

Senior Scenarios: What Would You Do?

In this section we offer nine scenarios that examine issues that may occur in work situations. The scenarios are composites based on real situations that the authors have encountered in classes and the workplace.

Each represents problems faced by immigrant seniors, program directors, supervisors, and co-workers that could occur because of language or cultural misunderstandings.

We believe the scenarios will be helpful to SCSEP program directors and staff members who offer community service and employment opportunities to immigrant seniors, to those who provide ESL instruction, to those who contract for ESL services, and to those who are preparing to offer services to this population.

Immigrant seniors, who are learning about the culture of their new country, may also find the scenarios and the topics covered both useful and illuminating.

How to use the scenarios

Consider using the scenarios:

- As self-study exercises to identify strengths and challenges immigrant seniors bring to the workplace as well as ways of meeting challenges;
- As exercises to help program staff distinguish between individual employment issues and cultural misunderstandings;

- As group activities in which service providers facilitate discussions with staff who work with immigrant seniors;
- As problem-solving activities with the immigrant seniors themselves;
- As part of an orientation for staff working with immigrant seniors.

The scenarios are not meant to be an exhaustive discussion of all the issues that immigrant seniors bring to the

workplace, but rather as an orientation to a few key areas where they may be challenged.

As you go through these scenarios, you will find many tips that will help you pave the way for greater success for immigrant seniors and SCSEP agencies.

While each scenario has its own TIPS (Training and Information to Promote Success), there are a few that are worth considering before you review the scenarios.

Training and Information to Promote Success

Understanding Language and Literacy

- English is difficult to learn (more difficult than many languages) and will take most people (including youngsters) many years of instruction and practice to become fully proficient.
- Diverse seniors may have difficulty with written English for many reasons:
 - □ They use a different alphabet (e.g., Arabic, Hebrew, Russian, etc.).
 - □ Their native language may be written with characters or small pictures (e.g., Mandarin, Cantonese).
 - □ Their language may be read from right to left (e.g., Arabic, Farsi) or vertically (e.g., Chinese, Japanese) instead of left to right and horizontally.
 - ☐ Their language has no written form (e.g., Dinka) or a writing system is just now being developed (e.g., Somali Bantu).
- While many immigrant seniors have high levels of literacy in their native language, many have not had the opportunity to complete formal schooling in their native language, which makes learning to read and write in English more difficult.

Promoting Good Work-place Practices

- Linguistically diverse seniors will find hands-on approaches to learning helpful because these methods depend less on language. Furthermore, a learn-by-doing approach allows a supervisor to assess how well the senior has understood instructions.
- Many immigrant seniors may be experiencing a sense of loss. They may need help adjusting to their new circumstances.

- Supervisors can improve the job performance of immigrant seniors by helping them become familiar with the culture of the American workplace and by helping their co-workers understand some of the cultural and linguistic challenges they face.
- Sensitivity to age-related roles is good practice with all seniors but requires special sensitivity with those from different cultural backgrounds.

Promoting Effective Communication

- Teaching linguistically diverse seniors how to indicate a lack of comprehension and how to ask for help will go a long way toward bridging the communication gap.
- Don't assume that once something is explained, it is understood. Many seniors may be afraid or ashamed to admit their lack of understanding.
- Use plain language when speaking and writing. Lots of white space and a legible typeface make reading easier.

Promoting Cultural Understanding

- Many immigrant seniors need help understanding the concept of time in the American workplace because it is different from their cultural sense of time.
- Many foreign-born individuals need help understanding the informal ways that people in the U.S. speak to one another.
- Gender and age-related roles in some cultures are more formal and may have an impact on how men and women speak to each other. Some immigrant seniors will need help adapting to women supervising men or younger people addressing older ones directly.
- Be open yourself to looking at situations through the eyes of another culture.

The Memo and Mr. Mohammed

Setting

It is Sayeed Mohammed's first day as a SCSEP participant at the community center in a mid-size city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. As administrative assistant, his duties include photocopying materials for the Center staff and other clerical tasks as needed. He sits at the front desk and answers the phone when the receptionist is on break or at lunch. Additionally, he provides interpreter services to Pakistani clients who do not speak English.

Situation

Mr. Mohammed worked in the government in Lahore, Pakistan, where his job conferred a high status on him and his family. He can read and write English easily, but he has a little more difficulty understanding oral English, especially when spoken with an American accent. His supervisor, the receptionist Betsy Green, explains to Mr. Mohammed how to run the photocopier. She speaks English rapidly, explaining while she photocopies a memo. When she is done, she asks Mr. Mohammed if he understands. "Yes!" says Mr. Mohammed. Ms. Green then goes to lunch.

Donald Gregory, another Center employee in his early 30s, needs to get 15 copies of a memo made. Mr. Mohammed says that he will do it soon. Mr. Gregory nods and says he'll come back in 15 minutes to pick it up. When he returns, the copies have not been made. Mr. Mohammed says he was busy, but he'll do it soon. Mr. Gregory is a little perplexed because Mr. Mohammed does not appear to be doing anything. When pressed for a time when the copies will be done, he repeats "soon."

Mr. Gregory returns in half an hour. By this time, Betsy Green has come back from lunch. She overhears Mr. Gregory asking for his copies. Seeing they are not done yet, she picks them up and photocopies them for him right then, looking at Mr. Mohammed in exasperation. Mr. Gregory thanks her and walks away, not looking at Mr. Mohammed but shaking his head slightly.

- What might be the reasons for Mr. Mohammed's behavior? Could any of them be the result of a cultural misunderstanding? Could any be due to a lack of familiarity with office technology?
- What kind of information might help Ms. Green understand Mr. Mohammed's behavior?
- What could Ms. Green do to help Mr. Mohammed improve his job performance?
- What additional skills or information does Mr. Mohammed need to improve his job performance?
- Is there another way that Mr. Gregory could have handled the situation?

TIPS

Promoting good work-place practice

People learn by doing. If Ms. Green provides opportunities for Mr. Mohammed to practice photocopying after she demonstrates, he might find it easier to learn how to perform according to expectations.

Mr. Mohammed may feel sensitive about his status as a SCSEP participant and the job he is to perform. He experienced a high social status through his job in Pakistan. Taking direction from a woman or from a younger person may also be difficult for him. Overcoming these barriers to good job performance in the United States may take some training and discussion on the part of both Mr. Mohammed and Ms. Green.

As his supervisor, Ms. Green may need to help other employees (such as Mr. Gregory) understand the cultural and linguistic difficulties that Mr. Mohammed may be experiencing.

Ms. Green's and Mr. Gregory's behavior may cause Mr. Mohammed embarrassment. Gaining more understanding of the reasons for Mr. Mohammed's lack of performance may improve cross cultural understanding and tolerance in the workplace. Answering the phone may be a surprisingly complex task for an English-speaking immigrant who is unfamiliar with American English. Mr. Mohammed should have an opportunity to practice this task in the presence of Ms. Green so she can both observe and assist while he is learning.

Promoting effective communication

Try to:

- Break the task up into small parts. After each part, you can
 - □ Ask the senior to repeat what you told him.
 - ☐ Have him show you that he understands; watch him do the task.
- Teach the following techniques for indicating lack of comprehension:
 - Isolate the word he doesn't understand and ask, "What does X mean?" Or "I don't understand the word X."
 - □ Teach him to say, "I should do what with the paper?" or "Then I press what?"
- Specify the time expectation. For example, say, "I need this job done in the next 10 minutes."
- Teach the senior to use more definitive statements such as, "I can do this job in 15 minutes."
- Rephrase instructions and demonstrate the task instead of repeating instructions when an immigrant senior indicates a lack of comprehension. Avoid asking the question, "Do you understand?" A "yes" answer may not indicate the level of understanding.

TIPS

Avoid:

Repeating what you said only more loudly, if the senior indicates a lack of understanding.

- Asking, "Do you understand?" It is difficult for many people to confess a lack of understanding. Instead, follow the suggestions above.
- Putting pressure on a senior by demonstrating a task immediately before requiring the independent performance of the task.

Promoting cultural understanding

Help immigrant seniors learn:

- Generally, in the United States, it is not good practice to say you understand something when you do not. On the job it can appear as if you do not care about the work.
- Some other cultures have a more flexible attitude about time than we do in the United States. In the U.S. workplace, when someone asks for a job to be done by a certain time, they expect it will be completed by then. Responses such as, "Soon," are generally not acceptable.
- Women may supervise men in the workplace. Younger people may supervise older people. This practice may be hard for some seniors from other cultures in which age and gender may hold more importance than background and position.

Key issues to consider

- The importance of expressing a lack of comprehension in the United States, especially regarding instructions
- The importance of asking questions for clarification rather than guessing or doing nothing at all
- The importance of time and punctuality in U.S. culture, particularly in the workplace
- Recognition that poor performance in the workplace may be due to language and cultural issues rather than poor attitudes or laziness
- The perceived social status of a job as a factor in the job performance.

The Teenager and Mrs. Samater

Setting

Six local groups share space at a community center in a large Midwestern city. The current tenants are a senior center that also administers the SCSEP program, an after-school homework and technology club for neighborhood children, a teen center, a small community gym, the community multicultural office, and a family health outreach program run by the local health department and the public schools.

Because space is limited and the children and teens are likely to be noisy after school, activities, space, and schedules are closely monitored. Many of the seniors participate in low-impact aerobics classes, eat lunch at the seniors program, and access routine health care through the outreach program.

Situation

Sahra Samater, 59, learned some English as a child in Mogadishu, Somalia, and has been able to start her work at the community center as a part-time custodian. Her supervisor, Mary Ann Franklin, is pleased with Mrs. Samater's punctuality and careful work.

Ms. Franklin has noticed, however, that Mrs. Samater doesn't seem to feel comfortable talking to people from other programs. Robert Briscoe, 17, one of the regular participants in the teen program, has been trying to talk to Mrs. Samater. Like many teenagers, Robert is a bit loud and brash because he is usually trying to impress his buddies with how cool he is. He has been following Mrs. Samater around when she is emptying the trash cans in the gym and common areas and saying things like, "Hey, Mama, want me to help you lift the trash? You look too old to do it."

One time, Robert said, "Why do you wear that towel on your head? It's too hot around here for that." He expected that Mrs. Samater would just joke back or at least tell him to be quiet.

Mrs. Samater is still doing her job well, but every day she is quieter, and she is no longer smiling, even at the little children.

- How might differences in gender and age-related roles between Mrs. Samater's and Robert affect her job satisfaction?
- What would help Robert and Mrs. Samater increase their understanding of each other?
- How can Ms. Franklin help Mrs. Samater feel more comfortable in her assignment?
- Is there a way that Ms. Franklin can help Robert understand the impact of his behavior on Mrs. Samater?

Promoting good work-place practice

People almost always feel insecure about a new job — let alone a job in a new country and with a new language. The supervisor can help break the ice by introducing the new worker to others who share the building and the workplace. There is a good chance that Mrs. Samater has never worked outside of the home before. Ms. Franklin may want to model appropriate ways of handling interactions with brash youth.

Promoting effective communication

Try to:

- Directly address the cultural aspects of language, including those that deal with age and gender.
 - Ask immigrant seniors how they wish to be addressed, and share that information with others in the workplace.
 - □ Help immigrant seniors understand that many varieties of English are spoken in the United States. Hearing unfamiliar varieties can be particularly upsetting to well-educated seniors or seniors who have studied English in their native countries.
- Help immigrant seniors and those they work with understand that different varieties of English are appropriate in different situations and for different audiences.
 - □ For example, the language in the newspaper is different from the language of the academic classroom, and both of those are different from the language of the gas station or convenience store.
 - "What's up, man?" is appropriate for greeting a friend on the street but not for being introduced to one's supervisor, where, "Hello, how are you?" could be more appropriate.
 - □ Also explain that people in different regions in the United States have different dialects and accents.
- Give learners the words or phrases they need to succeed at work.
 - □ For example, Mrs. Samater may need help explaining that wearing a head scarf is part of her religion and that she is comfortable and happy to wear it.
 - □ Since she works in a place that supports a teen center, Mrs. Samater may need help understanding teen slang. She may need to know how to use some phrases appropriate to the situation, such as, "How's it going?" or maybe even, "Give me a break."

□ If possible, consider having sessions in which people of various groups and ages mingle to brief one another on their cultures and to discuss issues. It might surprise Robert Briscoe to hear that what he is saying and doing is offensive to another person.

Avoid:

- Failing to give seniors explanations about important language and culture points — even for beginning English speakers. Explaining about the different varieties and registers of English that are used by people of different ages and in different settings may take a while, but they need real answers for their questions and problems.
- Assuming that once something is stated, it is understood. Be prepared to restate yourself using different words if possible. Give examples and use visual, audio, or multimedia examples. Try various activities or find native language assistance, especially for important and sensitive cultural issues such as the ones facing Mrs. Samater.

Promoting cultural understanding

Help immigrant seniors learn:

- The United States has a diverse population socially, culturally, economically, ethnically, and linguistically. What's more, unlike in some parts of the world, different groups interact often with each other.
- Small talk between workers and other people in the workplace is a common part of U.S. working culture.
- In the United States, young people often speak informally to their elders although opinions are mixed on this practice, even among native-born citizens. Younger, male individuals address older, female individuals directly, a practice that Mrs. Samater may find unfamiliar. It is not clear that Robert was trying to be disrespectful. Rather, his behavior probably reflected his ignorance. He may not have understood about Mrs. Samater's head scarf, often called a *hijab*.
- Even before a person speaks English fluently, the ability to make "small talk" is very important in the United States.
- In the United States, it is acceptable for workers to go to their supervisors and explain that they are having difficulty and need help dealing with a workrelated situation.

TIPS

Key issues to consider

- Intergenerational and gender issues in language and speech
- The American practice of informality between people of different ages, genders, and backgrounds, particularly in the workplace
- The diversity of the population in the United States
- The different varieties of English spoken in the United States
- The frequency and importance of small talk with co-workers and other people encountered in the workplace
- Misunderstandings related to cultural and ethnic differences, such as women wearing a head covering at all times in public

Mr. Beltran's Social Isolation

Setting

The setting is a community center in a mid-sized city in the Southeast. Like many cities in the South, this city has experienced a rapid growth in the number of immigrants of all ages.

Situation

Jorge Beltran, 73, from rural Guatemala, has been a migrant farm-worker for more than 20 years. He ended up staying in the area after he became too frail to do heavy work at one of the local farms. Because he is alone and needs to support himself, he was referred to a SCSEP program.

Through the years, he learned very little English because he didn't need it on the farm. In fact, his first language isn't Spanish but a Mayan language. The program coordinator, Frances Mary McNaugton, knows that Mr. Beltran needs job training and English classes. She is worried about him because, although he was initially quite enthusiastic about working at the community center, he has recently seemed distracted and every day seems to have less interest in the programs available to him.

Because of the difficult and isolated life Mr. Beltran leads, Ms. McNaughton is worried that he is unable to fit into mainstream American life. Furthermore, she is beginning to feel awkward with Mr Beltran. Just last week, Mr. Beltran attempted to kiss her when they were sitting together going over paperwork.

- What might be the cause of Mr. Beltran's decreasing involvement with the program?
- What does Mr. Beltran need to know about social behavior on the job?
- What can Ms. McNaughton do to address her own discomfort?
- What can be done to improve Mr. Beltran's communication skills in English while simultaneously addressing his employment needs?

Promoting good work-place practice

It is more effective to accentuate and build on a person's strengths than to try to transform weaknesses or challenges. In Mr. Beltran's case, his biggest strength may be his strong work ethic — he has worked very hard all of his life. Now he needs help finding a job that he can do with his limited linguistic and cultural knowledge and limited social support.

Reviewing the rules of the workplace up front is a good practice for immigrant seniors. If Mr. Beltran knew more about the laws concerning sexual harassment, he might not have crossed the line by trying to kiss Ms. McNaughton. In order to understand some of the social rules of the workplace, Mr. Beltran may need the help of bilingual staff or a translator because of his limited English.

Promoting effective communication

Try to:

- Use a variety of methods to teach necessary language skills for the workplace. These include hands-on and experiential activities when planning training, especially for seniors who have not had access to formal education. Index cards with important words and phrases on them, a picture dictionary, and such things as portable representations of work safety signs and other sight words may be good resources.
- Learn about the participant's linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
 - □ For example, although Mr. Beltran also speaks Spanish, his native language is Quiché, one of the several Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala. Because of this background, the way Mr. Beltran learns and speaks English will be different than if he were a native-Spanish speaker.
 - His native language is not as closely allied with English as Spanish is, but he will probably experience fewer problems pronouncing English vowel sounds than a native-Spanish speaker would.
- Enlist the student's input, needs, and goals in all language activities. For example, because Mr. Beltran has already learned a second language Spanish he has already demonstrated some facility in language learning. Ask him (with a translator if necessary) if he remembers how he learned Spanish. Ask him what has been easy and difficult for him about learning English.
 - Does he like to hear conversation and then practice writing words, phrases, or sentences after he has understood them?
 - Does he translate English into his native language in his head and then translate back to respond in English?
 - □ Does he enjoy listening to music and TV in English or Spanish?

The more you ask the student for input, the more you are able to serve him effectively. Plus, you are helping the immigrant senior by involving him in his own learning process.

Avoid:

Expecting that once something has been explained it is understood. Closely observe how seniors are reacting to new material of any kind. Do they understand the material? Is it pertinent to them? Is the language level appropriate?

Promoting cultural understanding

Help immigrant seniors learn:

- Gender issues are taken very seriously in the United States, particularly in the workplace. Among federal workers the law is so broad that if a person feels that he or she has been sexually harassed by a word or action, it is enough to pursue a claim. Mr. Beltran grew up in a vastly different environment, so he needs to learn about sexual harassment policy and appropriate work-place practice.
- The National Institute for Health Statistics suggests that a significant number of seniors suffer from depression (Garnett, 2000). Because he is no longer working, because of his isolated life, and as demonstrated by his inappropriate behavior, Mr. Beltran may be showing signs of emotional distress distress that he himself may be unaware of. Immigrant seniors need to know that seeking help for emotional problems is much more acceptable in this country than in many other cultures. Mr. Beltran and others like him also may need assistance to navigate the healthcare system to find the help they need and can afford.

Key issues to consider

- Gender-appropriate behavior on the job and the legal ramifications of inappropriate behavior
- The importance of assessing possible depression or emotional distress
- Isolation as a factor in social behavior
- The difficulties of communicating with immigrant seniors who have limited English proficiency and a lack of schooling in the native language
- Addressing the discomfort and possible stress of program personnel who work with immigrant seniors

Mei Chen on the Line

Setting

Mei Chen, 58, came to the Pacific coast of the United States five years ago from the Guangdong province in China. She felt lucky to emigrate because, as a member of a non-government sanctioned religious group, she feared official disapproval or worse.

Mei Chen now lives in an apartment complex where several other Chinese families live. Monday through Friday mornings, Mei Chen and three other elder Chinese women take a 5:15 a.m. bus to their job at a community hospital cafeteria.

Situation

Mei Chen and her friends seem to enjoy working in the hospital cafeteria. Their supervisor, George Franks, admires the efficiency and hard work he sees in his elder employees, but lately he has been getting some complaints from other kitchen workers and some of the cafeteria patrons.

When Mei Chen and her friends are working together — cutting up fruit, pouring juice, cleaning up, or even serving on the line — they talk to one another in their native Mandarin language. Another employee, Louisa Dade, a local area native said, "Those ladies don't know how to be friendly at all. They make my head ache — jabber, jabber, jabber — they sound like little Chinese chickens."

One of the hospital administrators, Calvin Brown, told Mr. Franks, "I think that employing immigrant seniors is a good idea for everyone, but why don't you teach them English and good manners before you send them over here?"

- What can Mr. Franks do to improve communication between the immigrant seniors and other workers?
- What would help Mrs. Chen and her friends become more comfortable and a more integral part of the workplace?
- What would help Ms. Dade and Mr. Brown address their discomfort?
- What kinds of language skills might help Mrs. Chen and her friends?

Promoting good work-place practice

Analyze a situation before making judgments and taking action. Both the English-speaking workers and the Chinese-speaking ones may be feeling uncomfortable. Sometimes using only English at the workplace is appropriate and using a native language is inappropriate. However, sometimes using native language at work can be both appropriate and efficient.

Many Americans are monolingual and do not understand how difficult it is to learn another language and how long it takes. Sharing information about learning another language can help native-born workers better understand the behavior of their culturally diverse colleagues.

Promoting effective communication

Try to:

- Analyze work and social language tasks, and ask the SCSEP participants to do the same. Let them discuss the following:
 - When is English necessary and appropriate?
 - □ What vocabulary, phrases, and sentences are needed? Why and when?
 - □ When might it be appropriate to use the native language?
- Brainstorm with diverse seniors about their strengths and challenges in English. Teach the seniors some techniques for indicating lack of comprehension. For example, teach him to isolate the word he doesn't understand and ask, "What does X mean?" or "I don't understand the word X." Or teach her to say, "I should do what with the paper?" or "Then I press the what?"
- Make certain that the diverse seniors are learning social language to use in the workplace with co-workers, supervisors, and customers. If no formal classes are available and it is impossible to start classes, hold small group meetings with the diverse seniors. Discuss greetings, responses to greetings, and appropriate topics for "small talk" on the job.
- Try to become more comfortable listening to other languages. Thousands of languages are spoken in the world today. Enjoy the diversity — maybe you can learn a little about another language as well.

Avoid:

Automatically assuming that something is wrong when diverse seniors speak in their native language. It can be very frustrating to adults when they can't express complex thoughts with their limited English. Sometimes the quickest way to understand a work issue or to solve a problem is by talking it over with a colleague in the native language.

Promoting cultural understanding

Help immigrant seniors and their co-workers learn:

- More than 80 percent of U.S. workers speak just one language usually English. Explain to immigrants from multilingual areas of the world that some American workers feel uncomfortable hearing a language they don't understand.
- It is difficult to learn a new language. Some may think that studying a textbook at home or taking a class for a few months should be enough for a motivated student to learn a language when, in fact, it takes many years.

Key issues to consider

- The use of native language on the job
- Knowing social language and how and when to use it
- Addressing the discomfort of not understanding what others are saying
- Americans' lack of understanding of the difficulty of language learning
- Monolingualism in the United States

Mr. Rubin's Expectations

Setting

The setting is a large multi-use community center in a mid-sized Midwestern city. Yosif Rubin, 61, came to the United States just before the break-up of the Soviet Union.

In the USSR, Mr. Rubin was a defense department engineer. When he came to the United States, he originally lived with his son and daughter-in-law, both of whom work in high-tech firms.

Mr. Rubin wasn't comfortable sharing the small condo with them and their two young children. He rented an efficiency apartment for himself, fully expecting to be able to pick up a part-time computer job himself. He wasn't able to get a job, and his income was very limited, so he enrolled in SCSEP.

Situation

Mr. Rubin studied German and English as a young man and he prides himself on being well educated. He is not shy when talking to Lynn Blackwell, his supervisor. In fact, he has told her many times how to reorganize SCSEP.

Mr. Rubin has told her again and again, "This program has inefficient system. You must to make it so that the wages are better. I was chief computer engineer in defense system in Ukraine. I know to organize more than you. Perhaps you just are social worker lady."

Recently, he attended an interview for a job entering data for a local food assistance program. Mr. Rubin said to the interviewer, "I don't understand USA — richest country in the world, but no food for poor. Must to have then stupid computer system for poor also?"

Although Mr. Rubin has the English and work skills to get a reasonable part-time job, he hasn't been offered one yet.

- Why might it be difficult for Mr. Rubin to find a job? What linguistic, cultural, and personal challenges might Mr. Rubin be facing?
- What can Ms. Blackwell do to help Mr. Rubin become more employable?
- What can Mr. Rubin do to improve his employment prospects?

Promoting good work-place practice

Before people can be successful in new situations, they need to accept the reality of the situation in which they find themselves. Perhaps with the support of Mr. Rubin's adult children, Ms. Blackwell can help him consciously acknowledge that his employment situation is much different than it was in the Soviet Union.

Because of Mr. Rubin's skills and education, he may be able use a training program to better establish his credentials in this country.

Promoting effective communication

Try to:

- Focus on language and communicative skills that diverse seniors need for success.
 - □ For example, Mr. Rubin could use help understanding the mistakes he makes with modals (*should*, *would*, *must*, etc.) because his misuse and overuse may be causing him to sound more impolite and cranky than he means to be.
 - □ Immigrants often hear words like "stupid" on TV and don't realize how inappropriate they are in the world of work.
- Understand that the comprehension and use of social language along with the processing of cultural information will take time. The amount of time will vary from person to person.
- Help immigrant seniors practice appropriate language and cultural behaviors for job interviews in the United States.
- Consider Mr. Rubin's suggestions, if appropriate. He may have some ideas worth implementing. As annoying as he may be, he still needs to be treated with respect and courtesy.

Avoid:

- Categorizing or stereotyping seniors into simple categories like "shy," "aggressive," "rude," "has learning disabilities," or "too old to learn." In Mr. Rubin's case, rudeness aside, he is a person who has probably suffered several blows to his self-esteem. Give him time and the tools to cope with and acknowledge his situation.
- Do not expect that explaining something once or twice means that you've taught it, and seniors have learned it.
 - ☐ It is important to continue to recycle topics and material.
 - □ Re-present material in different ways (for example, orally, in writing, etc.).

TIPS

Promoting cultural understanding

Help immigrant seniors learn:

- While Americans often appreciate direct and informal speech, they also value politeness. For example, Mr. Rubin needs feedback that his constant negative statements and comparisons to his former situation to the detriment of the current situation are considered rude.
- A fine line exists between standing up for oneself and boasting. Americans tend to admire the one and strongly dislike the other. Because Mr. Rubin understands English well, Ms. Blackwell or maybe his adult children who appear to be successful in their own work endeavors could explain outright the negative reactions he is getting.

Key issues to consider

- The value placed on combining direct and polite speech in English
- Understanding the impact of cultural differences in how one presents oneself
- The importance of a positive attitude on the job
- Addressing the personal and cultural losses experienced by many immigrant seniors

Mrs. Mangabay and Her Family

Setting

The setting is the neighborhood community center in a city in the Pacific Northwest. Luz Mangabay, 63, came to the United States from the Philippines. She had originally lived with her daughter, a nurse, who came here as part of the push to fill registered nurse (RN) positions in American hospitals.

The daughter acquired enough language for certification and began working in a local hospital. A year ago, the daughter went back to the Philippines to meet her old boyfriend. Now the daughter is married, pregnant, and her husband, her extended family, and she are staying at Mrs. Mangabay's small apartment.

Situation

Mrs. Mangabay has been working — first in a community service assignment and now as a part-time, unsubsidized worker — on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons as the receptionist at the community center.

She has a fairly good command of English. Her studies in school were in English, and she is fairly comfortable with American English, especially social English, having owned a small shop, a *sari-sari* store, outside Subic Naval Base in the Philippines.

She has been a favorite at work. She has never been absent. She is capable and friendly, and she works hard. However, twice last week she left early, once to accompany her daughter to the doctor and once to take the bus to meet another one of her daughter's in-laws at the airport.

Today Mrs. Mangabay told her supervisor, Derek Holmes, that she had to leave early to prepare a special traditional meal for all the relatives who are currently living in her small apartment. Mr. Holmes is concerned that an attendance problem is developing.

- What factors may be causing the changes in Mrs. Mangabay's job performance?
- Is there a way Mr. Holmes can address the work-place problem without forcing Mrs. Mangabay to choose between job and family?
- How else can Mrs. Mangabay handle her family pressures? What kind of support might help her address her family and employment issues?

Promoting good work-place practice

Family-related situations and issues of cultural and social identity are almost always emotional, so it is hard dealing with a situation like this one. In any conversations with the senior (or his or her family), be clear that you are not belittling the person's culture or the value of family. It is important to give seniors the necessary cultural and linguistic information so that they can fulfill their work obligations in an appropriate way.

Promoting effective communication

Try to:

Focus on the kinds of language immigrant seniors need for work-place purposes. Mrs. Mangabay knows English well but may need help to understand the best way to ask for time off. Teach immigrant seniors ways to make requests and ask for permission.

Some useful phrases include:

- □ "Would it be possible for me to ...?" ("... leave early tomorrow at 4 p.m. to pick up my sister at the airport?" "...take an extra hour at lunch this Friday to go to my son's school and see him in the holiday play?")
- □ "Would it be a problem for me to ...?" "I'd really like it if I could ..." "It would be very important to me if I could ..."
- □ "What do you think about me ...?" ("...leaving early next Monday to attend a parent-teacher conference?" "...taking a two-hour lunch next Wednesday to see my mother?" etc.).
- Instruct the senior that giving details about the request is important. For example, when asking permission to leave work for family business, provide the real details such as, "I haven't seen my sister in three years, and I would love to surprise her at the airport," or "My grandson is playing Tiny Tim in the play, and I'd love to watch him perform it next Wednesday afternoon." Make sure the senior understands that the time to approach the supervisor for permission is before the anticipated absence rather than at the time itself.

Avoid:

Assuming that you have taken care of the issue by stating office policy. It is also not enough to expect the senior to have the appropriate language to make requests for time off and other special considerations on the job. You may need to teach the relevant phrases.

Assuming that family issues will be an easy subject to discuss in the workplace. As described above, these issues can be emotional. They need careful consideration both from the point of view of language skills and cultural information.

Promoting cultural understanding

Help immigrant seniors learn:

- Families and family life are important in the United States. However, except for emergencies or important appointments that are planned in advance, employers expect workers to be to work on time and to work the whole shift.
 - □ Picking up people at the airport or making special dinners are generally not considered appropriate reasons for missing work. However, in some cases, at some jobs if permission is granted in advance plans can be made to make up the time off or to have someone cover for the missing worker.
- In many cases, helping a family member with a medical appointment is considered an acceptable reason for time off and, in some cases, is covered by family medical leave policy if planned for in advance. In Mrs. Mangabay's case, since there was no emergency, the daughter spoke English, and she was an RN, leaving work probably would not be considered warranted, especially as she had not asked in advance.
- In the United States, employers usually view absences regarding the immediate family and those involving the extended family differently. Here, the immediate (or nuclear) family is considered the most important. In some other cultures, such as those in the Middle-East, Africa, and Asia, the extended family may play a more important daily role in life than we are accustomed to in the United States.
- Workplaces differ in how they handle family issues. Mrs. Mangabay didn't fully understand what was expected of her in the workplace, especially since she experienced everyone as friendly and supportive. Ms. Holmes should review carefully with Mrs. Mangabay the schedule and performance she expects to be maintained on the job.
- People in the United States often are able to fulfill both work and family obligations by planning ahead. For example, if a person needs to pick up a family member at the airport, the worker asks the supervisor for permission a day or two in advance.

TIPS

Key issues to consider

- Addressing work and family issues on the job
- Differences between extended and nuclear family in different cultures
- The importance of planning in a U.S. workplace
- How to ask for permission

Keeping Mr. Ayala at Work

Setting

Jose Luis Ayala came to a large southwestern city 23 years ago from his native Chihuahua, Mexico. When he could no longer support his family, Mr. Ayala left the small farming village where he had been born. Because he was an undocumented immigrant, Mr. Ayala worked "under the table" at any agricultural, construction, or manufacturing job he could find.

In 1989, he obtained legal permanent residence status by filling out the proper government paperwork and attending 40 hours of English and civics class at a local adult ESL program. Those few weeks of class were the only formal education Mr. Ayala had ever received. He liked going to school, but once he had his immigration papers, he went back to working two jobs a day.

In 1999, Mr. Ayala hurt his back in a construction accident. This condition has been aggravated by osteoarthritis. Now, at 63, divorced, with his children grown and moved away, Mr. Ayala works 20 hours a week as a janitor at the YMCA in his neighborhood.

Situation

Everyone at the Y likes Mr. Ayala. In fact, he is a popular figure in the neighborhood at large. Because he is so popular and because the osteoarthritis is making it increasingly difficult for Mr. Ayala to perform his janitor duties, his supervisor, Suzanne Gomez-Smith, would like to make Mr. Ayala a desk clerk.

Although he makes mistakes, Mr. Ayala speaks English quite well. In this neighborhood, it's also useful to speak Spanish. However, Mr. Ayala can barely read or write in either language, so he has difficulty writing down phone messages, filling out supply requisition forms, and registering new members.

Ms. Gomez-Smith is concerned about how losing his job will affect Mr. Ayala. She knows that he misses his children and speaks of them often and that the Y is his home away from home. She doesn't want to fire him, but he can no longer do the physical labor required for janitor work.

- What kind of training might help keep Mr. Ayala employed?
- What accommodations might help Mr. Ayala be better able to perform a desk job?
- What can Ms. Gomez-Smith do to help Mr. Ayala with some of his feelings of loss and loneliness?

Promoting good work-place practice

There are many ways of learning and knowing, and book learning is just one variety. In fact, adults who have not had access to school have acquired coping mechanisms that they can use on the job. Many of these adults demonstrate flexibility, effective problem-solving techniques, and a willingness to jump in and try new things. They are also likely to have a good memory and well-developed oral skills. Mr. Ayala may also have some good ideas about the kinds of skills and accommodations that would help him be successful in a new job.

Training for specific job-related skills may help Mr. Ayala learn enough to perform a desk job. It might be valuable to investigate accommodations for the blind and people with learning disabilities that could be adapted to workers with limited literacy skills in English.

Promoting effective communication

Try to:

- Work with learners to analyze specifically what kinds of help they need to perform job-related reading and writing tasks.
- Make it easier for seniors by simplifying the literacy tasks. Make forms simple to use. Many forms are needlessly complicated. For example, the font may be too small, the spaces for writing may be too small, or old-fashioned or bureaucratic language may be used. Develop simplified forms in plain language that are easier to use. A customized, job-related ESL class could help seniors learn how to use the forms they encounter at work.
- Concentrate on the specific language and literacy skills Mr. Ayala will need for his new job, such as "Mr. Smith, call back (202) 374-4431." Use a variety of techniques to help Mr. Ayala learn to read and write. Copying letters and reciting the alphabet will not be enough to help him become literate in English.
- If even a limited amount of reading and writing seems too difficult for Mr. Ayala, investigate ways to develop a job that stresses his strengths spoken languages and friendly personality rather than his lack of literacy skills. Perhaps Mr. Ayala could use his bilingual skills to help the YMCA connect more with Latino parents or translate for families at YMCA board meetings.
- Investigate adaptive technology to help Mr. Ayala perform his job. Voice-based computer programs exist for the blind and dyslexic that link spoken and written language and could be adapted for those with difficulty reading and writing.

Avoid:

Overrating the literacy issue. Because a person cannot read or write does not mean that he or she is lacking in knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Promoting cultural understanding

Help immigrant seniors and their co-workers learn:

- Even though many people in the United States both native and foreign born
 — have limited literacy skills, a large majority of jobs assume at least some basic
 literacy skills.
- Becoming literate in a second language is harder if a person is not already literate in his first language.
- Unlike in some other cultures, in the United States there is a general feeling that people are never too old to learn.
 - ☐ Most communities have adult classes in everything from painting or martial arts to learning English or fixing cars.
 - Seniors can find information about free or low-cost classes from local public schools, public libraries, or other literacy organizations.
- Many American elders also experience separation from their families. Although families are very important in the United States, elders are generally expected to be more independent than may be the case in many other cultures. For example, in some countries, an aging or ill parent might expect to move in with one of his or her children. In the United States, seniors often live independently or in a senior residence community. Elder parents and adult children love each other but often like to give each other "space."

Key issues to consider

- Using training and technology to prepare immigrant seniors with limited literacy skills for new jobs
- The effect of native language literacy on becoming literate in English
- The importance of literacy in English for employment
- The independence of seniors in the United States
- The impact on immigrant seniors of families living far apart

Mrs. Le and the Missing Messages

Setting

Ngoc Anh Le left her native Vietnam in 1993 and settled with her husband in a fast-growing city in the Southeast. Her husband, Tranh Nguyen, had been in the South Vietnamese Army during the Vietnam War and later had been a prisoner in a "reeducation camp" for six years. During those six years, Mrs. Le took care of her 4 children by working as a clerk and general assistant in a photography and movie firm in Saigon. Mrs. Le's husband died in 1999.

When Mrs. Le became a SCSEP participant in 2003 (at age 57), her first community service assignment was to work in the administrative office of a local nonprofit program that matches low-income people with decent, subsidized housing. She received this placement because her spoken English was good if sometimes difficult to understand. Furthermore, she had experience working in an office.

Situation

Mrs. Le's supervisor, Marianne Feldman, is the office manager. Ms. Feldman is in her early forties. Because she usually has morning meetings with case workers, she has asked Mrs. Le to manage the front office from 9 to 11:30 a.m. During that time, Mrs. Le answers the phone, takes messages, files new periodicals and recent case folders, sorts mail, and greets people who come into the office. When Ms. Feldman trained Mrs. Le, Mrs. Le assured Ms. Feldman that she could do the job — "No problem," she said.

Ms. Feldman has been puzzled about what's going on in the office in the morning. Whenever she asks Mrs. Le if taking care of the office by herself is okay or if she needs any help or a work task explained again, Mrs. Le smiles and says everything is fine. However, three times this week Ms. Feldman has received irate calls from clients who said they left messages for her, but she never got back to them. Ms. Feldman never saw any messages. Furthermore, she can't find three important case files in the filing cabinet, and fewer requests for information about the housing program are logged in than there were before Mrs. Le worked there.

Ms. Feldman was sure that Mrs. Le was right for this position, but now she has her doubts.

- What can Ms. Feldman do to determine whether Mrs. Le understands her job responsibilities?
- What would help Mrs. Le meet the needs of the customers more effectively?
- What can Ms. Feldman do to help Mrs. Le improve her job performance?
- What factors might influence Mrs. Le's attitude about her job?

TIPS

Promoting good work-place practice

Mrs. Le's responsibilities require her to do many things at once and at a rapid pace. It is difficult for many peole to handle this level of multi-tasking.

People of all ages and in all work situations can benefit from hands-on assistance and a review of job tasks. Because different people learn in different ways, a supervisor should offer written, verbal, and hands-on assistance:

- Type up a clear list of job tasks and give the reasons for each step and expected time of completion.
- Help the senior order tasks on the basis of priority.
- Explain each task verbally.
- Demonstrate each task and give the worker a chance to try work activities in a nopressure situation.

Most people — of any age or situation — do not respond well to questions such as, "Is this too tough for you?" "Do you need some extra help?" or "Are you having problems?" Even if the job is difficult and they are clearly having a problem, many workers will not respond candidly to those questions.

Mentoring might be a more effective approach. Work side by side; demonstrate for the worker how the tasks should be done and allow opportunities for clarification to arise naturally. An apprenticeship-type of situation might be helpful in this case, where the worker is gradually given more responsibility as the supervisor becomes increasingly satisfied with performance.

Promoting effective communication

Try to:

- Make sure seniors know questioning and clarification language. Help them practice the *wh* questions (*who*, *what*, *why*, *where*, *when*).
- From the beginning, work with the immigrant seniors to build an environment of mutual respect and cooperation. Reassure seniors that asking a question about work or a lack of understanding is acceptable and even expected in the American workplace.
- Be aware of and sensitive to the ways different cultures respond to American directness. Like many cultures, Vietnamese culture does not put the same value on being direct as American culture does. If a Vietnamese person is confused or needs help, he or she may not feel it is appropriate to come right out and say so. This difference can lead to many difficulties. Americans may become upset that he or she is not explaining needs or wants, but Americans' directness may seem rude to a person who is not used to the American style. In addition, people from some cultures may feel the need to answer "yes" to any question because answering "no" or "I don't understand" might seem impolite to them. To address

this issue, service providers or supervisors could rephrase questions as open questions that do not take a *yes* or *no* answer. (For example, instead of asking Mrs. Le if everything is okay when she in the office by herself, her supervisor could ask her to demonstrate how she uses the phone and other tasks.)

In some, if not most countries, seniors are treated with more formal respect than Americans treat most elders. For example, if an elder is working in an office where he or she interacts with children or younger adults, the elder might expect others to use titles of respect (for example, *ma'am* or *sir*, *Mr*. or *Mrs*.) and polite language, rather than something like, "Hey, lady — gimme some help." The way to improve this situation in a school or workplace is to educate everyone. Immigrant elders learn about the directness and informality of American communication, and others who come to the school and workplace are reminded of the importance of politeness and respect.

Avoid:

 Assuming that because no questions are asked, an immigrant senior understands what to do.

Promoting cultural understanding

Help immigrant seniors learn the following:

- American directness does not necessarily imply a lack of respect.
- In class, at work, or in the community, often words or phrases will be used that diverse seniors don't understand. It's important that seniors know that it is acceptable (and expected) for them to ask for clarification. They need to know such appropriate language as, "Please repeat," "Can you say that again?" "I don't understand," and "Please speak slowly."
- In the United States, even when supervisors are younger than those they supervise, they expect the same attention and respect as those who are older.

Key issues to consider

- Differing cultural expectations about direct communication
- Ways of asking and answering questions
- The difficulty of managing many tasks at once
- Mentoring and apprenticeships to assist seniors with new jobs
- The impact of age and perceived status on relationships with supervisors

The Frustrations of Ms. Babcock

Setting

The Center for Aging Services is in a suburb of a large city. It is a big organization with many native-English-speaking SCSEP participants and many foreign-born seniors from Bosnia, China, El Salvador, Guatemala, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, India, Laos, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, Serbia, Somalia, Sudan, Turkey, Vietnam, and more. Seniors are required to fill out registration forms before they are eligible for services.

Situation

Today the seniors turned in their registration forms. The forms ask for name, address, phone numbers, date of birth, previous work experience, years of education, languages spoken, and days and hours available to work.

Moira Babcock, the SCSEP project director, prides herself on being efficient and has created a form that contains all of this information on one side of the paper. The printing is a little small and the space for writing is limited, but Ms. Babcock is concerned about saving paper and having neat, slim files.

Instead of giving the SCSEP participants the forms to fill out overnight, she gave them an hour this morning to fill them out while they were at the center. She wanted to make sure they wouldn't lose the forms when they took them home. This way, she is certain, they will fill them out and turn them in promptly.

As she reads their returned forms, Ms. Babcock finds herself getting increasingly upset. Some of the seniors have mixed up their first names and last names. Others have mixed up "day" and "month" on both date and birth date. Many seniors from Somalia and Afghanistan say they were born on January 1.

Many did not fill in their previous work experience, and she knows that most of the seniors worked before coming to the Center. The handwriting of most of the participants is hard to read. They have not been careful to stay on the lines; they have written too big for the space allotted; and she isn't sure what some of the responses say because the spelling is so atrocious. Not only the foreign-born seniors, but also some of the U.S.-born participants have made these errors. The more Ms. Babcock thinks about it, the more frustrated she becomes. She wonders why none of the seniors told her they were having difficulties filling out the form.

- What management practices of Ms. Babcock do not match the needs of the immigrant seniors?
- What changes would make it easier for the seniors immigrant and native born— to register and comply with the procedures?
- What could Ms. Babcock do to help address her own frustration?
- What skills or accommodations would help the immigrant seniors fill out forms?

Promoting good work-place practice

Filling out forms can be confusing and anxiety-producing for many people whether they are immigrants or not, elderly or not. Make sure plenty of help is readily available and provided without any stigma attached.

As many people get older, their ability to read small print decreases unless it is corrected with prescription glasses. When creating forms, use readable type and plenty of white space.

Don't put too many items on one line or on one page. Make sure the form is clear and has sharp, black type. Avoid photocopying the forms so many times that the type is faint or smeared. Include enough space for the response.

Many elders, whatever their literacy skills, will not have the manual dexterity and handwriting skill to write neatly on short lines with little space.

Promoting effective communication

Try to:

- Use a clear, readable typeface, plenty of white space, and plenty of room for seniors to fill in the answers. Use two or three pages if necessary.
- Distribute a completed model form with the form you want the seniors to fill out. If possible, ask the year of birth only rather than exact date of birth.
- Allow seniors to fill the form out at home, where family members can help them. This will allow them to "save face," whether they are non-native English speakers or not, if they have problems reading and writing.
- Provide non-judgmental assistance for filling out the forms.
- Consider providing bilingual staff for assistance with forms.

Avoid:

- Assuming that because immigrant seniors are literate in a language other than English and can speak English, that they can read and write in English.
- Assuming that because no questions are asked, everyone understands what to do or is willing to admit openly that they have difficulty with the task.

Promoting cultural understanding

Help immigrant seniors and program staff learn:

- In some countries for example, China and Vietnam the *family name* (what we call the *last name*) is listed first, and what we call the *first name* is listed second. When writing forms, especially for those who may not have been in this country for very long, use the term *family name* rather than *last name*.
- Many other countries in the world write dates by putting the day first, and then the month. This means that June 16, 1950 (6/16/50) would be written 16 June 1950 (16/6/50). New arrivals to the United States or those who have not had to read or write much in English may not know this difference.
- In some countries, especially those in developing areas of the world that do not have long histories of written language, people do not place as much importance on the exact dates on which specific events occurred. Most people will know the year of their birth, but many people may not know the month and the day. Furthermore, in some cultures, a person's age is counted differently than we do in the West. In China, for example, people are considered a year old when they are born. In any case, many immigrants and refugees, especially those from Muslim countries in Africa and those who were uncertain about their actual date of birth, were instructed to list their birthday as January 1st when they filled out immigration papers.
- Some foreign-born seniors come from countries where the language has only recently been codified in other words, matched up with a writing system. For example, the Somali written language, which uses the Roman alphabet, was developed in the 1970s, long after most seniors coming from Somalia would have been in school.

Additional considerations

- Many seniors, including native English speakers, may struggle with English literacy tasks. This does not mean they are stupid, have a bad attitude, or are unteachable. Some may never have had the opportunity to learn to read due to economic or social disadvantages; others are impeded by poor vision and motor skill deficits related to age. The senior may feel shame about the lack of literacy and a reluctance to ask for help with reading and writing tasks.
- If the seniors know how to read in a language other than English, the following factors may influence their ability to read in English:
 - □ Some languages are written with characters, or small pictures or symbols, rather than letters. Chinese languages, including Mandarin and Cantonese, are

written this way. In addition, Chinese is read from top to bottom rather than from left to right like English.

- □ Other languages are written with an alphabet that is different from the Roman alphabet used in English. Arabic is an example of this type of language. It is read from right to left rather than from left to right. What's more, Arabic writing does not always include the vowels.
- □ Languages, such as Spanish, French, Croatian, and German, are examples of Roman alphabet languages. Some languages, such as Hmong, are written with the Roman alphabet but use diacritic marks over letters (for example, $\check{C}\check{g}\check{a}$) to show tones or other important information.

Key issues to consider

- The challenge of reading and writing small print
- Differences in literacy practices across cultures and languages
- Cultural differences in how dates and ages are recorded
- Different alphabets
- Shame associated with lack of literacy