

Bilingual workers ascend management ranks

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Dallas When McDonald's franchise operator Baibrook Partnership Inc. began offering management-training classes to its hourly employees, cook Esmeralda Armijo signed up immediately, even though she could barely speak English.

She didn't need that skill. The entire management training was in Spanish, and once she successfully completed the program, Baibrook enrolled her in a three-month English language course.

Armijo will celebrate her first anniversary as a store manager next month. Fully bilingual, the Mexican-born single mother of two little girls has become a role model to her Spanish-speaking employees.

"They tell me, 'Esmeralda, you're my lady,' " Armijo said. "They know if you want to do something and you work hard, nothing can stop you."

Like other operators nationwide faced with a rapidly growing population of Spanish-speaking employees, officials at Baibrook, the largest franchisee of McDonald's restaurants in the north Dallas area, needed to create a program that addressed both the increasing communication problems between workers, managers and customers and develop future leaders.

"It's one of the most successful things we've done here," said Baibrook's president, Ed Bailey, who has expanded the company from nine to 46 stores in seven years. "Five or six years ago, we said, 'Look, if we don't come up with a strategy that enables our hourly people to go into management, we're going to have a real shortfall here.' Our strategy was to eliminate the language barrier and give the people who really are competent and hardworking the opportunity to move into these positions."

The program, which first teaches management skills in Spanish and then sends trainees to an intense English-language class, has lowered management turnover and created a pool of qualified managers to fill positions as the company expands, said Baibrook's director of training, Don Cucovatz.

The program also has gained recognition locally as restaurant operators grapple with ways to develop an employee population that is predominantly Hispanic and Spanish speaking.

Hispanics account for about 80 percent of the restaurant worker population in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, reported the Bill Priest Institute for Economic Development, a training program affiliated with the Dallas Community College District. The institute

provides skills training, including computer literacy and English as a Second Language, to people with low income.

The institute recently sponsored a forum for restaurant operators in which Cucovatz presented Baibrook's program. Other scheduled speakers included Tom Landis, owner of Texadelphia restaurants, and restaurant developer Gene Street of CRO Inc.

The challenge of developing and training non-English speakers is a national issue as well. The institute reported that according to U.S. Census figures, 17.2 percent of the more than 6.3 million people working in foodservice in 2000 were Hispanic and often spoke little or no English. Hispanics accounted for about 11.8 percent of all counter workers, 12.3 percent of kitchen workers, 18.8 percent of server's assistants, 21.6 percent of cooks and 26 percent of food-prep workers, according to the institute.

The growing number of non-English-speaking employees has prompted restaurant owners to provide language instruction through a variety of methods, said Bob Arnold, assistant director of the Priest Institute's Institutional Advancement program.

Some operators offer ESL classes for employees by bringing instructors into the restaurant or by sending workers to community colleges or private training programs. Some have tried using televised programs and computer programs and teaching English-speaking managers to speak Spanish, Arnold said.

While Baibrook has been very successful with its classroom approach, many operators find that method economically challenging, Arnold added. To encourage participation, employees who are pulled off the job to sit in a classroom often are paid for the time spent in class. Finding time for the classes is also difficult, whether it's in the morning before restaurants open or during slow periods between shifts.

The institute is looking for grants to test a pilot program that would allow Spanish-speaking restaurant employees to learn English through an interactive Internet program, either on lent computers that could be taken home or on computers in public libraries or college campuses.

"We're really focused on lower-income people who need skills to get a good, sustainable job," Arnold said. "This whole concept in restaurants is still fairly new."

Trainees at Baibrook's McDonald's restaurants receive 32 hours of restaurant management instruction four hours a week for eight weeks in a classroom. They earn their regular hourly wage while they are in the class. Those who successfully complete the training by scoring 80 percent or better on a final test also receive a \$250 bonus, said Baibrook's Bailey.

Trainees then are approved to take a three-month intense English language class through Quick Learning Centers, a Mexico-based company that has opened training centers in Dallas.

Baibrook pays the tuition for each trainee, although the employees take the class on their own time and are not paid while they are in class. The tuition is about \$300 a month for about a dozen students, Cucovatz said.

Trainees who complete the language classes successfully and become conversant with English are eligible to be promoted into management positions, from a shift supervisor all the way to store manager.

The investment in the program has been paying big dividends, Cucovatz said. Turnover is down almost 8 percent among managers who have undergone the training. To date, 236 individuals have been trained or are enrolled currently. Of them, 45 are now salaried managers, and 53 are shift managers.

Cucovatz started the training program when he noticed increasing communication problems between Spanish-speaking workers and English-speaking customers and managers.

"The transition from white Anglos to Hispanics was tremendous," Cucovatz said. "We had to do something to develop our people. They were hardworking and dependable, but they just weren't able to communicate."

Baibrook officials decided to look for motivated employees with leadership potential by offering the management training in their native Spanish and then capitalizing on that motivation by offering them the chance to improve or learn English, Cucovatz said.

No one had to convince Ruth Flores to enroll in the management-training program when she returned to work after having a baby. The native of Peru went from being an hourly worker who spoke little English to a bilingual restaurant manager in three years.

"There weren't too many companies offering that," Flores said. "I was really excited. It's a great opportunity for people who really want to learn more and take advantage of the program. I teach that to the people who work for me. If they are really interested, we can prepare them. They can do it, too."