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# Same Language, Different Meanings

Latin Americans in Mexico face communication barriers; too

Commentary by Ilya Adler and Maria Garaitonandia Tapie

**A**lan Riding, a former Mexico correspondent for *The New York Times*, chose as the title of his book on Mexico "Distant Neighbors." He was making an important point: that even though Mexico is geographically close to the U.S., the two countries are worlds apart culturally and socially.

This is not a lesson that most U.S. companies have learned when selecting the personnel they will be sending south of the border. Quite often, the only cultural variable that is considered is language. Hopefully, a couple of weeks at Berlitz will take care of it, and even if it

doesn't, enough people in Mexico speak English. And at any rate, they (the Mexicans) will adjust and learn to do business the U.S. way, since generally speaking that's where the money is coming from.

Speak with any American who has lived in Mexico, and you will hear a different story. Mexico is not only different from the U.S., it is often unlike other Latin American countries. It is no surprise that the culture shock experience in Mexico is demanding, exhausting and puzzling. It is equally not surprising that a rather significant number of expatriates in Mexico do not serve their full

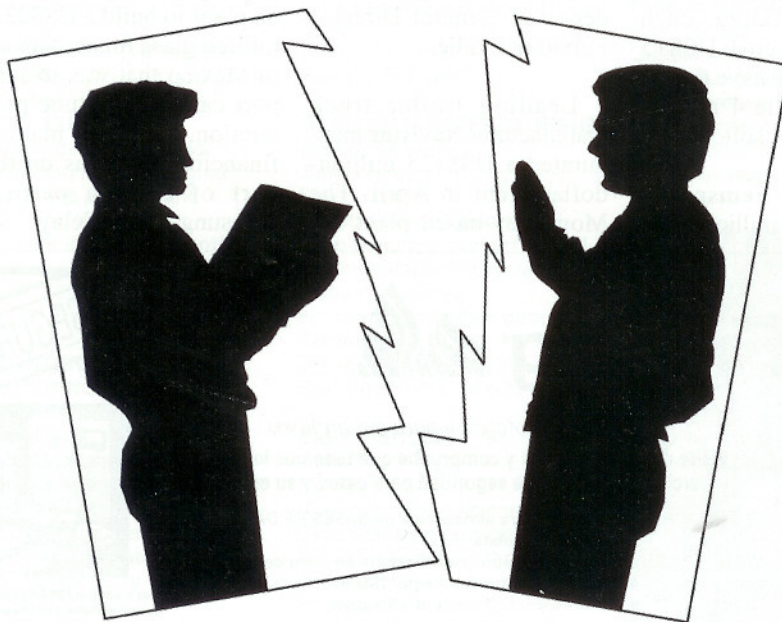
term. A few years ago, for example, one important U.S. company sent a few dozen professionals to Mexico (with their families), and over 50 percent of them returned to the U.S. within one year. It is worth noting that one "failure" of a typical expat costs an average of US\$250,000.

## CULTURE CLASH

Even when U.S. managers are fluent Spanish speakers and are aware of the Latino traditions, they often face great cultural obstacles. In recent years, many U.S. companies have sent Cuban-American managers to oversee their Mexican operations. As is well-known, Cubans are by far the most successful Latin American national group in the U.S., with an average income approaching the U.S. national average. So the assumption has been that since they are skilled in both cultures and languages, they could be excellent links between the two worlds, and of course, easily adapt to Mexico.

Not quite.

After interviewing a number of Cuban managers in Mexico brought down from the U.S., we found they often seem as frustrated as their Anglo counterparts. "Mexicans are too indirect—they are not honest," says one of these managers. The Mexican preference for using a softer, indirect style, especially when





communicating unpleasanties or opposition views, contrasts sharply with the more direct and loud style of Cubans. When Mexicans do not state their opposition verbally, or do not frankly say they will not be able to meet a deadline, it frustrates Cubans a great deal. Of course, and this needs to be underscored, what is happening is that they probably fail to read the other ways in which Mexicans express disagreements or communicate unpleasanties: non-verbal gestures, verbal hesitations, and so on. In this regard, Mexico is much like Japan, where a "yes" may mean many other things besides "yes."

If Cuban managers are often frustrated with Mexicans, Mexicans who work for or with these Cuban managers find them equally difficult to deal with. "They (Cubans) are basically rude and uncaring. They shout too much!" is the way one Mexican professional described his former Cuban-American boss. The gregarious and direct style of Cubans (and typically of all Caribbeans) is often heard as uncaring and insulting.

Then there is the issue of titles. In Mexico, titles are important and used often. You are not just Mr. or Ms., you are "*Licenciado*," "*Doctor*," "*Señor Director*." When meeting someone, it is safer to use the formal *usted* address until both parties feel at ease with the more informal *tú*. Cubans often find this a rather pompous and presumptuous tradition, and prefer the more informal use of *tú* and no titles at all. For Mexicans, this Cuban informality simply lacks respect, and as one Cuban told us, whenever he calls someone and simply asks to speak to the person by his/her last name, the intermediary (usually a secretary) reminds him that the person is a *licenciado* or *ingeniero*.

#### CAN'T SAY NO

It isn't only Cubans who face cultural differences with Mexicans. Often South Americans, especially Argentines, are viewed by Mexicans as arrogant or insensitive. Bragging in Mexico is viewed negatively, and modesty is a quality one

cultivates carefully. One Mexican professional working with an Argentinean told us that "she worked great, and I was prepared to speak positively of her to our common boss, but she kept telling everyone what a great job she was doing. You simply don't do that here."

Often South Americans complain that Mexicans "will appear to be your friends, only to later discover they were your enemies." One Chilean who came to Mexico many years ago told us of his frustrations when he was looking for a job. "Because I was told I was one of their top candidates I was led to believe I would either get hired or, at least, be called in for a final interview. They never called me, never answered the many calls I made." This fellow had not

attitudes toward work, including the much alluded-to "tardiness" issue, and the preference for the philosophical view of "work to live" over "live to work."

So the obstacles faced in Mexico by other Latinos seem to be mainly issues of communication style. While Mexicans are more reserved, more indirect, Cubans and other Caribbeans are gregarious and direct. While southern South Americans talk about personal achievements more openly, Mexicans regard self-promotion as arrogant.

But style differences often lead people to misinterpret behavior, since style itself is assigned meanings within each cultural group. It is for this reason that style goes below the surface. As was once remarked by a Latin American

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understood that the fact he was not called was the way he was being told he would *not* get the job.

Another Venezuelan executive who comes to Mexico to sell products on behalf of her company complained that "every time I visit a potential customer, they make me feel they will surely buy. I never know when they mean it or not." What she did not understand is that Mexicans, much like the Japanese, avoid telling people unpleasant news, and more subtle behaviors, such as silence, are the preferred way of communicating such messages.

The type of problems faced by non-Mexican Latin Americans is surprising, perhaps, given that they share common cultural roots. Indeed, when it comes to fundamental values, such as the importance given to personal relations, the feeling of obligation toward the family with the compulsory presence at multiple family reunions, and the great enjoyment of feeling and expressing passion, Latin Americans share a similar world-view. Likewise, they share many

scholar, "We (Latin Americans) should focus on our style differences, since deep inside we are the same."

What all this means is that foreign executives that are sent to Mexico would be better served if they received proper cultural training, even when they are Latin Americans. True, many international human-resource directors will argue that in the end they seem to perform adequately, and that most of their operations are turning profits in Mexico. But what is not often taken into account is the time lost, the personal and professional stress undergone, the crisis within families, all of which is translated into the never-seen accounting column of "missed opportunities."

*Ilya Adler is professor of Business at USIU's Mexico City campus and a principal of Kochman Communication Consultants, specializing in cross-cultural management issues. Maria Garaitonandia Tapie, a Cuban-American living in Mexico, is an independent contractor for translation and cross-cultural services.*