

By Paul Bierman

Teamwork, the Cuban way

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, it seemed. Five days earlier, a Cuban scientist emailed to inform me that we'd only be meeting 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 travel there to have a meeting? But I had something to learn in Cuba.

At the airport, one of my collaborators greeted me 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. As scorpions scurried across the floor of the conference room, each of us gave a presentation about our science and what we hoped to learn from the study of Cuban rivers.

Then, we 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 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 pored over maps to plan how we were going to collect samples. Had it not been for the Cubans, I would have been unaware that the maps I had were outdated and wrong. They left out reservoirs, which was a problem because had we sampled downstream of them, our results would have been biased. Local involvement and knowledge were key—making me wonder what I'd missed working without such a team in Africa, South America, and the Arctic.

Six months later, I flew back to Cuba and—this time—we headed into the field. I was impressed, yet again, by the lengths to which my collaborators went to ensure that all team members were treated equally. We drove around Cuba in bright yellow vans, and we made sure that each van had a mix of Cubans and Americans at all seniority levels. In the field, students, faculty, and technicians all sweated together.

On the last night of the trip, we searched for a restaurant that could seat all 14 of us at one table—because that's what



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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 always tried my best to treat my students as valued collaborators. I have never been a fan of academia's hierarchy. I want everyone working with me to feel as though they are part of a team. But my Cuban collaborators take teamwork to another level entirely. They make it clear—through actions both big and small—that all team members are valued, that everyone is equal, and that true teamwork makes for better science.

I returned to the United States a changed scientist. Now, I spend more time listening and making sure that everyone's voice is heard. Four

months ago, I took the Cuban approach to heart when I led a workshop for scientists from five countries. We met to discuss how we were going to analyze a few precious grams of rock collected from beneath the Greenland Ice Sheet. I made sure that every scientist had a voice in the discussions and that all 35 of us ate dinners together. The approach worked: We began as individuals, but after the workshop, we were a team.

Many people outside Cuba focus on its communist system or the bad blood between our two countries. In Cuba, my collaborators taught me about coming together. I learned that the best teams recognize that individual members bring different perspectives to the table. All voices have merit, and each and every person deserves respect. I hope this essay inspires others to recognize the power of real teamwork—even during routine moments such as dinner. ■

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