**A old professor learns new tricks in Cuba** or **What the Cuban people taught me**

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I settled into my seat on a plane bound for Cuba feeling frustrated. When I planned the trip, I had assumed that my Cuban collaborators and I would hit the ground running, heading out into the field straight away to collect water and sediment samples from rivers. That’s how I’d done fieldwork in Namibia, Bolivia, and Greenland. But not in Cuba, I was slowly learning. Five days earlier, a Cuban scientist emailed to inform me that we’d be meeting only to talk about our planned project. Sampling would happen during a later trip, she wrote. That left me feeling impatient and unhappy. Why did I need to get on a plane to have a meeting? But I’m thankful I made the trip because it taught me a key lesson: It was I—not the Cubans—who had a flawed approach to doing science.

When I got to Cuba, one of my collaborators greeted me at the airport with a broad smile. “Welcome to Cuba!” he exclaimed in perfect English, giving me a strong handshake and a hug. The next day, we drove to the research center where he worked. A dozen team members met in a modern, air conditioned conference room, as scorpions scurried across the floor. Each of us gave a presentation about our science and what we hoped to learn from the study of Cuban rivers.

Then, the group toured every lab in the building. I met scientists, technicians, secretaries, students, and the cook. Some spoke English; others communicated to me in Spanish while my collaborator translated. I was impressed that I was introduced to each and every person in their center. The lack of hierarchy—the team atmosphere—was unlike anything I’d experienced before in academia.

The next day we met again to brainstorm. Together, we poured over maps to plan our field campaign and decided what analyses we’d make and in which labs. Had it not been for the Cubans, I would have been unaware that even our updated maps were wrong, there were reservoirs, of which we had no knowledge, intercepting sediment and water. Sampling without input from the whole team would have biased our results. Local involvement and knowledge was key – making me wonder what I’d missed working without such a team in Africa, South America, and Greenland. I was learning – our work was better because we worked together.

Six months later, I returned and we sampled, and my Cuban collaborators ensured that all team members were treated equally. We drove into the field in two bright yellow vans, and we made sure that each van had a mix of Cubans and Americans as well as a mix of seniority levels. In the field, students, faculty, and technicians all sweated together. On the last night of this trip, we searched for a restaurant that could seat all 14 of us at one table—because that’s what teams do, they sit together. When a restaurant couldn’t accommodate the team without splitting us up, my collaborators insisted that we move on and find a place with a large enough table.

In 26 years as a professor, I’ve tried my best to treat my students as collaborators. I was never a fan of academia’s hierarchy. I always wanted everyone working with me to feel as though they were part of a team. But my Cuban collaborators took teamwork to another level entirely. They made it clear—through actions, both big and small—that all team members were valued; that everyone was equal and that true teamwork made for better science. I returned to the United States a changed scientist.

In Cuba, I learned that real teams listen, slow down, and do better work because people think differently. Now, I spend more time listening. Sometimes it’s as simple as talking through everyone’s ideas before we change a lab procedure or write a quiz. I’ve become a far more vocal advocate for equality. All voices have value; each and every person is deserving of respect. I know that we Americans have much to learn from our neighbors to the south. I hope this essay inspires others to recognize the power of real teamwork —even during routine moments such as dinner.