

7 Things NOT To Say to Latino Coworkers

by Chris Hoenig

One of the easiest ways to alienate your coworkers is to make assumptions, use stereotypes and say something you shouldn't.

"When I was an associate in a Philadelphia law firm, a well-meaning fellow associate came up to me in the law library and in the most sincere and friendly way wished me a Happy Our Lady of Guadalupe Day," recalls former EEOC Chairman Gilbert Casellas. "I thanked him but told him that I was not familiar with the day. He seemed puzzled by my ignorance and explained that it was Mexico's most important religious holiday. I pointed out that although I was a Latino, I was not of Mexican descent." Casellas is a member of the board of directors of Prudential Financial (No. 8 in the DiversityInc Top 50).

And while some of the questions and statements you'll read below aren't necessarily offensive, they can easily be considered insensitive. "No one wants to be stereotyped and put on the spot to explain why someone else's perspective is wrong," Allstate Insurance Company (No. 36) Chief Diversity and Organization Effectiveness Officer Michael Escobar says. "At best, it's an uncomfortable situation. It really gets at the Latino myths versus reality."

Here are some other things NOT to say to avoid putting yourself in an awkward situation or losing the respect of your Latino coworkers:



1 "Are you sure you're Latino? Because you don't speak Spanish ..."

According to Escobar, who sought additional input from several of his Latino coworkers, this no-no is two-fold: First, "Are you sure you're Latino?" is insulting in its tone. Second, not all people of Latino heritage speak Spanish. There are plenty of second-, third- and fourth-generation Latinos who don't speak Spanish. If you have a coworker of German descent, do you automatically assume he or she speaks German? "And if they don't speak the language, do we question the validity of their ethnic background?" Escobar asks. "Why should Latinos be any different?"

There are actually four South American countries where Spanish is not even an official language: Brazil (Portuguese), Suriname (Dutch), Guyana (English) and French Guiana (French).

2 "Do you speak Mexican?" "Mexican"

is not a language, and not every Latino is from Mexico. "Generally, we find statements offensive when someone makes erroneous assumptions or attributes false stereotypes to us," Escobar says, speaking for his Latino colleagues. "In some parts of the country, people assume if you're Latino, you must be Mexican.

In reality, there are immigrants from the various countries in South America and the Caribbean. While they may share a common language of Spanish, their culture, customs and food are different."

And speaking of mixing up nationality and language ...

3 "I have a lot of friends who are Spanish."

As pointed out by Casellas, Spanish is a language. People from Spanish-speaking Central and South American and Caribbean countries are Latino. And people from Spain are known as Spaniards.

4a "My housekeeper/gardener is Spanish."

This is the first of two very similar statements submitted by two different people who did not collaborate. Casellas cites this example, again noting that Spanish is not an ethnicity. And, of course, not all Latinos are gardeners or housekeepers.

4b "Are you the gardener?"

"I was standing outside my summer home in a fairly affluent neighborhood and my neighbor came over and asked if I was the gardener," Escobar recalls. "I politely explained that, no, I was

their neighbor and had been living there for three years. Needless to say, they were a little embarrassed."

5 "You are dark, do you go tanning?"

As Escobar and his coworkers explain, this demonstrates a lack of understanding about olive skin tones and the way melanin affects skin color.

6 "Have you ever dated a white person?"

First, isn't this the 21st century? Is there a law against interracial dating? Not all Latinos only date Latinos, just as not all whites or Blacks solely date within their race.

Second, as with the previous question, not all Latinos have brown skin and dark hair. Latino is an ethnicity, not a race. A Latino can be white, Black or even biracial, just like anyone else.

7 "When did your family get here?"

This is a favorite of Casellas, who says not to assume that everyone of Latino descent is an immigrant. Latinos have been in the United States since well before it was the United States.