

Culture and its Consequences
in Organizational Communication:
Lessons for the Expatriate on Assignment in Argentina

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As the global nature of business intensifies, companies will find it increasingly beneficial to send their employees on expatriate assignments to their foreign offices. Most companies provide language training and assume responsibility for satisfying the legal and logistical issues of the transfer. However, failure afflicts as much as 30 percent of the assignments and costs companies a staggering amount, often exceeding \$300,000.00 per incident (Martinko & Douglas, 1999). To reduce this high rate of expatriate failure, preparation needs to go further than just language training, it must also serve to cultivate cross-cultural competency. Therefore, in addition to learning the language, an expatriate should also develop an understanding of the effects a country's culture has on its communication to maximize the effectiveness of the assignment. Seven aspects of culture-general differences deserve attention in this endeavor: language, nonverbal communication, contexting, temporal conception, authority conception, social organization, and environmental issues (Victor, 1992).

A culture's language provides the primary vehicle to convey meaning. Therefore, lack of a common language and its shared meaning presents the most obvious impediment to effective organizational communication. Victor (1992) cites four problems multinational organizations experience specifically associated with language differences. First, language barriers augment separateness, which slows the development of trust crucial for establishing good business relationships. Second, even when the businessperson learns the other's language, connotations associated with particular word choices and figures of speech fail to translate accurately. Additionally, the native speaker usually attributes more understanding to the non-native speaker than exists. And last, this lack of understanding results in unintentional messages (pp. 15-16).

Many Argentine businesspeople speak English; however the Argentine expatriate should attempt to learn at least some Spanish. Fogel states, "the secret of working internationally or cross-culturally is not to be a stranger" (1999, p.4). To avoid this perception, he suggests learning

enough of the language to demonstrate thoughtfulness. “People often appreciate it” Fogel (1999) writes when an expatriate attempts to communicate in the host country’s language and will even help foreigner to improve his or her communication skills.

Even if fluent in Spanish, the expatriate will need to learn the subtle differences of the Spanish language in Argentina. The Argentine speaks a dialect unique to his or her country of Castilian Spanish reflecting an Italian accent. Moreover, Spanish varies from country to country in connotations and expressions. The foreign businessperson should remain alert for the nuances and hidden meanings in any conversation. “Many misinterpretations result from not relating to the cultural context and recognizing that in every culture, nuance can carry more weight than dictionary definitions” (Fogel, 1999, p. 5). To check for understanding, one can repeat the details back to the sender clearly for verification of the accurate transference of meaning. Generally, the expatriate will find that the Argentine speaks elaborately and complimentary but also may ask direct and frank questions, especially to the female expatriate, such as inquiring about her weight, age, and marital status. (Ferraro (2002); Leaptrott (1996); Morrison, Conaway & Borden, 1994).

In Victor(1991), Whorf’s hypothesis states:

“The linguistic system...of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual’s mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade (p.20).

This concept of linguistic determinism can explain some of the frustrations encountered in cross-cultural communication. As an illustration, many North Americans expatriates report that the Argentine often fails to fulfill his or her promise; however, the Spanish language does not have a word for commitment. The closest word, “compromiso”, actually goes much further, carrying the meaning of an actual sacrifice of oneself. Therefore, the tendency of a western businessperson to ask an employee to commit to a course of action often fails due to the lack of a word vehicle to

accurately translate this meaning. The cultural communication pattern in Argentina of preferring to answer a request with “si” rather than “no” compounds the problem (Leaptrott, 1996; B. Ricke, personal interview, April 2, 2004).

Language, or more precisely, words however carry only seven percent of a message’s meaning. The remaining 93 percent comes from vocal and visual cues. (Harris & Moran, 1996, p. 33). Therefore, cultural differences in nonverbal communication, while less obvious, impact effective organizational communication even more strongly. Gestures, for example, frequently create misunderstandings. Harris & Moran (1996) advise that gestures may convey different meanings in one culture than another or may not confer any meaning (p. 33). Some of the gestures to note in Argentina include: brushing the top of the hand from under the chin outward which means "I don't know" or "I don't care", standing with the hands on the hips which suggests anger or a challenge, and extending an arm palm down while moving the fingers in a scratching motion which signals “come here”.

Argentine culture ranks high in power distance which Hofstede (1980) defines as the extent to which a society accept that power is distributed unequally and in Argentina “powerful people want others to be aware of the distance between them and people who do not have power” and use nonverbal cues to communicate hierarchical status (Osland, Franco, & Osland, 1999, p.220). Argentineans employ proxemics, nonverbal communication that involves the manipulation of space, and chroemics, communication through the use of time, to signify rank. For example, the Argentine prefers to host the meeting in his office where he feels in control and to prearrange hierarchical seating of the participants, placing company representatives of comparable rank across from each other. Leaptrott (1999) provides an example of chroemics:

“subordinates usually arrive early to attend to seating arrangements and other details. A higher status executive arrives later, with a

personal secretary, interpreter, and any other necessary members of the entourage... This grand entrance gives both teams an indication of who the power brokers are” (p. 9).

Additionally, clothing, especially shoes, communicates the level of prestige and power attributed to the person.

Other nonverbal cultural communication norms govern behavior. Argentineans may touch each other when speaking, and they maintain little physical distance between speakers, much less than customary in many other cultures. Also, in contrast to other Latin American cultures, Argentines take a firm handshake as a sign of strength and sincerity (Brake, Walker, & Walker, 1995; Leaptrott, (1996); Morrison, et. al., (1994).

National cultures also differ with respect to contexting. According to Hall (1991) who coined the phrase,

“a high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite, that is, the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code” (p. 61).

Cultures vary on a continuum with respect to the degree they engage in primarily high or low-context communication. Victor (1992) addresses key implications for multinational business communicators. First, high-context cultures like Argentina generally assign a high value to the establishment of interpersonal relationships before conducting commercial affairs. In fact, Leaptrott (1996), Morrison, et. al.(1994), and numerous other consultants warn that if an expatriate leaves an assignment during a negotiation, the process restarts from the beginning with the new representative. “Argentineans do business with people, not companies” (Leaptrott, 1996, p. 255).

Second, written contracts and laws govern behavior much more rigidly in low-context cultures. Conversely, high-context cultures view verbal agreements as more binding than low-

context cultures do. In Argentina the tendency to engage in particularism results from this cultural dimension. Employees follow rules and procedures depending on the context of the situation including who issued the guideline or whether an “in-group” associate requested circumvention (Osland, et. al, 1999).

Third and perhaps most important, high-context cultures value indirectness in order to save face versus the more direct approach esteemed in low-context cultures. In Argentina, the importance of upholding one’s honor and refraining from causing someone to lose face demands the attention of the expatriate manager. Subordinates and coworkers should never receive criticism in public. Additionally, Brake, Walker, & Walker (1995) discuss the implications for managers when considering establishing new organizational work teams and committees, “The issue of face saving is very important. To consult with those of a lower rank could be very damaging to an individual’s credibility” (p. 119). Therefore, they caution the expatriate to work with the chain of command and not attempt to “force egalitarianism by mixing hierarchical levels” (p.119).

Cultural variances in time orientation also affect organizational communication. Past-oriented cultures like Argentina make decisions based on customs, traditions, and accumulated wisdom; whereas future-oriented cultures like the United States evaluate alternatives in terms of projected benefits (Adler, 1997, p. 30). Adoption of long-term or short-term outlooks, expectations of meeting and assignment durations, and punctuality also reflect cultural differences in temporal perspectives (Adler, 1997, p.31). Rarely will an Argentine adhere rigidly to a scheduled meeting time. Foreign businesspeople should anticipate waiting and should expect the eventual meeting to proceed informally and at a leisurely pace, but they should arrive promptly and remain patient and courteous (Ferraro, 2004; Leaptrott, 1996; Morrison, et. al., 1994).

Collective views of power and leadership determine a culture’s conception of authority.

This conception controls the breadth and pathways of communication upward, downward, and horizontal through the organization. Additionally, it governs the degree of formalness and style of management the multinational businessperson should employ (Victor, 1992, pp. 171-182).

Hofstede's studies of power-distance, a measure of a culture's willingness to accept authority, offer insights for the astute expatriate. In Argentina most companies utilize a highly hierarchical organizational structure and communication typically flows top-down in autocratic style. Osland et. al. (1999) explain the disadvantage of this model stating, "information from the bottom of the organization seldom floats to the top. Bosses and managers who make poor decisions do not receive input from below that might help them avoid errors" (p. 229).

During the interview, Bill Ricke, who recently served an expatriate assignment as President of Sprint International in South America, discussed the resistance he received when trying to implement change in the culture at the company's office in Argentina. He took an organizational chart and turned it upside down to illustrate the concept that in a customer-focused organization, the customer and those employees on the front line interacting with the customers direct the organization and management functions to support them. Still, first-line managers expressed frustration when they approached him seeking an answer and he responded by asking them what the company should do. This observation underscores a culturally ingrained tendency in Argentina of aversion to uncertainty. In fact, Argentina scores the farthest from the mean and the United States in terms of uncertainty avoidance according to Hofstede's 1980 work. This fact imparts several implications for effective multinational business communication. First, according to Ferraro (2002) employees in high uncertainty avoidance societies prefer not to embrace innovative techniques, and desire a competent manager who knows the answers. Second, when faced with an assignment in Argentina, communicate change proposals in a manner that reduces the unpredictability of how the organization will function under the change, provide written

guidelines, and deliver the decree with confidence and authority. Interestingly, the former President of Argentina provides further empirical evidence to support Hofstede's findings when he comments on the international business climate in his country, "it has become critical that we reduce to a minimum the uncertainty concerning the fulfillment of such contracts" (Menem, 1998).

"Social organization manifests itself in each culture's enduring structures and institutions. Collectively these institutions form the underlying social values of the culture" (Victor, 1992, p. 77). These values-building organizations include family structures, educational systems, religious institutions, occupational organizations, political and judicial systems and recreational activity. Moreover, a society socially constructs norms pertaining to gender roles and group or individual focus.

The family including extended kinship remains the centerpiece of Argentine life, commanding the individual's highest loyalty. Most young people live with their parents until they marry. Children will often grow up with cousins as their best friends, and this closeness frequently extends into adulthood. The heads of rich and powerful families command widespread respect, but this respect carries with it the responsibility to care for others and maintain personal and family honor.

Family relationships carry over into business as well. Argentineans routinely engage in nepotism, filling positions with family members first and with close friends of the family second, especially in smaller firms. Argentines distinguish between business and family more so than do other Latin American cultures, but the two spheres of influence overlap to a greater extent than in most North American or European cultures. Even in business dealings, the expatriate should expect to talk about family and friends.

The importance of the family places Argentina within the collectivist realm on Hofstede's scale; however, Argentina ranks much lower on the collectivist scale in comparison to its Latin American neighbors. This could result from the diversity in country of origin among its population. Or, another factor to consider derives from the work of communication scholars, Bolman and Deal (1997) among others, who have reported on the power of myths, stories and symbols in the creation of a culture. In Argentina, the gaucho, an idealized version of a complex historical figure, remains as one of the most vibrant symbols of the national culture embodying cherished virtues of independence, bravery, athletic prowess, boldness, loyalty, and generosity. Modern Argentines believe that they have incorporated the values associated with the gaucho into their own system and like the gaucho want to appear to act solely of one's own free will. They view taking orders from somebody else as undignified and weak. Many Argentines, therefore, strive to get into a position to give orders rather than have to take them. At the same time, Argentines can express their concern for others with *gauchadas*, gaucho-like acts of generosity, such as going out of one's way to help someone else solve a problem. Argentines take great pride in their ability to offer a *gauchada*. Thus, obtaining employee compliance through the use of directives and rules may prove difficult; however, that same person may readily perform the act if one asks for it based on a personal relationship, as a favor. Then, the request appears as a *gauchada* and proves the individual has acted selflessly and completely out of free will rather than under constraint (Osland, et. al., 1990; Foster, Lockhart, & Lockhart, 1998).

Along with the family, religion plays a formative role in Argentine culture. More than 90 percent of the population subscribes to Roman Catholicism beliefs. The Catholic Church assumes a much greater role in the political, civic, and governmental affairs in Argentina than it takes on in other, more secular countries. The roots of the cultural script of paternalism lie in the influence of the Catholic Church. Paternalism fosters leaders in organizations who act as the great patron

taking care of their group members in exchange for personal loyalty. (Osland, et. al. 1999). As an expatriate manager, paternalistic behavior can cause problems with boundaries and result in inefficient turf wars when attempting to implement matrix-like organizational structures or cross-departmental work teams. Osland, et.al.(1999) offer a solution to this dilemma. They advise the expatriate to choose the team leader and allow the leader to compose the work team. “In essence, the team leaders created their own in-groups based on the preexisting informal structure” (p.227). If the teams adopt superordinate organizational goals, these cohesive groups may provide the company with a competitive advantage (Osland, et. al., 1999; Davilla & Samper; 1994).

Political and judicial systems in Argentina as well as other Latin American countries have contributed to the prevalent cultural characteristic of particularism, “making exceptions based on individual circumstances and the obligations of friendship” (Osland, et. al., 1999, p. 222). These countries share a Roman law, which relies upon deductive reasoning and general principles, that make the law more open to interpretation and, therefore, influence. This contrasts with the common law tradition of the United States that relies on precedence.

Machismo or maleness, an attitude of aggressiveness, power, and confidence and courage, governs the Argentine attitude regarding gender roles. While typically a senior male holds a position of management in Argentine business, women have started to enter the business realm.

For the female expatriate, Leaptrott (1996) advises the businesswomen to:

“be perceived to be a third sex...Foreign men are not so threatened by doing business with a Western businesswoman because the latter’s nonadherence to his culture’s rules does not destabilize the structure of his society...A Western businesswoman must, in fact, accentuate the differences between herself and women of the foreign culture. If she is perceived to be similar, she will be treated like women with in the culture are treated. She will not be taken seriously, and the man will take offense from the company’s choice of representative.” (p. 213).

Additionally, she should not behave like a businessman. Specifically, in tribal cultures like Argentina, the female businesswomen should remember that she resides “outside the tribe” and remains fair game until she takes control and defines the limits (Leaptrott, 1996, p. 215).

Finally, environmental factors such as climate, topography, population size and density, and natural resources contribute to a similarity of perspective in a given culture. Argentina's plentiful natural resources including precious metals, fertile farmland, and the thriving and well-situated port of Buenos Aires-generated an economy based on rents and a culture heavily influenced by the interests of large landowners according to Biggart & Guillen (1999). This reliance on the wealth afforded within its borders combined with governmental forces influenced the country's economic development including the types of organizations and industries formed and the country's view of its place in the world economy. “Many Argentines believed that their country was inherently rich, and that labor and business did not need to exert themselves in the global economy to prosper” (p. 739). Argentina has historically shunned foreign intrusion, regarding multinational companies entering the country as “illegitimate actors” (p. 19). While this attitude has recently begun to change (Menen, 1998), the expatriate should expect a high degree of ethnocentrism reflected in the organizational communication at the Argentina division. Mr. Ricke concurred as he spoke of a sense of superiority and arrogance Argentines carry, especially when comparing themselves to other South American countries.

A culture's perspective regarding the use of technology to manipulate its environment holds particular interest for business communicators. Victor (1992) advises, “businesspeople accustomed to the application of technology particular to their culture should anticipate differences in other culture's technological development and adjust their communication strategy accordingly” (p. 67). This bears particular importance when choosing the proper channel of communication to disseminate the message. In Argentina, fax machines typically cost over

\$2,000.00, reducing their popularity and population and that combined with the high cost of paper and ink contributes to a low occurrence of communication via facsimile. Email; however, offers a viable substitution thanks to the availability of internet access (B. Ricke, personal interview, April 2, 2004).

Granell (2000) provides an effective summation: “Globalization does not mean eliminating differences, imitating others, or allowing more developed nations to impose their models. It means integrating differences, pulling together our strengths; building from the differences and being able to join efforts for a win-win process” (p.89). To promote the effectiveness of expatriate assignments in Argentina, recognizing cultural differences and restructuring business communication to accommodate them will reap rewards in this new global economy.

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