

Ni modo!

In these uncertain times, being fatalistic might be more useful than striving to be in control.

Commentary by Ilya Adler © 2002

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When I was in college, national development was a hot topic. We pondered over why some countries develop their economies faster than others. One popular notion was that for countries to develop quickly, their citizens had to have a strong internal sense of control and see their destiny as residing in their own hands. The opposite situation would be a country in which the people have a low sense of self-control: Destiny is not in their hands and outside forces determine destiny to a great extent. Another term used to refer to people who see external forces as greatly determining their destiny is "fatalist," and Mexicans have often been labeled as being a great deal more fatalistic than Americans. Mexicans often use the expression "*ni modo*" (loosely translated as "what can you do?" or "too bad") when they face a situation in which things go against them - they feel they can't do much about it.

A Time to Throw Up Hands?

The "*ni modo*" posture to life's disappointments contrasts with the "can do" philosophy prevalent in the United States, which basically says that you are the only thing stopping you from reaching your goals and aspirations. From this perspective, the "*ni modo*" way of thinking appears to be a weakness, and one that explains why Mexico is less developed economically. When people accept their condition as the result of an outside force, they do little to change it.

I don't know how valid this theory is, and I suspect that the truth lies somewhere in between. We, as individuals and as companies, can do much to shape our destiny, but there are external forces that sometimes are much bigger and more determinant than our own belief in how much we can do.

The way people from the two countries react to these days of great uncertainty and economic recession signals evident cultural differences. As I split my time between the United States and Mexico, I notice how the two nationalities react to these hard times.

My U.S. colleagues and friends spend a great deal of time preparing themselves to face these hard times. If they fear they will lose their jobs, they are busy sending out their resumes. U.S. public opinion demands that the government "do something immediately" to get out of the recession, and win the war on terrorism right away. They are angry that despite their personal efforts, destiny does not seem to be completely in their own hands. And as a result, they are certainly very frustrated.

My Mexican friends and colleagues react in a very different manner. They see the recession as something totally out of their hands - in fact even out of the country's

ability to do much about it. If the United States is in a recession, Mexico will be too - because of its economic dependence on the former. The only thing we can do is to wait for things to get better in the United States and then we can hope for better times here in Mexico. In the meantime: "*Ni modo!*" A job loss will be confronted with the help of family members and other social networks. Mexicans are certainly as worried as Americans, but seem to be much less personally frustrated and angry.

"In Mexico, we are used to experiencing recessions, and there is no point in wasting your time feeling angry," says a businessman friend of mine. "And I know that this one will pass as well, and that it probably will happen yet again. I do my best to strive, but if I fail, I won't feel it's because of anything that I did wrong."

He is planning on taking his usual vacation at the end of the year, albeit this time he will go to a somewhat less expensive destination.

So, fatalism is not always such a bad trait. In these difficult times, it gives us a better perspective, and a way of handling hard times with greater peace of mind.

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