

Our Family Business Affair

I opened the door to begin a new business day and was greeted by the stench of rotting beans. My brother, the head cook, had once again forgotten to put the beans in the walk-in cooler. If he had worked at Taco Bell, he would have been fired. Instead, he had protection in a family environment governed by emotion.

Our family business has existed since 1963. My father opened the café when few Latinos dared venture into the small business world. With no prior experience or training, he's managed to keep the café profitable -- no small feat considering that we are surrounded by Taco Bell and clones, selling 59-cent tacos and 79-cent burritos.

Like many other family-managed enterprises, we don't subscribe to scientific principles that are taught in college. A family business is too human, and can't conform to standards designed for faceless companies. Decisions are made often from the heart rather than based in profit logic.

My *Tía Olga* has worked at the café for nearly 30 years. At one time, she was the epitome of good service. Customers waited just to get a table in her section. She called them by their first names and already knew what they wanted.

Lately, however, some customers have begun to complain about *Tía Olga*. We discovered a note left behind by an old customer, detailing how she had mistreated him. Others have boldly told us that unless we fire her, they'll go eat burritos somewhere else.

I can't enter *Tía Olga*'s mind to find out what's bothering her, nor will she concede that anything is wrong. She remains defiant--

FIRE HER? SHE USED TO CHANGE MY DIAPERS

How can I fire a person who used to change my diapers? I've always been taught to venerate elders, so reprimanding *Tía Olga* would be sacrosanct. Furthermore, my mother Josefina would override any punitive action against her.

I doubt that any book on business management could effectively deal with this problem.

A few years ago my brother, who demanded a high wage, became increasingly derelict in his duties. He would leave during the busy lunch period and drink beer with his friends. We often discussed firing him, but my mother wouldn't permit it. After all, she reminded me, "He's got two of my grandchildren to feed."

Recently, I read that IBM was losing money on a grand scale. Mass layoffs of faithful employees were contemplated. Tough decisions about who would stay or leave had to be made. I imagined business persons, using computers, surgically down-scaling their work force. Though difficult, I believe the task was less painful than having to cope with real family members.

THE DAY I GAVE AWAY THE JUKEBOX

As the eldest child, I started in our restaurant as a dishwasher at age 13. I worked steadily up to manager, but won't deny that nepotism helped me along the way.

One business decision I recall making was to repair our broken jukebox. A casual customer volunteered to fix it -- maybe on the spot. After examining it, he said he'd need to take it to his shop, so I helped him load it onto his pick-up. That was the last we ever saw of the man. Elsewhere, that might have warranted a dismissal.

I teach school now, no easy job either, but I tip my hat to managers of family businesses. We have no maps or charts to guide us, and must often rely on our hearts to make decisions.

Maybe universities should change how they teach business management. Courses on how to run family businesses would be an asset for entrepreneurs who encounter caustic aunts, lazy brothers, and overly trusting managers like me within their employee ranks.

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MEDINA

Tribal Rights in a Bilingual Class

"Where ya from?" A swarm of old-timers crowds around the new student just before the bell. This is the first question, the primordial question that is the rite of passage to my bilingual history class.

"Mexico," the newcomer mumbles, unaware that he has just entered a world of tribal wars and secret passwords. Another member for the Mexican League.

The bell rings. Troops from the Caribbean, Mexico, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua and all of South America stake out their turf as they claim their seats.

Where the students sit depends on where they are from. My delaney cards reveal definite patterns. The Peruvians sit in the middle. They have the nickname *Machu Picchu*. The Mexicans, dubbed *Híjoles*, are scattered about, divided into camps based on province.

"Are you from *el Distrito Federal*?" they ask the newcomer.

"No, from Puebla."

"You can sit over there then. This side of the room is for *los chillangos*."

Giraldo, one of my Dominican students, dances *merengue* on his way to his seat in the back of the room. He never seems to have a pencil because carrying anything that points to an academic endeavor is, well, not cool.

'ARE YOU SURE IT'S SPANISH?'

The students from Galicia, Spain, always sit up front. Their hands tend to shoot up like arrows in the middle of the lesson. "I never heard that word at home before. Are you sure it's Spanish?" They look at me with dubious eyes.

As a 10th-grade teacher, I have 42 recruits to train. With five classes, that's roughly 200 students. I watch their struggles as they learn to get along in a new land and to master world history, the subject I set before them.

Some days there aren't enough chairs, so I send two of my best students, Melvin and Pedro, to round some up.

Those who were born here don't think they belong in Spanish-language classes. They may speak Spanish at home, but they consider themselves assimilated. They tell me they are victims of segregation and say it leads to second-class citizenship.

The newcomers, however, take comfort in my classes. The Dominicans and Colombians who flood into my district find the bilingual classes a safe haven where they can still speak their language. As they feel more at home, they begin to imitate the others.

'TEXTBOOKS? WHAT TEXTBOOKS?'

This strange culture offers privileges never heard of back home: wearing hats in school, carrying around walkmans, and for the girls, putting on make-up in the middle of class.

Now that's real freedom.

Textbooks? What textbooks? They must be hunted down in the wilderness. I make copies from anything, as long as it's in Spanish, has pictures and vocabulary that isn't over anyone's head.

My handouts -- so hard to get -- are so easily rolled into Canseco baseballs, molded into a Maradona *pelota* and folded into Avianca jets to be tossed, thrown and touched down in the wastebasket or Magic Johnson's hoop.

"What's for homework?" the disciplined Gallegos want to know. I assign four pages of reading. The final bell rings. Baseball caps go on heads. With four minutes to reach their next classes, the troops are gone in a flash of a firefly.

Only the balls of crumpled paper remain to define who they are, buried until tomorrow when they return to dig them up again.

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