

Employees, customers are no longer ‘just like us’

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



The shocking story of what happened to a 57-year-old grandfather from India when he visited his family in a Southern city made international headlines and demonstrated the need for businesses and public agencies to better train employees.

Sureshbhai Patel came to America in January to help care for his infant grandson. His engineer-son had recently moved to a culturally diverse, scientific community.

On Feb. 6, Patel was taking his morning walk along a sidewalk in his son’s neighborhood. A neighbor, who did not recognize Patel, called 9-1-1 claiming a stranger was looking into garages. The resulting exchange between Patel and police will forever impact the old man, the young officer and the community.

A dash cam in the responding patrol car captured the conversation between the officer and the non-English speaking Patel. The officer warned Patel repeatedly if he did not stop walking he would be thrown to the ground. You can hear Patel respond, “India.” And then came, “I don’t know what his problem is, but he won’t listen.”

As a second patrol car pulled up, the first officer yanked Patel’s arms behind his back and threw him to the ground. Patel eventually was taken to a hospital, where he underwent surgery to fuse his vertebrae. He still is unable to move one of his legs.

After publicly releasing the dash cam video, the police chief announced he would be firing the 26-year-old officer, who now faces misdemeanor assault charges. City officials and the state’s governor apologized to Patel, his family and the Indian government. An FBI investigation is underway. And lawsuits have been filed.

Not all botched cultural exchanges have such incredibly tragic outcomes. But just a little bit of training likely would have gone a long way toward diffusing this encounter.

Most business people work in a multi-cultural environment. Increasingly customers and employees are coming from diverse backgrounds.

Consider Kern County. “Quick Facts” released by the U.S. Census Bureau last December reveals Kern County’s population now is 50.9 percent Hispanic or Latino. Non-Hispanic whites comprise 36.9 percent of the population, with the remainder comprised of black or African-American,

American Indian, Asian, native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander, and people of two or more races.

Foreign-born people now comprise 20.6 percent of Kern's population. Around 42 percent live in homes where a language, other than English, is spoken.

To ignore these changing demographics – clinging to old beliefs that customers and workers are “just like us” – can hurt companies' profits and hinder the ability to recruit and retain the best and brightest employees.

The multitude of languages that may be spoken in a community also can pose challenges. There is no way to have sufficient linguists on staff to address all possibilities. However, translation devices are now available that can connect non-English speakers to interpreters.

But the ultimate answer to promoting cultural sensitivity is employee training. And the best results are achieved when managers and employees help design training programs.

Consider these steps:

--Survey “stakeholders” – managers, employees and customers – about behaviors and desired changes. Include such topics as management style, communications, age, race, gender, religion, etc.

--Plan a variety of workshops. Supplement speaker presentations with handouts from such sources as the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

--Create a quiz to test participants' knowledge of diversity topics. Google “diversity quiz” to find one online that fits your company's needs.

--Seek manager and employee feedback to improve the program.

Often company owners and managers claim they cannot afford to spend the time and money to provide cultural diversity training. The real question is: Can they afford not to?

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