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48 THE MARKETING WHIZ

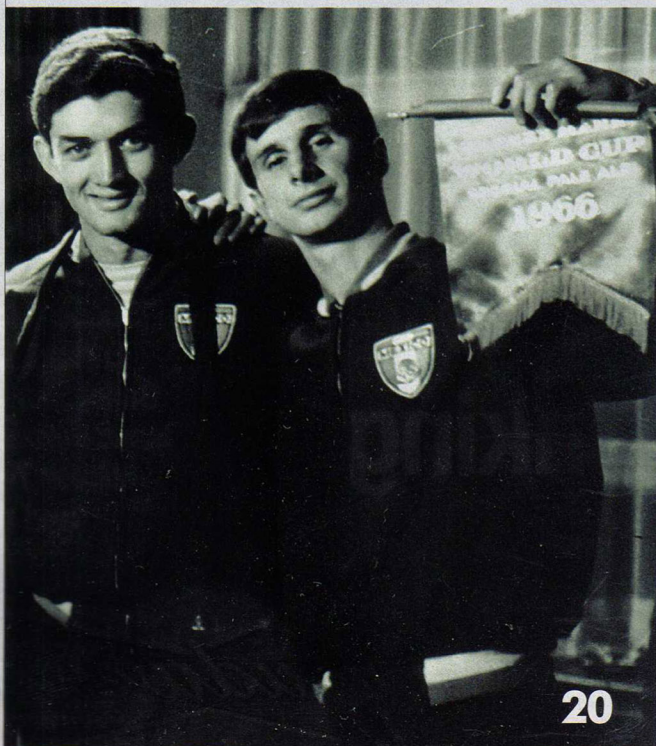
After a successful career as Chief Marketing Officer of Coca-Cola, **Javier Benito** takes the plunge into the hospitality business, and as CMO of Starwood Hotels, he manages to turn the hotel chain, and the industry, completely around.

20 SPEAKING OF

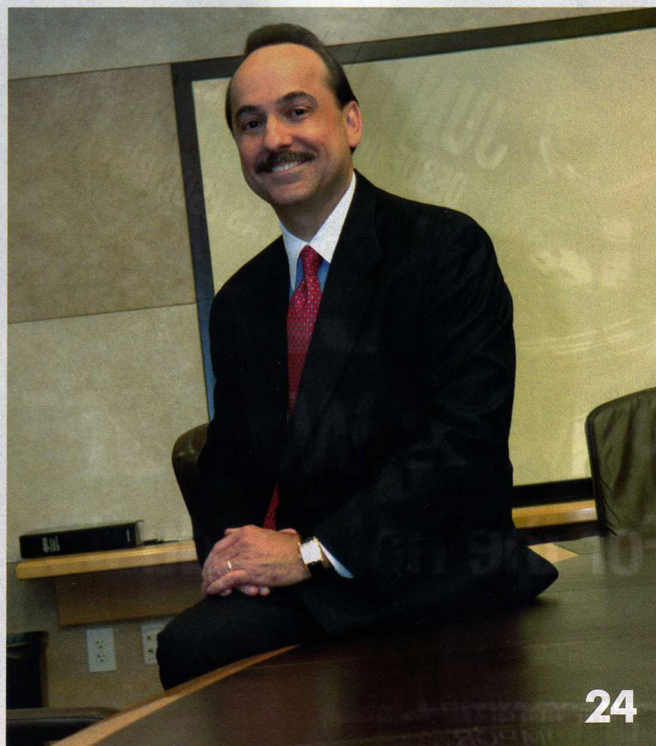
Mexican Soccer legend **Enrique Borja** talks about life in retirement, his new business venture and, what else? The upcoming World Cup.

24 THE ETERNAL OPTIMIST

For the COO of Cingular Wireless, **Ralph De La Vega**, life is filled with 'inflection points' that trigger, and in a lot of ways determine, the success of an authentic leader.



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Thriving on Challenge:

Ralph De La Vega

By Rick Laezman

For Ralph De La Vega, COO of Cingular Wireless, life is a series of “inflection points”. To hear him tell it, these are life-changing events, when everything appears to be in upheaval, but also moments of great opportunity to learn and transform one-self into a wiser and more experienced person.

Photos for
Latino Leaders
by Shawna
Herring,
Atlanta,
Georgia



For Ralph De La Vega, COO of Cingular Wireless, life is a series of “inflection points”. To hear him tell it, these are life-changing events, when everything appears to be in upheaval, but also moments of great opportunity to learn and transform one-self into a wiser and more experienced person.

When De La Vega was only 10 years old, his family decided to come to America from their native Cuba, but at the airport, the authorities intervened. They informed his parents that only their young son had the proper paperwork to leave the country. Choosing not to let this little setback spoil their plans completely, his parents phoned some friends in the U.S. and made arrangements for Ralph to stay with them. The young boy boarded a plane thinking his parents were not far behind, but what he thought would be only a few days eventually turned into four years.

For any 10 year-old to land in a foreign country without family or friends and unable to speak the language should have been a truly horrifying experience, but De La Vega was definitely not a typical child. For him, the event “changed everything for the better.”

He speaks proudly of how he took “a potential negative” and made it into a “life changing experience.” And this point of view, in a nutshell, became his defining philosophy. More than any other important event in his life about which he

speaks, his immigration to the U.S., unaccompanied and at the age of 10, helped shape the kind of man he would eventually become. In short, he says, “it set the stage for the rest of my life.”

It has proven to be a life driven by the desire to succeed. That desire is fueled, to a certain degree, by the thrill he gets from disproving his critics, or at least, those who say he can’t accomplish what he sets out to do. Ralph De La Vega, if nothing else, is a man who doesn’t like to be told what he can’t do.

His impressive credentials are proof of his determination. De La Vega acquired his B.S. in Mechanical Engineering at Florida Atlantic University and his MBA at Northern Illinois University. He started working at BellSouth, which was then Southern Bell, in 1974 as a management assistant, and held a number of positions over the years as he continued to climb the internal ladder of leadership.

At the executive level, he has served as President of BellSouth Broadband and Internet Services, President of BellSouth Latin America, and now, Chief Operating Officer of Cingular Wireless.

Still, an impressively unassuming De La Vega attributes some of his success to an American classic. And it’s not a famous song or a great piece of literature, but rather, a culinary staple of the North American diet.

Ralph fondly recalls the moment when he first arrived in the U.S. at the

home of his parent’s friends and his hosts offered him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a cold glass of milk, but he left the snack on the table uneaten.

“I didn’t want to eat it,” De La Vega reminisces. “In Cuba, we drank our milk warm with lots of sugar, and I had never had this kind of sandwich before.” Eventually he relented. De La Vega laughs, “When I realized I wasn’t getting anything else, I knew I had better eat it.” This, of course, is just another insightful way for Ralph to introduce his personal philosophy on education, which he describes himself as a “strong proponent” of. It is a position born out of his own personal experience. “When I first came to this country,” he reflects, “college was out of the question.” But a number of things conspired to overcome those seemingly insurmountable odds against him receiving his degree, and because of that, he says, “I never lost hope.”

De La Vega’s Tactics for Leaders in a New Situation:

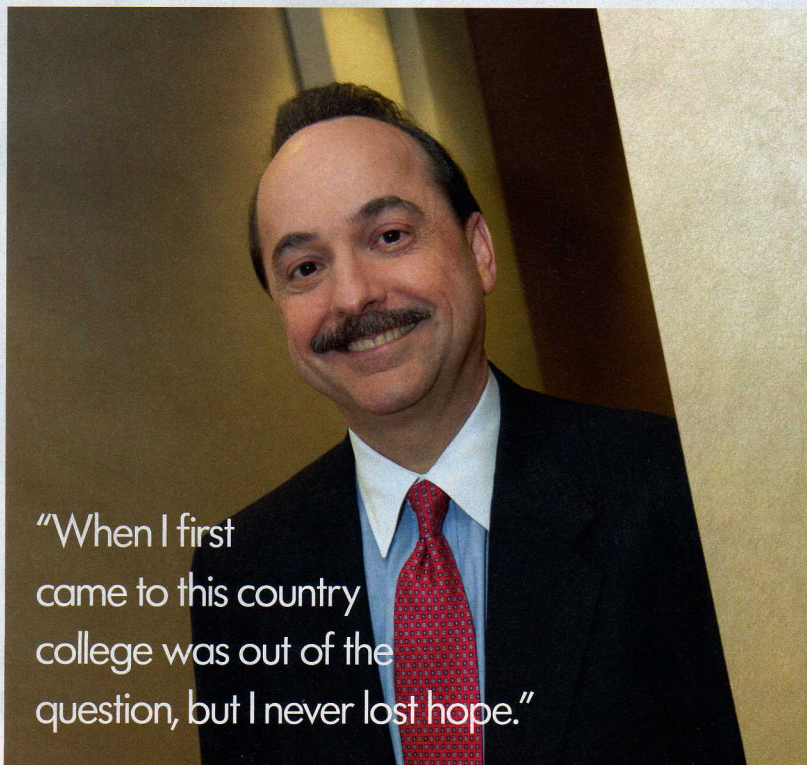
- Assess the situation
- Accept what you have
- Be brutally honest about what you have
- Build a vision
- Communicate your vision to your team
- Build a plan
- Get people to rally around it
- Recognize people for their efforts
- Execute
- Monitor and adjust

The influence of his family, always pushing him to succeed, was a big factor. In addition to his parents, there was his grandmother, a schoolteacher, who constantly told him, “Do whatever you have to do to go to college.”

With that goal in mind, De La Vega took “all sorts of jobs,” including stints as a janitor and a salesman, to save up enough money to go to college. He started at the Miami Dade Junior College because he “didn’t have enough money for a four-year university,” then went on to drafting school. With the skills he acquired there, he was able to work, support himself and earn his engineering degree.

On that subject, he returns to the theme of defying his critics. “Many people said college was impossible,” De La Vega remarks, “but if I had listened to them, I would still be working in a factory in South Florida.”

After college, he embarked on the career that eventually led him to Cingular. But first, he put his time in with another company, the telephone giant Bell South. It was there that he had another one of his self-described “inflection points.”



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Still residing in his adopted home of South Florida, De La Vega accepted an assignment in the company’s technical education center in Chicago. Listening to him describe the move, one can sense the nostalgia of the time when he felt like an immigrant “fish-out-of-water” and also the time when he was 10 years old, that forever changed his destiny. “I left the comfort of South Florida,” he says portraying the move as a bold adventure. “I went to a new environment, a new company.”

That event led to a third and perhaps more dramatic “inflection point.” Eventually, De La Vega found his way back to Florida, where in 1992 and as an employee of Bell South, he became involved in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, which until

Hurricane Katrina, was the most devastating storm in the country’s history.

It was on this assignment that he had an experience that was reminiscent of his arrival from Cuba. Again, starting from nothing, he had to oversee the resurrection and re-establishment of the telephone network.

Reflecting on the experience, he begins to wax on his philosophy of leadership. “Leaders need to create a vision,” he says. “They need to get other people to see their vision. They need to get people to step up, work together and sacrifice to achieve that vision.”

By all accounts, De La Vega succeeded, and his career ascendancy led him to yet another, even bigger challenge. As President of BellSouth Broadband and Internet Services in the early 2000’s, he launched a completely new unit for the company and directed the rollout of broadband services in the Southeastern United States.

As he describes it, “we had to start from scratch,” and it was a move that was greeted with overwhelming skepticism by industry analysts. The company lagged far behind the cable companies, which had already launched their own high-speed infrastructure. With characteristic defiance and optimism, De La Vega moved forward, undaunted.

“I denied the limitations,” he says of the shortcomings the critics were quick to point out. Drawing on another one of his recurring themes, making a negative

into a positive, he used the existing infrastructure, which the critics had cited as an extreme disadvantage, and exploited it to the company’s advantage. In the end, it allowed the company to move more quickly and cheaply into the market than it would have been able to if it had spent its capital on replacing the infrastructure entirely.

The results were impressive, and as De La Vega is quick to point out, the company scored a resounding victory in three different measures. First of all, it became the fastest growing cable company in the country. Secondly, it surpassed all of its competitors with seventy percent of households in its territory becoming broadband accessible. Lastly, it earned a number one rating by the JD Power and Associates, the consumer marketing survey company, in customer satisfaction for broadband providers.

With that notch in his belt, Ralph then embarked on what he describes as “the most difficult challenge ever.” As President of BellSouth Latin America in 2002 and 2003, he was responsible for the company’s ten cellular operations in the region, serving close to 10 million customers in 10 countries, including Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia, Venezuela, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. As if the geographical reach of his assignment was not enough, things were compounded by another more formidable challenge. As De La Vega describes it, the region was experiencing its worst economic depression in decades.

With characteristic aplomb, he dove into the situation head first and within two years, the “company was growing again.”

All of this ultimately led him to his current assignment as the Chief Operating Officer of Cingular Wireless. After arriving there in 2004, he became involved in one of the most impressive corporate mergers in the nation’s history, when Cingular acquired AT&T Wireless in October of the same year.

Perhaps somewhat understatedly, De La Vega remarks, “no one had ever done something of this size. I knew I was facing another inflection point.”

Once again undaunted, he rose to the challenge and defied his critics. “They all said we were too focused on the merger to succeed,” he bristles. “But one year later, we have grown by eight million customers.” As further proof of its success, the company rose from a Fortune 150-size company to a Fortune 50-size enterprise, with revenues in excess of \$33 billion.

Reflecting on all of these challenges collectively, the corporate executive is compelled again to expound on his

De La Vega’s Characteristics of a Good Leader:

The Inverted Pyramid

What he looks for in team leaders:

- **Integrity and Credibility:** The foundation. If it can’t be achieved the right way, it’s not worth achieving. Everything else is built on this.
- **Teamwork and Attitude:** Business is not an individual sport
- **Excellence:** Be better tomorrow than you are today
- **Vision:** Help others see the vision

personal philosophy of leadership. A leader, he says, "must focus and develop a framework that allows people to win. If the leader can convince people that they can do more than they thought was possible then that is a home run."

Expanding on the theme, he responds to critics of yet another move that he will be involved with. Sometime this year, the Cingular brand will most likely be phased out in favor of the AT&T brand name, as a result of some additional ownership changes executed by the parent companies since the 2004 acquisition.

Says De La Vega of the pending name change, "Brand is only a part of a company's success. What makes a company are its people. Brand helps, but it's only a part."

While he has clearly mastered the art of corporate success as it applies to his own endeavors, Ralph also has dedicated a fair amount of his time to helping others follow on a similar path. He is extremely active with the volunteer Junior Achievement program in his home state of Georgia and with the Boy Scouts of America.

He speaks passionately about the classroom lecture program that he started for Junior Achievement. The program, which entails taking volunteer professionals into a classroom where they speak about their experiences in the business world, has caught on, and by De La Vega's count, has reached over 3,000 students. He reports that Junior Achievement wants to launch the program worldwide.

"It's humbling to go into the inner city high schools," he says, "and see what these kids are up against."

According to him, more professionals are volunteering and even some of the students have told him how much the experience has impacted them. Ralph tells the story of one young woman who wrote him a letter several years after she heard one of the speakers in her classroom. "She got into college and was so grateful, she volunteered for the program." He adds, "if we can touch just one person, it's a success."

De La Vega also remarks favorably on the future for America's young Latino community. "I continue to be amazed," he says. "In the past, there were not enough leaders. Now, leaders are breaking through walls and ceilings. There are Hispanic entrepreneurs. We are in the arts and music, administration and business."

For those who hope to join these ranks, he passes on some of his characteristic optimism. "To young people, I say, 'decide what you want to do, don't accept labels. If you manage to do that, almost anything is possible.'"



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