

Attachment E

Hablemos Program

Spanish Customer Service Class – Developed by Employees for Employees

Learning to accept and appreciate another culture is imperative.

-Suyapa Moncada Contreras

Overview

In 2020, the County of Santa Barbara launched the JOIN Race, Equity, and Inclusion Framework. Through the framework, department heads, assistant department heads, and managers were introduced to concepts around racism, diversity, equity, inclusion, strategic questioning, and unconscious bias. County Human Resource Organizational & Talent Development team saw this as an opportunity to support the DEI initiative by developing a much-needed Spanish Customer course for employees that provided a forum for employees to:

- Practice basic Spanish to improve the attention and services to Spanish-speaking customers
- Learn to make small talk in conversational Spanish
- To build foundational knowledge about Hispanic and Latinx culture

The second objective was to provide an opportunity for employees to expand their capacity to contribute to the organization, grow their talents, and collaborate with internal departments to make a larger impact on the County at large.

Challenge

*"I got very excited when I was invited to participate in this project!
I joined the County of Santa Barbara in 2003, and this is the first time a Spanish class for the workplace has been offered to employees".*

The County of Santa Barbara serves many Spanish-speaking customers in different settings across the departments, and non-Spanish-speaking employees need help with communication; sometimes, this results in a misinterpretation of poor customer service. The Organizational & Talent Development (OTD), a division within County HR wanted to develop a Spanish Customer Service course to be offered within the course catalog to increase employees' ability to provide customer service to county residents. OTD had one

staff person who wanted to seize the opportunity as a stretch assignment and volunteered to develop a program but they knew they needed to collaborate with other departments for the program to become a success. However, the COVID pandemic had the County of Santa Barbara struggle with staff shortages and made it challenging to allow staff to volunteer for projects outside the realm of the normal scope of work. They were not deterred. The OTD division chief remembered an employee who had attended the Becoming A Supervisor (BAS) Program who is a native Spanish speaker with a bachelor's degree in Spanish and was asked if they would contribute their talents to the program. The employees reached out to their managers to explain the scope of work and benefits of the program to the County and residents and they joined in the effort. Because of their role in Public Health, they knew the need was great and wanted to help in any way they could remove barriers to providing service to the County's Spanish-speaking residents.

The County of Santa Barbara serves a highly diverse population, and many of this clientele are Spanish speaking. What better way to excel in customer service than being willing to go above and beyond our everyday responsibilities? - Karla Quintana

Solution

The ability to speak Spanish has been a benefit to the workplace because it provides the skills county staff needs to be comfortable speaking Spanish to effectively complete their work assignments of providing service to our residents. Spanish language courses also allow employees to build on leadership skills (become mentors as they lead by example within their departments) and practice cultural humility which is imperative to effectively implementing DEI initiatives.

The implementation of this program required the collaboration of three County departments – County Human Resources, Public Health, and General Services. County employees generated the idea for customer service training and they collaborated in the development of the 16-hour course content for the Customer Service course. Hence, we have the tagline “Developed by employees for employees”. They received guidance from the OTD Division chief and OTD Trainer on how to lay out the content for the course. The branding for the program was developed by an OTD employee. The program would also highlight the nuances of Spanish and Latinx Culture. The program was interactive and the participants not only had workbooks, but they watched videos and had the opportunity to practice their Spanish with each other. The program provided Spanish dictionaries for each employee that would be helpful in class and when they went back to their workstations.

To celebrate the diversity of the Spanish Culture, the instructors brought in artifacts from various Spanish-speaking countries and displayed them in the classroom. The instructors recruited other colleagues who were known for their Salsa dancing on the last day of the program, employees from The General Services Department, with the support of their supervisor, prepared the various dishes for the participants to try.

Innovation

As we become more connected worldwide, cross-cultural communication skills have become beneficial for the workplace to provide personalized customer service. It also helps us to avoid misunderstandings caused by cultural bias and prejudice.

This program was an innovative way not only to provide excellent customer service to our residence and the County to develop and retain its talent which aligns with the organization’s Renew initiative. Stretch assignment opportunities. The OTD staff showed interest in directly supporting the DEI programming. The facilitators for the program were identified through the BAS Program. Because of the Public Health employees' involvement in this program, they were able to build their confidence in providing training to other county employees. They learned new presentation tools like Canva and they also attended the 16-hour OTD Design Training that teaches subject matter experts about adult learning, facilitation, and design principles. In essence, parting in this innovation created an appreciation of our multicultural and diverse organization and communities and allowed them to increase their interconnectedness with the world around them.

Results

The Hablemos Program was piloted in the Summer of 2022. Based on the overwhelming feedback from the first cohort, an additional class was presented in North County in the Fall and another in South County in the Spring of 2023 for a total of three courses. A total of 48 employees attended the course since it was launched in June of 2022. Due to this staffing shortage, managers and supervisors could only approve a few employees to take this class; nevertheless, the course is now an ongoing lineup in the course catalog and it is offered onsite in the North and South County. Employees showed engagement in learning essential Spanish words that can be used when assisting Spanish-speaking customers and learning a little bit about the Hispanic and Latino cultures. Participants can now understand basic questions and respond to basic requests in Spanish.

During the course of the program, one instructor received a promotion and the other has increased her capacity to contribute by developing an alternate program for healthcare providers that don't speak Spanish that increases the quality of interaction with patients. This does not completely solve all problems but it does improve the quality of patient care. They were asked to participate on panels to discuss their experience and the success of the program at the annual County of Santa Barbara Human Resources Summit and the DEI Regional

Facilitating "Hablemos" added another set of skills I now apply to my workplace. It also reminded me to feel proud of where I come from. Knowing that more people from El Salvador are joining our County of Santa Barbara makes me happy and gives me a sense of belonging. – Karla Quintana

Symposium that was held in May of 2023.

Replicability

This program can be replicated if it is integrated with a broader organizational objective of DEI and improving service to our residents. One of the first steps is to identify staff who may want to assist with implementing or facilitating the program as a career development or stretch assignment opportunity. This way the burden is not placed primarily on someone in a training role who is already over-tasked. Listen to what interest your staff or those who may be attending your training programs and see if you have an opportunity to help them to increase their capacity to contribute to the organization in a way that ties into their purpose or one that will maximize their latent talent. This was the situation with one of the employees who attend our leadership series training.

Collaborate with other department leaders and supervisors to create a schedule that works best for them and the employee. Be a supportive supervisor. This was successful because the employees were convinced that they had the support of their supervisors and managers who also wanted to attend the program.

Program Contact

Dr. June Mighty, Organizational & Talent Development Division Chief
Santa Barbara County Human Resources Department
jmighty@countyofsb.org
805-692-1740

Additional Materials

Attachment A- [Hablemos Student Workbook](#)

Attachment B – [Hablemos Spanish Program](#)

Attachment C – [Hablemos Spanish Presentation Deck](#)