obtained was limited to 20 participants working within linguistically diverse manufacturing organizations within California or Florida. Participants were limited to persons in leadership positions, and not manufacturing employees' perception of safety or the organization's safety culture. Even though participants volunteered to be involved in the study, participants may have provided bias and superficial responses based on their personal opinions, motivation to participate, their personality, or leadership style.

In addition, although there are a number of communication models, a widely held notion is that communication meaning is comprised of 57% nonverbal, 37% tone, and 6% words (Mehrabian, 1981). Therefore, this suggests that communication is most extensive when an individual does not use words; that is, 94%. This brings home the overall message that over half the meaning that individuals send at 57% is nonverbal. Therefore, leader-managers need to have an awareness of the nonverbal communication.

The communication model will also vary by culture (Mehrabian, 1981). For instance, in one particular culture, certain hand gestures are entirely inappropriate and even simple eye contact can be a sign of aggression and sure disaster. In business, this could ruin a friendship or break a business transaction. Another exemplary cultural difference is proximity. Just how close can one person stand to another before it becomes uncomfortable or suggest inappropriate invasion of one's personal space. In one culture, this could be arm's length while in another this could very well be inches apart. In serious cases, this could be inappropriate conduct of a sexual nature and considered sexual harassment.

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BIOGRAPHY

Ernesto Escobedo, Ph.D, SPHR, CDM TMCA, 1999, Capella University, Minneapolis, MN 1992, The University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Ernesto Escobedo is a contributing faculty member at Walden University in the School of Public Policy & Administration. Dr. Ernesto Escobedo holds a Ph.D. in Organization & Management with a specialization in business from Capella University. He holds a Masters of Business Administration in business administration from The University of Texas at Austin. Also, Dr. Escobedo is certified as a Senior Professional in Human Resources through the Society for Human Resources Management and is a Certified Distinguished Mediator through the Texas Mediator Credentialed Association. Further, Dr. Escobedo is a Texas Business Hall of Fame Scholarship recipient. Dr. Escobedo has taught for institutions of higher learning for the past 17 years. His research interests include the following topics: public policy, finance, leadership, accounting, organizational behavior and change, budgeting, communications, and many more. Dr. Escobedo has made numerous presentations at conferences for masters and doctoral students. In addition to teaching, Dr. Escobedo serves as a board member and officer in his community and supports service organizations, including the Knights of Columbus.

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