

Working in a Different Culture

Meetings

"Working around cancelled meetings is a common problem. You can make an appointment, but it may be cancelled by your Mexican counterpart on very short notice. Fine distinctions must be made in such matters. For instance, the other party may cancel a meeting because a positive outcome is deemed unlikely. Or your Mexican counterpart may feel forced to cancel because of a sudden demand for his or her time by a senior official. Mexicans avoid giving offence at all costs. A cancelled meeting may be seen as a much lesser offence than failing to agree to a meeting in the first place."

Doug Clark, Managing Director, Northern Telecom, México, D.F.

Effort vs. Results

In the words of one Canadian director who manages a company in Mexico, "When a Mexican deviates from a commitment, the most important issue is whether there was malice. If not, you are expected to forgive. This is also reflected in meeting business targets. Very often for the Mexican it is not the result which is most important but rather the effort expended in achieving the result. Employees find it difficult to not be rewarded for their effort first, targets and objectives taking second place to effort."

Canadians will find Mexico to be as diverse, complex and sophisticated as our own society. Doing business there may seem like a daunting task, especially for a company with limited international experience. The time needed to research market information, to analyze the opportunities in Mexico, to locate an agent or other type of partner, to negotiate an understanding, and to battle through red tape may seem insurmountable. For those who persevere, however, the rewards are substantial.

The first step for the newcomer is to understand and appreciate the cultural differences between Mexico and Canada. Mexican culture is distinctive and being aware of Mexican values will help cement a solid and harmonious business relationship. Mexicans are inclined to be more formal than their Canadian and American counterparts. In meeting with Mexican business people, bring business cards and be on time, even if those with whom you are meeting are late. At the beginning and the end of a meeting, they will take the time to shake hands with all those in attendance. They will make small talk about current events or the interests of their Canadian guests. For Mexicans, personal relationships are very important, and developing them is the key to success. Mexicans do not like doing business over the telephone. They prefer to meet in person as a way of developing a closer and more trusting relationship. The time spent developing such relationships will be well repaid.

The family is predominant in Mexican life and the family hierarchy is also the model for business. The notion of delegated responsibility, therefore, is not always readily accepted by Mexicans. Everyone is more comfortable when the person in charge makes the decisions. Mexican subordinates may be reluctant to go beyond instructions without specific authorization. They are more likely to make constant reference back to the manager.

Mexican culture is changing, however. Both government and business are challenging traditional business practices. The youthfulness of the workforce, and the liberalization of the regulatory environment has given birth to a new "can-do" spirit which is gradually permeating both society and business. Even so, old customs die hard.

Because saving face is important to Mexicans, even technical or administrative specialists may be reluctant to criticize or offer unsolicited advice to a senior member of a firm. By the same token, reprimands and changes in direction must be handled with great care.

Honour is important. The sensitive business person deals first with the individual and then with the issue. For this reason, an employee should never be corrected in front of peers. This could cause personal damage which may be impossible to repair. Privacy and delicacy are much appreciated in such situations.

Canadian business people with extensive experience, in Mexico have commented on the reluctance of Mexicans to say no. It can take a while for the Canadian newcomer to understand how to interpret the yes which has been given in response to a question. Saying that one does not have the answer is