

Danes Managing across Cultures in MEXICO

“Mexico and Denmark are from opposite worlds” says co-author Jennifer Bremont, who was born and raised in Mexico before moving to Denmark. In this article we analyze three key differences between Danish and Mexican management behavior.

One major difference is the crucial importance of **personal relationships** in Mexico. Danish negotiators and business leaders tend to focus on the specific task at hand whereas Mexicans expect counterparts to build rapport over lunches and dinners before getting down to business. As Jennifer puts it, “Mexicans do not do business with strangers.” Since meals in Mexico typically last from two to four hours, it takes time for business visitors to build trusting relationships with local counterparts.

Finn Steffens, now owner of AIS-Sprog near Copenhagen, was for years an export sales rep covering Latin America. “On one sales trip I spent several days and evenings with my importer in Mexico City and at a trade conference in Cancun. We were out together every evening to restaurants, shows and ballet performances but had almost no business meetings. Shortly after my return to Denmark the customer telexed us a big order for several containers.” The lesson: If you have leadership responsibility in Mexico you need to spend a lot of time winning and dining your relationship-focused counterparts.

Hierarchical Management

Mexicans’ concern with hierarchies, status and formality creates another culture

gap for Danish leaders. To enhance their status Mexican managers stick to a strict dress code: Both clothing and accessories have to be of high quality. When visiting Mexico, Danes who dress as casually as they do at home risk being considered of low status and hence not very important.

Upon her arrival in Denmark Jennifer was shocked to see that “Here people speak to everyone with the informal pronoun. In Mexico when speaking to older people, authorities and professors you have to use the formal *Usted*.” She finds that “Mexican managers treat people very differently according to their status, while Danish leaders have no problem interacting with anyone regardless of their background or status. In Mexico bosses expect to be recognized as very special; in Denmark top managers think of themselves as no different from anyone else in the room.”

In Mexico your status depends on your rank, age and to some extent gender. Fewer women reach top positions in Mexican companies than in Danish firms. So if you are young, a low-ranking employee and a woman, you may not be taken seriously in business situations with Mexicans.

Failure to understand key differences between Mexican and Danish business behavior can cost companies money. A relevant example is how a Copenhagen manufacturer unexpectedly lost a lucrative export order. It happened when their Mexican customer visited for three days of negotiations and verbally agreed to place a large order. The firm’s 40 year-old export manager and his 21 year-old female assistant then took the importer out to celebrate the deal at a restaurant and night clubs.

Around midnight the export manager glanced at his watch and stood up to go. “As I told you earlier, Sr. Garcia, I have an early flight to Tokyo tomorrow morning. Margrethe will make sure you get to your hotel when you’re ready and will drive you to the airport in the morning.” After polite goodbyes Flemming left the club.

In the car the next morning Sr. Garcia was uncharacteristically quiet until they reached Kastrup. “Margrethe, please tell your boss that I’ve decided not to place the order after all, not after the way I was treated last night.”

What was the problem? At a cross-cultural business behavior seminar shortly after that unfortunate incident this Co-



penhagen firm learned that their export manager had unintentionally insulted his Mexican customer...twice. First, the deal-focused Dane left the club early whereas his relationship-focused customer expected Flemming to stay with him as long as he wanted to party. Leaving status-conscious Sr. Garcia with his young, female assistant was the second insult. "Flemming should have stayed there with Garcia, all night if necessary," said a company executive who participated in the seminar. "He could have slept on the plane to Japan."

Communication Skills

Being a leader anywhere requires effective communication skills. Since English-language competence is not widespread in Mexico, a good command of Spanish is very important. You learned the language at school or in Spain? That's a big step towards success. Just be aware that you will encounter major differences between Castellano and Mexican Spanish, to some extent in vocabulary but especially in pronunciation.

Even more important is the difference between how Danes and Mexicans use language, whether Spanish or English. One of the first things Jennifer learned after arriving in Denmark was, "Danes are frank and direct. They speak their mind, expressing their opinion even if everyone around disagrees." Mexicans on the other hand often use indirect, high-context language. "In Mexico people prefer to give the 'right' answer instead of saying what they really think."

Jennifer adds, "A Dane can say NO right way while a Mexican waits forever to say it. A YES answer is so much easier for people in Mexico. For instance, if my boss asks me to work an extra shift I can never bring myself to refuse – even if I know I won't be able to do it." 🇩🇰

Jennifer's Tips for Danes Managing Business with Mexicans

- **Always accept an invitation to breakfast, lunch or dinner – very often the best occasions for closing a deal.**
- **Never discuss religion or politics.**
- **Dress appropriately. Mexicans never forget the first impression.**
- **Stay cool. Avoid showing negative emotion even when discussions become heated.**
- **In Mexico negotiating tends to be a kind of game, a competition. The win-win approach is not popular.**

AUTHORS:

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Founder of the Global Management consultancy in the U.S., Richard has lectured at colleges and universities in Denmark and conducted workshops for Danish companies since 1993. His *Cross-Cultural Business Behavior* is the CBS Press's best-seller; his four co-authored books are also published in Denmark. Richard has been involved with the Mexican business culture since the 1980s when he managed teams developing *Maquiladora* suppliers for his company. More recently he has run workshops for mixed groups of Mexican and non-Mexican managers.

Jennifer N. Ortega Bremont

I'm originally from Mexico City and moved to Denmark in 2000. Cultural differences between these countries had a huge impact in my life as it felt like I moved to a different world back then. My studies have been surrounded by international students that made me realize the importance of knowing cultures especially in business situations. Today, I am writing my MA that deals with business environment between Denmark and Mexico.

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