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IAQ RADIO+

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Luis Suarez

Understanding the Latino Culture to Develop a Workforce and Better Service Client Needs!

Good Day and welcome to IAQ Radio+ episode 767 BLOG. This week we welcomed Luis Suarez of RestorRight Bilingual Academy in Edinburg TX to discuss "Understanding the Latino Culture to Develop a Workforce and Better Service Client Needs!" Luis is an impressive young man that is an up-and-coming star in the restoration world.

Luis Suarez is a seasoned technical educator and consultant with over a decade of experience in the Restoration industry. His journey in this field is marked by a passion for education and a strong commitment to helping others succeed.

As the founder and leader of RestorRight Bilingual Academy, Luis has created a dynamic platform aimed at advancing knowledge and skills within the restoration community. This endeavor was inspired and supported by Recovapro LLC, a prominent water and fire restoration company whose mission aligns with Luis's dedication to education and mentorship.

Luis's primary objective is to guide and mentor aspiring professionals in the restoration industry, helping them navigate the challenges that come their way. His immediate goal is to become an approved IICRC (Institute of Inspection, Cleaning, and Restoration Certification) instructor, enabling him to provide certification courses in both English and Spanish. This reflects his commitment to making high-quality training accessible to a broader, more diverse audience.

Beyond his professional pursuits, Luis is a loving husband and the father of two energetic youngsters who keep him on his toes whenever he's not furthering his own education.

Nuggets mined from today's episode:

Let's start with some background information about you:

Edinburg TX is about as far south in TX as you can get but also close to Padre Island and the Gulf Coast.

How did you get into the water damage world?

By accident. He was training to be a private bodyguard back in 2013 with a security company. As such, he was undergoing martial arts training during which he met the 1st supervisor of Servpro who asked if he was interested in working there. He thought he heard Surf Pro, so he said yes to which was completely off.

Tell us a bit about your journey through the ranks and how you ended up opening RestorRight Bilingual Academy?

Since a young age, he always wanted a career where he could serve and help others, such as being a paramedic. He started at Servpro as a helper/technician, and after about a year, moved up to supervisor when the previous one left.

Drawn in by customer “Thanks and Complaints”, he kept taking on more responsibilities such as estimating, communicating with insurers, handling customer complaints and eventually becoming the operations manager. Luis found resolving customer complaints to be fun and educational. Learning where mistakes were made, fixing them and trying to avoid repeating them. Most of his industry technical training was self-funded. Luis’ employer was supportive of his efforts seeing both his passion and stubbornness.

Luis eventually realized how much knowledge was missing, especially for Spanish speaking restorers and wanted to do something about it. After leaving his hometown of Laredo, he worked as a consultant for a mitigation company and couldn’t shake the feeling that he needed to help someone by teaching. That’s how *RestorRight Bilingua*l *Academy* was born out of experience, purpose, and a bit of stubbornness.

Do you just do training now or are you still doing water damage work?

He still takes on around three projects annually. As part of his one-on-one consulting, he works directly with companies and their teams on real losses, so the training is hands-on and practical.

You have a page long list of training courses, CEC courses, and professional development courses. How did you pull this off at such a young age?

To put it simply... sacrifice. Early on in his career, he used his lunch money to pay for courses because there were times when he’d get embarrassed by homeowners or adjusters for not knowing certain things. His employer covered the essential classes like WRT, FSRT, and CCT only. David Oakes, from the Restoration Science Academy, impressed him.

The turning point for Luis was taking Carpet Cleaning Technician with Doug Heiferman. Doug’s passion for teaching inspired him to become a lifelong student of this industry.

From then on, he stopped waiting for his company to fund his growth and he invested in himself. Looking back, that decision changed everything.

Why do you use Latino vs Hispanic and what is the difference?

For Luis, *Latino* represents identity and community; it's more cultural than linguistic. *Hispanic* tends to be associated with the language (Spanish speaking countries), while *Latino* connects to shared experiences, roots, and values. For him, the term *Latino* captures the people, not just the language. It reflects pride in who we are and what we bring to the table. Latino is communal. Hispanic is not linguistic; it's about shared roots and culture.

As someone that was able to access a lot of training over the years and is now doing training, what is the biggest misconception about providing Latino education?

The biggest misconception is that it's simply about translation. People think that if you just translate an English course into Spanish, you've solved the problem. For Spanish speakers, education doesn't work that way. Latino professionals need context examples (images/videos), food (yes food culture is different), and scenarios that match their day-to-day reality. It's not about teaching them less; it's about teaching in a way that connects. Latino students come with differing backgrounds and cultures. Their foods are different. Latinos tend towards visual learning. Hands-on and videos work well, especially training that replicates common day-to-day problems encountered in the field.

Is language the biggest barrier for new Latino's entering this industry?

Language is part of it, but not the biggest barrier. The real barrier is *access*. Many are unaware that educational opportunities exist and there aren't many. Latinos may feel intimidated by the formality of industry jargon. Once you break that wall and make training relatable, the language barrier becomes secondary and easy. Teaching in a way that connects students is important. Luis makes language neutral and allows students to use their own terminology.

How can the industry do a better job with educating the Latino workforce?

First, by recognizing their value. They're not just a source of labor; they're the backbone of many restoration/construction companies. The industry needs to invest in bilingual education, mentorship, and certification career pathways that actually fit their schedules and realities. That's why Luis started his academy to make technical knowledge accessible, not only for just Spanish speakers.

The industry also needs to work with Latino's in roles other than workers. Many customers, facility managers, etc. are also Latino. How can we all do a better job communicating and working with each other?

Luis believes it starts with acknowledgement, respect, and empathy. When communication breaks down, it's rarely about language, it's about assumptions. Companies should train their teams to recognize cultural nuances, be patient with communication differences, and use plain, direct language. The goal isn't to "simplify" for Latinos it's to build mutual understanding. It's natural to be wary of people from different cultures, smile, make eye contact, offer to shake hands.

When translating courses from English to Spanish I have been told there is quite a difference between Puerto Rican Spanish, Mexican Spanish, etc. How true is that and how do you deal with that?

It's true, there are variations. Certain words mean different things depending on where you're from. But if you use *neutral Spanish* and focus on real world application, people understand you. In his classes, he explains technical terms in multiple ways until everyone connects with the meaning, in some cases they create their own terminology to which the correct term attaches better in the end. The goal isn't perfect translation, it's comprehension.

Training Tip:
Overcoming the fear of participating: When the trainer openly shares his mistakes and what was learned from them, students are more likely and willing to do the same.

What other tips can you give our audience about working with Latino clients, managers, and employees?

Be real. Don't talk *at* them, talk *with* them. Latinos value relationships more than transactions. A handshake, eye contact, and respect go a long way. And when you take time to explain the "why" behind a process, you don't just earn compliance you earn loyalty.

How is the current policy on illegal immigration affecting Latino water damage restoration professionals?

It has created a lot of fear and instability. Many talented workers stay quiet or avoid formal training because they don't want attention. Some companies also hesitate to hire openly, even when they need the help. The reality is, the industry depends heavily on immigrant labor, documented or not. So instead of avoiding the topic, we should focus on education and safety because regardless of status, these workers deserve to go home healthy and informed.

Congratulations on your 2025 RIA - Volunteer of The Year Award! How has your work with IICRC and RIA changed your life?

Thank you. Working behind the curtains with both organizations has given Luis a deeper sense of purpose. It allowed him to contribute to something bigger than myself to help bring representation and awareness for the Latino community within this industry. It's also shown him that change doesn't come from complaining; it comes from building, volunteering, and showing up consistently...even if it feels like no one is watching.

Luis translated all of the RIA white papers so that his students would be able to benefit from those valuable resources. Luis then donated the translated documents to RIA because he believes and is passionate about the work RIA is doing. To someone whose contributions are unseen and undervalued, acknowledgement matters. Luis missed his high school graduation due to a personal injury caused by a drunk driver; being called onto the stage to receive his award at an RIA convention was a life highlight.

In general, how can the current curriculum in IICRC courses and CEC offerings be improved?

The curriculum needs to be more application heavy rather than information heavy, to allow students to share their mistakes. Most students don't struggle with the concepts they struggle with how to use them under pressure in the field. He opines what would help is selecting topics like:

- Case based learning: real losses, real moisture maps, real documentation failures.
- Scenario based: what would you do if…? Instead of memorizing definitions.
- Clearer distinction between "standard of care," best practice and common myths.
- More hands-on.
- Shorter gaps between theory and practice: if students learn psychrometry in the morning, let them apply it in the afternoon.
- Updates that reflect disputes restorers face today. Documentation examples, communication failures, inspection sequence, and how to handle limitations.
- Bilingual support where feasible: even just a glossary or summary page helps immigrants feel grounded instead of lost and he finds photos work best. Walking back into the field more competently, more confident, and less likely to be blamed for things they were never trained to handle.
- A big mistake is the focus on passing the exam.

Specifically, how can the current curriculum in IICRC courses and CEC offerings be improved to make it more beneficial to students for new immigrants to the US?

For new immigrants, the obstacle isn't intelligence, it's *access*. Everyone often feels intimidated before the class even starts and sadly a handful after class ends. The

curriculum could better serve them by focusing on simple clarity, context, and objectives:

- **Plain language explanations,** before the technical terms. Many can learn science easily if the concept is introduced in a familiar language first. Many students are intimidated that they pay so much money and don't know what the instructor is talking about.
- **More visual learning.** Diagrams, videos, flowcharts, cause, and effect examples less assumption. Learning is a journey currently there is too much complication.
- **Examples that match the actual work**. Job-site situations, videos of failures open up more curiosity and engagement.
- **Showing *why* each step matters.** When you explain the purpose, comprehension and retention go up, even with language barriers.
- **Instructor training on cultural differences,** such as tone, pacing, and interaction styles matter.
- **Bilingual support where feasible.** Even just a glossary or summary page helps new immigrants feel grounded instead of lost, he has found seeing photos work best.
- **The OSHA courses of the past used cartoons and videos to demonstrate safety issues. The new OSHA courses often use Latinos,** which is insulting and demoralizing.

  Most new immigrants want a better life and to respect where they now live, they want to learn, they want to grow, and they want to support their families. If the curriculum speaks to their reality, they'll outperform expectations every single time!

THE ROUNDUP

Pete Consigli, Global Disaster Industry Watchdog, Industry Historian & Moisture Mob Consigliere (Consigli gives a heartfelt recap of the show's key points from his unique historical perspective!)

- **Luis has a servant's heart!**
- The value and importance of hands-on training. In the book "The Stuff Americans Are Made Of" a study was done by Disney University of training methods used in the US, Germany, and Japan. The study found that while 80% of big corporations used lecture only and only 6% of students felt that was the best way for them to learn, The majority of students felt that hands-on or watching hands-on training was the best way.

- At the 1997 Water Loss Conference held in Pittsburgh, Microbiologist Norm Minor, PhD, opined his recommended protocol for microbial remediation was to: Clean it, Dry it, Disinfect it, and Send the bill.
- The late Martin King, CR, ASA started every course with a reminder not one "head" knows more than the combined knowledge of all the "heads" in the room.
- Claude Blackburn told Pete that when teaching from a podium, the instructor will learn more from the students than the students will learn from the teacher.
- Value in learning from mistakes. While every restoration has the big jobs that they are proud of, more can be learned from their mistakes. What was the problem? What didn't work? Explain how you fixed it and What was learned from the mistakes that can be applied for the next project?
- A job that has gone wrong, acknowledged and then fixed by the restorer may become a customer for life.
- A project on Knob Hill in San Francisco, a complex hardwood floor drying project that initially went well became problematic when problems occurred several months later. An inspection found that the hardwood was installed over layers of preexisting subflooring over slab, which upon natural drying over time caused problems to the hardwood. The restorer accepted responsibility and advised the insurance carrier that had they know about the underlying layer of flooring that they would have considered the hardwood to have been non restorable.
- The restorer was able to repair some of it and came to an agreement with the adjuster that they would refund the drying charges and that the insurance carrier would pay to replace the areas of the hardwood floor that needed to be replaced.
- Pete's good friend Butch Carpenter, would say, "Everyone screws up and gets knocked off their high horse now and then," if not they haven't been around very long, are lying or are unwilling to take risks!
- Through his skilled use of facilitation when teaching, the late Mickey Lee, WLS was able to get his students to participate, trust, share and learn.
- In the past, RIA had multiple programs on building a Latino friendly workplace, a big takeaway was it is more important to learn the culture than the language.
- Brazil is the only Latino country in South America that speaks Portuguese as a first language. Therefore, Brazil is Latino and not considered Hispanic.
- 50 million people in the US speak Spanish as a first language.
- Only Mexico has more Spanish speakers, making the USA the second largest Spanish speaking country in the world!
- The most successful service businesses that have integrated Latinos into their workforce have bilingual supervisors and utilize bilingual trainers.
- At an RIA event a high-level insurance company executive gave members a list of 11 things that restoration firms can do to improve relations with insurance carriers: 2 were contents related, 3 were science related and 6 were communications related. RIA's AGA is tearing down walls and building bridges.
- Martin King- "Insurance companies fund restorers work; restorers should be respectful." Don't be afraid to express your opinion when you feel an item is salvageable.

- Different dialects and expressions in both Spanish and English-speaking countries should be understood, as regional culture and norms often give phrases and words different meanings which can be taken out of context.
- Oral or hands-on exams are needed to confirm competency of people who have difficulty reading and writing.
- Stephen Covey for team building exercises and leadership training used staged scenarios to instruct adult students in the same manner that kids learn.
- Visual images send powerful messages that require few words!
  - 1970s most successful TV advertisements, showed images of an egg being cracked into a hot pan, with the accompanying dialogue “This is your brain, and this is your brain on drugs!”.
  - A PSA Billboard on the NJ Turnpike showing a photo of an arm with a needle stuck into it with accompanying written message “Smoking is bad for you.”
- Students need to score 100% on exams, An example of this model is used by John T. Hull, for his ARE roofing inspection certification course. After the student takes exam and the exam is scored, John reviews the test with students so they know what questions they answered incorrectly. https://americanroofingeducators.com/
- Go home safely, a lesson learned in the late 1970’s. Pete wanted to avoid telling a family that the breadwinner died or was injured on the job. Pete worked for a renowned rug and upholstery cleaning firm in Connecticut.
- They had two master carpet and upholstery cleaners who had years of experience and were in their 50s and they looked like they were in their 70s due to chemical exposures.
- Early in his career Pete was given a liquid by a supplier in a brown glass bottle and told to add it to his cleaning solution when encountering heavy soil or grease. The liquid was straight butyl cellosolve, a key ingredient which makes degreasers like Formula 409 & Fantastic, Windex, carpet and wall cleaning pre-sprays, etc. effective cleaners.
- **It’s about the work!** We want to properly protect our workers. When it comes to worker protection there are minimizers who under-protect workers and maximizers who over-protect workers, the answer is the proper protection.

Luis, is there anything you would like to add?

- Luis uses Artificial Intelligence Tools- Chat GPT and Google Notebook LM. He also uses numbers, pictures and colors to help workers learn.
- The restorer’s value should last longer than the invoice. If we’re not protecting people, we’re missing the point. We have to teach from real mistakes, not hide them, and focus on what truly changes how people work, not just on completing forms or procedures. Since I can testify to this speed, obedience, and clean KPIs don’t always mean it was done right.

Z-Man signing off

Trivia:
How many Spanish speaking countries recognize Spanish as an official language?

Answer: 20

Answered by: Don Weekes, Ottawa, Ontario CANADA