

Supporting cattle health by respecting culture

Aaron Mark Pospisil, DVM

Abstract: Culture plays an important role for the veterinarian serving a particular population. Understanding one's culture allows vets to make better recommendations for a given producer, their employees, and ultimately, their animals. This presentation focuses on the author's experience working with Amish and Hispanic owners and employees, delving into some specifics about both cultures. Ultimately the aim of this presentation is to provide the courage to ask more about the cultures around them, explore them respectfully, and encourage the owners of the farms around them to do the same. Doing so will enrich the veterinarian's career and provide new and exciting ways to assist your producers.

Keywords: culture, Hispanic, respect

Culture is defined as the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group. It is more than just the country you are from or the religion you practice, though those can certainly play a role. So for example in the United States alone, there are at least 11 different cultural areas, springing from their settlement history. These would include broad categories like "Appalachian Americans" and the "Left Coast."³ There are a lot of things that go into defining a person's culture, and all of these things go on to affect their attitudes, their thoughts, and their actions. This then goes on to affect how employees, or farms, may treat their cattle, the things they will most value, and the goals for their futures.

Culture can be very broad, or very specific. Both will impact how a person is going to interact with their work and the people around them. On the macro level, nationalities, generations, or religions can shape individuals. Shared lifestyles based around age, such as the Recent Graduate Conference, convey a different type of attitude than a general convention with all ages present, in part, because of a more closely shared culture among the participants. On the micro level, each specific farm will have its own culture, whether intentionally or not. Most veterinarians can appreciate this fact from interactions among their different farm clients. It is very common to find farms that invest heavily in their employees, facilities, and cattle. It is also common to work with farms that have not done any of the above for 30 years. There is a large difference when working with each, a fact that is largely defined by the individual culture of each of those facilities.

While cultures may help to indicate a trend, it is equally important to remember that every person is a unique person. Just because someone is from Mexico does not mean that we can automatically assume everything about them. I have many Amish clients, and each one of them is different despite sharing a religion. It is possible to talk in broad terms about culture, it is critical to remember to treat every person as an individual. Just as each reader likely did something unique with our families for Christmas, care should be taken to avoid painting with too broad a brush when talking on the individual level, even if two people share a culture. The last thing to bear in mind is that people are proud of their culture. I am proud to be from Ohio, and on most Saturdays in the fall you will see me sporting a Block O to represent my beloved Buckeyes. Any person, especially from the state of Michigan, who would like to disparage that team will create conflict. It was a place I lived and loved. It shaped who I am. People are proud

of where they come from. The Guatemalan employees I work with usually have a flag hanging from their rearview mirror. Even though they have left and are pursuing opportunities for their families here in the US, they still love their country, their people, and their customs.

Take home point # 1: No one expects that you will know everything about their culture, but they do expect you to respect it. Assuredly we cannot know everything about the people we work with, but there are a lot of ways we can demonstrate to them that their culture is respected. Employers who do this will facilitate employees who stay invested in their farms, reducing turnover. Reducing turnover saves a lot of money, a lot of hassle, a lot of stress, and can potentially save a lot of cows. Many veterinarians have seen a new parlor crew get hired then see the cell count increase dramatically on a dairy. When this has occurred, overall welfare and health for our cows is negatively impacted. Farms with poor culture tend to have poor training programs, poor onboarding procedures, and poor communication. Because of this, turnover creates a risk for events that continue to negatively impact their cattle. As we as veterinarians make recommendations, it is critical that we keep our client's cultural beliefs in mind. If those recommendations violate some piece of their culture, they are unlikely to follow them, and it will degrade trust within our relationship. Continuing to push for something without recognizing that fact, will continue to increase communication challenges moving forward within the relationship. Respect matters, and it goes a long way for investing in the future of your relationships with these people.

Culture can affect farming. Travelling to different veterinary clinics across the country allows you to see this first hand. During veterinary school I had the opportunity to work in upstate New York, South Dakota, and in different parts of Ohio. Each and every single place was different. Undoubtedly the shared experiences of those around them help to shape each region's farming culture. Also bear in mind that some employees will be coming from farming backgrounds that are infinitely different from those they may be working with now. I never saw a barn full of cows in Ecuador during the week I travelled there. What I did see was individual cows, or groups of 3-4 cows, staked out in pastures to graze, and each day someone would come out and hand milk them, then move the stake when the grass was all eaten. This experience would certainly affect how an Ecuadorian employee would interact with cattle. Culture can also greatly affect goals of the farm. For example, in my Amish dairies, growth is never going to be one of their goals because they're extremely limited on their land and barn space. I need to know that when I am consulting with them, because that's just almost never going to be on the table for future plans on the dairy.

Language is absolutely part of culture. Unfortunately, language can also be a hard barrier to overcome. Everyone knows this struggle, but I would also argue this is one of our greatest opportunities to demonstrate respect for another person's culture. Learning some simple phrases to say "hello" validates that person's culture, and creates a connection with that person. Different cultures also have different communication styles. The stereotypical "Masshole" is very different from the stereotypical mid-westerner. I can remember when I met some of my classmates in veterinary school from New England for the first time, and they were confused about why the

strangers at the grocery store were conversing with them. It boggled my mind how that wasn't just viewed as "nice". I assumed they must have all been extremely rude. I was obviously wrong, but that difference in communication style—them being much more "just the facts" and my midwestern self who needed to talk about the weather and the football game before delving into the facts—created some definite friction until we figured one another out. With that, there are differences in the ways some cultures carry themselves non-verbally, which if they're not understood can easily create friction. When I was in Costa Rica doing mission work in undergrad, we were told when playing with the kids, be sure not to make an "ok" symbol with our fingers because that meant "a-hole". That might have been a little scandalous for a church in Latin America.

I want to share some examples of the things I have learned through my years in practice. I am not any sort of expert on other cultures. What I am hoping to demonstrate are some of the things I have learned to inspire you to start thinking about what kind of questions you should ask your clients, or encourage your clients to ask their employees, to better craft relationships. Because at the end of the day, this career is all about those relationships. The better they are, the more you'll enjoy your day to day practice, and the more influence you'll get to have on animal health, which I am hoping is everyone's ultimate goal.

The two cultures I work with most frequently are the Amish and Hispanic/Latinx cultures. It is important for me to say I am neither of these. I am not going to tell you a bunch of specifics because I think that's wrong of me to do when I am not of these cultures.

Beginning with the Amish, it is important to remember that no churches are exactly the same. In the same way that painting all Catholics or Zen Buddhists in the same way, it is a gross

oversimplification to classify all Amish under one umbrella. I work with extremely “modern” Amish for the most part, but do have some pretty conservative clients. For example I have some clients that call us for emergencies only that have to use the neighbor’s phone. Others might have a landline at the end of the driveway. And one of my favorite dairy clients texted me a photo of a newborn calf sitting in the house next to his wood stove one Christmas Eve when the temperature was below zero. Another example is bicycles. One of my horse clients from a pretty conservative church has bicycles tires with a scooter. They have no pedals. I have other clients that are big fans of their e-bikes and the freedom it has provided them to run into town quickly without hitching up a horse. Broadly speaking, there are a few general truths that I have been taught when working with them. Electricity is generally allowed with work. While there are definitely areas of the country with hand-milking herds, all of my dairies have milking machines, and some even have automatic takeoffs. Tractors aren’t allowed for field work, unless you’re hiring it out. So generally my clients are planting with draft horses, raking hay with horses, and some harvest. Others will hire custom choppers instead so that the silage can get off in time and not lose quality. They speak Pennsylvania Dutch as their first language, and children generally get taught English as they become school-aged. Farms usually are handed down to the youngest son, if he wants to stay on the farm. This is one of the most frustrating things to see on a farm at times. One client we have is just a flat out excellent dairyman. His kids love the cows, and are also incredible dairy people. It would be so great to see them be able to just grow the farm and become a two generation farm, but this is just not what happens for these farms. The kids may marry into a dairy family and buy the father-in-law’s farm, or they may start their own once they grow up and move away. Or, sadly they may end up leaving the dairy world altogether and working off- farm.

There are several ways in which Amish culture affects my day to day work as a veterinarian. Understanding the producer's goals is critically important for me to offer good advice. These farms are not looking to grow to 1000 cows. These farms are not going to have Holsteins making 125# at peak. They tend to be low-input, grazing dairies. So if we evaluate nutrition, it is going to be very different from most of my conventional freestall herds. Things like a prefresh cow diet are almost impossible to mix for three cows. I have to keep these factors in mind, because even though they're Amish, they still want to be better farms next year than this year, and are still seeking recommendations from me. There are large variations in how willing they are to adopt technology, and this includes vaccines. I have a large number of organic herds, and many do not vaccinate. Even though I disagree with them, I am not going to change that belief. So, we need to look for every other tool possible to try to prevent toxic mastitis or BRD. Because of the limited space on most of these farms, even if we build something new, we usually are still forced to use the old spaces. Usually this means calves get shoved into the bottom of a bank barn, which we all know is just lovely for BRD. I have had some success designing PPTV tubes that can run off a solar panel for some of these farms, but this is a huge challenge for me every day. Heat abatement is another great problem to try to solve given their constraints. I have found some of these clients, especially clients without regular herd health visits, can be quite difficult to earn trust with. You have to remember they have an eighth grade education, so your fancy degree does not confer you an abundance of credibility. They don't even understand sometimes how little they know about science. One very conservative client called and asked my boss if I was any good because I treated his horse with ceftiofur and didn't use penicillin. I could have maybe taken more time and explained my thought process there, but I generally don't have

that problem with my routine clients and didn't even think about it. It is very likely at times the neighbor might be held in higher esteem than you, but they had to call you because they just couldn't get a bottle of penicillin at the store now. Do your best to help them understand, but if they refuse to listen, that is on them. You're not going to convince every client, regardless of their culture.

I can't speak a lot to this, but in some areas women will struggle with Amish clients more than male vets. I am sorry sexism exists, and can definitely be heightened in some communities. If you get asked not to come, take it as a win because they were never going to be happy with your work anyway, so may as well let someone else deal with it. Sometimes they will request a male vet if they think the call is particularly dangerous. Once I had an absolute outlaw of a mare with a newborn foal. Somehow testicles were going to magically make this a safer experience in their eyes. They were incorrect.

Don't be shocked to find a lot of home remedies, especially in more conservative groups. I have only seen it once, but onions in the butt of colics are very common in some regions.

Unfortunately this can mean you get called on things that you should have been called about multiple days earlier. Once last spring I got called for a sick horse. She had foaled three days earlier, except it had been a multi-hour dystocia handled by the owner and the neighbors. The mare had holes all over her uterus and was rotting inside. If they'd called me for the first emergency, they may have had a living horse at the end instead of on the second. So knowing this, I tend to discuss this pretty frankly about when the right time to call me is so that they don't waste their money (and my time).

Let us change topics to Latinx labor. Spanish speaking labor makes up 78% of US ag employment.² In other words, there are a LOT of cattle clients that have any Spanish-speaking employees. I view this as one of the greatest opportunities for a young veterinarian to help improve your client's operations. This can be through helping producers develop leadership skills, providing resources for employee training, language training yourself, or labor evaluations. This is also a rapidly changing world. Pre- COVID it was easy to hire. Retention was not an emphasis on farms. However, there are many things that have changed in the world, and this is no longer the case. There are an increasing number of opportunities in Mexico, so the infinite supply of labor on our farms is not what it once was. The most successful farms are going to be the ones who understand this facet and start investing in employee wants, rather than just simply throwing higher wages at employees.

Terminology can sometimes be an uncomfortable and challenging topic. Choosing the correct word can sometimes be awkward, and you certainly do not want to offend anyone. Latino or latina are both acceptable terms describing someone from Latin America. The word Latinx is sometimes used more recently in an attempt to be more inclusive in terms of gender, as blanketly using the term Latinos can imply a masculine undertone. Latin America is a Geographical construct, including Mexico, Central America, and South America. Not all Latin American nations speak Spanish, Brazil being a massive example. Hispanic is a term with a cultural context. All Hispanic nations speak Spanish. This includes most of Latin America and Spain. Most of our farm workers are going to be both Hispanic and Latinx, so both words are acceptable to use. If we have Brazilian employees, they would not be Hispanic, but would be Latinx. Hopefully this is more clear. There are 21 different nations that list Spanish as an official

language. Fascinatingly, the United States does not have an official language, but IS home to the second highest population of Spanish speakers in the world. Adding to the language challenge is that just because a country lists Spanish as an official language, this does not mean that it is everyone's first language. For example, in Guatemala, the official language is Spanish, but there are 22 Mayan and 2 other Amerindian languages recognized as National Languages⁴. Most of the employees on the dairies around us grew up speaking K'iche' as their first language. Their proficiency in Spanish varies, in my experience. It is also useful to remember that while written materials can be useful tools for learning, it is not always prudent to rely solely on them. Literacy rates are rapidly rising through most of Mesoamerica, but is still at 83% nationwide in Guatemala, with indigenous populations as low as 33%². In other words, check your privilege and be sure that you are providing multiple routes for employees to learn. Most people are not going to openly admit to someone in your position that they cannot read well. Avoid putting them in that position. Admittedly, it is uncomfortable to speak in a foreign language, especially when you are not yet fluent. I tried to rely on written materials as a crutch, because typing it all out was much easier than speaking it in the moment. At one parlor check, I tried to employ this strategy early in my career. The lady I was trying to teach kept asking me if she could take the info sheet home with her, and for the life of me, I could not understand why. It dawned on me hours after the fact—she could not read it, but someone at home could.

This brings us to take home point number 2, “Don't be an arrogant Jerk”¹. Respect starts with understanding. Showing an interest in another's culture goes a very long way. Understanding that it is really difficult to speak a foreign language goes a long way. A lot of employees probably speak as much English as many of you all do Spanish, but it takes a LOT of

courage. You put yourself in a vulnerable position when you speak a foreign language, and that is uncomfortable for anyone. No one wants to look stupid. No one wants to be wrong. Showing respect starts simply with acknowledging employees. Look them in the eye as you walk by and say “hello”. You are also allowed to say “hola” even if that’s the only Spanish word you know. By doing so, you reinforce that you think it is ok that they are there. It shows you are open to their culture and language. Lastly, avoid saying stupid things. Your farmers may be saying or doing some of the following things. Encourage them to stop. These things are hurtful. They are not supporting cattle health on their farms by using these words and demotivate employees.

- 1) “We have mexicans!” Unfortunately this is not an uncommon phrase uttered on farms. One producer was so excited when he said this to me. I said “Johnnnn” (very much in the tone I use with my children when they’re about to do something stupid). “Are you sure they’re even from Mexico?” It turns out he was, so that was at least a good start. However, they don’t “have” anyone. Hispanic workers have shared their dislike of this phrase for the lack of inclusivity, but also because they do not own employees. Farmers have cows; employees work there¹.
- 2) Unequal pay for various groups. Not only is this illegal, but it is also very disrespectful. Why should someone make less money because they are of a different culture? Do not encourage this behavior. It is a huge turnover risk, for starters. If the different groups find out, it is very likely you will disenfranchise the lower-paid group, risking lower performance and increased turnover. Also, it is just unethical¹.
- 3) “They live here, they should speak American/English.” Immigrant groups holding onto their language is nothing new. My great-great-grandparents spoke only Czech. They

never learned English on their farm in Southwestern Pennsylvania. The United States has no official language. We are a nation of immigrants, and that is reflected by the lack of an official language. Also, bear in mind, many of these workers are already bilingual. All of the Guatemalan employees near us speak both K'iche and Spanish. But ultimately, if you or someone else thinks that, how is it working out for you? Spanish is the fastest growing language in the US. It is the most commonly spoken language among Agricultural employees. The best farms will embrace the fact, respect it, and figure out how to manage it. Farms that will struggle will try to fight the fact. There is an opportunity to build trust and reward employees by helping them to learn English. This can be done from a place of compassion and leadership, rather than in a condescending manner from a place of superiority. Taking active steps to ensure farm managers are engaging in other areas of their employees culture can be one way to ensure they know their culture is respected, and English is being taught as a tool to improve their working skills and life skills, not as a means to try to force assimilation.

I am again by no means a cultural expert. These are some things I have learned from talking to farmers and employees over the last few years. One of the biggest challenges facing hired employees, regardless of which country they come from, is a feeling of isolation. Many cattle veterinarians move from a community in veterinary school to isolated rural communities and can empathize with this feeling. Imagine that compounded with an inability to comfortably speak the dominant language around. The holidays and customs you are used to are not followed. You may have children left behind that you only get to see grow through photos. One farmer told me about how during COVID an employee lost his mother in Guatemala. He obviously wasn't going

to be able to get back to Guatemala for the funeral, and he was extremely upset about it. A family member was able to livestream it for him, and that farmer sat with him during the entire service. The farmer said it was so absolutely difficult, but what he did demonstrated how much he cared about that employee, not just as an employee, but as a human. Do you think that employee respects that farmer? Do you think he's going to leave for 50 cents an hour more elsewhere? Do you think if he ever leaves this farm that he will recommend a great person to take his place? Above just demonstrating your humanity, little things like creating opportunities to share their culture with you on holidays build relationships and help combat that isolation. This could be giving some money to allow employees to cook a traditional meal to all share together on a holiday, or even simply asking what they would be doing at home for this holiday and allowing them to feel some nostalgia.

I am a firm believer that the vast majority of people want to do well in their jobs. Most mistakes are made out of ignorance of the importance of a task, allowing for cut corners. Regular training, especially when things are not going wrong, demonstrates how much you care about employee growth, the cows, and the farm. If training is only done when things are bad, your trainers start to create an "oh no that guy is back...guess we are in trouble again!" attitude. Then your training sessions suffer. As someone doing those trainings, the difference in the two situations is obvious! One is INFINITELY more fun. But I truly believe when done correctly, people want to learn and do better. Especially when the farm culture around them supports it, and when other employees will not support shoddy work from coworkers. This starts from the first day on the farm. How are new employees trained? Is time taken to actually teach them the importance of their role?

Training sets the tone as to expectations on the farm. What is tolerated, and what is not. Why we do what do should always be included, as well.

Another extremely important facet of Hispanic culture is family. This obviously is not unique to Hispanic culture, but is still true. Opportunities to learn about employee families goes a long way in building trust and loyalty. A farm I know of, with very low turnover, has a yearly Mother's Day celebration where they ask their employees to submit some photos of their moms for a digital photo frame. It created a large sense of camaraderie among the employees that day as they shared stories about home and photos of them from childhood with their mothers. Look for opportunities to do these things on farms. Small investments like that can go a LONG way to helping employees stick around.

Again language is intimately connected with culture. Attempting bad Spanish is so appreciated. My Spanish is not excellent. There are a lot of times I cannot think of a word I need. I sometimes have to stop mid conversation and google a word because I cannot mime it or describe it well enough. But no one has ever been angry or frustrated by it. They are generally just excited to have their questions answered and to be acknowledged. Imagine working on a farm where you see people like us (vets, consultants, salesmen, etc) and almost none of them acknowledge your existence. An "hola, como esta?" can go a long way. Or just miming shivering and saying "frio!" when it is cold out. Every time I go to see calves at one farm that I have started talking to their employees regularly, I have at least two grown men excitedly come up to me to chat and always to ask how the calves are doing in my eyes. It makes my job more fun, they are as invested as ever in their jobs, and they feel valued. That is a win-win-win.

Immigration is a touchy subject in today's climate in the United States. But I think the following points are important to make as we discuss our Latinx employees. Visas are really hard to get, and almost impossible to get outside of Mexico. The majority of the employees I am working with are not here legally. The Guatemalan people I work with got here through predatory loans, potentially through a coyote. They do not want to work 60 hours a week, just like you do not. However, they have a loan to pay. And everything they owned, or potentially their family owns, in Guatemala is on the line. They are going to work their tail off to ensure they do not lose it and get that loan paid off. Imagine that situation they are in: they are so desperate to look for a better life for them and their families, they are willing to illegally cross a border with a massive loan hanging over their head, to go work 60 hour weeks. There is more food insecurity than we care to admit among these employees, because they would rather be hungry than not make that loan payment. Compound that stress with a poor work environment, and yes, employees will absolutely leave for 50 cents an hour more elsewhere. But, create an environment where you are decreasing stressors in their lives by doing things like housing being provided, or offering some meals, or meat from split out cows, or helping them set up bank accounts, and it becomes much harder to leave just for a small raise.

So I am going to leave you some small pieces of closing advice. The reality is, in order for me to offer the best advice and get the best outcomes, I need to understand the people I am working with. This reality is no different if you are working with a farm sanctuary with vegans, organic farms, or the two populations we discussed today. You have to be on the same page, or you're going to create frustrations that lead to a bad relationship. Bad relationships do not help you

improve cattle health. At the end of the day, you are more similar to others than you are different. You have special foods you eat on holidays, and so do the Amish! You like talking about your children and sharing photos. This is also a fact of life if you're Guatemalan. I encourage you to be curious. No one gets mad if you ask more questions about how they celebrate a holiday. These conversations build relationships, which allow you to ask harder questions, and create better opportunities to understand one another. This gives you more opportunities to help positively impact the animals on that farm. Be adventurous. There are few things more disappointing than when you offer a piece of your culture to someone and they shoot you down. And lastly, be respectful. If you disagree on something, don't badger them on it. If you inadvertently offend someone, apologize for it sincerely. A friend of mine once was talking to a conservative mennonite client and it came up that he wanted to be a paleontologist when he was a child. And the man got very serious and told him don't say that on any other farms. He wasn't offended, but others might be, because they believe the dinosaur fossils were placed here by Satan to tempt them into believing the world was older than it is. I never imagined dinosaurs being a controversial topic, but if you make such a faux pas, that's ok. Just apologize and learn.

Your career can go to entirely new places if you are willing to put yourself out there! Deepen your relationships by exploring the cultures around you at work. This is true regardless of who is around you. Maybe there are Hutterite colonies where you work. Or a large Nepalese population on farms. Obviously the specifics of who I work with is different, but my advice is the same! By developing better relationships, you create a massive opportunity to help farms decrease turnover of employees, create potential niche services for your practice, and can increase overall cattle health accordingly.

References:

Presentations:

1. Katy Doterer. "Spanglish 101." Ann Conf Am Assn Bov Prac 2024, Columbus, OH.

Electronic Resources

2. Guatemala Literacy Project. "Why Guatemala?" Accessed 12/28/24.

<https://www.guatemalaliteracy.org/why-guatemala/>

3. Wikipedia. "American Nations" Available at:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Nations Accessed 12/16/24.

4. Wikipedia. "Languages of Guatemala." Wikipedia. Accessed 12/28/2024.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Guatemala