

ORGANIZING

Organizing in Mexico presents unique challenges

Last week I had one of the most unusual and challenging organizational projects ever. I am sharing this experience with you because the principles I learned hold true for any organizing task. My husband, Eric, and I were in Cozumel, Mexico, volunteering on the campus of Ciudad de Angeles (City of Angels), a Christian children's home that provides a permanent home for orphaned, abandoned, abused and needy children. Our family has been involved with Ciudad

for about 13 years, and we visit yearly to spend time with the child we sponsor and to help with improvements to the campus. Our "Mexican daughter" is now 20 years old and a student at the local university.

As the team of volunteers was gathering materials for the various projects, the team leader approached me and said, "I heard you were an organizer. We've got a job that's perfect for you!"

I love organizing so much and was excited for a chance to use my skills there. The building that needed work was a small storage area for construction materials. Because it is used by many different people and no one is in charge of maintaining it, it was in disarray. The shelves and floor were almost totally covered, but there appeared to be no order to where things were placed.

There was also quite a bit of trash and empty containers scattered around. More materials needed to be brought into the space, but doing so in the current state would only make matters worse. The goal was to remove anything not worthy of saving and to put the remaining contents into order so that materials could be saved easily. This solution would save the home both time and money.

There were several things



PHOTO BY ERIC HYCHE

Since we couldn't buy anything, we looked around to see what kind of containers we had available. Since painting and construction are constantly taking place, we had an abundance of empty 5-gallon buckets and some random plastic containers.

about this project that made it considerably different from other organizing projects. First of all, usually when I begin a project I spend a lot of time speaking to the primary user of the space to find out about their goals and preferences. Although most of the staff at Ciudad speaks both English and Spanish, the construction workers spoke only Spanish.

They would be the most important ones to ask about how items should be arranged. But since I speak very little Spanish, I wasn't able to have that crucial conversation with them. There wasn't time to enlist someone's help to translate, so I just had to arrange things in the way I thought best. I had several "angels" (a few older children who live at the home) to help me, and their English was good overall, but it did create an additional challenge.

Secondly, funds are limited at the home, so I wouldn't be able to buy any new organizing supplies. I would need to limit my choices to what I had available to me. The third difficulty was that I wouldn't be able to label the shelves or containers after I finished because I didn't know the

Spanish term for the objects.

My helpers and I got started immediately by removing any obvious trash and unusable items. This part of the process took the longest since there was so much that needed to be removed. I had to occasionally check with a Ciudad staff member to ask whether an item was valuable enough to save. Then we pulled everything out of the building and swept off the shelves and the floor.

As we pulled items out, we started grouping them into categories. Sorting — the process of arranging like with like — is always my favorite part of the organizing process. Even with the language difficulty, the angels were excellent with this task. I was very thankful that my husband, Eric, was able to join me. He has much more knowledge about building materials than I do, so he was able to help with the decision about whether something needed to be saved as well as with the sorting process.

Once we had everything sorted, we started making decisions about how to arrange everything. We wanted to keep heavier materials (like buckets of paint and large tiles) on the

floor. Items that would be used regularly needed to be stored in an area that was easily accessible. We also wanted to keep as much of the floor clear as we could to allow space to work.

Only at this point did we start thinking about whether we would need containers. We looked at each grouping of items to decide if it needed to be placed into a container. Since we couldn't buy anything, we looked around to see what kind of containers we had available. Since painting and construction are constantly taking place at Ciudad, we had an abundance of empty 5-gallon buckets.

Eric had a great suggestion; we used 5-gallon buckets turned on their sides for a few items so that they could be corralled into one place but also be seen easily. Once everything had been arranged, we were able to bring in some additional supplies (wood scraps) that had been stacked nearby.

I was so pleased with the results that we took a few pictures. I was wishing I had taken "before" pictures so that you could see what a big difference we made. The Ciudad staff was thrilled with how much better the building looked. But the true test of whether an organizing project is successful isn't based on how a space looks but whether or not it is functional. Toward the end of the process, a construction worker came into the building to look for some electrical wire, glanced at the shelves, and quickly found what he needed. I was encouraged by watching to see him find it easily now.

When I reflected on this experience later in the day, I realized that there was much to be learned:

No matter what the situation, the basic steps of organizing are always the same: Reduce, arrange and maintain. First, remove anything that doesn't belong in the space (reduce). Next, group the remaining items into like categories and deter-

mine the best order (arrange). Finally, figure out a plan for how the items can be kept in order in the future (maintain). I guess only time will tell as to whether the order will be maintained, but hopefully if we arranged it in a functional way, maintenance won't be a difficult challenge.

If you're on the fence about whether or not to keep an item, err on the side of purging. I am glad I was given permission to use this criteria. One of the biggest reasons that clutter develops is because we keep too many things "just in case." A good basic rule is to only keep something if there is strong evidence that it will be used for a specific purpose in the very near future. Make purging your default mode, and you will have much better long-term results!

Wait until the very last step of the process to even think about what containers you might need. So often, people will decide to get organized and immediately go and buy storage containers. Until you have removed what's not needed and sorted items into categories, you have no idea what kind of organizing products you will need.

Besides, most of the time you already have everything you need. The 5-gallon buckets and plastic containers weren't the ideal solution, but they worked just fine. I find this to be true the vast majority of the time with clients here as well. Organizing doesn't have to be expensive. You don't have to buy specialty products.

I'm so glad I got an opportunity to organize in Mexico. It's always nice to find a place to use your skills and passion in a way that benefits others. I hope that the principles I learned during this job are helpful to you.

Happy organizing!
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