



BUSINESS BOOK Summaries

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Obstacles Welcome

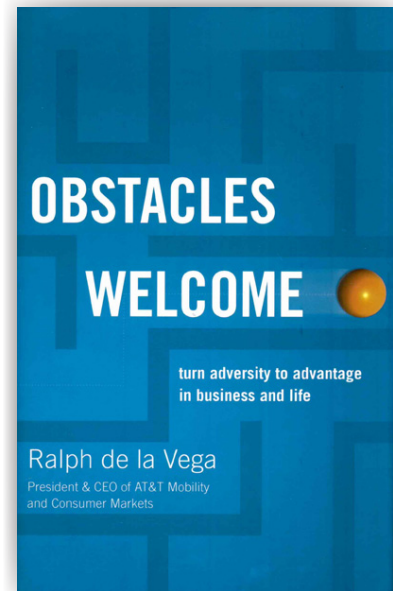
Turn Adversity to Advantage in Business and Life

Ralph de la Vega

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INTRODUCTION

In **Obstacles Welcome**, Ralph de la Vega describes in rich and fascinating biographical detail how adversity and obstacles present opportunities to enrich and transform our business and personal lives. De la Vega, currently the President and CEO of AT&T Mobility and Consumer Markets, arrived in the United States in 1962 as a ten-year-old Cuban immigrant. In an engaging and accessible style, de la Vega demonstrates that the lessons he learned from obstacles in his early life have impacted the various life stages and “pivot points” in his career, and how his positive responses to adversity formed the backbone of a successful values-based management system.

CONFRONTING OBSTACLES, RECOGNIZING OPPORTUNITIES

Separated from his parents for four years, Ralph de la Vega early learned that dwelling on negatives and

frustrations was not at all a productive way to live his life. Obstacles presented themselves at every turn, whether it was the disappointment of being away from his family or his inability to understand English in his new school in Miami. Nevertheless, de la Vega points out that these situations forced him to look for opportunities to adapt his circumstances to something positive. He early learned the importance of making sacrifices in the present in order to plan for a better future. It does not help to simply sit back and hope or wish for something better to come around; instead, it is essential to plan and to take risks to maximize opportunity.

In business and in life, obstacles should be embraced, because any given challenge is an opportunity for growth. It is essential that we learn how to recognize pivotal points in life, those places where major challenges to our personal lives or our corporations

change the directions our lives or careers take. When viewed as opportunities, such pivotal points convey several lessons:

1. Hope is not a substitute for planning.
2. It is necessary to take calculated risks, rather than simply going with the flow.
3. Our greatest successes in life come only when we recognize opportunities.
4. Obstacles make us stronger, wiser, and more capable.

Obstacles take many forms, and include things like large-scale change, general discouragement, a pervading sense of fear, and general adversity.

De la Vega provides numerous examples of how opportunities lurk in difficult situations. One of the most impressive examples is his particular pivotal point of becoming the president of Bell South Latin America. During his tenure there, de la Vega experienced everything from military insurgency, economic meltdown, and political revolution, in addition to unstable markets, lack of uniformity in corporate leadership, and nonexistent profits. Rather than shy away from these, de la Vega took a chance and embraced the challenges as opportunities to lead an entire sector of the international communications market into profitability. To say that the experience was a pleasant one, however, is to miss the point; often times it is necessary to become comfortable with being uncomfortable, and de la Vega knew that the presidency of Bell South Latin America was not going to be easy.

Sometimes it is necessary to “unlearn and relearn.” As people, as employees, as managers and leaders, we have a tendency to get stuck into certain routines that have proven to be successful. Phones, for example, are “supposed” to have keyboards or physical dial pads on them. But if corporate executives had made this “obvious” fact of cell phones a non-negotiable element for new technologies, how far would the iPhone have gone? Cingular and AT&T would have missed their opportunity to be the exclusive network (at the time) for what would become the most revolutionary wireless phone in communications history. It was necessary for AT&T and Cingular executives to “unlearn what they had learned” about cell phone technology

KEY CONCEPTS

In **Obstacles Welcome**, Ralph de la Vega describes how adversity and obstacles present opportunities to enrich and transform our business and personal lives. He offers the following steps to achieve this mindset:

1. Hope is not a strategy. It is necessary to plan for success.
2. To achieve big goals and dreams, it is necessary to take calculated risks.
3. Big wins in life come from an ability to recognize opportunities. The most significant and important opportunities lie in problems that are waiting to be solved.
4. Embrace and overcome obstacles. Obstacles and adversity make stronger, wiser, and more capable leaders.
5. Be willing to unlearn old habits and relearn old lessons from life experiences.
6. Building winning teams involves effective, honest, and open communication.
7. The greatest successes always involve willingness to make sacrifices.
8. Leadership is not something inborn, but learned and practiced.



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in order to seize the opportunity that Apple and the iPhone presented them. Rather than seeing the lack of keyboard as a problem, it was a revolutionary eureka moment.

The key to developing the ability to unlearn and relearn when opportunities present themselves is to learn from our experiences in our careers and our lives. An effective strategy for this is to begin with an appreciation for our experience of things that we have done or that have happened to us and to begin building a mental space to keep experience in memory. For some, this might be primarily verbal, while for others, who learn best through non-verbal means, experience might be better retained through more visual techniques. Once retained, however, it is important to then reflect on our experience. Our past experiences can help us deal with new situations only by using them to look backwards and forwards at the same time. It is important to think about how what we have done before might be useful down the road in similar situations. The time may well come when the lessons learned from a natural disaster, such as the affect Hurricane Andrew had on the telecommu-

nications industry in 1992, become applicable when a similar disaster strikes, such as happened to de la Vega with the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Only after reflection and envisioning potential lessons from our experiences are we in a position to apply them when opportunities arise.

The minute we stop learning and trying out new things, we start to become stagnant. We won't go much further in our growth. The pace of change is too fast for us to become locked in place.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ralph de la Vega is President and Chief Executive Officer of AT&T Mobility and Consumer Markets. After graduating from Florida Atlantic University in 1974 with a bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering, de la Vega was a Facility Engineer with Southern Bell and placed in the Initial Management Development Program, where he began a career spanning over thirty years in telecommunications management. He is formerly the President of Broadband and Internet Services at BellSouth and President of BellSouth Latin America, and in 2004 he became the COO of Cingular Wireless, where he was responsible for the historic integration of Cingular Wireless and AT&T Wireless.

A VISION FOR SUCCESS

However, even the most exciting opportunities and well-applying life lessons will flounder without a compelling vision and the ability to communicate it. De la Vega's pivotal point in the merger between Cingular and AT&T Wireless is an outstanding example of the importance of a clear and well-communicated vision. Shortly after de la Vega joined Cingular as the Chief Operating Officer in 2004, he found himself playing a lead role in the integration of the two companies in what was, at the time, the largest cash transaction in history at \$41 billion. The particular challenge that both companies faced was to finalize the merger in a span of forty-five days in order to maximize profits for the 2004 holiday shopping season. Complicating matters was a delay in approval of the deal, leading to a loss of nearly four weeks from the original timetable. Instead of taking the safer route of delaying the joint company launch until early 2005, Cingular and AT&T's top brass decided to lead a complete integration of people, training, network, branding, retail makeover, and marketing in a matter of weeks. Success depended on selling a comprehensive and compelling vision of the success of the merger and a plan to implement it to everyone in both companies.

Visions for success involve a number of elements. Among the most important elements is the demonstration of leadership's confidence in the people who are part of the project and corporate community. The herculean tasks of combining two wireless networks into one, of converting over a thousand retail stores to the new designs, logos, phones, product literature, and so forth, and of combining two workforces of roughly thirty thousand employees from each

company would have been impossible if everyone involved had any misgivings over the vision and goals articulated in it, and if the large constituents harbored any doubts over leadership's confidence in their ability to carry them out. It is a testimony of Cingular/AT&T Wireless' ability to convey confidence in their employees and in the corporate vision of success that within three weeks, the newly merged wireless giant not only met their goals for the merger, but exceeded even their own expectations with a net gain of over 1.7 million customers in the fourth quarter of 2004, and over 5 million customers by the end of the fourth quarter of 2005.

Even routine work can become inspiring when it is seen as part of a big picture that adds meaning to life. What gets a group of colleagues excited? A compelling vision. A shared vision.

The Cingular/AT&T merger took just nineteen days after the deal was approved by the federal government. Crucial to its success was clear vision, inspired leadership, confidence in the people, well-communicated integration plans, and the sense of urgency for the expectations that were set.

VALUING VALUES

Turning obstacles into successful opportunities is not a matter of following a simple blueprint. Ethics and values matter, and need to be the foundations on which our lives and our careers rest. Integrity and credibility are two fundamental values that should be most important, both as individuals and as members of corporations and other organizations. Leadership is only respected if it is ethical and honest and if it insists on the same from everyone. Everyone from corporate executives to the workforce needs to be credible, or more bluntly, to put their money where their mouth is. Respect is earned, and it is earned by doing what we say we are going to do.

Perhaps nothing is more central to winning the trust of our companies, teams, and project groups than integrity and credibility. When leaders recognize that business is a team sport, not an individual sport, and that the success of the team depends on the credibility of its leaders, project managers, executives, and so forth, it is capable of doing some extraordinary things. Good leaders also recognize that some members of

the team are most effective when they are allowed to work alone, and successful teamwork includes the contributions of these members as well. That kind of trust is best built on foundations of confidence, integrity, credibility, and teamwork.

Successful teams and projects simultaneously depend on and generate good attitudes. Having a good attitude stems beyond simply being enjoyable to be around, although that is certainly part of it. More significantly, the right attitude is focused on the right goals and objectives for success, and is committed to accomplishing them. Persistence and open-mindedness are indicators of teams and leaders who possess the attitude it takes to accomplish tremendous things.

The crowning core value is excellence. Far from being an abstract concept, excellence describes someone who sets goals that stretch the limits of what others think possible, who strives for measurable results grounded in integrity, and who performs better than the competition. Excellence in personal success is mutually dependent on team success, and those who possess the value of excellence intuitively know the old adage that "there is no 'I' in 'Team.'" Through excellence, good leaders enable their teams and companies to implement ambitious visions, and inspire people to want to be a part of them, support them, make sacrifices for them, and do whatever it takes to achieve the goals inspired by them.

PLANNING TO LEAD

Being able to recognize opportunities in obstacles, learning from personal experiences, and cultivating good business ethics and values can prepare anyone to lead. However, it is still essential to have a plan of action. Leadership is not an instinctive skill for most of us, and it needs to be developed. There are no shortcuts to becoming a leader. Leadership comes from a combination of hard work, education, and personal development as part of the experiential learning process. One of the major impediments to leading well is the habit that many have of staying with old routines that confine their abilities rather than let them emerge. The key is to dream big, and to not be confined to simple, quick-fix solutions. No one aspires to be simply good enough. Truly good leaders aspire

to be the best, and are capable of identifying various potential objections and clearing them from the path to success.

The starting point for success is an honest assessment of whatever situation an individual is confronted with. It helps to first ask questions in order to properly assess: What obstacles are there? What limitations might there be? What possibilities are lying dormant, waiting to be discovered? Secondly, successful leaders are able to create a compelling vision of what a successful outcome would look like. Without a clear and well-articulated idea of what a leader would like to see happen, it is difficult, if not impossible, to bring others on board. It is also impossible to start the next step: building a plan to make the vision a reality. Hope is not a strategy, and neither is wish-fulfillment. Building a plan can include the following questions: What strategies and initiatives are required? What are the top priorities? How can we best assign accountabilities to the team to make sure the project is successful?

When developing such a plan, it is imperative to be clear and focused. Things that are unclear lead to confusion and setbacks that compromise the outcome of the vision. Similarly, it is important to keep the plan as concise as possible, emphasizing the objectives, accountabilities, approaches, and outcomes. Huge binders with hundreds of pages of planning material are rarely read or taken seriously. Perhaps most importantly, it is quite beneficial to gather input from the entire team. If the group does not feel like it owns the finished project, there will not be much incentive for everyone to give their best effort. This last step helps with the next phase of plan-building, which is to align everyone to the vision and the task. Everyone from executives to managers to the overall workforce need to understand the priorities and organizational goals, and it needs to be early enough in the process to ensure that resources and funding can be obtained in time to carry the project out to completion. The final stage, then, is executing the plan and adjusting it to deal with any number of variables that can affect the outcome. To do this, it is essential to fine-tune the plan and adjust as necessary, and results need to be monitored very closely to know what adjustments are required.

COMMUNICATE!

The key to any plan's execution is to make sure that people who are part of the project know who is responsible for what, and for that, good communication skills are essential. According to de la Vega, good communication involves "three C's": Clarity, Conciseness, and Consistency. Great communicators are able to take complex ideas, subjects, or visions and make them simple and easy to understand for many kinds of audiences. In addition, great communicators know that it is important to get to the point as quickly as possible, and to be consistent with the messages they send. Providing contexts to the messages allows the audience and hearers to understand why a course of action is being taken, however, it is important not to overload the message with context at the same time. The author stresses that it is important to know your audience; it may be important to some groups to have a detailed discussion of context, but to other audiences, the real message may be lost in the contextual details. For some groups, a discussion from a written report may be best, while for others, a highly interactive visual presentation may be most effective. It is important to be observant, pay attention to the needs of the audience, and be receptive to feedback.

Great communicators take complex subjects and make them very simple and easy to understand.

It is also significant to measure in qualitative and quantitative terms how well the plan execution is working. Not every metric will be the same, but most will operate under three basic principles: Choosing the right metrics, tracking performance against those metrics, and displaying or demonstrating progress regularly and consistently. It is neither possible nor desirable to measure everything, so project managers need to be able to smartly identify the priorities of the task and highlight the important elements. Usually, it is only necessary to have four or five metrics that will identify key areas of the plan that are working or not working.

It may seem difficult for the leader to choose these four or five metrics. Ideally, good metrics should pass three tests:

1. They need to be comparable across territories, geographies, product lines and, if possible, departments.
2. They should present a balanced view of the goals of the business, such as how well the business is growing revenues and expanding margins.
3. They should be easily and accurately quantifiable on a regular basis, so that small variations in both positive and negative directions can be spotted quickly.

Sacrifice opens doors to opportunity, and hard work and discipline turn that opportunity into a reality.

Whatever system is used, the metrics should be used to encourage, not discourage, and they should build trust and credibility.

SACRIFICE AND GIVING BACK

Every great enterprise requires a willingness and ability to make sacrifices. Sacrifice requires a generous spirit, and is a willingness to give something up for the benefit of something greater. Sacrifices can take many forms, including time, money, and any number of personal situations, such as relocating from a familiar area to a new place for the benefit of the company or, at a more personal level, of the family. It is also just as important to instill in employees an attitude that is willing to sacrifice. Sacrifice cannot be forced upon anyone; instead, people should be inspired to make personal and professional sacrifices only for causes or products that they believe in and are committed to. When individuals and companies are ready to make sacrifices and to empower those sacrificial choices with hard work and opportunities, it becomes possible to bring an inspiring vision to reality.

One major sacrifice that many executives find difficult to make is the ability think beyond convention to try something new and even controversial. De la Vega relates a compelling story of how he reluctantly agreed to assign a very young woman to reach a target segment of eighteen to thirty-five year olds. Despite serious reservations about the youth and inexperience of this otherwise qualified young woman, the measurable results of the decision confirmed that

de la Vega's willingness to place her in charge of the youth segment was absolutely the right decision to make. From this example comes a valuable lesson: sacrificing ideas of how things ought to be and taking calculated risks can lead to success in areas not previously considered. In addition, this experience opened up a new opportunity by making the workforce look like the customer base. Employees and leaders who are themselves part of a targeted segment understand better what the needs and expectations of the customers. Implementing this may mean sacrificing our own prejudices in order to build an environment where employees can bring their own experiences to the table.

Just as it is important to be willing to make professional sacrifices, great leaders must also take opportunities to make sacrifices outside of the work zone. When it comes right down to it, great leaders are not great because they enable their companies to be financially successful. Great leaders are great because they help people realize and reach their full potential not only as managers, executives, and workers, but as human beings. They are obligated to bring their leadership outside the walls of the company and into the communities to make a positive impact for change and for the betterment of society. De la Vega finds fulfillment in his involvement with Junior Achievement and the Boy Scouts, but he is quick to point out that leaders can and should get involved in just about any community activity or project that they feel passionate about. Because no one lives in a social vacuum, de la Vega stresses that everyone owes something to those people and communities who helped make us who and what we are.

BECOMING THE LEADERS WE WANT TO BE

De la Vega concludes **Obstacles Welcome** with a model for measuring leadership ability and progress. The "Leadership Capability Model" is based on de la Vega's more than thirty years of management experience, and is designed help determine progress on the road to capable leadership in business and in life. Each of the five steps of the model builds on the previous step and is based on concepts described throughout the book.

The first step is the foundation of experience, where

leaders learn from activities and events in their own experiences that contribute to the beliefs and values that inform all of their decisions. At this level, everyone experiences new things, but good leaders reflect on and learn from those experiences before applying those lessons to new situations.

The second step is the execution of plans and visions that apply experiential lessons that are grounded in values and morals and that deliver positive results. Thirdly, leaders enable the people who work for and with them to carry out the plan and execute the vision through effective strategies and initiatives. Good leaders communicate well, and strive toward encouragement and to building teams with a winning spirit. Fourth, good leaders help grow new leaders. At this step, leaders empower others to carry out the company's visions and initiatives, but recognize that ultimate responsibility for the success or failure rests within themselves. The key to success at this level is an ability to establish clear direction and expectations for other developing leaders and workers to follow.

Finally, the fifth step is what de la Vega calls the "Extraordinary" leader, one who is able to consistently deliver excellence in all aspects of personal and corporate leadership. This level is further outlined in ten additional steps:

- Set the direction, create the vision.
- Establish values and lead by them.
- Select strategies and key initiatives.
- Build plans to achieve vision.
- Establish goals, priorities, and focus.
- Establish key metrics to measure progress.
- Align and inspire people.
- Empower and enable people to achieve vision.
- Create winning culture.
- Select, recruit, and develop other leaders.

To be sure, extraordinary leaders are rare, but that should not discourage anyone from aspiring to greatness. By recognizing opportunities hidden in obstacles encountered in life and in business, de la Vega provides a road map to success that, with a combination of experience, hard work, education, and sacrifice, can be achieved by anyone.



FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Reading Time: 4-6 hours, 262 pages

Obstacles Welcome is relevant to a wide range of audiences, but is particularly well-suited to younger professionals who are eager to begin their careers or to take the next step on the corporate ladder. **Obstacles Welcome** is highly readable, although de la Vega has a tendency to repeat core messages and lessons, but as he points out good communication often depends on repetition to make sure that critical points "stick." In addition to its engaging prose, there are dozens of charts and diagrams that summarize major points in various chapters, and each chapter concludes with a summary of "Takeaway Messages." While it is probably not essential to read the book in order cover-to-cover, **Obstacles Welcome** is very biographical and it is likely that many readers will find it easier to digest by reading it straight through, as opposed to skipping around selectively.

Henry Cisnero, Executive Chairman of CityView, comments that "Ralph de la Vega tells an All-American story for our times." **Obstacles Welcome** is certainly that. It is a story of the American dream, one that is grounded in reality and in de la Vega's real experiences throughout his life. Success and excellence are not abstract in **Obstacles Welcome**, and this is one of the great strengths of the book. It should benefit students and professional readers alike.

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