

## Breaking The Language Barrier

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Our company is called "a miniature United Nations". In our 16 years we at Centerton Nursery have achieved phenomenal growth. The credit must go to our employees, who have represented 11 nations. This has enabled us to gain some insight to human barriers.

"What do you see when you look at an immigrant?" Those who consider hiring immigrants see barriers. "What do you see when you look at an immigrant?" The answer to that lies in what you see . . . in yourself.

Our international corps developed in an effort to repay a debt, I was once an immigrant. My dad took a job in Ecuador, South America. I know what it's like to be thrown into a culture where you don't speak the language—to be the outsider.

There were other Americans in Ecuador. I watched them "hermitize", erecting micro-Americas of card clubs and coffee klatches from which they never emerged.

But I was encouraged by my new-found Ecuadorian friends to immerse myself in their society. This I did and received compassion and understanding in return. I learned to speak another language, studied a rich culture and stood atop snow-capped mountains. My family dined with presidents and ambassadors. We cultivated friendships that will endure for generations.

These gratuities were available to anyone that did not build a barrier. It is a debt that I can never fully repay.

Years later I left my family behind and traveled to the states for my first semester of college. Shortly after, I received a letter from my father. In it he said something that I have never forgotten. He said "Son, I'm proud you're my son. And I'm proud of the things you can accomplish. But now you must take the full responsibilities of a man. And if I could send you off with a piece of advice about responsibility, it would be this: Everyone on this earth owes a debt to society. Sometimes this debt has been paid by whispering one kind word, and sometimes it has been paid by making an unpopular decision that hurt a few but helped many. Nevertheless it is a debt, and if we are to fulfill our responsibilities as human beings, we must spend our lives repaying that debt."

I kept that letter. And since then I've kept the conviction that by doing everything we can to repay the debt each of us owes to society, we can dismantle the barriers that stand between human cultures.

The best advice I can give for breaking the language barrier is to become fluent in "human". Smiles and handshakes aren't restricted by language. Sincere eye contact has nothing to do with linguistics.

Ben Franklin said "Well done is much better than well said." It's what we do, not what we say, that counts. And forget about words. Words can get us into trouble. Let me illustrate this by destroying our idea of what the word America means.

Who are we? Americans? What is America? We know that America is named for Amerigo Vespucci, the Italian explorer who discovered Brazil. The word "America" was first used on a map of the New World for what is now known as South America. So where is America? We share the name "America" with more than two dozen other countries!

Early in my travels I put my foot in my mouth by using this “America” term. Others around me did not agree that “America” was the sole possession of the United States. Now when I address someone from another part of the world I never call myself an American. They may choose to use the term that way; that’s their prerogative. But I say that I am a citizen of the United States of North America.

This may sound like a frivolous semantic detail, but I assure you it’s the stuff that successful diplomats and negotiators are made of! The point is, what we do is a much more effective communicator than what we say, and is much less likely to be misinterpreted. Let’s be conscious of the positive and negative powers of words. Then maybe we can break some barriers!

What makes an American in the sense that you and I would use the word? Let me tell you about a fellow who settled in my town ten years ago. Pedro was born in a one-room house in Ayotitlán, a pueblo nestled in the mountains south of Guadalajara, Mexico. The town had no running water or electricity. His home had a dirt floor and mud walls. Pedro worked his father’s farm until the tender age of 13. Then his father started a conversation that went something as follows:

“Pedro, you are a man now.”

“I am, father?”

“Yes. And it is time you went out into the world.”

“It is, father?”

“Yes, Pedro. Tell me, my son, do you like to eat?”

“Oh, yes father, I like to eat!”

“Well, it is settled then. You must find yourself a job. Make what money you can. Eat, and what money is left over, send home to support your family.”

With eight months’ wages his father hired a transportation specialist (otherwise known as a coyote), to smuggle the boy across the Texas border. And for the next 15 years Pedro traversed North America, following the seasonal progression of crops. Pedro remembered his father’s words, and faithfully sent money home to his family every month.

Today Centerton Nursery employs 10% of Ayotitlán’s population. I have been there myself, and believe me, it is of a different time. The town was preparing a celebration for the installation of the first telephone, a pay phone to be placed on the central corner of the four-block metropolis. Everyone welcomed me personally. Each addressed me as “patrón” (lord and master). They called me a white man, and they told me that I am the first white man ever to enter Ayotitlan.

The town prepared for my visit: a colorful parade, a huge fiesta and a 21-piece orchestra that played the sourest music I ever heard. I had guided trips to volcanoes. I was taken to the bullfights and bequeathed with cooked goats in my honor. I got a tour of each home, a toast of some strange alcoholic beverage in each home, followed by an escort to the chicken fights (of which I remember very little). Yet, another debt I can never fully repay.

Whenever I tell Pedro’s story, people say, “What a tough life! That’s so terrible!”

Was it tough? You bet it was! Is it terrible? You tell me. Is it so terrible that today Pedro has nearly finished paying off his third mortgage? Is it so terrible that he has become the one to whom others turn in time of need? Is it terrible that Pedro is bilingual? Is it terrible that he thinks so far ahead that I frequently find myself trying to catch up? Is it terrible that his survival skills compare to that of a puma? Is it terrible that the tough life lessons in Pedro’s experience have helped him bring

his beautiful wife and children into a financial situation that places them in the top percentages?

It is not so terrible that Pedro is Centerton Nursery's Operations Manager and our top income earner. He is "a man's man." And it certainly is not terrible that he could be no more my brother, had he come from the same womb. What is terrible, is that most of us in this country cannot appreciate the meaning of "tough". That is a barrier!

The irony of this story is that if you were to ask Pedro his nationality, he would reply "Oh, I am Mexican!" But he is grossly mistaken. Because in the purest sense of the word, Pedro is a classic American. This United States is a country of immigrants, and he is the living embodiment of his American ancestors: the Italian that landed at Ellis Island 75 years ago; the Irishman that escaped to our shores 150 years ago; or the Hessian (like in my family), that arrived as a soldier 215 years ago, hired by the British as a mercenary, to subdue the tea burners of 1776. Like these other immigrants who achieved the American dream, Pedro is as much an American as you or I.

The lesson here is that what has brought us to what we are in this country today is that what we are is a country of toughened, hungry immigrants. And immigrants have a track record for uncovering opportunities. We are the living legacy of that ability. We and our country, are the product of that immigrant strength, and we can wear that distinction... with pride.

Let's assume our responsibilities of paying our debts by utilizing our actions to tear down our barriers. What do you see when you look at an immigrant? There are no barriers but those that we build around ourselves. I'll tell you what I see when I look at an immigrant. I see a fire in his eyes and a burning desire for achievement in his guts. I see this country's heritage. I see the exciting story of our future revitalization before my eyes. When I look at an immigrant, I'm proud to share the space he occupies. Because what I see...is a true American.