

Practicing Cultural Correctness in South America

by Susan Glanstein

In November of 2007 while my husband was in South America, he had the opportunity to observe a condominium association meeting. (See sources, below.) While there were many similarities to meetings in the U.S., he observed numerous cultural differences.

In January 2009, we had the opportunity to meet a group of South American toastmasters who were very interested in having my husband teach them parliamentary

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procedure at one of their meetings. In order for this to happen, their cultural practices would have to be integrated with the instruction. There are multiple opportunities for parliamentarians in North America to teach parliamentary procedure or provide parliamentary services in South America.

Each country in South America has its own customs, some of which are significantly different than those in North America. Prior to traveling, one should read the

local papers from the different South American countries. Some international internet links are provided at the end of this article. There are pictures of how people look and dress from country to country. Personal safety issues make it advisable to blend in with the locals as much as possible. While traveling in Ushuaia (the southernmost city of South America), a European commented, "People from the U.S. are easy to spot. They wear white sneakers." If you are a woman, don't wear too much jewelry. Jeans should replace tailored suits when leaving the airplane unless one is going directly to a business meeting.

Other concerns that should be considered:

- Punctuality and time
- Greetings
- Exchanging business or personal cards
- Gift giving
- Building relationships
- Meals, food, tipping
- Conversation

These are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Punctuality and time: The word "mañana," used in South

American countries, means that what cannot be done today will be done tomorrow. For these

cultures, time is a mixture of past, present, and future rather than the separation that exists in North America and many Northern European countries. In many South American

countries it is expected that you will be late to dinner or parties; your host may not be ready for you if you arrive exactly on time. In North America, the division of time in a business meeting is typically eighty percent task and twenty percent social. In South America, it is typically fifty percent task and fifty percent social.

Greetings: The usual greeting is to shake hands using a moderate grasp, and repeating the pumping action numerous times. People also shake hands when saying goodbye. It is not unusual for men to hug each other; this is considered a compliment and sign of acceptance. When introduced to a woman, a man will bow slightly and will shake hands if the woman initiates it. The person should be addressed by his or her last name with a title; first names are not used during initial encounters.

Exchanging business or personal cards: Colored cards should be avoided. In non-

English-speaking countries, have the information on your card printed in English on one side and in the local language (Spanish or Castellano in most South American

countries, or Portuguese in Brazil) on the other side. Be sure to have a competent translator, because many slogans or bylines do not retain their original meaning when translated. It may be necessary to rethink what is written on your card. Indicate your position with your company, your university degree(s) and professional certifications.

Business cards are an expected part of business or professional introductions in most countries and are exchanged at the first meeting. They play an important role in relationship building.

Gift giving: It is important to choose an appropriate gift. Be careful about giving flowers as gifts, because there are many rules. Flower colors have different meanings in South America. For example, yellow, red, or white flowers could signify death or romance. Ask a florist or an in-country local in order to avoid



Susan and Steve Glanstein in Argentina

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making a mistake before selecting a gift of flowers.

- Pick the perfect gift, perhaps for a hobby or collection the person has.
- If you buy your gifts in North America, they should be U.S. or Canadian made. (This could include native art.)

It is necessary to build relationships with South Americans in order for them to trust you.

- Be aware of superstitions and taboos related to gifts.
- In gift giving, check the significance of numbers for the country. (Some numbers may be considered unlucky.)
- Present gifts at the conclusion of business contract negotiations.
- Avoid giving a knife, as it could be interpreted as wanting to end a relationship, or a handkerchief, as it is associated with tears in South American countries.

Building relationships: Single women tend to be isolated from social situations that involve family. Being single past a certain age may have a negative connotation; however, being introduced by a third party is very helpful to break through this barrier. It is necessary to build relationships with South Americans in order for them to trust you. They look at business relationships as being long-term. Meetings will begin on time;

however, it is acceptable to be a few minutes late. You may be kept waiting if your host has not finished his last meeting. They will allow as much time as necessary to finish the current activity before moving on to the next activity. Their culture is people-oriented rather than task-oriented. Appropriate attire in South America is similar to that in North America. Generally speaking, dress is more conservative in the larger cities (i.e., Buenos Aires, Santiago, etc.) than in the smaller cities. Shoes and accessories should be of good quality. South

Americans are fashion conscious and appreciate good quality in clothing, shoes, and accessories.

Meals, food and tipping: The European continental style of dining is prevalent. For example, the fork remains in the left hand, tines down, during cutting and eating food.

In Argentina, Brazil, or Chile breakfast is eaten between 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m., lunch is around 12:00 noon to 3:00 p.m. and dinner between 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. An afternoon refreshment break may occur around 5:00 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. It usually consists of coffee or tea, served English style, and a light snack. Lunch is the largest meal of the day and typically lasts two hours. Most business lunches are held in restaurants. South American

in Argentina and Uruguay, as well as some foods that are uncommon in many countries: intestines, kidneys, and tongue. The level of spice may vary considerably between countries. Argentinean food is not very spicy, whereas Brazilian food has more spices. Chile is well-known for its fish dishes. Arroz con leche (rice with milk) and arroz con pollo (rice with chicken) are popular dishes in many South American countries.

Most food is eaten with utensils, even sandwiches and fruit. You are expected to keep your hands in sight and to sample everything you are offered. Your host may observe whether you respect the food by sampling it. You need to become familiar with special foods associated with the country so that you are not caught

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countries usually have more courses than is common in North America. In addition to coffee and tea, various alcoholic beverages are served. Pisco, a liquor made from grapes and served as a pisco sour or pisco and coke, is popular in such countries as Bolivia, Chile, and Peru. Beef is popular

off guard and make inappropriate comments about the food customs. Sometimes the surprise is not so much in the type of food that is served but in how it is served. Foods that people in some countries expect to be cooked may be served raw.

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Tipping has become customary in restaurants. A ten percent tip is considered appropriate and is sometimes included in the bill. Leaving an extra amount, although not required, is appreciated. Tipping taxi drivers and hotel porters is optional, except when they help you with your luggage. In those cases, the equivalent of \$1 is appropriate. In many South American countries, it is wise to ask before you get into the taxi what the fare will be.

Conversation: In South American countries (i.e., Argentina and Brazil) appropriate topics for conversation include sports, the arts, local sights, and international travels. In Chile, asking questions about recommended tourist sites and discussion of Chilean art, history, and literature are appropriate. Topics to avoid include politics, religion, discussion of wars, and comments about social classes. In addition to these topics, avoid asking about salary and other personal matters in Brazil. Avoid initiating conversations that would imply criticism of the country, such as economic problems, social class differences, and the government. In Bolivia and Colombia, do not initiate conversations about drug policies or terrorism. A good rule

to observe is to follow the lead of your South American host; do not make any derogatory remarks about any aspect of the country, its government, its people and their customs, or their sports teams.

- Break eye contact while conversing; constant eye contact is perceived as aggressive.
- Stand close while conversing; stepping back is considered rude.
- Avoid placing hands on hips or hands in pockets during conversation.
- Choose these topics for small talk: the weather, places visited, travel plans, and soccer. Talking about your family or other personal topics is also appropriate.
- Avoid talking about politics and religion.

There are people in South America who are waiting to learn parliamentary procedure. Preparation, support, and training can help you meet the challenges of a parliamentary intercultural assignment and be successful doing it.



Web links to news media:

English Language: <http://www.world-newspapers.com/south-america.html>.

Spanish Language: <http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/news/>.

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Susan Glanstein, M.B.A., and a Parliamentarian, has recently retired from the University of Hawaii system after working there for more than 30 years. She has begun to study for the RP exam and continues to study Spanish at the University of Hawaii. Other languages she has studied include French, German, and Japanese. She has traveled to 50 countries. Most recently, she spent time in South America. The only continents she has not yet visited are Africa and Antarctica.

In Memoriam

Helen L. Anderson, Virginia
Carolyn Davies, Ontario
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M. Jean Franks, Florida
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Patricia T. Gentry, North Carolina
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