

Community engagement helps strengthen and transform groups of people by increasing understanding and connections among its members. Centered in the significance of such engagement, BMO's Latino Alliance was founded in 1994 in the United States and in 2019 it established its formal presence in Canada. This enterprise resource aims at fostering an inclusive environment for professionals of Latin American heritage. It aims at helping build ties with individuals who wish to network and strengthen their relations with their community. Over the years, this alliance has created trust and loyalty amongst its customers. It has invested in Latin American employees and provided representation for members of the Latin American community throughout our country.

As part of a group of students in a 4th year, Spanish course at York University, we understand the value of fomenting community relations. After learning about BMO's enterprise, we decided to interview Catalina Vargas and Roberto Mendieta, two employees who play significant roles in the alliance. Our goal was to better learn the benefits of community engagement within the professional world. Hence, we wished to grasp the way in which the BMO alliance operates in Canada and, by extension, how it benefits its employees and customers. With a focus on this publication's theme, we also wished to understand how recent events have impacted community dynamics and its members' success.

During the interview, we learned that Ms. Vargas has been working at BMO for the past 10 years and is currently the Co-Chair of the Alliance and Innovation & Strategic Initiatives. Mr. Mendieta has been working at BMO for 9 years and is currently a Technology Director in the Treasury & Payment Solutions team. When inquiring how recent events have impacted their

operations, significant changes that resulted from our pandemic were brought to the forefront. Ms. Vargas and Mr. Mendieta highlighted the manner in which COVID-19 gave way to unique challenges affecting employees and workplaces. Yet, regardless of government mandated restrictions and the inevitable creation of virtual spaces, the Latino Alliance has flourished throughout our unprecedented times. Their success was founded on their ability to focus on community involvement, while adapting to their customers' and colleagues' needs.

Ms. Vargas and Mr. Mendieta highlighted the critical significance of community involvement. Such involvement, they explained, promotes change within community members' personal and professional lives. The Latino Alliance has created a space for networking and development. Catalina Vargas states, "The Latino Alliance started because there was a strong desire for people of Latin American heritage to connect with one another in Canada" (R. Mendieta & C. Vargas, Personal Communication, March 18, 2022). In other words, there were not any Canadian spaces that supported Latin American heritage. The insistence on creating opportunities for Latinos reflects the importance of representing less dominant cultural groups in job environments. This cultural hub provides individuals with a sense of belonging. Furthermore, their community involvement significantly improves the quality of life for others. Individuals have the opportunity to succeed and accomplish academic or professional goals through financial support. According to Roberto Mendieta, "scholarships for single parents, women's groups, charity groups" and more exist to bring people together for a common cause (R. Mendieta & C. Vargas, Personal Communication, March 18, 2022).

Studies have shown that “scholarships have positive effects on persistence” (Ganem & Manasse, 2011, p. 2). This suggests that community engagement that provides financial support to students can positively impact their academic pursuits and goals. As a result, the Latino Alliance’s community outreach programs contribute assistance to vulnerable members and students struggling to afford college. Furthermore, heritage groups foster representation for minority ethnic groups. This creates a place for individuals to connect through language and culture. It provides a networking space to collaborate with and amplify the voices of underrepresented communities. BMO’s Latino Alliance strives to cultivate unity, share knowledge, and appreciate the expression of culture. Ultimately, its emphasis on community involvement fosters a sense of belonging, unity, and representation for Latin Americans to come together to participate in cultural expressions.

Ms. Vargas and Mr. Mendieta also stressed how their dedication to building up colleagues provides mentorship to enhance the work culture by focusing on purposeful work. When working as a team, valuing each members' contribution to the collaboration is essential in building teamwork dynamic. This leads to more motivation and efficient processes, promotes success and improves communication between members. By listening and learning from team members, goals become more reachable. This increases the rate of employee productivity. Moreover, the division of labour increases flexibility among members of a team. This, by extension, also leads to an increase in productivity and members’ success. As stated by Mr. Mendieta, "We're shoulder to shoulder, we're in the same pay grade, and at the end of the day, you always have to treat everyone with respect and dignity because that person may be your manager. That's how small this world is, you know, and when you put the work in and your will

and determination, you can accomplish anything" (R. Mendieta & C. Vargas, Personal Communication, March 18, 2022). Acknowledging that each team member adds value is essential in enabling or improving members' communication. Positive dynamics, they argue, also impacts reputation. Evidently, developing mutual respect is imperative because it depicts professionalism.

During our conversation, our interviewees expressed some challenges COVID-19 presented when connecting with colleagues. The pandemic altered everyone's typical work routines. Interactions that typically took place in person migrated to virtual settings. Employees noted how the engagement levels online differed from the participation in person. In addition, there were minor distractions, such as a dog barking in the background. Despite the minor struggles, the two emphasized the importance of encouraging others to continue to show up authentically at work to inspire transparency that leads to curiosity. Catalina Vargas states, "It is such a small world here; your colleagues may be your manager, or they may be working on a project for your colleagues, so I definitely encourage for you to always be yourself. And always ask questions" (R. Mendieta & C. Vargas, Personal Communication, March 18, 2022). Catalina Vargas and Roberto Mendieta have also witnessed the importance of humility in the workplace because it fosters an environment for exchange, harmonious interactions, and promotion.

The Latino Alliance has adapted to employees' and customers' needs, encouraging the creation of an atmosphere of trust and loyalty. According to Mr. Mendieta, "At the bank, people have this stigma, where they think it involves working with numbers all day, but it's not like that at all" (R. Mendieta & C. Vargas, Personal Communication, March 18, 2022). He stressed that there are so

many different initiatives members could be a part of, such as Chain Management, Product Management, and work in media. Mr. Mendieta is involved in an initiative called BMO Pulse, which is linked to HR. Through Pulse there has been a change in the bank's pre-existing systems. Its aim is to make things more convenient and better for their customers and employees. It actively seeks arising problems and develops solutions to fix them. In addition, as Co-chair of the Latino Alliance, Catalina Vargas stays connected to customers through sales, leadership, and strategizing initiatives. The Latino Alliance is also very keen on proactively reaching out to its customers to maintain healthy customer relationships. In our interview, Mr. Mendieta explained that he was mistaken when he initially thought that the banking role was just a branch where you clock in and out. Being in sales, Mr. Mendieta sometimes meets clients in person and has dinners and lunches with them to talk about the product he's selling. He has even travelled to British Columbia on a boat and plane to meet one of his clients who lived in a government building. His success within BMO is, at least in part, due to his ability to connect with people "because you never know what someone's day is like, so ask questions and see who you can support next time" (R. Mendieta & C. Vargas, Personal Communication, March 18, 2022).

The Latino Alliance grows and maintains healthy client relationships. Its team believes in the importance of interpersonal relationships and creating a supportive environment for the client. Along such lines, Paul Patterson's 2016 study indicates that the communication between the provider and customer allows for their relationship to grow in importance. Quoting from Patterson, "Subsequent research has examined communications style; the impact of communications in a business-to-business professional services context and linked it to client psychological comfort, co-production and value co-creation, client engagement, client

experience management and empowerment" (p. 485). The actions that Mr. Mendieta has described in his day-to-day work, such as proactively reaching out to his clients and even going out of his way to visit a customer in a different province, depicts the Latino Alliance's goal in growing and maintaining healthy relationships. Likewise, Ms. Vargas has shared how the Latino Alliance is about supporting the workers and customers who partake in BMO: "We advocate these three C's that we call our colleagues, communities, and customers. Our day-to-day is literally spent around finding ways to support our colleagues, customers, and our communities" (R. Mendieta & C. Vargas, Personal Communication, March 18, 2022). Their work is centered in striving to create a supportive environment and fostering an atmosphere of trust and loyalty for both employees and customers.

Throughout our interview, the significant impact of the Latino Alliance, has become clear. As argued throughout this paper, this enterprise strives to foster a space of inclusivity for Canadians of Latin American heritage to unite in one place. In spite of the many challenges imposed by COVID, by focusing on their values of community, colleagues, and customer satisfaction, the organization, the Alliance thrived. This is because members clearly understood which values were of utmost importance to their establishment. Their emphasis on community involvement has fostered the representation for Latin Americans, encouraging them to come together, support each other's work, help each other through challenges and even engage in cultural activities. Their dedication to colleague-based mentorship furthers their leadership skills to spread knowledge and insight amongst employees. Their group is also committed to adapting to their customers' needs. They deliver above-and-beyond performance to ensure satisfaction. Our interview with Catalina Vargas and Roberto Mendieta has shown that COVID-19 did not

adversely affect the caliber of work and focusing on the 3 C's supported employees in prioritizing their mission.

References

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