More and more Northeast dairies of all sizes have immigrants from Mexico, Central America and other Latin American countries joining their workforces. Some dairies have had Hispanic labor for 10 or more years; others have more recently hired people from this responsible and hard-working sector of the workforce.

As an employee of the Quality Milk Production Services (QMPS) program, I have worked with dairy farm owners and their Hispanic employees for almost three years. Daily, I see the unique challenges faced by people from diverse cultures as they attempt to work and live together comfortably.

I’m often amazed that things go so smoothly since most of the Hispanic labor from Mexico and Guatemala arrive in the States with no familiarity, let alone training, in dairy production. They are equally unfamiliar with the U.S. culture and often with its language.

Know the culture
My experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala illustrates some challenges Hispanic employees and their employers face. The U.S. government trains Peace Corps volunteers for three months to prepare them for another country’s culture before they’re sent into the field.

This isn’t the case for people coming to work on U.S. dairies from Guatemala and Mexico. They usually have no introduction to living in this country.

Cultural differences make us do things differently. Also, people from countries with such different standards of living may identify the big houses and large herds with wealth and not realize there are limited resources. From my Peace Corps days, here are examples of differences that can cause cultural confusion:

- Heat and hot water. People from other cultures may not realize how expensive it is to heat a home or how a heating system works. This can explain why Hispanic employees may not alert you to the hot water heater going out or a furnace malfunction.

- Bathroom etiquette. When arriving in Guatemala, we “silly gringos” had to learn not to throw toilet paper in the toilet. The septic system couldn’t handle it or if there was an outhouse, no one wanted it filled with paper. So everyone had to throw paper in the trash or in a pile for burning later.

If you’ve noticed piles of used paper on the floor of your bathroom, it’s not because your workers don’t know any better. They just do things differently.

- Washers and dryers. In rural areas of countries such as Guatemala, laundry is done by hand. So some Hispanic employees may not know how to use a washer, how much detergent to add or the potency of milkhouse chemicals. Tell Hispanic employees that milkhouse chemicals are concentrated and not used for washing clothes or their hands.

Challenges and solutions
Communication is at the core of most major challenges related to hiring and working with a Hispanic workforce. Without the ability to communicate, dairy managers find it difficult to achieve other essential goals such as consistency with cows, employee motivation and retention, and training.

Here are some common things I hear dairy owners and managers say with regard to training and working with their Spanish-speaking employees.

- I’ll train one Hispanic laborer and let him or her train others as new people join the dairy. They can’t understand me anyway.”

A variation on this is: “The Hispanic that speaks the most English will be my translator no matter the person’s relationship with fellow workers.”

- Realize that Hispanic workers often don’t want to be trained or corrected by their peers. Dairy management must clarify to workers who the trainers are and make sure everyone understands the importance of standard operating procedures (SOPs).
Build a mult-cultural dairy team

Since Spanish-speaking employees are learning about the U.S. culture for the first time, here are ideas, compiled from New York dairies and consultants across the country, to help them feel part of the dairy team.

• Grease workers everyday with a handshake, smile or a new word. It’s common in Central America to greet people when you pass by whether you know them or not.
• Have employees learn a few words – both English and Spanish – every week. Post the words in a visible area and encourage all employees to use them at least once in the week.
• Have periodic educational sessions to increase dairy knowledge and clear up questions or doubts. Have each English- and Spanish-speaking employee work together for at least an hour when someone is first hired. It can break the ice, reduce segregation and foster respect.
• Have staff parties on holidays and include food from both cultures.
• Conduct periodic parlor audits to avoid procedural drift. QMPS can help you do this and communicate the results to your crew.
• Discuss goals periodically with employees, veterinarians and dairy service providers. Hire QMPS or another translator to ensure that meetings are bilingual.

To explain pay, benefits and job responsibilities can avoid some of the confusion.

• “They’re getting cows milked so I’ll let well enough alone, although the routine isn’t what I want. If I correct my Hispanic employees, they may think I am mad at them and leave.”

Lack of communication can breed fear and uncertainty. In general, Latin Americans are warm, family-oriented people, and they may react differently, or negatively, to reprimands or corrections. But that doesn’t mean you should change your normal best management practices used with other employees. If you show employees that they are important members of the team, they normally won’t leave at the first sign of discord or discipline.

The basics of good performance are still important with Hispanic employees. I encourage employers to:

1. Have job descriptions in Spanish and English. Fill out a work agreement.
2. Create SOPs for required tasks and ensure they are being trained.
3. Have a dedicated training period with an introduction to your dairy.
4. Evaluate workers periodically. Have regular meetings to provide feedback on work performance.
5. Prepare salary ranges with pay and benefits. Explain paycheck deductions to avoid confusion.

The language barrier may prevent many dairies from taking these steps. But if you implement them, you encourage a team environment where employees feel secure and informed.