

Improving Intercultural Awareness for Team Life

by Juan Carlos Parodi

To date, we probably have been quite satisfied with the ways in which we in AWM handle our international teams. Because the majority of our members are from Western cultures, our emphasis has been on orientating people from other cultures to our Western-style mission. It is time for us to look at ways in which our largely Western mission might adapt to people from other cultures.

Some of you might say, 'But most of our workers live in cross-cultural settings! They should know better!' We should not assume that living in a cross-cultural setting makes you a person sensitive to cross-cultural differences in a team. I have lived in multi-cultural settings, worked with people from North America, Europe and Asia, lived in the Arab world as well as in three different Latin American countries and learned six languages – and I still believe that we need to learn more about being part of a cross-cultural team. Most Western international agencies continue to fail in making non-Westerners feel welcomed into their family.

Unfortunately, in the past, some Latin Americans (including myself) have felt rejected, offended or ignored by Westerners in our own company. I am not saying that it was intentional, but I strongly believe that it was because of a lack of mutual cultural understanding. Intercultural communications include, besides language fluency, the awareness of other compo-

nents of communication such as the meaning of relationships, the notion of time, formality, hierarchy and non-verbal communications that people bring with them.

Speaking the language is only one part of the process in establishing a relationship with any other culture. In Latin America, for example, it is a priority to establish a personal relationship with others in order to gain trust. There is an enormous emphasis on strong handshakes, closeness, touch and a sincere smile. The Latin Americans will always stop what they are doing and greet you with genuine pleasure. If they have known you for some time, they will ask after your health and family. The place of a woman in the family is so important that you are always expected to ask after the wife and, in some cases, after the mother of the person you are greeting if you have met these relatives before. Showing interest in the family of the other person is a sign of respect and *sincere friendship* because family is what Latin Americans value the most.

With the development of globalisation, researchers are also considering the factor of the *individualism-collectivism* context as it exists in different cultures. Some authors explain that the term *individualistic* describes cultures in which the 'I' identity has precedence over the 'we' identity. In other words, individualistic societies, such as in North America, focus on individual achievement, whereas col-

lectivist societies emphasize the importance of belonging to a group. Latin American countries are considered to be collectivist societies where the group to which Latin American people give all their loyalty is their family. This strong sense of family loyalty goes beyond the family circle and shows itself in organizational life as well. And it will definitely be an expectation of team life for our Latin American members.

Despite the friendliness that a Latin American person might show to other people, it should not be taken as a sign of openness toward an immediate trusting relationship on their part. Latin American people are rather private about their personal lives and do not open up to a person who does not belong to their trusted social circle. Research in cross-cultural communication has found that members of individualistic societies are less influenced by group membership. Consequently, they are able to express more open and precise communication than individuals from collectivist cultures. While a North American can talk about a recent divorce or other personal matter to others outside the family circle, a Latin American would never reveal such matters to anyone besides close family and friends. Latin Americans are open with people they consider as their friends. And in a cross-cultural team setting, they would expect friendship from the rest of the team. This is all related to trust. If members of the team do not show sincere friendship, then the Latin

American might end up not trusting the team or team members.

So, if you have not established a friendly relationship with the Latin American person, you run the risk of having your requests ignored for the simple reason of priority. If you are not a well-known person to them, they will probably give priority to someone else whom they know well. Authors call this behaviour *personalism*. The following quote illustrates what this means. Latin Americans are 'people who seem to produce work for others primarily because of a personal relationship with them.'¹ It is important to point out that once you develop a friendship, you can count on the person's loyalty because you will be treated as someone they care about; it will be very unusual for them to let you down.

There is also a strong sense of identity among all Latin Americans. The legacy of past cultures has passed on many traditions that have been zealously kept by the descendants of these cultures, making it difficult for modernisation and globalisation to easily envelop these cultures. However, they are still open to globalization and to new international matters, as long as they can keep their sense of belonging and loyalty to their Latin heritage. That is why you see Latin Americans bonding together in close communities. Conflict might occur in a team if several of them attach themselves to their small group and put a wall between themselves and others. Such a difficulty could be avoided by a 'welcoming team' with a strong sense of belonging: not 'them' and 'us' but 'we'.

I would like to point out what Osland wrote in 1999 in an article on Latin American culture.² She explained how to express empathy and respect toward others. Such appreciation is given when you take time to understand where the Latin American team member comes from and what value this person has. This has to do with affirming the concept of dignity. Unfortunately, Western cultures do not take the time and the effort to appreciate people's backgrounds and cultures. Latin Americans see Western missionaries as 'task-oriented' machines that ignore them and are just concerned about their performance, competency and ability to learn the language. The result may be that Latin Americans feel used and abused. They need individualized attention and recognition of being part of the team. In the Latin culture, trust is built upon friendship, not on performance.

Good team life for Latin Americans and Westerners could be advanced by planning for multicultural understanding. The Western colleagues need to be aware of the Latin culture and traditions. Here are some practical suggestions:

- Talk about issues of diversity in your teams and ask for examples from different group members.
- Avoid ethnic slurs, jokes and stereotypes.
- Use resources and illustrations that represent Latin Americans.
- Take into consideration the variety of parenting and child rearing approaches. Parenting styles and

forms of discipline vary from culture to culture.

- Determine participants' reading abilities and language skills before using written materials. Avoid mimicking language, dialect or gestures of another culture. Never correct a Latin American in front of everyone!
- Be aware of special family needs. For example, some men do not want their wives to attend team meetings alone – so encourage family team gatherings.
- Be sensitive to people with special needs for special equipment and materials. Also, be sensitive to the need or desire to bring children to meetings.
- Bring in resource people who represent different cultures and viewpoints.
- Use colleagues' own experiences in exercises and activities.
- Be inclusive and be careful not to focus only on your Western team members.
- Be aware that the Latin social orientation is collective with a group identity and interdependence; it is cooperative rather than competitive and it has an emphasis on interpersonal relations. A Latin American team member will definitely 'die' in an individualistic team setting.
- Be aware of differences in living standards between Westerners and Latin Americans. I recommend that AWM families adopt Latin American team members spiritually and emotionally. I remember when I lived in Jordan, my team leader and his family made me feel that I was part

Seedbed XX No. 1

of their family. We should not feel guilty if we have higher living standards than others in our team, but we also should be sensitive to their needs and be generous as well.

- Remember that the concept of time for a Latin American is focused more on the 'present time/now' perspective.

When I lived in Jordan, my worst culture shock came through living with three Europeans. I fitted into the Arab culture right away because I loved passing time with people and talking and listening to them. My European roommates were in the house doing homework for several hours. I felt lonely since they didn't want to come along with me to meet Arabs. I was focused on learning Arabic through my

Arab friends; they were focused on learning Arabic through their study notes. This was an example of *Time and Task oriented* versus *Relational oriented*.

In conclusion, I would like to encourage Western colleagues to be extra compassionate, extra patient, extra loving. In other words, exercise the gifts of the Spirit when you interact with your Latin American colleagues. Wear their shoes and understand how much they have sacrificed to be able to minister to Arabs.

Footnotes

1. O. Osland. 'Organizational Implications of Latin American Culture: Lessons for the Expatriate Manager.' *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 8, 219-235 (1999)
2. Ibid.