

Bridging Cultural Differences

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Preamble

International trade agreements, overseas operations and global financial systems have an effect on our business and national economy, and the dynamics of social change influence the makeup of the local workforce. All of these factors are demanding a shift in our management practices. The need to communicate clearly across different languages and cultures has become critical. Our increased exposure to other cultures requires us to manage accurate bilingual communication and promote an understanding and respect of foreign cultures, languages and business practices.

We can no longer afford to compromise the success of our business due to mistakes generated by erroneous communication, misunderstandings, and cultural misconceptions. Business performance can be optimized by valuing cultural diversity and bilingual communication as a business asset, and therefore, improving productivity, sales and profit margins. As a management resource, effective multicultural integration will reduce the liability of diversity challenges, business and safety operations.

The enclosed article sets forth a number of intercultural variables that are frequently present in the workplace. Its objective is to make cross-cultural business performance more efficient, aligning corporate objectives with cross-cultural interaction. As such, emphasis has been placed on several topics, for instance, differences in communication context, cultural values and, learning styles. It is not my intention to stereotype any culture, nor to perpetuate cultural misconceptions, or to indicate contempt for any culture; rather, to emphasize the importance of a clear understanding of the variables that influence communication, decision making and behaviors in multicultural environments. For it is through our knowledge and understanding that we can improve our interaction and working relationships for the betterment of all.

Cultural Diversity in the Workplace¹

Basically our conversation started by commenting “Why do Hispanic / Spanish speaking workers suffer more work accidents than the American / English speaking workers?” – In fact, the rate of fatal work accidents for Hispanic workers has increased by 72% from 1992 with 533 fatalities to 917 in 2005² – “We think, they continued saying, that it has much to do with communicating properly in Spanish”.

As I reflected on their comments, my memories took me back to my personal experience on living, studying and working in both countries, and the different aspects that influenced my decision-making, action and behaviors. It is through this experience that I offer you *Bridging Cultural Differences*, as an integrated approach to cultural diversity in the workplace. Understanding that it is not only bilingual communication that marks the difference, but culture, work conditions, literacy levels and training methods that also weigh heavily in what can be identified as the “*Cross-cultural Workplace*”.

Culture

What do you understand by **Culture**? Is it an attitude, is it what guides our understanding and explains how we relate to each other? Does it define our perceptions and our assumptions? In general terms, it is all that and more, because what we see in our interaction with other people are *Actions and Behaviors*, which are the end result of our cultural conditioning.

The best definition I have found about Culture is offered by Anthropologist Edward T. Hall, Ph. D. “Refers to the totality of **ways we understand and interact** with the environment and **with each other** (norms, values, beliefs, orientations, understandings and so on) that govern **our actions and behaviors**.” Based on this we can conclude that Culture guides our Communication, our Values, and the way we interact with other people. Therefore, it also defines our Perception, Common Sense and Decision Making.

Example: Consider you are working on a roof top. While working, your hammer breaks by the handle. What do you do?

1. An American Worker: As the hammer breaks, his Common Sense tells him, “go to the tool shed to replace the hammer”. His Decision Making: Goes to the tool shed, replaces the hammer and returns to his workplace.
2. A Hispanic Worker: As the hammer breaks, his Common Sense tells him, among other things, “I’m in trouble as my boss is going to think that I don’t take good care of things, that I’m just wasting time. His Decision Making: Hide it, don’t tell anybody or, even better yet, repair it, wrap with some wire or duct tape, make it hold and continue working, buy one out-of-pocket after work. Hopefully they won’t notice it; I’ll get the work done and all will be ok; no problem”.

¹ Note: This article addresses the Hispanic workforce in the United States. The information can be modified to address the uniqueness of other cultures and be adapted by companies who receive workers from rural areas or other countries.

² U.S. Labor Department, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Fatal Injuries 2005.

Communication Styles

Communication style refers to the way we communicate, understand and transfer information. Based on the way communication is conveyed, it has been divided into two major groups: **Low Context Communication** (LC) and **High Context Communication** (HC). It is considered the North American culture uses Low Context Communication, while the Hispanic Culture relies on High Context Communication.

Low Context Communication (LC) is based on direct, to the point communication. The meaning is explicit and dependent on the *Speaker* to clearly state the meaning (objective) of the communication. Cultures that use this style of communication, among others, include: American, English, German, Swiss, Scandinavian, and other Northern European countries.

High Context Communication (HC) frequently uses lengthy explanations, (as some would say: talking in circles), relies heavily on context. The meaning or objective of the communication is implicit, where it is not clearly defined considering the *Listener* will be able to conclude or deduct the underlining meaning. Cultures that use this style of communication, among others, include Mexico, all Latin America, Spain, France, Japan, Mid-Eastern, Mediterranean, and African countries.

As we communicate, we all move along the spectrum between low and high context based on our interests, objectives and needs. This becomes more visible in cross-cultural communication, where communication context plays a critical roll. Consider as an example, the guidelines listed below on communicating effectively from low to high context cultures; namely, from the North American Culture (LC) to the Hispanic (HC) Culture:

<i>Pay Attention:</i>	To the Person and the Entire Message
<i>Listen:</i>	To the Entire Message, Analyze the “Unstated Meaning”
<i>Identify:</i>	Possible Cultural Values in Conflict
<i>Explain:</i>	Using a High Degree of Background Information
<i>Show How It’s Done:</i>	Give Explicit Explanations about Objectives and Processes

Note: Table 1: Case Scenario H, under Communication Styles, shows additional aspects from low to high context communication.

Cultural Values

I understand *Cultural values* as the elements that define broad modes of our conduct. Their importance resides on what we value and how it guides our behavior and decision making. Cultural values are complemented by traits or cultural dimensions. These, influence our behaviors in areas such as direct or evasive eye contact, dress codes, our public demeanor, social hierarchy, food and eating habits, mental process, learning and work habits, among others.

The way in which people from one culture or another conduct themselves basically defines their cultural traits, which in turn reflect their values. Generally, the North American culture is considered to have a more *Pragmatic* approach to their cultural values, whereas the Hispanic

Culture would be more *Multifaceted*. Table 1: Case Scenario H, under Cultural Values, highlights some of the more common cultural values between both cultures.

Learning Styles

The education systems differ between the North American and Hispanic cultures. The North American system is considered *Sequential*, its learning style is linear with an analytical approach to problem solving and emphasizes specialization. The Hispanic culture's is *Practical*. Learning is based on memorization, stresses a theoretical approach on problem solving, and highlights a broad academic curriculum. Specialization, research and analysis are emphasized mainly in higher educational levels. Mexico's education system has been moving towards the American education style in the past decades, so the academic experience of your Hispanic employee will be impacted by their age and academic level. What happens when a new employee starts working at our American company? First, *Management* gives him/her a lot of *Information*. Much of it is in written format; it includes a number of manuals, procedures, benefit packages, company policies and the employee handbook. They also take him/her through an orientation course and assign them to a work crew. Second, once he/she is introduced to the work crew, his *co-workers* provide him a *Practical Understanding*. Essentially, practical understanding is learning the rules of the game for the company, who's who, the supervisor's personality, what they are expecting from him, and the work environment (corporate culture), as well as, what work to do and how to do it.

On top of all this, the new employee has all the good intentions of doing a good job, he/she wants to meet expectations and get the work done. Although this happens with all employees regardless of their cultural background, it becomes significant with non-English speaking employees, for whom their effort and apprehension on trying to understand their work orders, complete their assignment correctly and on time, frequently overwhelms them. Being overwhelmed increases the risk of incurring errors, misunderstandings, and using incorrect safety behaviors. So, on working and training Spanish speaking employees, we need to take into account two additional factors: Their *Educational Background* and their *Practical Work Hierarchy*, which seems to be intrinsic to the "practice of work" throughout Latin America.

The academic structures in Mexico and Latin America are very similar to those in the United States. The differences reside in the teaching methods and the academic advancement the student has, which impacts his work performance. Mexico's primary and junior high school systems and learning style have a theoretical orientation, underlining memorization. Much of it is based on lecture, dictation, and reading. Activities such as analysis, research, and group discussion are introduced during High School and are emphasized in college and advanced studies; we must be aware that attendance significantly drops off. In the United States, these activities tend to start much sooner at earlier academic levels.

The *Practical Work Hierarchy*, as I call it, dates back mainly from Mexico's colonial times, (1535-1821) and Latin America. It is a work structure, (organizational hierarchy), that assigns liability, decision making, and accountability, based on the knowledge and work experience the employee acquires. It consists of three hierarchical levels, from the bottom-up: Apprentice, Officer, and Master. As a new employee starts work he would be considered an *Apprentice*. He/She would be lectured (theory), shown how to do the work (demonstration), and expected to follow orders (no decision making). Learning would be based on practice and memorization. As

skills, knowledge and experience grew, the employee would advance to an *Officer's* level. This level allows for some limited responsibility and accountability, delegation is kept minimal. Learning is obtained through experience, study of the craft and reference materials. Once their experience and knowledge became solid and respected, they would grow into a *Master's* position and status. Vested with full authority and recognized for their expertise, they would have full responsibility and liability for decision-making and problem solving. Reading and printed material would be considered more as reference than study material.

This system although practical, is autocratic where delegating authority and empowering decision making basically does not exist. This tendency generates an evasion of responsibility and lack of commitment, mostly from lower level employees.

Currently, modern management teams in Mexico are putting into practice updated dynamic management systems which are similar to those in the United States. Mexico is implementing structures for the delegation of authority and responsibility, as well as, empowerment of decision making. In the United States, managers have a stronger tendency to delegate authority and responsibility. This permeates all levels in the organizational hierarchy and determines the company's management style. It is also rooted in the cultural values of pride in one's work, leadership and team-work, which characterizes the northamerican management style. Table 1: Case Scenario H, under Learning Styles, highlights the different levels of experience for apprentice, officer and master.

Case Scenario H

Read through the scenario in Table 1: Case Scenario H, then correlate the information in both columns. The left column summarizes the information on Communication Styles, Cultural Values and Learning Styles.

Communication Styles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listener • Non-verbal Messages • Status / Identity • Face-Saving/Candid Communication • Develop Interrelationships Over Time • Indirect Routes for Problem Solving 	Case Scenario H <p>Hermenegildo (age 26) recently started working with us. He was recommended to work at the company by Manuel (age 53) who has been working with us for at least 10 years. Hermenegildo is a hard worker and always has a good attitude when complying with work orders. Nevertheless, Frank, his supervisor, (age 37) is becoming increasingly upset with him.</p> <p>Frank has seen Hermenegildo constantly asking his co-workers what to do or, frequently sees him helping Manuel with his work. When Frank asked him if he understands his work orders he always says, “yes.” However, he does not appear to be sure of himself, he never questions anything and is always prompt to follow.</p> <p>A day or two ago Frank asked Hermenegildo if he had finished his work assignment. Hermenegildo gave him a lengthy explanation of the current update of his work. Hermenegildo had not finished his work assignments and had several errors which required re-working many of his task assignments. Although he helped doing the re-work, it appeared that he had become more the work-crew’s general helper than a member of the work crew.</p>
Cultural Values <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family • Education • Work • Time • Motivation • Communication • Truth • Relationships • Leadership • Criticism • Teamwork • Loyalty / Trust 	
Learning Styles <p>Master</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirm Information • They can “Teach” Others • They “Debate” Criteria <p>Officer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They “Debate” Experience • They Confirm Information • They Apply It “Practice by Doing” <p>Apprentice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They Apply It “Practice by Doing” • We Show Them “Hands-On” • We Instruct Them “Theory” 	

Table 1. Case Scenario H

Analysis to Case Scenario H

Note: To facilitate the analysis, on the right column, the quotation marks refer to extracts from Case Scenario H. The bulleted segments are observations to the extract in relation to the cultural component on the left column.

Communication Styles	Correlation to Case Scenario H
<i>Listen</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The emphasis is on Frank, as a listener, to decipher what is going on.
<i>Non-Verbal Messages and Gestures</i>	<p>“Has seen Hermenegildo constantly asking his co-workers what to do”, “he does not appear to be sure of himself”, “he never questions anything and is always prompt to follow.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hermenegildo’s actions and behaviors are non-verbal messages and gestures indicating that he does not understand.
<i>Status and Identity</i>	<p>“Manuel (age 53) who has been working with us for more than 10 years”.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manuel is expecting signs of respect, both from Hermenegildo and Frank. The fact that Hermenegildo is not meeting his work obligations and Frank is becoming increasingly upset with him, does not give respect to Manuel’s self-perceived status.
<i>Build Interrelationships Over Time</i>	<p>“Frank, his supervisor, (age 37) is becoming increasingly upset with him”.</p> <p>Note: This situation may generate conflict between Manuel, Hermenegildo and Frank.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It will take time for Frank to develop a relationship with Hermenegildo. Frank can use his existing relationship with Manuel to help build his relationship with Hermenegildo.
<i>Indirect Routes for Problem Solving</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the same way, Frank can try to reach Hermenegildo through Manuel, thus creating greater trust with Hermenegildo; improving the work relationship and allowing for correction, and detection of errors in work and safety behavior.

Cultural Values	Correlation to Case Scenario H
<i>Family and Relationships</i>	<p>“Hermenegildo (age 26) recently started working with us. He was recommended to work at the company by Manuel ...”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommending or helping another to obtain work is based on the concepts of solidarity, helping each other.
<i>Relationships and Loyalty</i>	<p>“Frequently sees him helping Manuel with his work. “</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hermenegildo might be showing respect towards Manuel or showing appreciation for helping him obtain that work.
<i>Team-work and Membership</i>	<p><i>And,</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the same time, Hermenegildo could be receiving from Manuel and/or asking for work guidance, advice and orientation.
<i>Motivation, Team-work and Loyalty</i>	<p>“Hermenegildo is a hard worker and always has a good attitude when complying with work orders.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hermenegildo is trying to show through his actions, that in spite of not fully understanding, he has good intentions and is willing to learn; by trial and error, if necessary.
<i>Communication, Work, and Trust</i>	<p>“He always says, “yes”, “he never questions anything”.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hermenegildo is still not sure of what he is doing; answers yes out of past experiences. • It also addresses the concern of <i>Criticism</i> and the cultural dimension of self. After all, Hermenegildo does not want his supervisor thinking that he is dumb because he does not understand.
<i>Truth, Criticism and Trust</i>	<p>“Had several errors which required re-working many of his task assignments”, “Hermenegildo gave him a lengthy explanation of the current update of his work.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hermenegildo is worried that if he says the truth – I did not understand, I’m stuck or, I’m not finished – will get him in trouble or get him fired; so he uses half-truths to explain himself, hoping that in the end, it will be ok.

Learning Styles	Correlation to Case Scenario H
<i>Apprentice Level</i>	<p>“Frank has seen Hermenegildo constantly asking his co-workers what to do”, and is always prompt to follow.”</p> <p><i>Note: Hermenegildo may be asking what to do, or even how to do it.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hermenegildo’s mindset and actions are showing that he is here to learn and to be taught or lectured.
<i>Truth and Criticism</i> <i>Face Saving / Candid Communication</i> <i>Interrelationships Over Time</i>	<p>“When Frank asked him if he understands his work orders he always says “yes”.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Places Hermenegildo on the spot, because he might understand but is not sure if he can actually do it; (Hands-on and practice by doing should be enhanced). He won’t ask for more explanations from Frank, only his co-workers.
<i>Master</i> <i>Officer</i> <i>Apprentice</i>	<p>“Frank asked Hermenegildo if he had finished his work assignment.”, “had several errors which required re-working many of his task assignments.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basically implies the <i>Master</i> asking Hermenegildo as an <i>Officer</i> (based on training style), if his work is done. Hermenegildo, who sees himself as an <i>Apprentice</i>, feels stressed and starts answering with lengthy explanations and half truths.
<i>Apprentice Level</i>	<p>“Although he helped doing the re-work, it appeared that he had become more the work-crew’s general helper than a member of the work crew.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This can be seen by the American workers as a demotion from Officer’s <i>Level</i> training to an <i>Apprentice Level</i>. On the other hand, being placed by his co-workers as a helper rather than a crew member is a way of re-training – it is better to have him learning by helping, than just sitting *by and watching how the work is done.

Global Effects

Recent economic trends, such as globalization, international trade agreements, and overseas manufacturing sites, have created a significant economic division between countries. Seen from a global management perspective, countries with economic power focus more on management and

delegate their manufacturing processes to third world countries. We find the in-bound industries and overseas manufacturing sites located mostly in the southern hemisphere. The parent companies are mostly in the northern hemisphere.

These globalization efforts have emphasized migration trends and flows to the North and to the West. Countries like Spain, Peru and Costa Rica are having the same immigration issues as the United States. In 2005, the UN estimated there were on average, at any given time, between 175 and 200 thousand migrant people around the world. That is 1 out of every 30 people who are migrating; in which 90% of the sovereign countries of the world are either points of departure, transit, or destination³.

As we think about immigration in the United States, we can not help thinking about Mexico and Latin America. Considering the migration flow towards the U.S., Mexico is frequently used by a number of immigrants as a gateway, platform or point of entry to the United States. According to Mexico's Organization for Immigration⁴, in 2005 they held and deported 2000 undocumented migrants from 60 countries, representing almost 1/3 of the countries in the world. According to interviews, these individuals were planning to enter the U.S. through Mexico's northern border. Nevertheless, for those who reach the United States, their experience as migrants, (first, second or, third generation), will influence their decision making, actions and behaviors in the workplace. They share with us their hopes, dreams and expectations for a better life. They are our co-workers, our fellow students; their culture permeates ours, reflected in all the Mexican foods and restaurants, music and sports. Hispanics are the largest growing minority in the U.S. Please keep in mind that Hispanics are not the only immigrants, there is a wide number of migrants from other countries – Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Italian, German, Ethiopian, Greek, Irish, and so many more – that also live, work and study in the U.S. and have influenced the American Culture.

It is through this exchange that we begin to notice cultural differences. For example, we all share the value of *Family*, though our cultural approach is different. We all value clear understanding, although our communication styles may differ. We share the value of *Relationships* and *Team-work*; nevertheless, our cultural approach on how to reach team-work and maintain relationships may be different. Therefore, it is these *Shared Differences*, that become apparent through our actions and behaviors, which have an effect in our workplace. I believe it is better to become aware of them, understand them and manage them. Since, as we continue growing as world population, there will always be migration, cultural exchange and shared differences from one culture to another.

In The Workplace

An area that strongly influences the Hispanic worker is his/her past experience and exposure to the workplace and work conditions. It is necessary to understand that the work conditions from which the Hispanic worker comes frequently do not match the conditions found in the United States; there are significant differences in terms of the use and access to work equipment and machinery but, most of all, in the concept of safety behavior as a requirement for their work.

³ United Nations, Commission for Immigration Studies, 2005.

⁴ Organización Mexicana para la Inmigración, 2005.

Hispanic workers can have an important advantage, which is worth recognizing, that because of these working conditions to which they are accustomed, they are exceptional craftsmen. If we recognize this advantage and attempt to preserve their skills and complement them with the training and work style in the U.S. we will end up with very qualified and capable workers.

There are other strategies to consider in managing a Hispanic workforce.

Immersion into a new culture is not only about learning a new work culture, but requiring an adaptation to all aspects of lifestyle. As we go through the process of educating and training Hispanic workers on methods, requirements, rules and policies, we may not see consistency in the workers' enthusiasm or efficiency. What often happens is that many Hispanic workers experience cultural shock, as their current experience is not consistent with their prior image and expectations. Culture shock can create a tangible impact on the worker's performance. A strategy to ease the tension of transition, if the work environment allows it, would be to move this worker to a different work environment or under another trusted Hispanic co-worker.

Not all bilingual individuals can speak Spanish and English with the same degree of clarity, and evaluating these abilities can create a significant communication issue within the company. I have seen cases in which a company owner would say: "No, I do not have a problem, I just choose the worker who I think can speak better in Spanish and English, and he/she will translate anything I have to say". Unfortunately, this approach often creates misunderstandings, communication gaps, and frequently mistaken information. What we need to understand is that bilingual people have to deal with a number of issues that can jeopardize clear communication. To be effective as an interpreter, a bilingual employee has to be knowledgeable of the subject he/she is translating and must be respected by co-workers. He/she also needs the ability to be accurate in both languages and to have a clear understanding of the expectation for this role. Not being aware of these areas can cause mistrust among co-workers, misunderstandings with management, and create frustration either due to favoritism or a burden of added functions and responsibilities without additional compensation.

If you have an employee in your work crew that essentially is a good interpreter and/or translator, develop him/her. Develop a career path in the company where the bilingual employee can effectively become the bilingual communicator for your company. But most of all, remember that if you are going to communicate bilingually, be respectful to your Hispanic co-workers by using a professional interpreter. On a daily basis there are matters that need to be addressed clearly in the workplace. You can not afford to be misunderstood.

Conclusions

As we think about the different aspects involved in working with a Hispanic workforce, we must consider that as a business we need to achieve the following objectives:

1. Improve the safety behavior of our Hispanic workforce.
2. Enhance the company's work environment by including the Hispanic workforce as team-members.

3. Increase productivity, sales and profit margins by incorporating effective cultural diversity, bilingual communication and cross-cultural understanding.

Thus, we offer an integrated approach as means of satisfying our three objectives.

1. **Cross-Cultural Communication.** Bilingual communication goes beyond language. Do it right, show the effort of communicating correctly with other cultures. It will be appreciated. *Suggestions:* Adapt your training materials and employee information to theories of adult education, language and literacy levels.
2. **Conflict.** Conflict appears everywhere, either covert or overt. Be prepared to identify it and resolve it as soon as possible. *Suggestions:* Determine the source in order efficiently manage the underlying issue that caused the conflict.
3. **Training.** It always has a significant impact. Management should request that the trainer cover not only work procedures, but also training on corporate culture. *Suggestions:* If this is not possible, gear your training towards a hands-on and practice (show me) approach. Bilingual trainers will make a significant difference.
4. **Cross-Cultural Competency.** Have you ever asked yourself, how much do I really know about this culture, or even about my own? Or is it something that we just take for granted? Make it a point to learn and understand about the culture and the people you work with. *Suggestions:* In the meantime, practice mutual workplace respect and tolerance.
5. **Inclusiveness.** The objective is to work as a team. This does not mean “you need to change and adopt my culture”. Real teams welcome diversity; they appreciate the benefits of different points of view. They share and know each other, most of all, they respect each other. *Suggestions:* Enhance your teamwork efforts. Interconnect *and get to know the other person.
6. **Management Commitment.** By all means, avoid token statements. They are not an easy way out of EEO and OSHA regulations; they do create cynicism, first towards the culture in question, second, towards management itself. *Suggestions:* Become accountable for your communication and decisions, your involvement must be unquestionable. If you are going to implement a cultural diversity awareness program, become its leader, measure it, ask for results. Don’t just let it go, be accountable.
7. **For the Long Run.** Working with a growing intercultural workforce does not have short term solutions. It is going to take time and effort. *Suggestions:* It will serve your company much better to understand the current cultural diversity and how to manage its impact on your company’s performance and change its effect into a competitive edge.

I want thank you for your interest and consideration and would like to invite you to read Case Scenario H one more time; try to determine what your assumptions are, have they changed? What is there that you did not see before? I also want to leave you with three more questions for your own follow up:

1. How does cultural diversity impact your workplace?

2. What can you do to improve the intercultural relationships in your workplace?
3. What is the next step?