

managing worldwide

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Editorial

What should your training department favor in order to help your company's managers better adapt to their increasingly international setting? Country specific trainings or intercultural / interpersonal skills trainings?

Speaking about trends, Robert Gibson, Responsible for intercultural business competence development for individuals, teams and organizations at Siemens AG, Learning Campus in Munich recently stated: "In our company, over the last 10 years, we have seen a shift from culture specific trainings towards international /multicultural management and communication skills development... and we have encouraged it!"

To our mind, this opposition between country specific and generic cultural competencies seems fairly artificial since we are convinced that the essence of what participants gain in both instances is the same:

- 1-their ability to understand cultural and individual differences
- 2-their capacity to adapt their behavior and their managerial style.

As Astrid points out in her conclusion, Spanish culture is very different for some people and yet can seem more familiar to those who have developed their cultural skills set.

Enjoy reading about a real-life experience which could be helpful to some of your managers and colleagues.



Laurent Lepez
Associate Partner



Róisín Saunier
Associate Partner

Management style in Spanish professional settings: Is Spain still so different?

by Astrid Moix, Senior Consultant

Years ago, in the late sixties, the Spanish Ministry of Tourism launched an international campaign with the slogan "Spain is different". It was not specified how or compared to what Spain was supposed to be distinct or special, but this was not important, since the main focus of the marketing action was to promote the Spanish traditional attractions of the so-called sun-and-beach tourism. Nowadays, almost fifty years later, any sensible traveller who visits Spain will notice that the cultural diversity of the country goes far beyond the typical exotic images of bullfights, flamenco and siestas, with each region offering its own richness in terms of climate, language, art, folklore and traditions.

What about the Spanish management culture? Does it differ so greatly from those of other Western or European countries? Is Spain still different in that respect?

One should be aware that Spain is a [country of contrasts, and this also applies to its corporate and business culture](#). There is a curious mix of tradition and modernity, a permanent tension between what is considered new and old and this ambiguity is present in the way Spaniards work and conduct business. In my experience, more than in many other Western countries, large differences in management style should be expected depending on the size, region, sector and ownership structure of the company.

[However, in general terms, foreign managers working in Spain are more likely to succeed if they consider the following aspects:](#)

Communication style: Spaniards tend to talk more and for longer than people from other less emotional cultures. They are lively conversationalists, feel a little uncomfortable with silence and can express their opinions with vehemence. Taking time for a coffee or an informal chat with colleagues in the workplace is important and it should be considered as well invested time, not as a productivity burden.

Virtual and physical meetings: internal meetings, in addition to being a place to discuss professional issues and make decisions, are also real or virtual places to exchange experiences, both in the professional and personal spheres. When planning the agenda, it is important to allow some time for informal conversation. Business meetings may seem somewhat chaotic to someone not used to interruptions, loud statements and occasional bouts of exaggeration, but showing feelings and emotions in the workplace is a sign of interest and involvement in a given project. More than in Northern Europe, face-to-face meetings are clearly preferred, particularly for the first contacts.

Management style in Spanish professional settings: (continued)

Management style: the traditional bureaucratic structure of Spanish corporate management has dramatically evolved during the last 30 years, but, broadly speaking, the leadership style is still fairly autocratic and somewhat paternalistic. Management decisions are made at the top and delegated downwards, but managers are also expected to ask employees for their opinions. Negative feedback to subordinates can easily be misinterpreted as a criticism of the person more than the job done or the situation. Since face-saving is very important, such feedback should be presented in an indirect way using gentle terms and always in private.

There is a clear separation between the tasks of the boss and those of the subordinates. Each employee knows where she or he is situated in the hierarchical chain in terms of duties and responsibilities. Assigning extra tasks that do not correspond to the “official” job description can lead to misunderstandings and negative results.

Indeed, [this is what an American client of ours recently experienced](#) when he tried to implement in Spain a model he had successfully applied in Denmark and the Netherlands. Believing that his level of Spanish was insufficient to communicate with his team, our client chose a member of his Spanish team to act as a sort of ambassador, a contact person between him and the others. Information and reporting were supposed to be channelled through that person who, in this way, acquired a privileged unofficial status compared with the other team members. Their reaction was a mixture of jealousy and suspicion. Suddenly, their former colleague was not an ordinary team member anymore. But he was not the manager either... This situation caused a lot of confusion and negatively affected the performance of the team as a whole.

Additionally, the ambassador was not very happy either because he did not know how to manage the duties of his new role while remaining loyal to his colleagues and friends. In the end, we helped our client redesign his organizational chart, implement new channels and work on his communication style. The whole process, being a better fit for the Spanish culture, worked out really well within a matter of months.

Now, going back to the initial question: is Spain still so different? My answer is “Yes”, if you compare it to what it was. There clearly is a generation gap that has developed over the last two or three decades where management styles are concerned. I would also answer “Yes” to anyone tempted to minimize or deny the existence of cultural differences. But I would say “No, not really” to managers who have developed the intercultural/interpersonal skills that give them a real ability to adapt to sometimes strong and sometimes very subtle differences in the various professional situations they will meet.

Mini bio: Astrid Moix



Astrid designs and delivers courses in diversity leadership, cross-cultural communication and team building around Europe.

Prior to specializing in cross-cultural issues, Astrid held various senior management positions. Following a 7-year period spent in the banking sector, she then turned to legal advising working for Andersen Legal and as an independent lawyer.

Today, Astrid lives between Barcelona and Berlin and speaks Spanish, English and German fluently.

Cultural Tips

Working effectively with Spanish colleagues or business partners

- 1 – Be aware of your communication and management style and try to flex it to others’ preferences
- 2 – Think carefully about your organizational chart and the information / communication channels you’re using
- 3 – More than in most Western countries, don’t underestimate the generation gap in terms of management style
- 4 – Consider informal chats and networking with colleagues and business partners as well invested time