



## HEAD OF THE CURVE: NEHRA'S 2004 INVENTION CONVENTION

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It was Red Sox Nation in Boston on October 20 to 21st as Beantown's favorite team inched closer to fame in the World Series. Sox Fever animated the 950 attendees of the HR Invention Convention, sponsored by the Northeast Human Resources Association, one of the largest regional groups in the Society for Human Resource Management, and an upbeat energy level permeated the breakout sessions. Here's a look at some of the cutting edge ideas that emerged.

### Putting Culture to Work for You

100 percent of the growth in the Massachusetts labor force since 1990 is coming from foreign-born workers. That stunning statistic came from Kari Heistad, Principal of Creative Concepts, a Newton, MA-based firm which provides organizations with culture coaching that helps them use the strengths inherent in their diverse workforces.

Heistad's point: the workplace is increasingly becoming a multicultural world, and managers are increasingly coping with language barriers, employees with nontraditional styles of work and communication, and the potential for misunderstandings among culture groups. These realities affect workplace life from recruitment to separation. If companies demonstrate behaviors and attitudes that enable them to work cross-culturally, they not only build employee loyalty, they release each employee's potential, to employees' own personal benefit and that of the organization. Some aspects of culture that affect workplace life:

- **Concepts of self and space.** Hispanic, Latin, and Arab cultures want to stand closer to one another in conversation so that they can touch one another. Americans want to be arm's length from one another.
- **Lunch.** Cultural differences include whether employees go out or eat at the desk, how long they stay out, and what they eat.
- **Time.** "It's a huge adjustment for foreign-born workers to be clocked by the minute," Heistad observes. People who show up half an hour late might not be aware that they've done anything wrong. In Spain, for example, half an hour late is still "on time." It's critical to let immigrant workers know the American view of lateness.
- **Mental processes.** Some cultures are more team-based, but in the United States, more projects are individually based.
- **Faith.** For some, faith has an overriding influence on their lives, including their lives at work.
- **Gender expectations.** In the United States, more than in some other countries, it's acceptable for an employee to have, and respect, a female supervisor, or work with women on teams.



### **Best practices**

All of which demonstrates the need for HR managers to cope with cultural issues in the workplace. Some best practices which Heistad recommends:

- Set company performance and behavior norms before immigrant employees come on board
- Train US managers in overseas communication styles
- Educate the workplace on cultural issues. Ask immigrant employees to talk about their cultures. Post cultural information.
- Celebrate other cultures by publicizing and inviting participation in gatherings focused on holidays or other cultural events
- Hold weekly bilingual meetings with a consultant who will teach life skills and business language skills for the American work culture
- Build loyalty by giving holiday flex times
- Use immigrants to help you achieve your organizational goal-ask them to help with marketing to, and serving, niche markets and immigrant communities.
- Confine English-only rules to employees' private times, such as lunch. Stress that during work time, English is the language of business.

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