

Every Conversation a Coaching Conversation, Part 2 (Cross-cultural)

A while ago, I wrote for this website an article (See “Every Conversation a Coaching conversation”.) that proposed that all of our conversations are, or could be coaching conversations. Recently, I engaged in another conversation that reinforces my thoughts in that earlier piece. So here it is:

For a number of years, I was on the Board of Directors for my homeowners’ association in San Antonio. As such, I sometimes would get into conversations with the workpeople on our property about jobs that were being done. And since I’m the only Spanish-speaker on the Board, it frequently would fall on me to deal with the workers who are not native speakers of English.

An experience of this nature happened recently, when I was observing a bricklayer repairing a retaining wall. I wanted to compliment his work and also ask a question; but when I did so, he returned the conversation in very limited and accented English, and it was obvious he was not very comfortable talking with me.

So I identified myself as a dual-national, Mexico-U.S., and asked him if I could speak with him in Spanish. At first he looked a little quizzical, as if it didn’t register that a gringo like me could speak his language. Then a transformation passed across his face, and he smiled openly and began to speak fluidly (in Spanish) about his brick wall. I asked him (inquiry before advocacy, remember?) how he was able to raise the broken part in one piece, and he told me he and a helper had been able to lift the wall by hand. I told him the story about another wall on the property, which had sunk and gone crooked, and the bricklayers had had to use a... – here my Spanish failed me -- I wanted to say “jack”, but I didn’t know the technical word. So I used the word one uses in Mexico for an automobile wheel jack, which is “gato ” (literally “cat”, but the word is has several uses, depending on the context, much as the English word “kitty” has several meanings in English). He understood my meaning, and used the word he uses – “*yaque*”, which when pronounced, sounds like “jack”. Of course, I thought, I was trying to use formal Spanish, but in San Antonio, a jack is a *yaque*, and that’s that!

Another piece of the conversation was interesting as well. In Mexico, one addresses senior workmen as “maestro” , which is an honorific title suggesting a trade specialist. When I called him “maestro”, he beamed, and I was home free in the conversation. I could then ask him his plan for back-filling the wall (using a high-performance question – “What could you do to support the wall...?”); and he gave me the detail of how he planned to fill it with cement, then dirt, as befitting his expertise as a “*maestro albañil*”, a Master Bricklayer who knows his trade. I was no longer just a meddlesome gringo asking impertinent questions, but a person who appreciated his skill and shared his culture and was interested in his work. At least that’s how I saw it, anyway....

As I think about it, it’s amazing the twists and turns our communications with people take. The words we use, the tone of voice, the culture and the relative status of the

communicants, all determine what is heard and the reaction that the communication produces. The denouement of this story is also interesting: not all my neighbors were happy with the work that the maestro did – the repair was a bit crooked, and there was a mortar wash left on the wall. So then, how would I handle the communication between the disgruntled neighbor, the bricklayer, and the boss of the bricklayer, who would have to order the job to be re-done?

And this is just a brick wall – it's not about brain surgery in a hospital operating room, nor a conversation in an airline cockpit, nor is it difficult communications between a Harvard professor and a Cambridge police sergeant....What's a leader to do?