

Como agua para liderazgo - **Like water for leadership:**

Magical Realism at The Refinery

by Tim McGrady, a Consultant with the Refinery Leadership Partners Inc., heading up the Mexico/Latin America operations.

I have lived and worked in Mexico on and off for the last 20 years of my life. I initially went there in my twenties in search of adventure and sun. As a professional guide, I lead expeditions in the mountains and on the oceans of southern Mexico and the Baja peninsula. Beyond the stunning natural beauty of the region, I fell in love with the Mexican people and their culture – all of which continue to lure me back for more adventures.

More recently I have found myself co-facilitating leadership training workshops throughout the region with my good friend and colleague Francisco Castellanos. While I have taught leadership training programs here in Canada, there is something very unique about teaching leadership in Latin America. I have often reflected on the nature of these differences without much success in identifying that key, distinguishing ingredient.

Last week on my six hour flight back to Vancouver from Mexico City I passed the time reading 'El amor en los tiempos del cólera' (Love in the time of cholera) by Gabriel García Marquez, the famous Colombian novelist. At last, it struck me – the distinguishing ingredient that makes teaching leadership so different in Latin America: Magical Realism.



Magical Realism is a narrative technique that has come to describe the work of Latinamerican novelists such as Isabel Allende, Jorge Luis Borges and García Marquez. It is a style in which ordinary reality is juxtaposed against an irrational, fantastical or magical backdrop. Think of Tita's cooking in *Like Water For Chocolate* which has such powerful emotional effects on whoever eats her food or the literal river of tears produced when she cries. Another critic has described magical realism as fostering the view of humans as 'a mystery surrounded by realistic data.' I prefer this last description.

I definitely don't mean to imply that Mexicans are less rational than Canadians. Rather, I believe that Latinamerican culture has a very cultivated appreciation of the essential mystery of existence. Moreover, it is this appreciation of the mystery of the human condition that is typical in the novels of many famous Latinamerican novelists and novels such as 'Like Water For Chocolate' by Allende and 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' by García Marquez. (*Como agua para chocolate* or *Like water for chocolate*, by the way, is a Spanish idiomatic expression. It refers to the fact that you need very hot water to dissolve hard chocolate to make a beverage. So, by extension, *Like water for chocolate* is ultimately a reference to anything that requires passion – such as leadership!)

But what does Magical Realism have to do with leadership? It has everything to do with leadership. After all, the best leaders understand that leading people is all about knowing when to call to action our rational side and when to harness our irrational or emotional side.

Leaders who only call upon our rational faculties lack inspiration while leaders who rally only our emotional side lack execution. The best leaders intuitively understand that humans are at once very magical and very real.

One of the aspects I really enjoy about The Refinery's style of teaching leadership is that I believe we incorporate elements of magical realism in our programming. With our emphasis, for example, on 'playing with a purpose' we engage participants in play that allows them to immerse themselves in the magic of 'just having fun'. Then in our debriefs we tease out the essential leadership learning and help them make the connection between the game or simulation and their workplace.

I firmly believe that part of our success in working in Latin America is a result of the congruence with our style and a (perhaps unconscious) appreciation for the elements of magical realism amongst our Latin American participants.

This article was written by Tim McGrady, a Consultant with the Refinery Leadership Partners Inc. Tim heads up the Mexico/Latin America office and can be reached at tim@refinery.com.mx

