

No See Ums: Hidden Aspects to Communicating With Your Mexican Workers

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Have you ever been giving your Mexican workers instructions to do a specific job and they are listening intently to you nodding their heads up and down? Their head nodding is an indication to you that they understand what you want them to do. So, you hurry over to your next job, confident that they know what to do. A little while later, you see them doing something completely different than what you told them to do? What happened?

The obvious barrier to effective communication with your Spanish-speaking workers seems to be the language barrier. Many of you have commented that if I could just speak their language more fluently, or they could speak mine, I would be able to communicate with them more effectively. What we don't realize is that the language barrier is only a tiny barrier compared to the much deeper cultural barrier that exists between the two of you. The reason that I say the cultural barrier is greater than the language barrier is that you can see and hear the language barrier. The cultural barrier is hidden from view and sometimes the cultural differences are so subtle that they can easily be misinterpreted. You can learn the language by taking classes or having one of your workers teach you. There are not as many opportunities to take classes in the cultural communication differences between the two groups and your workers may not be totally conscious of what their culture is even though they act from their cultural context in everything they do. It is a grand puzzle out of which a whole new field of study called Intercultural Communication is emerging.

In this presentation, we will focus on these cultural differences with an emphasis on values and how that drives the way we communicate as well as the meanings that we derive when we talk face to face with one another. I will focus my points on the differences between Mexicans and United Statesians. (United Statesian, this is a new word. Well, it makes sense, though. The equivalent to the word Mexican is United Statesian. They both refer to a national origin. We might more commonly say American, but Mexico is a part of America. Mexicans consider themselves to be Americans, even though many of them have adapted to our way of describing ourselves as Americans and them as Mexicans. When I studied the Spanish language in Costa Rica, my teachers told our class without hesitation that we were Estados Unidensians and we had

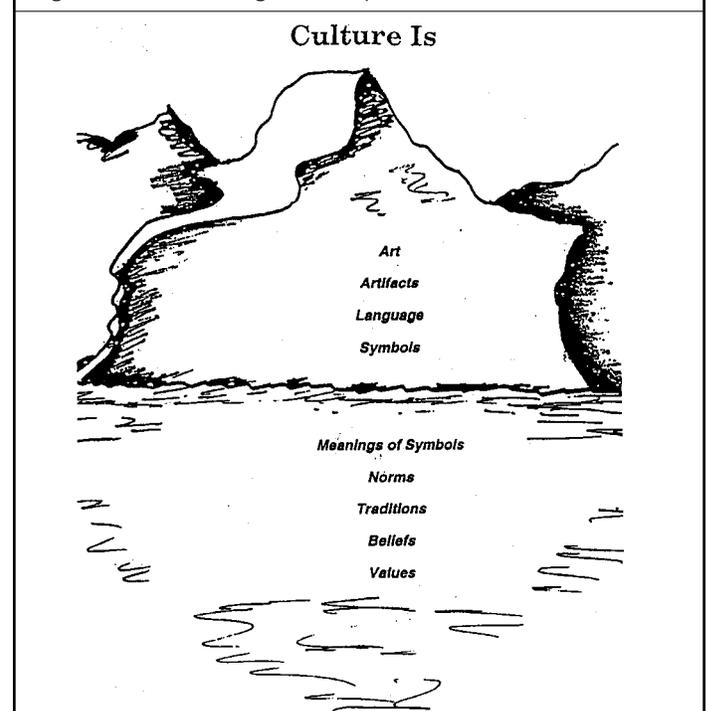
better get used to saying it. I find it to be a mouthful and difficult to say in both English and Spanish, so I will refer to people who are white like myself to be Anglos for the rest of this presentation). Specifically, I will look at the Mexican worker and the Anglo boss.

As an aside, I do want to say that these basic cross-cultural communication principles apply in other situations in your lives where you experience difference. For example, I have found an understanding of cross-cultural communication to be very helpful in working through disagreements with my husband. After all women come from a different planet than men do... wouldn't you agree?... at least that is what the author John Gray says.

A Cultural Model

To understand better what I am saying, I would like to use a metaphor of an iceberg. I want to shift the focus for the moment from your Mexican worker to yourself. How many of you have seen an iceberg? What is it about an iceberg that makes it very unique?

Figure 1: An iceberg: a metaphor for culture



When you see an iceberg, what you see is only the tip. Most of the iceberg is under water. This is similar to

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what culture is. By culture, I am referring to any group of people who have shared practices, beliefs, and values. The part of culture that we see and acknowledge is the part of the iceberg that is above water. That is, the language, the arts and artifacts, and symbols of a group of people. What we don't see is what is under the water, that is, the meanings behind the symbols, the norms or rules that we live by, the traditions, the beliefs and the values. Down deeper still is a set of universal human needs which goes across all cultures but is communicated up through the differences. For example, all people have a need to feel respected. However, respect is shown in Mexican culture through indirect eye contact with superiors and elders and with Anglos respect is shown through direct eye contact. Both cultural groups have the same need for respect but it is given differently. When someone is talking to you and looking down or averting their eyes, that is, not looking directly at you, what do you begin to think about that person? Right, you begin to look on them with suspicion. Maybe they are not telling you the truth. Maybe they are not listening or maybe they are not interested in what you have to say. Without knowing the cultural norm, you come to a conclusion that is the exact opposite of what is really being communicated. This person is really showing you respect, the very thing you wanted from that person. This is an example of why I say that the cultural divide is much greater than the language divide.

What I find fascinating about culture is that we all learned it, we all believe that our way is the best way because our mothers and teachers told us so, we internalize it, so that we are not even aware that it is a part of who we are. It is like tying our shoes. We do it automatically without thinking on a daily basis. We also hand our cultures down from generation to generation. Our culture changes, but the deepest part of our culture, that is, the part under the water, changes very slowly.

It is a good thing that we have a culture. It tells us what to do, how to say something, and how to make meaning out of our experience. We all need to make sense out of our experience with the world. It is just that differing cultures have learned different ways to make meaning.

Through the study of different cultural groups, we have begun to crack this cultural communication code through identifying differences in values, beliefs, non-verbal behaviors, and norms.

Value Differences

I would like to focus now on looking at a few contrasting values between Mexicans and Anglos and how that plays out on the dairy farm. I want to look at differences in family and group orientation and how that affects a sense of pride, loyalty, and getting the job done. I will talk more about the issue of respect and why the Mexican worker nodded his head "yes" when he really didn't know what you were talking about. I will also talk about what it means to tell the truth. Finally, I will talk about the differences in the concept of time.

Family/Group Focus

Oregon dairy producers whom I talked to said that most, if not all, of their Mexican workers come from one extended family. This has worked well for the owner/manager as well as the workers because the family of workers take care of one another in making sure that the job gets done well while also taking care of their own family needs. For example, one dairy owner said that he allows his workers to take the time that they need to return to Mexico every year. Some workers will be gone for as long as two to six months. Before the worker leaves, however, he has his replacement trained. For example, one brother or cousin arrives from Mexico and is trained by his brother/cousin who is currently working on the dairy. Once the new arrival learns the job well, the brother/cousin leaves for an extended stay in Mexico and usually returns to the dairy to relieve another relative. I must caution you though, that you need to make sure that your workers understand whether or not there is a job for both the replacement and the returning worker or only for one of them. You do not need a worker to return from Mexico with the expectation that his old job is waiting for him when it is not.

What I find most impressive about this new, flexible hiring practice found on dairy farms today is that it is not only culturally appropriate and makes good business sense, it is also way beyond where much of corporate America is in addressing the needs of a changing workforce. To quote one Oregon dairy owner, "I need to pay attention to my worker's family needs. If I have a disgruntled wife, I know I will have a disgruntled employee."

Let's take a look at what is going on here from a contrasting value perspective. Why has this worked to hire Mexicans from only one extended family and how is it that the result is better quality work and more dependable workers?

When we look at contrasting values with peoples around the world, we find that there are groups of people who put more emphasis on doing or getting the job done

and others who put more emphasis on relationships with others. Generally, we all do both, but there is a difference in which takes higher priority. In Mexican culture and in fact most all of the cultural groups which are Spanish-speaking, the relationship takes a higher priority over accomplishment of jobs. In the mainstream United States culture, we reverse that preference. We must be “doing” something to feel a sense of satisfaction. For example, how many of you are thinking right now about what you are going to do right after my presentation? How many of you make a daily “to do” list? It is not that relationships are not important to us, it is just that our emphasis is put on what each of us as individuals can accomplish in a day rather than “Have I spent time talking with the people in my office?”

For Mexicans, spending time with their group is of the utmost importance. The immediate family, which is defined in much broader terms than how we define family in the mainstream U.S., is the primary group from whom they derive a sense of satisfaction, connection, and identity. It is as if there is a string tied from their belly button to every one of their extended family members, even the ones still living in Mexico. Every move they make affects every one else in their immediate family, which consists of grandparents, parents, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, and even “padrinos”, that is the Godparents of their children.

Cultures, which are more group than individual oriented, take care of their own. They make sure that each member pulls their weight because whatever one member does affects the entire group. That is why hiring Mexicans from one family, makes good business sense. You are meeting their needs to be with their family members, to provide for their family both in the U.S. and in Mexico, and in turn, they will take care of making sure that together they do a good job on the dairy. In fact, the more sense of ownership that you give them to take care of what needs to be done on the dairy farm, the more sense of pride and satisfaction that they will take in doing a good job. As one dairy producer said, “I want them to think that this is their dairy.” What happens then is that you have less turn over in employees, they take care of hiring their own replacements, and you build loyalty to your dairy enterprise.

For those of you in the audience who are thinking, wait a minute, this is not fair. Aren't you supposed to advertise a position and make it an equal opportunity for anyone who wants the job to apply and be hired? Let's take a look at that question for just a moment. There are two fundamental U.S. values embedded in that question. The first is a sense of fairness and the second is the belief in equality. Both of these values are built on the belief in another value, the importance of the individual over the group.

I don't want to spend a lot of time talking about the

U.S. values of fairness, equality, and the importance of the individual. I simply want to say that if you are feeling uncomfortable with the idea of hiring Mexican workers who are from one family, it may be coming from your own sense of values. I would ask you to think about what these values mean to you. For example, what does it mean to be fair to you? The second question I would think about is what are my labor needs on the dairy farm? If the answer is good reliable workers, then the next question is, “What can I do to ensure that I have the best workers possible?” It is an issue of adapting our U.S. traditional way of hiring to a more culturally appropriate way in this circumstance. It is forward thinking.

Respect and Authority

While fairness is perhaps the most fundamental of mainstream U.S. values, respect is the most fundamental of Mexican values. Respect is important to us in the U.S. also, but the meaning is slightly different when applied from a Mexican perspective.

When you look at “respeto” from the Mexican perspective, you find a very emotionally charged value that is tied to relationships with others, especially hierarchical relationships. For example, if you are the owner/manager of your operation, by the nature of your authority, you are respected. In the mainstream U.S., the nature of your position does not necessarily entitle you to respect, instead, you have to earn it. From a Mexican perspective, respect is assumed by the nature of your position.

How does this play out on the dairy farm? As the owner/manager, you are giving out instructions to your Mexican workers of what to do that day. They listen attentively and nod their heads, as if, you think, they understand. A few minutes later, you see them doing something entirely opposite of what you had just told them to do. What happened here?

I can think of two possibilities, both having to do with the issue of respect. One is that you are the owner/manager. You have a lot of things on your mind to get done that day. Telling the workers what you need done is just one of a long list of tasks to complete. As you are telling the workers what they need to do, they are reading your body language that says that you are in a hurry. You have a lot of things to do. They sense that and as a sign of respect, they do not interrupt you. Instead, they nod to communicate that they are listening to you and they respect you. In their minds, they are hoping that one in their group will understand what you wanted them to do. As soon as you leave, they will immediately ask one another what you said. If they don't know, they cannot go back and ask you because that would be disrespectful of you.

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The second possibility is similar in that they know that you want them to understand and because they regard you with respect they nod to say that they want to do the right thing and are listening intently to you. A lower level employee does not interrupt the boss. They also don't want to look stupid in front of you, the boss. They want to please you and look good. Again, in their minds, they are hoping that one of them understood what you wanted.

How can you prevent these two possibilities from unfolding? The answer is simple. Complete the communication loop. Get feedback from them that tells you that they understand. But be careful how you do it. It is just as important that you as the boss show your workers respect. Asking, "Did you understand?" or "Do you have any questions?" is a very direct and somewhat confrontative way of getting feedback from a cultural group that uses much more indirect communication styles. No Mexican worker wants to show his lack of understanding in front of his boss. You and I are comfortable with a very direct communication style so those two questions would not be offensive to us. A way to check to see if they understood is first, to not appear to be in a hurry. Take a moment to greet them individually. Second, after you have given instructions, ask "Did I make that clear?" or "In what points have I confused you?" There is a subtle difference in this second set of questions. The first puts the responsibility on understanding what is communicated on them. The second puts it on you. It is a safer environment for them to speak up and say what they are not clear about.

I'd like to make one more point with regard to showing respect to others. Have you ever noticed that if you are at a social gathering of Mexican people, they make a point of formally greeting everyone in the room when they first arrive? The same goes for when it is time to leave. My Mexican friends will say, I need to go now, but will take over a half-hour to finally get out the door. The reason is that they will go around and formally say good-bye to everyone in the room, even if they do not know that person very well. I find that to be in definite contrast to my own way of doing things, although I do prefer the Mexican way. I find it much easier to slip in, say hi to a few folks, and later slip out when no one is looking. My point here is that taking time to greet one another is a very important way of showing respect to others. You as the boss will always receive respect from the workers and their family. It will strengthen your work relationship with them if you also show them respect through a formal daily greeting.

Telling the Truth

A few of you have shared with me that when something goes wrong in the milking parlor and you ask for what happened and who did what, your workers lie to you. You see that they are not willing to take responsibility for their actions. You could be right, but there might also be something else going on that is culturally based.

In the mainstream U.S. culture, we believe that telling the truth is to give the facts as they exist. Be straight. Be direct. If you don't tell exactly what happened, you are not telling the truth. We value honesty. For example, who here can quote what George Washington said about the cherry tree? And how do we describe Abraham Lincoln? Being directly honest is ingrained in us.

It is a little different in the Mexican culture. Truth is connected to the interpersonal relationship. Again, this is a subtle difference, which is so easy to miss, because we tend to interpret behaviors according to our own "cultural script". In Mexico, there are many different kinds of truth. What the truth is depends on the situation and the relationship of the people involved. For example, sometimes telling the truth is based on loyalty to the person you have a strong relationship with. What if an INS officer approaches a 12-year-old Mexican boy and asks him if his parents are here legally? If they are not legal, what is the most truthful answer for that boy? How does he take responsibility in this situation? If he gives the facts and tells the immigration officer that his parents are not legal, he dramatically changes the life of his parents and his entire family. If he tells the officer that his parents are legal, he is being loyal to his parents but not to the immigration officer. If you were in his shoes, what would be the correct answer? You might say, well, in that case, I would tell a lie to the immigration officer but it is justifiable in this circumstance. To the Mexican, being loyal to your parents is telling the truth. It is a different way to look at telling the truth than we do. It is relationship based.

So in the milking parlor, someone is not cleaning the milking equipment very well. As the boss, you ask, who is not cleaning the milking equipment correctly? No answer. Not because no one wants to take responsibility, but because no one wants to look bad in front of the boss. It is a relationship issue. As the boss, however, all you want are the facts so that you can solve the problem. You come from a culture that values a direct style of communication. It is efficient and effective.

A more indirect approach to handling the situation may be more effective. One way is to make the problem the responsibility of the group. Don't focus on who is not cleaning the equipment thoroughly. Make sure they all know what the problem is and tell them as a group what

the consequences to the dairy operation are if you lose your quality bonus. Tell them that if they see someone who does not know how to do a thorough job in cleaning the equipment that they have a responsibility to show that person how to thoroughly clean the equipment. This works if all of your Mexican workers are considered to be a close group. If they are not close, you will have to check the equipment yourself until you can find out who doesn't know how to clean them properly or you will have to rely on a third party informant. Someone in the group will let you know without letting anyone else know that he told you. When you do learn who the culprit is, the best way to work with that person is in a supportive way. Show him what you need without making him lose face, that is be embarrassed or feel stupid. The indirect approach is tricky, but it results in more satisfied workers, more loyalty to the boss, and better quality work overall.

Time

When we think of Mexico, we often think of the land of "mañana". However, there is more to this view of Mexican time. Again, like the other values I have talked about, the issue of time is intertwined with the importance of relationship or connections between people, with being less concerned about "doing" things, and more focused in "being" in the moment. For example, in Mexican culture, interruptions are commonplace and are not considered rude, as we would consider them. It is more common for Mexicans to be in the midst of many things happening at the same time. We tend to segment what we do, that is, do one thing at a time. If a Mexican is waiting on you in a deli, he or she might be waiting on several people at once. To the Anglo, time is money. The Anglo needs to be served so that she can get going with what else she has to do. She doesn't want her server waiting on several people at the same time. This messes up her schedule, her plan. To the Mexican, time is life and relationship. The one thing the Mexican knows he has is time and the most important thing to do with time is to enjoy being with others. When a Mexican is talking with you, he gives you his complete focus and attention because being with you in that moment is of greatest importance. Therefore, as an owner/operator, the most powerful way to show respect to your workers is to be with them in the moment when you are interacting with them. I do think many of you do that because you have told me how much you enjoy working with them and how you consider them to be almost as family members. As one dairyman told me, "Before the Mexicans came to work with us, we were scraping the bottom of the barrel to find good workers. Now, with the Mexicans, we have really good workers."

Steps to Communicating Effectively

Let me review then, some simple steps to consider when you want to work effectively with your Mexican employees. First, is to acknowledge that you have a culturally learned way of seeing the world, communicating with others, and making meaning out of your experience. Mexicans have their own cultural way of being in the world. When communication breaks down between you and your Mexican workers, stop and rethink about what may be going on. It may be something other than what you first imagined. Be clear about what your desired outcome is. It may be to have a safe, effective, profitable dairy operation. Then, considering what you now know about value differences and how that transfers into behavior, consider culturally appropriate communication that will get you your desired outcome with the least amount of added headaches possible. This translates into taking time to be in the moment when you are with your workers, treating each worker with respect, and possibly using more indirect styles of communication.

When I began this talk, I said that the barriers to communication were not just language barriers. A greater barrier is the cultural communication barrier. It takes a lot of work to become conscious of how your own communication style comes from your own culture and then to recognize and accept that there are other cultures which are just as valid as yours, but very different. It is difficult work to do. But the potential outcome is to have a life which is enriched with different ways of seeing and being in the world and a thriving dairy business. And you are up to the challenge, because after all, you are way ahead of most American businesses. And heck, you can always start practicing these cultural communication skills on your spouse or closest partner at home.

As a Final Note

If you are interested in this topic, I would like to suggest three books that you may want to read. They are three of my favorites! They are:

- Good Neighbors: Communicating with the Mexicans, by John Condon, Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1985.
- The Silent Language, by Edward T. Hall, New York: Doubleday, 1959.
- The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: a Hmong child, her American doctors, and the collision of two cultures, by Anne Fadiman, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1997.

This last book is a page turner and it is more a demonstration how the most well meaning good people miss the real meaning of the message when working cross-culturally.

