The Workplace for Latinos: Building Culturally Competent Skills

By Dr. Ana C. Berrios-Allison

Understanding cultural differences and the challenges those differences create in the workplace become critical as differences in approaches, values, and expectations may improve or hinder levels of communication, work performance, and job satisfaction among employers and employees.

The following general insights about Latino cultural values may assist in gaining a better understanding of the workplace for Latinos. Caution should be given since these generalizations may not apply to all Latinos because of cultural group differences. Latinos’ levels of acculturation and assimilation to the United States mainstream values may make these differences become less notorious; however, this information may also be misused if generalizations about the two groups are made in a stereotypic fashion.

Work Performance

Completion of Tasks

Latinos tend to attach more value to developing relationships at the beginning of a shared project and more emphasis on task completion toward the end. In the U.S., the general tendency is to focus immediately on the task at hand, and let a relationship develop as they work on the task. This does not mean that people from a Latin cultural background are more or less committed to accomplishing the task or value relationships more or less; it means they may pursue them differently.

Decision-Making Styles

The roles individuals play in decision-making vary widely from culture to culture. In the U.S., decisions may frequently be delegated to a colleague. In many Latin American countries, there is a strong value placed on holding decision-making responsibilities to the authority/manager. Depending upon the job responsibilities, co-workers are used to being assigned tasks, not necessarily decisions. Therefore, many Latinos may convey a submissive attitude in the workplace waiting to be told rather than being ready to assume leadership.
Competition

Latinos tend to avoid personal competition and rather favor harmony at work. On the contrary, many Americans may enjoy proving self in competitive situations. Latinos in these types of circumstances, may be perceived as less skillful or as lacking initiative. Often times, this translates in poor performance evaluations and/or denial of promotions.

Deadlines

Although Latinos are very responsible, deadlines and commitments may not be firm. The assumption is that what is happening now is only important if it contributes towards the completion of tasks in the future. They will work extra hours to accomplish a task without being compensated in order to meet deadlines at “the last minute” and also to improve the quality of the product beyond the standards. However, if the completion of a task requires more time than the deadline, Latinos will ask for an extension in order to accomplish the “perfect” product. The emphasis is on the product rather than on the deadline. This may have consequences in a future-goal oriented society as in the U.S. where time is imperative and results need to be seen. For Latinos, time in general, is also marked by events rather than by the clock, so sometimes even if Latinos show up late to a meeting, in their minds, they are still responsible and loyal to the company (e.g., “I’ll go to the meeting after my appointment is done.”).

Levels of Communication

Conflict

In the U.S., conflict is not usually desirable; but people often are encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that do arise. In fact, face-to-face meetings customarily are recommended as the way to work through whatever problems exist in the workplace. In contrast, for Latinos, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning; as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly. A written exchange might be the favored means to address the conflict.

Disclosure

For Latinos, it is not appropriate to be open about emotions, about the reasons behind misunderstandings, or about personal information. If Latinos are encouraged to disclose in the workplace they may feel very uncomfortable and lacking personal control. Unfortunately in the U.S., they may be perceived as difficult people who may not be open to cooperation. Latinos may differ in what they feel comfortable revealing. Questions that may seem natural to ask in the workplace, may seem very intrusive to Latinos (e.g., “So, tell me, what was the conflict all about?”).
Direct Feedback

Latinos are being sensitive to being "checked upon." They are sensitive to giving and receiving critical feedback. In the U.S., confrontations are accepted and practiced. Critical feedback is expected and discussed. Latinos may feel uncomfortable with this direct style and may favor an indirect method since in general this approach conveys a sign of respect to colleagues. Silence and indirect eye contact is frequently used by Latinos as a sign of respect and may be very frustrating in the work place where the use of a direct verbal confrontation is expected.

Conversational Space

The distance between people who are talking is much closer for Latinos. In the U.S., many people may feel like their space is being invaded. Moving away may be considered discursive or negative for Latinos.

English as a Second Language

Learning English as a second language can be very demanding, especially when it is necessary for survival and functioning in a foreign country. Here are a few tips that will help you avoid miscommunication:

• **Clarify:** When in doubt, ask. It is important to ensure that your foreign colleagues have understood everything that you meant to say. Ask them to give you feedback about what you have told them in their own words. This may assist in addressing any major misunderstandings.

• **Get into the details:** Although it’s often tempting to agree on general principles and leave details to further discussions for brevity’s sake, this can create major problems at later stages. Indeed, an agreement on general principles may turn out to be empty, if it is not tested through negotiation on the finer details.

• **Summarize:** The time taken to summarize the decisions made during a meeting and to issue minutes to all participants is often a good investment. It helps to prevent future challenges of decisions reached at meetings and to ensure that action items agreed to at meetings are actually implemented.

• **Simplify:** Use simple words that are easily understood, and be consistent. Using synonyms can confuse your colleagues unnecessarily, particularly if they are not native English speakers. For similar reasons, technical jargon should be avoided when possible and explained clearly when it must be used.
Latino Work Expectations

Humbleness

Latinos will assume responsibility and get the job done without the expectation of being recognized for it. Being aware that they are contributing to the company’s goal is enough for their definition of success. The person comes before status and rank. On the contrary, in the U.S. the expectation of being recognized by a supervisor and other colleagues is part of the social status success. Humbleness may play against Latinos as they may not be seen as seeking success in the job place; moreover, they are often quiet about their accomplishments as they will see the opposite as an arrogant attitude.

Teamwork Approach

Latinos work very well in groups and teams to get things accomplished. Because of their community orientation, Latinos rely on one another for problem solving, collaboration, and feedback to achieve a common goal. Consensus is important as well as respect for individual talents. Since Latinos are group centered, cooperation is their natural way to accomplish a purpose. In the workplace, Latinos may make an invaluable contribution as a result of a teamwork approach.

Going the Extra Mile

For Latinos it is difficult to say “no.” Self-sacrificing is very common, and going the extra mile in order to keep things under control, avoiding any type of potential difficulties, and pleasing their employers, is expected. In addition, in the majority of Latin countries, (because of fear of unemployment) Latinos are used to hard work beyond office hours where they assume extra responsibilities at no cost to their employers. Latinos in the U.S. though, may be aware that they are being taken advantage of if this becomes a common practice. Especially since in the U.S. office hours are in general respected, and extra time is compensated.

Loyalty

A sense of belonging and development of strong ties in the workplace is important for Latinos. In exchange they may become very loyal to the organization where their commitment becomes unconditional, even if it means turning down other career opportunities. Latinos may have difficulty separating work from personal relationships. In general, in the U.S. many Americans are guided by self-loyalty where personal interests may be favored over relationships and/or the company’s goals and interests.

Rewards

Latinos, in general, may not expect formal recognition for their accomplishments since they do not define themselves by what they do, but rather by who they are. However, in the U.S. money
is often the main reward for achievements and it may be an end in itself. U.S. employers may need to take initiative in recognizing Latino accomplishments, while Latinos in the U.S. may need to learn how to negotiate their accomplishments and be rewarded for them.

Creativity

A main strength of Latinos is their use of creativity. Latinos are well known for developing strategies to accomplish what is needed. This is mainly a result of a survival mechanism developed in most Latin countries to fulfill basic needs. Their use of creativity is the result of a pragmatic mind, action-oriented problem-solving approach that may be of general benefit in a workplace.

Personal Appearance and Etiquette

Latinos are very formal in their manners at the professional level. Dressing and grooming constitute status symbols. In the U.S., appearance may be secondary to performance, and efficiency more important than formality.

Use of Spanish

Latinos may choose to speak in Spanish (if they know the language) to bond to each other and have a sense of connectedness and trust. It creates an easy way to communicate while emphasizing ethnic identity.

Staffing

Latinos will favor family and friends for staffing due to trustworthiness in the workplace. The rationale behind their preference is that learning can be acquired and a skill can “always” be developed. The expectation in the U.S. is that promotions are based on performance and staffing is the result of direct networking where recommendations are based on execution.

Ethics

Dignity and preservation of integrity is vital for Latinos’ job performance and personal satisfaction. Truth is mediated by the need for diplomacy. Negative comments from a colleague are perceived as being very unethical and lacking in respect. In the U.S., it is expected to hear a direct Yes/No answer where truth is seen as an absolute value.

Family and Mobility

For Latinos, family is the first priority and their jobs are secondary. They will favor closeness to their families and friends before moving for the right career opportunity. In the U.S., mobility is quite common and the families may play a secondary role in these types of decisions.
How can you tell if a company is culturally sensitive?

- Search for employee photographs, they can give a good indication not only of a company's diversity, but also of its promotion practices.
- Employ the “six degrees of separation” strategy. See if you know someone who knows someone who works for the company in question. Get the inside scoop on company politics.
- Do your homework; look carefully over the company's literature.
- If very concerned, expand your research to include possible EEO (Equal Employment Opportunities) lawsuits pending against the company. You may search a legal database such as Lexis or Westlaw.
- Learn about their non-discrimination policy (e.g., “move in” vs. “move up” policy).
- Become aware of any company-wide education to raise awareness of diversity issues.
- Research professional development and training opportunities.
- Become acquainted with equitable benefits programming and pay equity.
- Gain knowledge of employee resources and the existence of support or mentoring groups.
- Study how much demonstration or public support to diversity issues the company has in the community.
- Find out if the company fosters a safe work environment.
- Gain a sense of how rigid the institution may be towards the balance of family and work.