

## Time and Understanding – keys to relationship building in cultural communities

The building of a new clinic has opened our eyes to a lot of things, especially language and cross cultural differences. But did we ever think that the concept of time, placing it in its cultural context and understanding its importance would be the key that enables parties from divergent societies, to work closer together than ever before in pursuing a common objective? Well, that's exactly what happened when a "people-oriented" friend, who happens to be a university professor, informed us about *monochronic* and *polychronic* time – whoa! Wait a minute, now! This forced us to take a good look at ourselves and how we behaved opposite the Latin culture we were dealing with in Honduras.



According to our professor friend, we as typical North Americans are monochronic in outlook and training, having this cultural obsession with time – adherence to schedules, worshiping time management, seeing time as money and experiencing limited friendships. We, consequently, lead compartmentalized lives and frequently have short term relationships, use language with specific meanings, economy and precision, want information in narrow or specific verbal or physical form and expect others to do likewise. We manage a narrow range of information, after all, we are specialists in something or other aren't we? We assiduously

adhere to plans and seem more concerned about today and the immediate short-term future where we think we exert some degree of control. This certainly sounds like us!

Being polychronic, as the Latin culture is, they see things quite differently. Here relationship building and talking is more important than adhering to a schedule. For them, time is open-ended. Changing plans is easy and done frequently. They are more intent on building lifetime relationships. Business relationships are apt to be deep, long term and likely to span past, present and future dealings. Doing one thing at a time and completing it is more important than multi-tasking. They seem to have tightly held extensive information networks, which are both close and personal. They are well informed about people who are important in their lives. They are heavily influenced about the past, and talk means very little without understanding the surrounding context, players and friendships involved in the communication loop. Their words seem to lack the precision that we want and they are very generous in their use of language, preferring to rely on the meaning of an event and looking at past history, status, religion and views of their reality when taking actions. Why did we not recognize this for ourselves? We were right in the middle of these actions? But then again, we didn't teach at the university! We are definitely students in this culture, learning as we go.



Armed with modifications to the building plans on a recent visit, we were intent on taking the pressure off the healthcare staff at the clinic, so we drew up the job description for a general contractor/site superintendent for the clinic's construction. Having a preferred Honduran

candidate in mind from a large city that we thought would be acceptable to all, we suggested that this might be the way to proceed so that clinic staff and MA Board members could concentrate on servicing the patients. Fortunately for us, one of our network friends whispered to us that this was tantamount to cultural suicide and proceeded to point out the implications of our best intentions. Obviously we should rethink this direct approach because of the implied message of mistrust! There was only one thing we could do and that was to apologize and own up to our unintentional mistake of being monochronic and oblivious to the expectations of a high context society.

What we did next was unheard of in the community and it did more to cement relationships with MA than anything we could have envisioned. We immediately approached Sonia Bustamante, the Board President, said we were sorry for our actions, explained the rationale behind our intentions and then learned how construction is really done in Honduras! Feedback later from our network friend was that all was forgiven, we were in good standing and by our actions – both past and present, cemented a relationship of mutual respect and trust. It seems that in Latin culture, a man never publicly admits a mistake, taking it to the grave with him if he must, and definitely does not apologize to a woman. But then again, what do gringos know? All we tried to do was to be honest and do what we would have done at home – obviously the truth prevailed!