

A Cultural Look at Working with
Mexican-Americans (Hispanics) in the United States

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A Cultural Look at Working with Mexican-Americans (Hispanics) in the United States will posit what Americans need to know to effectively work with Hispanic people and how to manage this diversity in the workplace. In doing so, the primary focus will be on the Hispanic culture, which includes their shared experiences when working with Americans and how Americans experience Hispanics, the negative and positive stereotypes associated with Hispanics and the stereotypes that Hispanics have about Americans, the impact of these stereotypes on business, and the Hispanic cultures impact in the workplace when dealing with the Americans as the majority culture.

A Hispanic is defined as relating to, or being a person of Latin American descent living in the United States; especially one that is of Cuban, Mexican, or Puerto Rican origin (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, n.d.). Accordingly, Hispanic and Mexican-American will be used interchangeably and denotive of those persons who were born in the United States, but who represent the cultural experiences of first generation Mexican-Americans.

Escape Salon & Spa, Inc. ("Escape Salon") is an upscale hair salon in Murrieta, California, which is located between San Diego and Los Angeles, and east of Orange County. Murrieta, which is about eighty miles from the Mexican border, is a bedroom community with a population of just over 100,000 people who typically move there for the affordable housing, better than average school district's, proximity to major cities and the breadth of religious Christian denominations offered in the area. In 2010, the Murrieta population that identified

itself as Hispanic was 25.9% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Thus, about 1 out of every 4 citizens in the City of Murrieta self-identifies as part of Hispanic culture. Similarly 25.0% of Hispanics surveyed felt that diversity of Hispanic culture was represented in the United States very well (Conill, 2012). The salon has twenty-five staff members, five of whom depict a Hispanic culture, but only three out of the five self-identify as truly Hispanic, based upon their first generation ethnicity. Nancy Martin, Anita Armenta and Karina Alvarez represent the three staff people at Escape Salon who self-identify as Hispanic based on their ethnicity. Each woman was interviewed separately, one per day for three consecutive days and were not allowed to discuss their responses with each other until all interviews had been completed.

By its very nature a hair salon, especially one that is located in Southern California, invites and fosters a palpable cultural diversity, not only from the people that work there, but also by the diverse clientele that seeks its beautification services. Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that Escape Salon's workforce and substantial clientele represents the spectrum of cultural diversity, which includes different races, colors, genders, sexual orientations, religions, national origins and accommodations. However, staff members Nancy, Anita and Karina who represent the Generation X, Y and Z respectively will be the focus of research when advancing *A Cultural Look at Working with Mexican-Americans (Hispanics) in the United States*.

The shared experiences Hispanics have when working with Americans are extremely culturally driven. Nancy, a Generation X cohort, whose father crossed the Mexican border in the 1960s to start a family in the United States, still holds true to her Mexican beliefs of being hardworking, honest and loyal to her employer. Prior to her working at Escape Salon, Nancy

worked at a school district as an interpreter. She soon discovered that she shared the same values and experiences as the American employees, because they too were passionate about their work. These similarities allowed her to be treated the same as her American co-workers, even though she self-identified as a Mexican-American via ethnicity.

Anita, a Generation Y cohort, whose parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico were very poor and had a ‘live to survive’ mentality. Like Nancy, she still holds true to her Mexican beliefs, but is working more to survive. Anita believes that even though she was born and raised in the United States, the strict and disciplined way that she was raised is more culturally endemic to her Mexican ancestry. Prior to her working at Escape Salon, Anita worked at a local bar and restaurant. Consequently, because of the low wages, restaurant work represented a ‘live to survive’ mentality that was culturally learned by Anita’s upbringing. This value and experience was equally shared by Anita’s fellow American co-workers, which engendered a more cohesive workplace, even though she self-identified as a Mexican-American via ethnicity.

While pregnant with Karina, who represents a Generation Z cohort, her mother immigrated illegally to the United States from Mexico and adopted an ‘equality for all’ mentality for her family. Like Nancy and Anita, Karina still holds true to her Mexican beliefs, but is more self-aware of the exploitation of Hispanics, because of the dearth of inequality in the workplace she has experienced. Prior to working at Escape Salon, Karina worked at a business that only wanted to hire Mexicans, because they sought to exploit them for not being familiar with the wage and hour laws, this included uneducated Hispanics and Americans as well. Subsequently,

because of this exploitation, restaurant work represented a lack of ‘equality for all’ mentality that was manifested by Karina’s cultural upbringing. This value and experience was equally shared by Karina and her fellow co-workers, Mexicans and Americans alike, but became more conspicuous when a Caucasian friend of hers was denied employment, because of the business’ covert discriminatory policy. Interestingly, because of this perceived ‘equality for all’ mentality, Karina self-identifies as a Mexican-American via ethnicity, as well as race.

Strikingly, all three women had similar responses as to how Americans experience Hispanics when it comes to illegal Mexicans, but not so when it comes to experiencing legal Mexican-Americans (Hispanics), which they all self-identify. In Nancy’s experience, Americans have always treated her with respect in-and-out of the workplace. She attributes this respect to her cultural upbringing insofar that her family valued education and the acquisition of assets. As a result, this instilled cultural philosophy of education and acquiring assets has positively impacted her life personally and professionally to the extent that she has never experienced racial discrimination, because Americans experience her as an educated Hispanic with money.

In Anita’s experience she has found that American’s value her sense of loyalty, especially employers. She attributes this to her cultural upbringing as well insofar that Hispanics look out for one another, especially those that work together. It is Anita’s belief that Americans rely on that sense of loyalty that Hispanics have for each other and consequently hire Mexican-American friends of hers to foster that workplace loyalty.

In Karina's experience she has found that Americans see her as an equal in some sense, because she is a citizen. Culturally, Karina was brought up to treat people fairly regardless of the color of their skin and consequently this is how most Americans experience Karina.

Experiencing people with different cultural backgrounds inevitably leads to the manifestation of stereotypes, positive and negative for reasons that may be concomitant with economics, power and social stratification. Nancy, Anita and Karina see the negative stereotypes of Hispanics more aligned with illegal Mexicans, insofar that they are labeled lazy, uneducated, dirty, and are only in the United States to create problems and steal jobs from Americans. Unfortunately by conflating the stereotypes with illegal Mexicans, Hispanics have had less success in accessing and advancing in the U.S. labor market than the majority culture (United States Department of Labor, 1997). However, Nancy views herself and other Mexican-Americans with more positive stereotypes, insofar that they are hardworking, will work for less money, trusting and family-centric. Nancy related a story that one of her clients will only hire Mexican-Americans, because of this hardworking stereotype, regardless if this hiring tactic may rise to the level of a Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964) disparate treatment, because other ethnicities are intentionally being discriminated against.

Anita views herself and other Mexican-Americans with the positive stereotypes of being hardworking, but that they are also warm, friendly and love their country's food. For Anita, food is very central to the cultural identity of Hispanics, with recipes handed down from generation-to-generation. However, Anita has Americanized some of the recipes, much to the dismay of her mother, to reflect a healthier California lifestyle. In the workplace, Anita has

shared many of her recipes with her American co-workers as a way for them to understand and share in her cultural identity of what it means to be a Mexican-American.

Karina views herself and other Mexican-Americans with the positive stereotypes of being family-centric, respectful to their employer and able to connect with Hispanic clients. For Karina, the stereotype of being able to connect with Hispanic clients has become an integral part of building her business. Nancy, who is an esthetician in the salon frequently refers her Hispanic clients to Karina, a hairstylist, because connecting with someone of your own cultural upbringing engenders and accelerates a more positive and trusting experience for the client, than could not be easily established by an American hairstylist. However, positive and negative stereotypes are not just for Hispanics, but they also apply to other cultures.

It should come as no surprise that Hispanics have their own positive and negative stereotypes about Americans. Nancy feels that Americans place too much importance on money, and not enough on family. Nancy said, “Americans try to get their kids out of the house as soon as they can, whereas the Hispanic culture invites all their relatives to live together under one roof.” Likewise, Anita feels that American’s are negatively stereotyped as “quick-buck artists” by Hispanics, because they try to make money too fast, whereas her Hispanic culture has taught her to be more responsible with money, because she has less of it. Karina, the youngest of the group and a Generation Z cohort, negatively assigns the stereotype that most illegal Mexican’s think that Americans are racist, lazy and unappreciative for the things they have. However, as a Hispanic, Karina does not assign stereotypes to people, including Americans, because as she stated, “It’s not about a stereotype. It comes down to [a] personality, which may eventually

identify a stereotype.” Consequently, even when attempting to extract information of the stereotypical American, positively or negatively, Karina continued to emote an ‘equality for all’ mentality that is demonstrably central to her cultural upbringing. Accordingly, it is these stereotypes, which create a profound impact on a business’ organization.

Nancy believes that because Americans place too much importance on money and not enough on family, that some organizations are impacted more than others, because of the conflict money creates. In America, the quest for profits creates a socioeconomic stratification that invites conflict, but when family values, especially those of a Mexican culture are integrated, it has an ameliorative effect. Although Nancy’s father came to the United States illegally in the 1960s seeking a better life, all of his family chose to stay in Mexico. In doing so, they were able to accumulate substantial wealth without having to sacrifice their family values, and did not look upon the United States as the ‘land of opportunity,’ but rather as a country, which placed monetary gains above all else – including family.

Anita echoes similar sentiments as Nancy; insofar that Americans have an almost unquenchable thirst for money. Anita states, “Although Americans are generally better educated and work smarter than Hispanics, it is this ‘quick-buck artist’ mentality that has stereotyped Americans, which negatively impacts a business’s organization and its survivability. It was widely known within the small community of Temecula, California that had the owner of the restaurant, which Anita previously worked at been more financially responsible, as her cultural upbringing taught her, they probably would not have gone out of business five years ago.

Karina echoes similar sentiments as Anita, insofar that Americans are generally better educated and smarter than Hispanics. However, she believes that this will only get an organization so far, because they also need to employ hard and smart workers to ensure that the organization is not only on an 'equal' plane with its competitors, but is also 'equally' representative of the cultural diversity of the immediate area to be successful, and correlative and central to her cultural 'equality for all' identity. Although stereotypes tend to be the most obvious, cultures, especially Hispanic cultures, do indeed impact the workplace when dealing with the Americans as the majority culture.

Without question, Nancy, Anita and Karina all agree that speaking Spanish in the workplace, especially in front the Americans, who represent the majority culture, at times, makes the Americans feel uncomfortable, because they probably think they are being secretly talked about. However, it is because of this bi-lingual ability that most American business owners, including salon owner Joelle Garfinkel, love to embrace Hispanics for competitive reasons. Food is also an essential part of Hispanic culture for Nancy, Anita and Karina, which positively impacts the workplace's majority culture. Insofar, that traditional Hispanic or Americanized-Hispanic recipes are discussed at great lengths and traded, not only between Nancy, Anita and Karina, but more so with the other American women whose husbands come from a traditional Mexican or Hispanic family. Interestingly, the Hispanic cultural practices that one would think would be endemic to our three Hispanic women spanning three generations were not present. None of the three celebrated *día de independencia de Mexico*, which occurs on *16 de Septiembre*, i.e., September 16, but rather celebrate Independence Day on the Fourth of July. Whether it is through language or food, Hispanic culture impacts the workplace in a mostly

positive way with the Americans as the majority culture, but it is clear that through Americanization, some cultural practices have lost their significance.

When reviewing the answers of Nancy, Anita and Karina, which represent X, Y, and Z cohorts respectively all of them fall within the ambit of their generational personalities in some way. Nancy, who values the balance of work and home, typifies the core values of a Generation Xer (Holtzman, Krueger & Srock, 2012). Anita's 'live to survive' mentality compares with the core values of having 'street smarts' with that of a Generation Yer (Holtzman, et al., 2012). Karina whose 'equality for all' mentality is supported more by the core values of a Generation Xer is in her own way trying to point her generational cohort in the right direction. A cohort that is all consumed with social media and tolerates practices that are demeaning to women, e.g., sexual harassment. As Generation Zer Emily Spangler said, "Our [cohort] is the future, and for young men and women to be guaranteed equal opportunities in the world we must start taking a stand to end these demeaning practices" (Spangler, 2013). With Generation Z leaders like Emily and Karina, it is only a matter of time and research when 'equality for all' becomes a more prominent value for our younger generations to achieve.

Nancy's, Anita's and Karina's shared experiences when working with Americans and how Americans experience Hispanics, the negative and positive stereotypes associated with Hispanics and the stereotypes that Hispanics have about Americans, the impact of these stereotypes on business, the Hispanic cultures impact in the workplace and their commonly held experiences when dealing with the Americans as the majority culture clearly demonstrates the knowledge that Americans need to effectively work with Hispanics and manage this diversity in

the workplace. In order for Americans to work effectively with and manage Hispanics in the workplace they must be interactive on all generational levels, place more importance on family values and exhibit the loyalty and respect that they have received from their Mexican-American colleagues.

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