



COMMUNICATING WITH LATINO FARMERS: CULTURAL ASPECTS AND STRATEGIES

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Introduction

Since the 1950s, Latinos in Washington State have been integral to the success of agriculture as farm workers, farm managers, and increasingly, farm owners. The 2012 Census of Agriculture counted close to 3,000 Latino/Hispanic farm operators and 1,874 Latino/Hispanic principal farm operators in Washington, a 14% increase from the 2007 census. Latino-operated farms now account for 5% of all Washington farms, up from 4.2% in 2007, and generate over \$367 million in farm sales.

The growing number of Latino farm owners in Washington State reflects the growth of the Latino population in rural counties (Kirschner 2009). Working with Latino farmers (many of whom are first-generation immigrants) is becoming increasingly important for many Extension faculty, conservation district employees, farmers market managers, government agency personnel, and non-profit organizations in Washington.

However, traditional methods of communication may not always have the desired outcomes when targeting Latino farmers. For example, relying on fliers or mass email announcements to attract Latino farmers to trainings, conferences, and other events may have disappointing results if the farmers prefer to develop personal relationships with organizers prior to participating in unfamiliar activities. By taking time to learn about the cultural backgrounds, histories, values, and norms of Latino farmers, Extension educators and other agricultural service providers can create more effective Latino farmer oriented outreach efforts.

The purpose of this fact sheet is to help agricultural professionals build their skills in cross-cultural communication to foster more meaningful relationships and participation in educational programs across cultures. An overview of anthropologist Edward T. Hall's model of "high and low" context cultures is employed to highlight significant ways that culture can influence communication styles (1976). Finally, the fact sheet introduces some of the barriers and challenges that Latino farmers may encounter, and offers specific ideas on ways to overcome them.

Cultural Values and the "High and Low Context Cultures" Model

The term "Latino farmer" can refer to vastly different population groups, with differences that span nationality, race, indigenous heritage, language, gender, age, class, education, immigration status, and farming experience. While there is a considerable literature about "Latino culture" (Chong and Baez 2005, Flora et al. 2012, García-Pabón 2011, Schaubert, 2002), it is important to stress that "Latino" is not a cohesive social and cultural grouping.

Latino farmers' value systems and approaches to farming are strongly influenced by their own unique cultural backgrounds and personal stories that are frequently, but not always, crossed with immigration into and travel within the United States. While a cautious level of generalization can help make sense of differences in cultural norms, it is more useful to think in terms of "tendencies" or "patterns" rather than characterizations that apply equally across an entire group.

Hall's widely adopted model of communication styles is based on distinct tendencies and differences found across cultures (1976). His model attempts to characterize different cultures by grouping them along a continuum of "high-context" and "low-context" attributes according to how people relate to one another, behave, and communicate. In contrast to highly theoretical academic models, Hall's framework can be readily understood at an introductory level, yet also supports more complex analyses of modern communication patterns across cultures and emerging technologies (Adair and Brett 2005).

In a "high-context" cultural setting, Hall suggests, a great deal of background information is already known and people look for and derive most of their meaning from the context of an interaction or activity. This may be a place they know well, such as a farmers market, place of business, neighborhood, or farm. They do not necessarily need direction from signs or verbal communication to tell them what is going on. They can read the setting from experience, tradition, relationships, and by watching who is there and what they are doing.

In a “low-context” setting, ways of behaving and expectations are explicitly spelled out or formally prescribed, are less personal, and do not rely on nonverbal forms of communication. For example, farmers from a low-context background doing business in a low-context setting like a major bank can generally recognize and make sense of the steps and paperwork needed to get a loan. The expectation in this setting is that communication will be direct, to the point, concise, and stick to the business at hand. Punctuality is expected, and detailed plans and agreements are stated verbally, put in writing, and signed.

The vast majority of situations or settings are both low- and high-context; some being more low-context as in the bank illustration and some being more high-context (for instance, your own household).

Cross-cultural communication and cultural literacy can be improved by considering whether the participants are from high- or low-context cultural backgrounds. Hall emphasizes that these categories are not “absolutes” but rather exist along a continuum. Table 1, adapted from Pacific University’s School of International Studies, highlights some of the key differences between these two types of cultural orientations.

People from a low-context background may perceive the purpose of communication as exchanging information, seeking clarification, consulting on issues and decisions, and reaching agreement. People from high-context cultures may feel that the primary purpose of communication is to build or deepen a relationship.

Consequently, people from contrasting backgrounds may feel frustrated as a result of having different expectations for their interactions. Further, rules tend to be more explicit in low-context cultures and are expected to be followed. In contrast, rules may not be explicit and may receive less attention from high-context people whose traditions, experiences, and relationships may lead them to see rules as less literal, and more acceptable to go around.

Latino farmers and agricultural professionals are all shaped by their own distinct cultural backgrounds whether on a farm, at a farmers market, at a lending agency office, in an educational setting, or in another business venue. Latino farmers, especially first-generation immigrants, are likely to come from high-context cultures, while agricultural professionals may have been conditioned by their cultural and educational backgrounds to employ low-context communication styles in professional interactions.

Misunderstandings will be inevitable if educators or service providers are unaware of their own cultural orientations and how they may stand in sharp contrast to other equally valid orientations. Such unawareness may make them wonder why Latino farmers appear uninterested or reluctant to participate in educational activities, programs, trainings, meetings, or government farm programs that seem like promising opportunities to improve their farms.

Table 1: High and Low Context Cultures^a

	HIGH CONTEXT	LOW CONTEXT
ASSOCIATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships require trust, are long-lasting, and take time to build. There are clear inside and outside groups. Getting things done is based on relationships and group process. Social structure and authority are centralized. Group harmony and consensus (collectivism) are valued above self-actualization. Identity is tied to one’s group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships can begin and end quickly. Boundaries between inside and outside groups are blurred. Getting things done is based on formal procedures and orientation to results. Social structure is decentralized. Individualism is accepted as a cultural norm. Identity is based on individual accomplishment.
INTERACTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verbal messages are implicit and indirect, with strong use of nonverbal cues. Context is more important than words. Communication is a way of building relationships. Disagreement is personalized, with a high value on avoiding or resolving conflicts. Space is shared; people may stand close. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verbal messages are direct and independent of context. Communication is a way to exchange information, ideas, and opinions. Disagreement is depersonalized, with a high value on moving forward to complete tasks. Space is personal; privacy is valued.
TEMPORALITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Everything has its own time. The needs of people or the need to complete an activity may take priority over following a preset schedule. Change happens slowly. Stability is important. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Following a schedule and being efficient are prioritized. Change happens quickly. Quick results are expected.

^aAdapted from Pacific University, School of International Studies. http://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture/pub/Context_Cultures_High_and_Lo.htm

Understanding Latino farmers in Washington State

Like many new farmers in Washington, Latinos face tremendous barriers and challenges. Many who transition from farm laborer to farmer do so without much formal assistance. Upon assuming farm ownership, they may suddenly acquire completely new responsibilities and need to make quick decisions in an unfamiliar, even hostile, environment and in a second language.

To successfully support these new farmers through transitions, educators and service providers will need a good idea of their experience, values, goals, and approaches to farming and marketing.

The framework of the high- and low-context model can be helpful in understanding contrasting approaches to “doing business.” The longer that Latino farmers have been in the business of farming in the U.S., the more likely they will have mastered the knowledge and cross-cultural skills needed to navigate within a U.S. agricultural setting. The diagram below shows the transition from “new” to “established” Latino farmer.

Latino farmers in the early stages of adaptation are more likely to operate from a high-context cultural perspective, but, over time, acquire the skills needed to operate in a low-context cultural framework. In the process of establishing themselves, however, most face unique and daunting challenges as a result of entering the farming profession with a high-context culture perspective and little familiarity with the farming profession.

Adding complexity, U.S. agriculture is rapidly evolving to encompass a variety of market opportunity structures for small and mid-sized farmers who want to add value to their products through differentiation from commodity markets.

Understanding how to employ these new market strategies is a challenge faced by many small and beginning farmers; however, it can be even more daunting for those who have little familiarity with the segmentation of U.S. consumer markets related to concepts of natural foods.

Based on the authors’ experience and anecdotal information from other service providers, these unique barriers and challenges were identified for Latino farmers:

- Translating knowledge from their country of origin to the farming situation in the U.S. Many practices brought from other regions and environments may not apply (or be legal) in their current setting.
- Operating within the low-context U.S. agricultural business sector. For instance, the paperwork required for a loan application might be overwhelming, but asking for help from a professional with whom there is no prior relationship could be equally daunting.
- Overcoming cultural and language barriers and even discrimination with service providers. Using the previous example, non-English speaking farmers can face obstacles in preparing a loan application, or encounter prejudice and discrimination. The potential for communication difficulties is very real in such a situation.
- Distrust of the financial system. Some Latino farmers may not trust the financial system because of negative experiences in their countries of origin, and lack of any prior relationship with U.S. financial institutions.

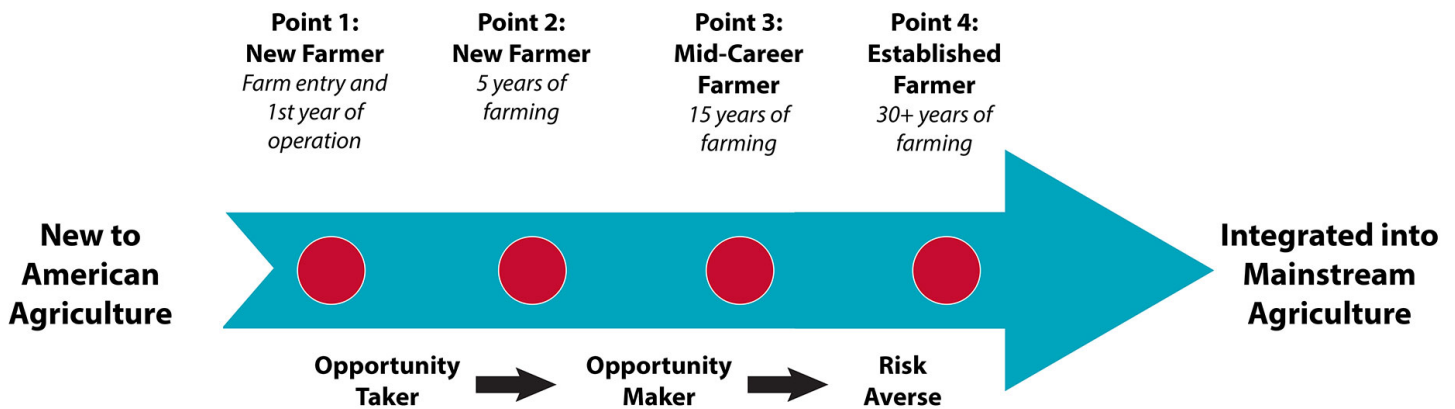


Figure 1. Latino farm-life continuum (García-Pabón and Lucht, 2009).

- Lack of documentation, such as a Social Security number, valid identification, or Green Card may make farmers hesitant to participate in many programs and services.

Tips for effectively communicating with Latino farmers

Schauber and Castania (2001) indicate the need for new skills development as part of creating a new institutional framework within Extension.

In the context of Hall's model, people from a low-context culture working with Latino farmers might consider that:

- the status quo is not necessarily conducive to cross-cultural work; and
- programs, delivery methods, and organizational structures designed from a dominant cultural perspective do not necessarily work for all farmer groups (Schauber and Castania).

The following tips for communicating in diverse cultural settings come from the authors' experience, supplemented by recommendations from Schauber and Castania:

- Be aware of your own cultural communication style, which reflects your underlying perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, and values.
- Be aware of other valid cultural communication styles, which may reflect a different set of underlying perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, and values.
- Keep in mind differing priorities, responsibilities, and notions of time. Try to be flexible and nonjudgmental. You can explain the importance of punctuality (and of communicating unexpected changes) in a business environment in the U.S.
- Learn about historical and current power differences and how the history of a group's survival may affect present day behaviors. For example, if someone does not comply with a specific rule, it may be because their experience with rules and authority has been one of oppression.
- Always be transparent. It is important to create a sense of honesty, especially at the beginning of building a relationship. Identify and address initial hesitations and doubts to decrease risks of dropping out.
- Learn to empathize cross-culturally, to seek out and embrace multiple perspectives, to observe mindfully while reserving judgment, to avoid generalizing, to give the benefit of the doubt, and to adapt your communication style to that of others.

- An inflexible focus on completing a task on time without any social overtures may send the message that you care more about the task than the person.
- Use multiple communication methods to recruit farmers, including word of mouth, radio announcements, meetings with community leaders, approaching churches and schools, and attending Latino-oriented community events.
- Schedule group trainings, particularly one-on-one meetings, off-season (November to March).
- Make an effort to get to know the Latino farmers in your area personally and become familiar with their communication style, approach to farming and rules, family values, and needs. Look for opportunities to engage with Latino farmers outside of work settings.
- After your first contact, be sure to follow up and keep the communication flowing. This will demonstrate your commitment and build trust.
- Emphasize social courtesies before moving on to your agenda.

Conclusion

Latino farmers are becoming increasingly integral to Washington agriculture. As agricultural communities become more culturally and ethnically diverse, agriculture educators and service providers will increasingly be expected to work with farmers and farm workers from high-context cultural frameworks.

There is clearly no magic bullet or "one size fits all" approach to working with Latino farmers. Many factors play a role in successful communication, including understanding specific needs and situations, background (immigration, education, income, familiarity with the U.S. and local agricultural systems), language barriers, and cultural differences, as well as the level of cultural competency and the cross-cultural communication skills of each party.

It may be challenging to work cross-culturally, but it can also be extremely rewarding when efforts to transition new farmers into established and stable farmers succeed. Indeed, the future of many agricultural communities will depend on providing culturally competent support for new farmers. Understanding the issues and needs faced by Latino farmers and their families and developing some basic communication strategies will help ensure their access to the tools and strategies they need to be successful. Bridging cultural and language differences will be key to the success of both educators and farmers.

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