

Things NOT to Say to Latinos

By Julissa Catalan

At the start of National Hispanic Heritage Month, we offer this cultural-competence lesson in helping Latinos feel welcome and valued at work by avoiding common missteps. A simple lack of understanding can easily be misconstrued and damage office relationships.

Here is advice on Things NOT to Say to Latinos from two leading Latinos with extensive corporate experience: Raymond Arroyo, Managing Director for Reffett Associates and former Chief Diversity Officer for [Aetna](#) (No. 19 in [The 2014 DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity](#)), and Gilbert Casellas, Chairman of OMNITRU and former Chief Diversity Officer of [Dell](#) (No. 32). He is also a member of the board of directors of [Prudential Financial](#) (No. 8), a member of the Joint Diversity Advisory Council of [Comcast](#) (No. 44), and a member of the Diversity Advisory Board of [Toyota Motor North America](#) (No. 38), and the former chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

Here are seven Things NOT to Say to Latinos:

1 Referring to a Latino as “Brown.”
“It’s inevitable in this country and we do it all the time, and it happens consistently with whites and Blacks as they say whites and Blacks,” says Arroyo. “Generally, you shouldn’t categorize people by their skin color ... because that shows a lack of understanding of the Hispanic community. It’s neither white, Brown or Black. It’s a combination of all of those—a plethora of backgrounds and nationalities and races.”

In fact, a great deal of Latin America is made up of Mestizos—people who are a mix of Spanish and indigenous decent.

2 “You can’t be Latino, you have light skin and eyes” or

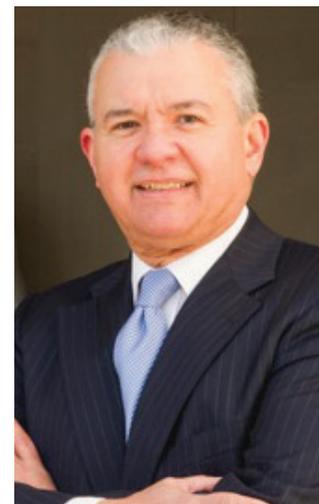
“You can’t be Latino, you are Black.”
Millions of Latinos around the world have light features. In countries like Argentina and Mexico—where German ancestry and Italian ancestry are very prevalent—these types of features are much more common.

Conversely, many Latino countries have African ancestry. Countries like the Dominican Republic, Brazil and Colombia have large populations with African ancestry.

In fact, there are even Latin countries with Asian ancestry. Remember ex-Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori? Peru was the first South American country to establish diplomatic relations with Japan, shortly before World War II, and Japanese-Peruvians now make up 1.4 percent of its population.



Raymond Arroyo



Gilbert Casellas



You can't be Latino, you have light skin and eyes.



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 America and the Caribbean are Latino. And people from Spain are known as Spaniards.

4 “Do you speak Spanish?”

Being Latino or of Latino heritage does not mean you have to speak Spanish, and here are two very valid reasons why: First, although Spanish is the native language of many Latin American countries, this is not the case everywhere. 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).

Second, someone can be of Latino descent, but over generations a family may have chosen to only speak English. Many families of European descent have done this over generations.

5 Even more offensive to a Latino is “Do you speak English/Hablas inglés?”

Just because a person is Latino or of Latino descent does not mean anyone should assume he or she is not fluent in English or that English is not his or her native language.

6 “Do you speak Mexican?”

“Mexican” is not a language, and not every Latino is from Mexico.

“There are 22 Spanish-speaking countries in the world—and from a nationality perspective, they have their individuality and their culture and music and food,” Arroyo points out.

7 “You are Mexican, right?”

“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,” Casellas recalls. “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.”

**MORE THINGS
NOT TO SAY**

“But you act so white.”

How can a person act a color? This is usually said to an Americanized Latino who may have lost his or her accent over time, or to a U.S.-born Latino whose primary language is English.

This is also said to Latinos who have picked up American customs.

“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.

**“My housekeeper/
gardener is Spanish.”**

This statement is offensive on two counts. First, as mentioned previously, Spanish is a language. Second, not all Latinos are domestics or landscapers, nor do all Latinos know someone who is.