



# Intercultural Communication Checklists

## Latin America

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*Enabling you to communicate across cultures*

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[Author's note: This text is written from the perspective of German communication behaviour, which is also prevalent in varying degrees in other Northern European cultures. Therefore, depending on where you're from, some of the points made, in particular in the checklists, may not readily apply to your situation.]

The checklists below are meant to guide you to a smoother, more communicative interaction with Latin Americans. However, these lists are the *products* of intercultural communication competency and not an end in itself. Knowing *how* to communicate effectively with other cultures follows from understanding *why* they behave the way they do. Our approach is to provide you with a framework of cultural core values which impact behaviour and communication styles in the South American culture (and other cultures with similar core concepts) at the *national* level. This knowledge is the foundation for developing those skills necessary to bridge communication gaps between cultures where the distance between two sets of cultural assumptions is the greatest. Our aim is to enable readers to develop intercultural communication skills to a point where they can eventually create their *own* checklists. That is why, in addition to the standard Do's, Don'ts and Be Aware lists, and a compilation of small talk topics, we provide a more vital 5<sup>th</sup> list of guidelines to help readers to actively apply the intercultural communication “vocabulary”. Against a solid framework of knowledge, *this* is effective “learning by doing”.

Before reading these checklists, make sure you read

- the terms and conditions that apply when you are using the information provided ([www.aspetersen.de/terms\\_e.html](http://www.aspetersen.de/terms_e.html)),
- the article on Latin America itself ([www.aspetersen.de/countries\\_e.html](http://www.aspetersen.de/countries_e.html)), and
- the introduction to our country-specific articles ([www.aspetersen.de/countries\\_e.html](http://www.aspetersen.de/countries_e.html)).



## Points to avoid

1. Given the *mañana syndrome* (roughly translated by “Why do today what can be put off until tomorrow?”), expect business deadlines to take a lower priority than those of obligations to family and close friends. Therefore realise that pushing, and persistent legalistic reasoning or arguments based on your “technical” rights and needs, will likely achieve nothing but mutual discomfort and embarrassment. Whether or not a deadline is met may well depend on the strength of the relationship!
2. Don't be insulted by interruptions, which will be frequent and get you off track from business. Keep in mind that in their cultural context, their creative input is a sign of bonding and a willingness to make a personal contribution to your interaction. Simply be prepared for conversation to be a wilder ride than you would experience with goal- and issues-oriented Northern European clients and associates.
3. Try not to react suspiciously to what you might perceive to be exaggerated warmth from perfect strangers. Latin Americans, especially Brazilians, strive to be liked and to please

others. If you are stiff and formal, what may be respectful behaviour intended by you, could well have the opposite off-putting and disorienting effect for them. You may be initially uncomfortable with Latin tactility, but learn to gracefully accept their warmth as a sign of goodwill.

4. Observe hierarchical levels in meetings or elsewhere. Communication behaviour among individuals in a group clearly reveals their individual social rank, especially in a business environment (e.g. who speaks first, who speaks most, who speaks after whom, who says what, etc.) . Don' t try to force egalitarianism by encouraging “open” issues-based discussion.
5. Don' t push your technical “rights” or legal reasoning if it means compromising the other person' s self-esteem. “Face” has a much higher value for relationship-oriented cultures than an over-meticulous observation of items in a contract. One' s obligations to the interpersonal relationship always requires more thought and caution before action than a strict adherence to rules and empirical facts.



## Points to be aware of

1. The human relationship orientation and high context nature of Latin American communication means, you may miss some of the subtleties that exist for promoting social harmony between individuals and groups. Take particular notice of body language and what is *not* said in conversation or *how* something is said.
2. Expressiveness, exaggeration, and even passionate discussions are typical characteristics of the Latin American communication style. To time-pressed and direct-speaking Northern Europeans this may appear to be an irritating manner of not getting to the point. Such a speaking style, in fact, signifies personal enthusiasm and commitment and an effort at building personal relations. This is fundamentally different from the *dispassionate* truth-seeking argumentative style so common in Northern European communication behaviour. Also, as in all hierarchical cultures, eloquence is highly valued as it reflects one' s status and position and is considered a sign of one' s intellectual prowess and wisdom.
3. The majority of Latin American countries place a high value on hierarchy and rank. Therefore, there is very little direct or implied criticism of persons of higher rank, or face-to-face questioning of authority. Expect indirect communication from lower ranking associates and “flexible truths” which protect the higher ranked individual' s self-esteem.
4. Even in those that are considered relatively high-competitive, Latin American countries still place a high priority on quality of life and relations. A very direct, purely problem-oriented argumentative communication style is perceived as destructive and leading to disharmony.



## Points to do

1. Constant tracking and monitoring of the follow-up stages of a project or operation is necessary. The value Latin Americans give to establishing and building relationships naturally brings a high level of enthusiasm and energy to, for example, the outset of a project. For especially agenda-oriented Northern Europeans, however, how much of this momentum is actually carried over into action can prove to be disappointing and

frustrating, as projects can often be left unfinished or delayed. Organise the stages of your projects but allow for more time to task completion. Be prepared to exercise ‘hands on’ control, but not be overbearing or domineering in your communication style. If you are the *patron*, aim for the manner of a ‘benevolent dictator’.

2. Think relationship before business. Allow more business time to be used for non-business activities, such as visiting local sites, accepting personal invitations to meals and home visits, etc. The basis of mutual trust on which business completely depends is being *simpatico*. You have a greater chance on success if your counterpart feels you can be a loyal *compadre* and not just a business associate.
3. Be more expressive in your gestures and body language. Smile and enjoy your host's hospitality. Be prepared to reveal more about yourself than you would to your clients in your home culture (e.g. Germany). Inject more emotion and personal character into presentations. An effective general rule would be: the dryer the statistical and technical description of business is, the more personality should be injected to compensate for it.
4. Expect delays to be caused by the necessity to juggle options or assets due to lack of resources, or simply because one is not ready to act yet. The natural ebb and flow of life may not correspond to human-made schedules and deliveries. Sometimes one has to make adjustments to accommodate changes elsewhere.  
Similarly, expect meetings to be far-less agenda-based than you are used to. Life is not organised around a clock – certainly not when one takes into account personal relationships, opportunity, excitement – and certainly not to be interrupted by a call or a knock on the door. Expect any points to be discussed that seem opportune and as much time to be given an issue as the relationship between the parties deserves.
5. A natural sense of courtesy, the high value of personal relationship, and the value of hierarchy means that Latin Americans will often say the things you want to hear. Keep in mind that truth is somewhat flexible and be prepared to check meaning through frequent summaries and repetition. Ask many different questions and check with several sources for a more realistic approximation of what is really meant and what you can actually expect.



## Small Talk Topics

This list of small talk topics is an adapted and simplified version of the corresponding list for Spain (see our article on Spain).

Symbols: ⊕⊕ very good topic, ⊕ good topic, ⊖ avoid topic, ⊖⊖ bad topic.

- ⊕⊕ Family and mutual acquaintances
- ⊕⊕ Travel, leisure, holidays
- ⊕⊕ Sport
- ⊕ Politics, current events and scandals
- ⊕ Wine and food
- ⊖ Job or profession
- ⊖⊖ Money (Salary, cost of personal possessions)



## Becoming interculturally literate

1. What previous (or typical) cross-cultural experience(s) have you had with South Americans where you did not initially consider a possible problem to be one of *intercultural communication*? Can you now re-evaluate the experience in an intercultural communication framework? How would you now act/react in the same situation?
2. Can you identify other cultures that may exhibit similar behaviour or communication styles as the South Americans?
3. Can you imagine other situations where the South Americans may react negatively to something that is said or done, but which you consider normal?
4. What other aspects of South American communication style and behaviour have you had experience with? What cultural values do you think are at the root?
5. How do German communication style and behaviour in the same situation differ? What is the German value at the root?
6. Isolate the areas of greatest difference between the German and South American communication behaviour and predict the most likely situations of misunderstandings you can expect to encounter in your professional field.