



Cultural communication
crucial to business
success between the
U.S. and Mexico

By Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez

Bridge over troubled border

PHOENIX RESIDENT LISA J. Koss has made a successful business – and a name for herself – out of her deep understanding of the cultures and languages of the United States and Mexico, and the many ways in which they intersect, or don't.

Through her company, International Advantage, Koss, who holds degrees in linguistics and management, works to help organizations, businesses and people to, she says, “achieve their goals across cultures.”

When U.S.-based connector parts manufacturer Molex, Inc., discovered tensions between its American executives and Mexican executives at its Nogales, Mexico, factory, the company called Koss to mediate. She spent time observing meetings, and watching the management team – which is half-American and half-Mexican – interact. Afterwards, she told them what she often tells people in these situations.

“You might think you have interpersonal conflicts,” she says. “But in fact you have intercultural conflicts.”

Koss said that cultural norms that are considered proper in Mexico are often interpreted incorrectly by Americans, and vice versa, leading to major issues in the workplace. In the era of NAFTA and globalization, it is crucial, she points out, that people understand the behaviors of those they are working with across cultural lines.

Some interesting examples Koss listed in the Molex case include Mexican executives who expected the American executives to socialize with them and their families during non-working hours. When the Americans declined, the Mexicans took this to mean that the Americans were not dedicated to the company.

“In American culture, we tend to really separate business and pleasure,” explains Koss. “While in Mexico, personal relationships

are considered to be the backbone of professional dealings.”

American executives working at the Nogales plant, meanwhile, told Koss they felt as if their Mexican counterparts were not being honest with them when there were disagreements. Koss cited the example of a Mexican executive who was surprised that the American executive did not realize he, the Mexican, disagreed with him.

“The American said, ‘you never told me that,’” says Koss, “but the Mexican said, ‘what do you mean? I stopped making eye contact with you in the meeting, and did not look at you again.’ To a Mexican, this was clearly communicating disapproval. I had to explain to them that Americans need it spelled out for them. Mexicans are much more in tune to body language and gestures than we usually are in the U.S.”

Other areas that Koss says commonly cause misunderstandings between American and Mexican business associates include:

America as a future-looking society, versus Mexico as a past-looking society. “Americans tend to ask things like ‘Where do you plan to go to college?’ or ‘What do you plan to do in the future,’” says Koss. “Whereas Mexicans are more likely to ask you about your grandmother’s life. It’s just a completely different way of seeing yourself and the world. Everywhere I go in Mexico, people still talk about the fact that the U.S. took half their territory. Here in the states, most people don’t even realize that. When you tell them, they roll their eyes and say, ‘Yeah, well, okay, but that was a long time ago, it has nothing to do with me.’ In Mexico, it’s still very real, and very personal.”

Mexicans look for close relationships with colleagues outside of work, while Americans tend to avoid – or at least conceal – such relationships. Mexicans view these close relation-

ships as “developing confianza,” or trust, says Koss.

Time versus relationships. In Mexico, Koss says, people come first. In America, schedules come first. An example of this is that many Mexican executives will answer cell phone calls in the middle of a meeting. This is not their attempt to be rude, as many Americans interpret it, says Koss. Rather, this is them “multitasking, and putting relationships with people ahead of the concept of a timed schedule.” To such a Mexican, the American habit of answering a call only to say something like “I’m in a meeting, I’ll call you back,” is offensive.

Formal versus informal. In America, executives tend to be informal, as is the rest of society. In Mexico, formalities are a business requirement, even in email messages. You don’t fire off an email to someone you don’t know in Mexico with a simple “Hola Lucia,” says Koss. Rather, you write “Licenciada,” or something formal, until a relationship is established. Then, you switch to the informal. Botch the timing of all of this, she says, and you are sunk.

After Koss’s visit to the Nogales factory, the company saw most of its problems resolved, and profits increased. “I can’t stress enough how important it is for people doing international business to be culturally literate,” says Koss. “It often means the difference between success and failure.” ■

