

English-Only: One Hotel's Dilemma Case

Erica, the Human Resource Manager, was frustrated by many of her hotel staff speaking Spanish in the hallways and rooms as they were cleaning them.

The Sawmill Hotel where Erica works is situated in downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota. Its target market includes sports enthusiasts attending nearby professional (Twins, Vikings, Timberwolves, Wild) games but also business professionals and families. This four-star hotel features an indoor and outdoor swimming pool, a message center, three stores, two restaurants, and a beauty shop. Total staff includes about 10 managers, 30 cleaning assistants to take care of rooms, 10 front desk specialists, and 25 who are involved with the stores, restaurants, and beauty shop. All are required to focus on customer service as their number-one value.

Erica hires everyone in the hotel except for the Chief Executive Officer, Vice President of Finance, and Vice President of Marketing. For the rest of the managers, the 30 cleaning assistants, and the store, restaurant, and beauty shop workers, she advertises for openings with the local job service and the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* (with the associated website). A typical *Tribune* ad for a cleaning assistant reads as follows: Cleaning Assistants Wanted, Sawmill Hotel, \$9–\$11/hour. Prepare rooms for customers and prepare laundry. Contact: Erica Hollie, Human Resource Manager, 555-805-1234.

As a result of the advertising, Erica has been able to obtain good help through the local target market. Twenty-seven of the 30 cleaning assistants are women. Twenty of the 30 have a Hispanic background. Of the Hispanics, all can speak English at varying levels.

Rachel, the lead cleaning assistant, believes that maximizing communication among employees helps the assistants become more productive and stable within the hotel system. She uses both English and Spanish to talk to assistants under her. Spanish is useful with many assistants because they know Spanish much better than English. Spanish also is the “good friends” language that allows the Spanish speakers to freely catch up on each other’s affairs and that motivates them to stay working at the hotel. The use of the Spanish language among cleaning assistants has been common practice among them for the two years since the hotel opened.

In the last few months, top management decided to have an even greater focus on customer service by ensuring customer comment cards are available in each room and at the front desk. Customers also can comment online about their stay at the hotel. There have been several customer complaints that cleaning assistants have been laughing about them behind their back in Spanish. One customer, Kathy, thought that staffers negatively commented about her tight pink stretch pants covering her overweight legs. Other customers have complained they didn’t think asking staff for help was easy given the amount of Spanish spoken. In all, about 15 out of 42 complaints in a typical month were associated with the use of the Spanish language.

Though bellhops and front desk clerks are typically the workers who handle complaints first, Erica, the Human Resource Manager, has the main responsibility to notify workers about customer complaint patterns and to set policy in dealing with the complaints. The prevalence of complaints concerning workers speaking Spanish each month led Erica to make a significant change in policy concerning the use of Spanish. In consultation with top management, Erica instituted the following employee handbook policy effective immediately:

“English is the main language spoken at the hotel. Any communication among employees shall be in English. Use of Spanish or other languages is prohibited unless specifically requested by management or the customer.”

In an e-mail explanation for the new policy, Erica stated the number of complaints that had come from the use of Spanish and the need for customer courtesy and communication.

Rachel immediately responded to Erica's e-mail by stating that the new policy was too harsh on the native Spanish-speaking assistants at the hotel. She thought that a better policy is to allow her assistants to communicate with each other through Spanish but by quietly doing so away from customer earshot. If there is a general discussion in front of a customer, it is recommended to speak English. There should never be discussions in any language about customer appearances.

Though Rachel grumbled, the policy stuck because Erica and top management wanted to stop customer complaints. As a result of the policy, 10 of the 20 Spanish-speaking assistants quit within two months. These were high-quality assistants who had been with the hotel since the start. Their replacements came from a job service and have not worked out as well in their performance.

Questions

1. What law(s) do you think might apply in this case?
2. Should a complete ban of Spanish be instituted among staff of the hotel unless customers use Spanish themselves, or should the use of Spanish be completely allowed by staff among themselves as long as it is quiet (why or why not)?
3. What rules, if any, would you put into effect in this situation, knowing about the customer complaints? Explain your answer.