

# managing worldwide

N°6 – September 2009

## Editorial

Does it make sense to talk about Latin America as a cultural entity? Same question about Brazil, with its regional (it's the size of a continent!), ethnical (7 main ethnical groups) and socio-economic diversity. Yes and no.

Yes! because there's no denying the impact of common history, common languages, common regional and national prides.

No! because as Carlos, our Senior Consultant, points out, in the corporate world, most Western expatriates need to recognize the need for a degree of complexity in management that goes well beyond traditional frameworks & cultural models.

Cross-cultural management offers a unique way to raise questions that any mature manager should ask her/himself, even in their own company in their home country. Doing so at home is highly desirable. Abroad, it's an absolute must.

For instance, who thinks of asking in his own job: "How can I measure my level of integration in this team?" Simone, our Consultant in Sao Paulo, proposes an approach that might be useful to most of your colleagues working in Brazil, and indeed to many other people working in countries around the world where relationships are the key to doing business.



## "Lindo, loiro de olhos azuis": Conducting Business in Latin America

by Carlos A. González Carrasco, Senior Consultant

Oh! Did you hear what he said? He is a racist, an opportunist, a populist, only stereotypes!!! These were some of the reactions at the peak of the global financial crisis when Brazilian President, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, met with British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, early this year. Mr Lula's striking and controversial remark was reported worldwide as "This crisis was caused by the irrational behavior of white people with blue eyes, who before the crisis appeared to know everything, and now demonstrate that they know nothing".

However, if you have a deep knowledge of the Brazilian economic system, you know that you can hardly find a "non-white" executive at the very top. In Brazil, the above remark is an historical one and refers to an anti-colonial expression pointing to Anglo-Saxon Europeans: "**Lindo, loiro de olhos azuis**" Beautiful, blonde, with blue eyes. It's used when someone who has exhibited arrogance and snobbery makes a mistake, but refuses to admit it.

From an intercultural perspective, if you ever thought you could manage effectively on the grounds of simply understanding cultural and communications styles differences, today, that is no longer the case. One of the key developments in the region has been the self-financing of training and self-development of a significant number of Latin executives who have become increasingly confident about their own abilities, experience and knowledge. Despite the current economic gloom, there is a sense of regional and national pride, a feeling of self-confidence and self-worth. When working in Latin America, Westerners need to abandon outdated perceptions and quickly move from simplicity to complexity. Latin American executives can no longer be described or profiled by using traditional frameworks.

Ignoring the new regional trend can only have a detrimental impact because it would result in underestimating the true potential of your Latin colleagues. To really engage in doing business in this diverse and complex continent, you need to move from a low level of cultural-awareness to higher levels of relationship-management awareness at the local level. When building credibility, respect and trust in Latin America, my recommendation would be to revert to the art of active listening and building solid relationships. Latin America business culture has changed. You might have to do so too.

### Mini bio: Carlos A. González Carrasco



Carlos, a Chilean national, has designed and facilitated training programs for corporate clients in several countries of Latin America. His favorite subjects: business integration strategies, communication skills, cross-cultural negotiations and global team building. His background: Strategic Business Consultant and Market Analyst, 80 international projects involving strategic intelligence activities. Carlos is a regular commentator for Bloomberg TV (Spanish network).

## Time and levels of communication in Brazil

by **Simone T. Costa Eriksson**, Senior Consultant  
based in San Paulo

The experience of living and working abroad for 13 years in 4 different countries (USA, Sweden, Poland & Italy) has certainly made me a bit less Brazilian than I planned. Still, based on my experience, the 2 most striking cultural differences between Brazilians and foreigners are: time orientation and levels of communication.

Do you control time or does time control you? The Brazilians' lack of punctuality and their 'ability' to ignore time can drive foreigners crazy. If Brazilians meet an old friend, even on the way to an important meeting, they would probably choose to be late for the meeting favoring relationships over punctuality. At work, the main complaint of foreign executives is that Brazilian co-workers tend not to meet deadlines and come up with last minute ridiculous excuses and justifications such as "I haven't really understood what was supposed to be done" or even "I do not agree with it".

On the other hand, Brazilians cannot understand foreigners' 'obsession' with time since there are always other more important things to worry about such as people's ability to be flexible, gentle and tolerant towards 'unexpected' difficulties; they prioritize maintaining good relationships way over time. It takes a lot of **intercultural competence** for a foreign executive in Brazil to be able to respect the local culture and, at the same time, to align team work on 'international time management standards'. Learning to communicate becomes essential.

Another interesting difference between foreigners and Brazilians is how deep and how fast they go into emotional and private topics in social conversations.

The 5 culture communication levels, as they are called by Pollock & Van Reken, start from **superficial, still safe, judgmental, emotional**, and finally, **total disclosure**. Foreigners seem to need much more time in the superficial stage to build trust and feel comfortable before going into private topics. For Brazilians, going too slowly would demonstrate a lack of interest and even a sign of coldness. Professional and social lives are highly interrelated in Brazil. To foreigners, the Brazilian way of constantly asking personal questions is probably very intrusive, and even impolite. However, they must realize that in the Brazilian workplace, personal discussions are not only difficult to avoid, they are **the measure of how integrated people are**.

If you work in Brazil, you should be aware of these differences. It does not mean you should accept and agree with them (not all Brazilians agree either), but it is advisable to find constructive ways to react to them. They can be a strong obstacle to your success.

### Mini bio: **Simone T. Costa Eriksson**



Simone's professional experience includes international recruitment, headhunting and customer service in Brazil and 4 other countries. She trains both HR professionals and expatriate families on intercultural issues.

## Cultural Tips

### Building solid relationships with Brazilian colleagues

1. View the possibility of a personal discussion as an opportunity and consider these exchanges to be a measure of your integration
2. Avoid any verbal and non-verbal communication that could convey a "Lindo, loiro de olhos azuis" attitude
3. When explaining why meeting a given deadline is important to you, don't limit your explanation to pure business logic: talk about your feelings