

El Buen Patrón

Mexican managers return to a tradition of paternalism

Commentary by Ilya Adler © 2002
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In the 1980s, many companies in the United States, aware that their employees' personal problems were affecting their performance, began to create Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) to help workers deal with their problems.

The appearance of these programs was certainly a challenge to the prevailing thinking of the times, and certainly to mainstream U.S. values, which stress the separation of personal and work-related issues. This compartmentalization

is a unique feature of mainstream U.S. culture: Don't mix personal and work issues; my family is separate from my friends; my tennis friends do not necessarily have to know my classical music friends, and so on. It is not strange at all that in the United States two friends may not have met either each other's family, friends, or colleagues.

For Latinos this is difficult to understand. Typically, in Latin America, if you are a friend, chances are that sooner or later you will be invited to meet and socialize with the other groups, and will meet and get to know each other's family. Likewise, attitudes in the workplace are dramatically different: Latin cultures tend to assume that personal issues affect work-related performance, and vice-versa.

Taking Problems to Work

Essentially, what EAP programs acknowledged was that indeed, personal problems do affect work performance. As managers have realized that personal issues affect work performance, "helping out" on some personal issues has become a business necessity. Paying for child-care centers saves many hours for single-mothers. Substance abuse programs clearly help companies as well. Likewise, people going through divorces could become productive more quickly with the help of therapy. What prompted the adoption of EAPs in the 1980s was much more pragmatic than ethically based.

By contrast, traditional Latin culture has always taken the interdependence of work/personal, family/friends, and so on, as defining the whole human being. So in very traditional settings, the buen patrón (good boss) was not only in charge of work-related issues, but often adopted a paternal attitude to help his employees solve or deal with personal issues.

However, this system worked well enough when a company had few employees. But, once the company reached a certain size, it was impossible for the boss to be aware of each employee's personal problems. Thus, with time, as companies grew to a certain level, the attention to personal problems simply ceased to exist. Culturally speaking, it broke a tacit understanding of how employers and employees were supposed to relate to one another.

The Pay Back

Now we jump ahead a few years to the early 1990s when some U.S. companies began introducing EAPs in their Mexican operations. They found-not surprisingly-that their investment in helping people deal with personal issues was a profitable proposition. And since everyone is saying these days that it is people who make a difference, what could make more sense than to implement EAPs in Mexico as well?

Of course, those EAPs have worked very well in Mexico, not because they were inspired by great innovation-oriented U.S. human resources practices, but because they legitimize a given in traditional Latin culture: You help your employees deal with personal issues, and your employees will give you back devotion and loyalty.

And that's what's curious about all of this: It has taken a "systematic" approach to employees' personal problems for Latin-based companies to go back to what they originally knew, but lost along the way.

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