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A Wild Thanksgiving

by Jose L. Berrios

Last year I decided to trade the typical Thanksgiving football game and turkey dinner for a two-day hike in the high mountains surrounding the city of La Paz, Bolivia. It was a totally different and fun way to give thanks for a rewarding change in lifestyle, while living and working as an independent consultant in Bolivia this year. I never would have guessed that my actuarial and business career would have prepared me for such a career move.

As a business professional, however, I could not help but connect some dots between what a hard hike is like and some business concepts we face on a daily basis. I thought some of them were worth noting in this article. The article is meant to be thought-provoking and entertaining, so if the reader is interested in more in-depth intricacies of doing business in Latin America, please contact me at the coordinates indicated. Also, if the reader is interested in team-building activities or adventure hiking in Bolivia, please contact me.

An Exciting Beginning

The preparation for the hike was thorough, similar to that of a Due Diligence project. The expedition team (my brother, my nephew, and I) knew we would be facing several types of weather. Now that the rainy season had begun, it was hard to predict what sort of climate Mother Nature would bring. I made a complete list of items and equipment to take (exam-like, for those who understand that language). I have to thank the Colorado Mountain Club for the wilderness training course I took in Denver two years ago when I lived there, it was most helpful. As in any well-planned activity, we faced several “unexpected” situations during the hike that we had not fully anticipated and therefore we had to improvise as the hike went on. This is typical of doing business in Latin America (improvise, improvise and improvise), where almost all “perfect strategic plans” fail because people are used to acting based on the

spur of the moment. Initially I had planned to take a tent, sleeping bag, cooking equipment, etc. After I stuffed it all in the backpack, the weight was like a ton of bricks. My brother (professional hiker) fortunately convinced me that there was no need for a tent as we would “camp” during our first night in an indigenous community that offers shelter. He offered to carry the cooking equipment and food, since trail-mix and power bars get old after a full day of serious hiking—I thought, fair deal! After repacking, the weight was much more manageable, but my shoulders told me otherwise at the end of the trip—the lessons here were 1) when in doubt, less is more, and 2) let the experts lead you and you will be fine.

The Weather

Like in any start-up business climate, the start of the hike was in a cold and snowy mountain, where the road always goes up.



We started climbing at around 4,000 meters (approx 12,000 feet), and even though now I am used to the altitude of La Paz (3,700 meters), the uphill climb was slow as my feet started to get used to the terrain with all that gear on my back. This is similar to the normal process of running a business overseas. First you have to get used to the landscape, and then make decisions, not the other way around. Of course you need to start with a basic set of goals, but first

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Jose L. Berrios is a U.S. trained actuary who now lives in La Paz, Bolivia. He works as an independent businessman and actuarial consultant. He may be reached at: berriosjose2@yahoo.com

know the lay of the land. Foreign companies who do business in Latin America forget this basic principle.

As we climbed, it started to rain mildly (the type that never stops) as we reached the summit of one of the mountains in the Cordillera Real (a chain of mountains that forms the Andes Region). Our goal was to pass over the mountain and descend to a lovely valley called Yungas, a pretty simple goal, the way it should be when one runs a business; keeping it simple is beautiful, but it is hard to perceive and practice because of all the information overload, high-tech tools and people factors. In the open wilderness, one realizes how simple life is, no cell phones, no distractions, just a trail that is supposed to lead us to accomplish our objective. One beauty of this country, Bolivia, is that there are many Inca “roads” that have remained the jewel of the mountains around La Paz. Some are heavily traveled but many are less well-



known and therefore on the wild side. My brother knows them all. The one we took was definitely a wild place to hike and I was very happy, because I enjoyed the challenge and I learned a lot from this hike. This is another key trait of working in Latin America, there is constant learning and no exams are substitutes for experience.

During the course of the hike, the weather changed from cold, to sporadic rain, to warm and sunny, forcing us to change clothing (peeling ourselves like onions, layer by layer). Therefore we had to adjust our hiking approaches, very similar to the phases of a normal business project. The similarity with doing business in Latin America is that one has to adapt to different business conditions and be flexible to have success in the long-run.

The ascending part of the trek, only took one and a half hours, but the descending part during the first day was a brutal nine-hour hard journey. The first part of the downhill hike was wet and we faced slippery stones. We had the right level of adrenaline, not rushing to slip and injure ourselves, and not too slow to make the descent endless and boring, but just right to manage the obstacles along the journey. The lesson here was that having the right level of chemistry and adrenaline in Latin America is very important for doing business and is something that can only be learned by living in the country and learning the intricacies of each culture. This is one reason why I love my job as a consultant, each culture is rich in many ways. Back on the hike, persistency and focus were necessary to manage the trail, but we never forgot the awesome views and the big picture (our goal) that we established for ourselves. As in many business situations, there is no going back, but only going forward and accomplishing our objective. This was the main reason why the three of us were together in that particular expedition, and is what I will coin a “real team spirit.”

DECISIONS, DECISIONS, DECISIONS

As we descended the trail, it became much more challenging than I had anticipated—remember the word “unexpected?” The trail was full of slippery stones, mud, and water. We found several obstacles along the path. Heavy rain caused our water-proof boots and water resistant gear to become vulnerable, so we just had to deal with being damp and get used

to it. The vegetation became denser and the climate semi-tropical making the scenery even more spectacular. Even though we were wet,



we enjoyed the challenge ahead of us. The first major sign that we were on the right track was an awesome waterfall. If I had known, I would have brought my swim trunks, but I assume the water was on the chilly side.



To manage the road from that point onward, we had to use different strategies and in some situations, adapt and improvise on the spot. No committees, no phone calls to get approvals, no bureaucracy, just plain and simple execution to get the job done. On some occasions, because the road was slippery we had to walk making “baby-steps.” Sometimes we had to leap over puddles of mud to avoid sinking our hiking boots, and sometimes we had no choice but to sink our feet in the deep mud or get our boots fully submerged in water to cross the rivers that intersected the trail. We made conscious decisions based on the conditions of the road at that moment. These situations and actions are the kind that can never be planned ahead of time.



After nine hours of intense walking and seeing all sorts of beautiful vegetation, my knees, feet and shoulders were nearly destroyed, but we managed to make it to the “camp-site,” where there is a friendly community that offers a few “huts” with rooms (real beds and mattresses) and a clean bathroom with showers. The view from the open trail as the sun went down was outstanding and



worth all the pain and hard work. When we finally made it to the hut, we crashed there with our aching bodies and had a wonderful Thanksgiving dinner; no fancy Martha Stewart recipe, but a simple fettuccini a la carbonara that tasted so delicious because we were hungry and it was warm food. After such a long hike, any warm food is heaven sent and a very good reason to “give thanks.” After the meal, the second best feeling was a soft and warm sleeping bag and a restful night with the sound of crickets in the background.

Day Two

The next day we embarked on the last leg of our journey, *only* a three hour hike to our final

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destination. The day was beautiful, a warm and sunny day, the views were breathtaking and the smell of semi-tropical air filled our lungs with pure clean oxygen.



We saw the last turn of the mountain, the last leg of our journey, where our loved ones were waiting for us with transportation.



I must confess, my body ached for about three days afterwards, but it was one of the best Thanksgivings of my life. Thank heavens for hiking poles, and I gave thanks that our expedition crew was reunited with loved ones—what smiling faces we had.



In summary, achieving our objective and seeing the big picture come true (being together again with our respective families), was the most rewarding feeling we achieved as human beings. Keeping it simple is what we forget sometimes when we are involved in business. As for the final thought, set yourself a simple (but hard to accomplish) objective and see it through to the end. You will have that same awesome feeling of accomplishment. I have the good fortune of working as a consultant and must travel all over Latin America, and every time I finish a successful project and come back home, I have that same rewarding feeling. What else is life all about? □