

CULTURE SHOCK

Border Consultants are Opening Eyes to Workers' Needs

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Forgetting Mother's Day can get a border businessman in trouble with a lot more people than just his mother. Anabella Ramos of OD International, who offers bicultural and management consulting to local companies, tells the story of an American executive managing a factory in Reynosa who said holidays just distract workers from what they are supposed to be doing: work. "I want them to get away from the partying mode and more into the working mode," the executive told Ramos, a Reynosa native. The executive, who was new to the Rio Grande Valley, was learning Spanish from Ramos so he could better communicate with his factory workers. He told Ramos that he didn't plan to do anything to mark Mother's Day at his factory. Ramos told the executive about the importance of Mother's Day in Mexico, and how ignoring it could hurt his relationship with employees. "There are many management-employee challenges that people would not normally attribute to cultural differences that I clearly see as the result of cultural differences," Ramos said.



Teaching Business: Joanna Groom King, left, and Anabella Ramos of OD International are consultants specializing in the border maquila industry.

After learning the cultural context for the holiday, the factory manager used his basic Spanish to talk to workers, and he discovered that they were all excited about Mother's Day and expected the company to celebrate the day. The manager figured that if he didn't meet workers' expectations, it could hurt both production and relations with his workers, most of whom were women and many of whom were mothers. He quickly bought a cake and hired a mariachi band to serenade the mothers in his workforce. "After that lunch, he became very popular with his workers," Ramos said. The incident, which happened about six years ago, gave Ramos the idea that companies on both sides of the border need much more than just language training if they are going to work well.

Two years ago, Ramos met Joanna Groom King who for eight years had been doing management consulting for exactly the sort of Midwestern companies that were quickly moving into the Valley to set up factories across the border in Mexico. Ramos joined King's locally-based firm, OD International, enabling the firm to expand its management consulting services to include bicultural training. "Our

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backgrounds seemed to complement one another,” King said. “Each of us had deep experience in related areas of consulting and training, and it seemed to work well together.”

OD International (the “OD” stands for organization development) has helped organizations in manufacturing, agriculture, healthcare and other industries to more effectively manage their diverse workforces. King got into management consulting after seeing how managers she reported to effected her work. “I had the good fortune early in my career to work for some very good, talented managers, and one or two people at the opposite end of the spectrum,” King said. “I became very appreciative of what a difference a manager could make in employees’ performance, and wanted to help leaders learn to draw the best performance from their employees.”

Improving relations within a company doesn’t always call for crossing cultures. “Companies will see a dip in productivity or see morale fall off and not understand what s causing it, so they call us in to figure out what’s going on,” King said. OD International will respond by looking at how the company trains their leaders, as well as by examining people management processes within the company – such as performance evaluation and recognition and reward.

While OD International does most of its business in the United States, providing intercultural training in Mexico has become an important part of the work done by King and Ramos. Intercultural consulting has been a common service in other parts of the world, but has just started to catch on in the United States in the last few years. Inlingua, a Bern, Switzerland-based company that provides intercultural services in the form of seminars, language training, translation, and interpreting, has seen U.S. awareness of its business grow steadily in the last few years. “Ten years ago the people who would buy intercultural services were people who thought they had money to burn,” said Matthew Leavenworth, Director of Business Strategy for Inlingua in the central Mid-Atlantic states. “Now we have people saying ‘If I don’t get this training I’m not going to get promoted. I’m not going to move on.’”

During her time teaching Spanish and English in factories in Reynosa, Ramos began to put together a program for bicultural understanding between U.S. and Mexican workers. In the Spanish classes, Ramos’ management students would complain that their workers didn’t follow instructions and didn’t tell management about problems, while her Mexican students learning English would tell Ramos that management was insensitive to their needs. A poor understanding of cultures inside a company often causes big problems.

”Most companies decide to get intercultural training based on conflict they’ve had internally,” Leavenworth said.

OD International’s bicultural program handles issues including different views of authority in Mexico, how family relates to work performance, which holidays are the most important to recognize at work, and different etiquette and manners in Mexico.

“We were surprise at how interested people are in business etiquette on both sides of the border,” King said. “People are very concerned about embarrassing themselves or their companies.”

King and Ramos are planning two new bicultural programs. One program is aimed at teaching Mexican personnel the values and expectation of American business culture, while a second program helps spouses and families of executives transferred to the Valley adjust to the unique culture of South Texas. Both programs will use OD International’s formula of giving concrete examples for common situations where cultures meet, and clash. “Our experience has been that clients are happier if they can quickly get their hands on skills and approaches that they can use at work,” Ramos said. King expects that interest in the firm’s bicultural services will grow along with the Valley economy. “As companies become more aware of the bicultural program, I expect demand for this program to rise,” King said.