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# Things 'to' Say to Latino Coworkers



By

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If you've read [10 Things NEVER to Say to Latino Executives](#), you have a good idea of what to avoid saying in order not to offend your colleague or embarrass yourself. But understanding better ways of communicating with your Latino coworkers can be trickier.

"It's really easy to point out the things not to say," says Rene Rodriguez, president and founder of the Latino social-networking web site [Babbalu.com](#), part of the [DiversityInc Recruitment Network](#). He says when it comes to things to say, it's more about your approach than your words. "Whether you're African American or Asian or Latino, you get to know the person ...you get to know their culture."

Knowing about your coworker's culture can make it easier to address things specific to a person's job that crosses cultural lines.

"Performance is performance whether you're Latino or African American or white," says Ana Mollinedo Mims, managing director of The Hunting Ridge Group and former vice president of global communications, community affairs and diversity for Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide (no. 19 on [The 2008 DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity® list](#).) "How you carry yourself, how you present yourself and how you communicate are things that are difficult for employers to talk about with their Latino employees because they're not the things that you can measure like your performances."

Knowing how to address a specific situation that may involve cultural aspects is key to open communication among coworkers.

So before you speak to a Latino coworker concerning something that may be culturally sensitive, take a look at these six things to say to Latino coworkers.

## **What is your ethnicity?**

The word Latino is an umbrella term that covers many different cultures. Although they are connected by the Spanish language, Cuban culture varies from Puerto Rican culture, which varies from Mexican culture, which varies from Colombian or Peruvian cultures.

"I was once told, 'Happy Cinco de Mayo!' by a coworker at a previous job who assumed all Latinos consider the fifth of May a holiday," says Mims. "He didn't know I was Puerto Rican and that Cinco de Mayo is a Mexican holiday. If he had simply asked, 'What's your ethnicity?' or even, 'Do you celebrate Cinco de Mayo?' I could have easily answered, 'I'm Puerto Rican, but enjoy the festivities of Cinco de Mayo.'"

"We celebrate Cinco de Mayo and we're Cuban," says Rodriguez. "For St. Patrick's Day, my sister makes a mean corn beef! It's kind of hard because we don't really look at where the person's from to gauge what we should say or what we should not say because we treat everyone on the same path."

By phrasing the question in a general but direct way, you can avoid the embarrassment of making the wrong assumption while learning something about your coworker that you didn't know before.

### **How do you want to be perceived?**

Different cultures have various fashions, and at times these differences may be at odds with the general attire needed for day-to-day business. But there are more effective ways to address the issue of a colleague's inappropriate attire than criticizing.

"I was the only woman on a government-affairs team in the South, and I was the only minority in the whole office," recalls Mims. "[My boss] called me into his office one day to have a conversation about the way I was dressed. He said, 'How do you want to be perceived when you walk over to the capital? Do you want to be perceived like you're a lobbyist or do you want to be perceived like one of the assistants or the secretaries?'"

Keeping away from a cultural reference and sticking to the point at hand can prove to be beneficial for not only the employee but the supervisor as well.

"He spurred a thought pattern in me that wasn't there before, that nobody had shared with me before," says Mims. "A lot of Latinos don't come from the background ... their families have not walked in those places, in those rooms, among those types of situations to coach them to do that.

"I went back to him and said, 'You know what, all the other lobbyists were wearing suits.' And he looked at me and he goes, 'That's right.' And I said, 'I got it.'"

### **Share with me why you think that way.**

Instead of expecting all Latinos to have similar opinions, ideas, experiences and backgrounds, a better approach is to see them as individuals first. That means you shouldn't expect your Latino colleague to answer for all Latinos when speaking about an issue.

"First of all, don't generalize because the only thing we have exposure to is what the media tells us and our own personal experiences," advises Mims. "You need to put aside what the media tells you [about a group of people]. 'You're different than other Latinos that I've met. Tell me more about why you think that way.' Or don't even make the cultural reference ... and then it's no longer a cultural thing--it's just a difference in thinking."

### **What types of food are traditional in your family?**

Taking the direct approach works well, especially when dealing with culturally specific things like food.

"I remember living in Birmingham and having one of my colleagues ask me if I ate Cuban sandwiches," says Mims. "I said, 'What do you mean? I've been a vegetarian since I was 21. Why did you ask me about the sandwich?' He said, 'Because a friend of mine was telling me he had one and that it was really cool, and I was just wondering what was in it.' And I said, 'Oh, so here's what's in it' ... All of a sudden we got into what turned into this really good conversation about Cuban food, and what he really wanted to know was, when I came here did my parents change how they ate? He didn't know how to get there. He thought that would be too direct and too personal."

### **You got this job because you are the best candidate and you're Latino.**

Let's face it: Successful Latinos, like other traditionally underrepresented groups, are often viewed as filling quotas rather than as accomplished professionals in their field. But that doesn't mean that being Latino doesn't give them a competitive edge for the same reason their experience does. In understanding that both a person's experience as well as his or her culture could be assets to a company, you gain a better perspective as to why they may be in that position.

"The truth of the matter is, if my being a woman and Hispanic is going to be of value to a company, which it should be, then I have to be willing to tap into my cultural resources and my gender resources because that's what gives me value in the position over somebody who doesn't have that," Mims says. "I can't get offended if they ask me, 'What do you think Hispanics are going to think about this?' That's the value that I bring. We have to start seeing what we inherently have as a value and being able to use that value rather than always getting offended. So if you hired me because I'm Hispanic, I might as well tell you how we think. That's why I'm there, and not some white woman who couldn't do that."

### **I'm sorry, I don't speak or understand Spanish. Please speak in English.**

Out of habit, a bilingual Spanish-speaking employee may revert to their native tongue if they are around others who also speak the language. But if there are others in the room who don't understand, it can sometimes make them uncomfortable.

Rodriguez feels that in such a situation, it's OK to ask your coworker to speak in English. "If you're in a room with five people and two are Latino and three are not ...whatever the case may be, it's rude for those two people to be speaking in a manner that the other people do not understand," says Rodriguez. "That goes more to a courtesy issue, not so much a race issue."

### **Readers' Comments**

Posted: Sunday, Aug 03, 2008  
Things 'to' Say to Latino Coworkers

Many Indigenous/Native American organizations state that of the 37 million labeled Hispanic/Latino in the last U.S. census 75 - 95 percent are Indigenous. A language does not define an ethnic or cultural group of people. Ever wonder why the majority of us in the "Americas" were not called Indigenous Hispanic/Latino/African/European, etc...? Instead of first Hispanic/Latino...African...etc? I have always considered myself Indigenous...not Hispanic or Latino...I find it offensive to invalidate my long Indigenous heritage since the arrival of the Spaniard Hispanic/Latino, who have dominated most the Americas where Spanish predominates. Look at our faces...do you see mainly Hernan Cortez or Indigenous? Which is the dominant gene features? What about our food, dance-rhythm-music, frame of reference?

javier del sol

Posted: Friday, Aug 01, 2008  
Things 'to' Say to Latino Coworkers

Raul is a white from Chile.

If you have an Hispanic accent, then you'll probably be considered Hispanic. If you don't have an accent, then your looks determine how people place you into a category.

As this article points out, people may look at you and assume **WRONGLY!!**

But I agree with Clyde--I never ask about what someone's ethnicity is. They will say something if they want to.

Anne Herrera

Posted: Thursday, Jul 31, 2008  
Things 'to' Say to Latino Coworkers

In my 23 years in the pharmaceutical industry, one of the greatest rewards for me has been the ability to learn about the cultures of the people that have crossed my path, with a particularly strong interest in Latin America. I have never danced around this question; I will usually ask, "Where are you from originally?" at what seems to be the right moment. If the employee gives a US city as an answer, I'll talk with them a little about that city and then ask, "What is your heritage?" or something similar. Fortunately, my intentions are almost never misunderstood, because the employee usually senses

that I genuinely want to know about the culture that they call their own. If there's any chance that my intentions might be misunderstood, I will be quick to follow up with a more detailed question such as "Where in Puerto Rico is your family from?" In my case, it helps that I chair the Latin employee network at my company and that my wife is Colombian. However, if I didn't feel secure in my general knowledge of the particular part of the world that the employee happens to be from, I would be more careful so as not to say anything that could be perceived as unenlightened or insensitive. Instead I would ask them to talk about their place of origin so that I can learn something new.

Michael Esposito

Posted: Wednesday, Jul 30, 2008  
Things 'to' Say to Latino Coworkers

This article is more confusing than enlightening. The reason? The persons quoted make the mistaken assumption on several occasions that all Hispanics are part of a separate race.

"Performance is performance whether you're Latino or African American or white."

"That's why I'm there, and not some white woman who couldn't do that."

"That goes more to a courtesy issue, not so much a race issue."

Fact is, Latino or Hispanic is not a race. No one in the U.S. would assume every person named Johnson is part of the same race. Why make that assumption when someone's name is Jimenez?

Interestingly, there are more people of sub-Saharan African (AKA black) ancestry in Latin America than in the United States. Afro-Cuban salsa legend Celia Cruz is a notable example. And as a host of white Hispanic celebrities from Andy Garcia to Alexis Bleidel will attest, Hispanics can be Caucasian as well.

Let's celebrate the true diversity of our nation. That's not done by lumping all people with a Spanish surname into a monolithic racial bloc.

Raul Ramos y Sanchez

Posted: Tuesday, Jul 29, 2008  
Things 'to' Say to Latino Coworkers

I have a Spanish surname and I appear as other Caucasian Americans. Hispanics do not automatically assume I can speak Spanish and assume my ancestry is from anywhere other than Spain. Why do many people expect a person with a Spanish surname to have a tan? I wonder how many jobs I was passed over for when they saw my surname, never mind the fact that I was born in the USA and so were both of my parents. My hair is medium brown and I have brown eyes, but freckle rather than tan. While riding the bus or train, it is nice to be able to understand the Spanish conversations taking place around me, while the speakers are unaware I understand, until

I chuckle at a joke they tell, and reveal myself. I wished I was darker haired, tanned, but I realized that being able to blend in with other Caucasian Americans is an asset and being bilingual is an even bigger asset. I still get asked if I am from Argentina, Chile, Puerto Rico, among others. Hispanics come in skin tones, hair colors, shapes and sizes, not just dark or tanned. I often correct people who refer to the cleaning crew staff as Spanish, whereas they usually self identify as Central American or mention a country by name. When our office was being evacuated due to a hurricane warning, the announcements were in English, I wonder what some of the cleaning crew thought if they were unable to understand the instructions. All Hispanic people should make sure their children learn Spanish, even if they cannot, the same is true for people who adopt a child from South or Central America. Each child should be taught the culture of their ancestry and the language of their biological parents, not just that of the adoptive parents. The children will seek out what they were not raised with and the company of others like themselves. Adoptive parents need to understand the pull of genetics and not deprive the children of their language and cultural heritage. In the precious generation, parents thought to protect their children from discrimination by not teaching their children to speak Spanish, how wrong they were, it is a shame to see some left out because they are not bilingual or are not drawn to Latino music and cuisine. Bilingual children grasp languages concepts quicker than their monolingual counterparts.

E Alvarez