



ABOUT NUMBER ONE

BY ILYA ADLER

A common saying among professionals in the United States goes something like, "I've got to take care of number one, you know," usually when discussing a situation in which the speaker had clearly behaved thinking of what was best for her or him. If you are more trendy and now consider Starbucks to be the primitive version of good coffee (now you roast the coffee yourself, in case you didn't know), you might say, "I need to take care of numero uno," showing a still limited Spanish vocabulary but one that may impress those who only learned "ole," (which no one says in Mexico except at bullfights) or "amigo." But regardless of how you say it, everyone understands who is Number One. It is me, the speaker, of course. This is not to say that people are selfish (as many Mexicans believe) but rather that you need to take care of your own business before you can take care of others.

When I conduct cross-cultural seminars in Mexico, I tell them about this "strange gringo" expression, and then I ask them if they can guess who that famous (or infamous) Number One is. Typical answers include "parents," "spouses," "children" but rarely, if ever, does it cross their mind that the person is actually talking about her/himself.

As is always the case, language use reveals the deep values of cultures. In individualistic cultures, such as the United States, to take care of yourself is not only all right, it is your duty, for only then can you be of help to anyone else. Thus the individual is the center of life, so to speak. Jean Mavrelis, a cross-cultural expert from Chicago, often refers to the many words used in the U.S. that start with "self." "Self-initiate," "self-service," "self-fulfilling," "self-sufficient," among many others. I may also add that the magazine SELF is extremely popular. In short, the self is important, and needs to be protected. Perhaps it is self-evident but, just in case, the explanation is offered.

But in group-oriented cultures, such as Mexico (and in reality, most of the world) the self plays second fiddle to the group, thus actions such as self-promotion are seen as negative traits in a person. Not only there is no magazine called "self," but the word itself needs to be explained in Spanish. Thus, when people appear to be promoting themselves (such as when asking for a raise) there is usually a



qualifying statement to the effect that "I am not doing this for me, you know. I have to take care of my family," and the family is the Number One.

So what's the big deal? One group feels comfortable self-promoting, the other does not. As it turns out, it does have many implications in the workplace, as often Mexicans (and Asians, and) are seen as lacking "ambition," self-initiative, and so on, on the basis that they behave more humbly, and therefore are already marked as "limited leadership potential," or are often paid less because they do not know how to self-promote.

As I write this column, I find myself in the middle of a process in which I am interviewing various people for a teaching position at my university. The way a resume is written, for example, changes drastically according to what their ethnic culture has taught them about "showing off." No doubt, and Anglo CV exaggerates accomplishments, and Asian one belittles them. I advise my International Human Resource Managers to take off 20% of an Anglo CV, add 20% to a Mexican, and add 50% to a Japanese!

To prove the point further, when I teach Cross-Cultural Management to a diverse group of students, I ask them to write down a statement in which they are self-promoting and then describe how they felt doing it. Most people do not feel comfortable, but Mexicans feel really awful, and some students from even more so-called humble cultures refuse to answer the question altogether.

Thus, taking care on Number One is not really an easy concept. One is just a number, and there are so many others to consider.

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