



# Book Obstacles Welcome

## Turn Adversity to Advantage in Business and Life

Ralph de la Vega  
HarperCollins Leadership, 2009  
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### Recommendation

When Ralph de la Vega was 10 years old, his parents sent him from Cuba to the US. They planned to follow him a few days later, once their travel documents were in order. Ralph arrived in Miami without money, without his family, unable to speak English and unfamiliar with the culture. A young couple, Cuban émigrés and acquaintances of the de la Vegas, took Ralph in, thinking it would be only a few days until his parents arrived. It took four years. Ralph had to take a job after school to help his parents when they, too, arrived with nothing. Ralph worked hard, moved ahead and went to college. Hired by Southern Bell, he advanced. Today, he is CEO of AT&T Mobility and Consumer Markets. In his inspirational life story, de la Vega draws valuable lessons you can use to attain your own goals. *BooksInShort* warmly recommends de la Vega’s book. He is a great role model for those who aspire to reach personal and professional ambitions. However, once past his personal saga, de la Vega tends to write his solid business advice in the form of ordinary bromides and lists – “four pillars of success,” “six pivotal points” – that do not do full justice to his gripping tale. He writes, “If all this sounds obvious...” Regrettably, some of it does, but he still tells an exceptionally moving story.

### Take-Aways

- After the Cuban Revolution, personal freedom was curtailed, and many people left Cuba.
- Ralph de la Vega arrived in Miami at age 10, without his parents, without money, and without knowing the language or the culture.
- His parents had to wait four more years in Cuba to receive immigration papers.
- The sacrifices of exile were a rude awakening for young Ralph, who came from the comfort of a middle-class family in Cuba.
- He swept a factory to help the immigrants who took him in and, later, to help his parents.
- Those years of adversity and privation, while difficult, helped forge the character of a fighter who has overcome obstacles and turned them into success.
- For example, de la Vega had to cope when Hurricane Andrew destroyed the South Florida telecommunications network for which he was responsible.
- He led BellSouth Latin America to a profit amid hard social, political and economic times.
- In 2004, he led the then-largest all-cash merger in US history: the \$41 billion union of Cingular Wireless and AT&T Wireless.
- The lessons de la Vega learned along the way shaped his “framework for success.”

### Summary

#### “Only the Boy Can Go”

In 1962, following the Cuban revolution, the de la Vega family – parents Rafael and Andrea, and their children Ralph and Barbara – gathered at the airport in Havana, prepared to emigrate from communist Cuba (which meant abandoning their family, friends and belongings) and begin a new life in Miami.

“Each of us is in control of our own journey – deciding where we want to go and how to get there.”

Unfortunately, at the last minute, paperwork problems prevented everyone – except 10-year-old Ralph – from leaving. “Only the boy can go,” a Cuban official told the distressed parents. Ralph flew to Miami alone while his parents stayed in Cuba, hoping to be reunited with him in a few days, once they received the right papers. They did not make it out for four years.

“Sometimes we look back on painful experiences and realize that while we never would have wished for them, they made it possible for us to grow.”

During that time, Ralph lived with family friends Arnaldo and Ada Baez, recent Cuban émigrés, who cared for him like their own child. Ralph struggled to acclimate. He learned English within a year, mostly by asking his classmates in Spanish, “What did the teacher say?”

When his parents finally made it out of Cuba, Ralph went back to square one, since they, too, arrived with nothing. He returned to the impoverished circumstances of new immigrants.

“It’s one thing to say you want to be successful. It is quite another to have a plan for assuring that you are successful.”

At 14, he went to work sweeping floors in a garment factory after school. The company quickly promoted the hardworking boy. Soon he was earning good money selling clothing made in the factory. Staying with the company and moving up the ranks would have been easy, but de la Vega’s *abuela* – his grandmother, Julia Díaz Gomez, a schoolteacher who valued education – advised him to go to college. He followed her counsel.

## On to College and a Career in Business

De la Vega began a pre-engineering curriculum at Miami Dade College. Working part time as a draftsman at an engineering firm, he went on to earn his degree in mechanical engineering from Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. After college, he joined the Management Development Program at the local telephone company, Southern Bell.

“Education can unlock nearly any door.”

De la Vega worked hard and received regular promotions because he was always willing to take on challenging assignments. In 1985, for example, then married with two sons, he made a tough decision to accept a job as director of Bell’s Communications Research Technical Education Center (Bellcore TEC) in Lisle, Illinois. His family was comfortable in South Florida’s Cuban community, but the move presented a major opportunity, so the de la Vegas relocated. Bell System’s top engineers and technicians went to Bellcore TEC, a high-profile corporate entity, to learn about the latest telecommunications advances. In the 1980s, while he was extremely busy at Bellcore, de la Vega also earned an MBA at Northern Illinois University. This was hard, but he knew that the degree would make him more competitive in his industry. De la Vega’s academic achievements demonstrated his discipline and commitment.

## Hurricane Andrew

By 1992, de la Vega had become a BellSouth operations manager back in South Florida. On August 24 of that year, Hurricane Andrew slammed the region, causing more than \$30 billion in damages overnight. De la Vega had to keep part of the BellSouth network running under extremely harsh circumstances. The storm wiped out the “network infrastructure” and the area’s electrical power. De la Vega drew on his personal experience of overcoming obstacles to do his job amid such devastation. If anyone could deal successfully with this major emergency, he could – and he did.

## “President of Broadband and Internet Service, BellSouth”

During the 1990s, innovative web browsers opened the Internet to users worldwide. In 1999, BellSouth had only 30,000 broadband access lines. The next year, it put de la Vega in charge of its broadband and Internet operations, charging him to sign 200,000 subscribers by the end of the year and 600,000 in 2001. To attain these goals, de la Vega had to adapt BellSouth’s infrastructure to new technology, promote broadband to its customers and prospects, define a target market, and build and operate a new broadband network. He and his team hit these goals, making BellSouth the US’s “fastest-growing broadband provider.”

## “President, BellSouth Latin America”

In 2002, de la Vega became president of BellSouth Latin America. Many of his close friends warned him not to take the job, given Latin America’s severe economic and political difficulties. Additionally, BellSouth’s operations in that region had never turned a profit. But, true to his philosophy of turning obstacles into opportunities, de la Vega eagerly accepted the assignment putting him in charge of providing wireless services to “more than 11 million customers” in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Venezuela and Uruguay.

“Opportunity is a defining concept of the United States.”

Within days of taking on his new post, de la Vega’s portfolio of 11 operations in 11 countries experienced turmoil:

- Amid civic unrest and political demonstrations, Argentina went through several presidents in short order. The peso lost value, and the gross domestic product fell 10%, cutting BellSouth’s revenues “from approximately \$1 billion to \$250 million.”
- Venezuela “went through three presidents in the space of four days” in April 2002 and, in the process, devalued its currency. Businesses went on a two-month strike as crowds protested. Many demonstrators carried cellphones, creating “floating cloud[s] of calling activity” that presented huge problems to Telcel’s engineers.
- In Brazil, a new joint venture faced a billion-dollar loan default.
- In Ecuador and Colombia, new “government-backed competitors” threatened to put BellSouth out of business.

“Making yourself a victim doesn’t change or help anyone – least of all yourself. You need to adapt to whatever the situation is and figure out how to make it positive.”

De la Vega gathered the CEOs from the 11 Latin American operations for a “summit meeting.” He explained that the company would operate their businesses as a combined, integrated corporation. He promised they would have the flexibility they needed in their particular countries, based on his firm belief in “giving strategic planning responsibility to the people who will be accountable for executing the strategy.” Despite their initial misgivings, the executives bought into his plan. Coming together under his direction, they worked to increase BellSouth’s Latin American revenues and profits. Aware of the region’s rigid hierarchical structure, de la Vega instituted a special “Talk to Ralph” day, when any employee could contact him and discuss how the company could improve. The idea was so popular that his office phone lines became jammed.

## “Chief Operating Officer, Cingular Wireless”

In 2004, de la Vega became COO of Cingular Wireless. He was in charge of “sales, marketing, network operations, technology planning and customer service.” Shortly after he started, Cingular bought AT&T Wireless. Merging the firms and two 30,000-employee workforces was a huge challenge. With 46 million subscribers to serve, the company had to rebrand AT&T’s 1,100-plus stores within a “19-day implementation window.” Cingular produced “60,000 playbooks” to inform staffers about their jobs during the merger, which actually went according to plan.

“Faith in a better future is a key enabler to overcoming incredible odds and seizing opportunities.”

De la Vega’s Hurricane Andrew experience helped him prepare Cingular for Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The company quickly erected a tent city in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, for Cingular employees who lost their homes. Because Cingular staffers didn’t have to worry about their families, they could focus on re-establishing the cellphone company’s network.

## “President and Chief Executive Officer, AT&T Mobility and Consumer Markets”

In 2007, de la Vega became president and CEO of AT&T Mobility and Consumer Markets. De la Vega demonstrates that a determined person actually can transform obstacles into opportunities. He used his experiences to develop a “leadership framework” that he illustrates with two images: The first image is a “House with Four Pillars and a Foundation.” A foundation of principles provides the basis for “four Pillars of Success”:

1. Develop a winning plan.
2. Take risks.
3. Overcome obstacles.
4. Recognize opportunities.

“Hope is not a strategy.”

The apex of the four pillars is “dream big...believe in yourself.” De la Vega takes charge of his life. He does not meander or yield to chance. He aims for realistic goals and regularly evaluates his progress.

To pursue your dreams, he suggests following a five-phase cycle depicted with the image of a pyramid, showing a bottom level of “integrity” and “credibility,” a second layer of “teamwork” and “attitude,” and a top layer of “excellence” and “vision.” Those elements support compelling leadership, which you can carry out if you build upon on this five-level pyramid:

1. **“Assess the situation”** – Take an honest look at the good and the bad that you face.
2. **“Create the vision”** – Plan where you want to go.
3. **“Build the plan”** – Take action to make your goals a reality.
4. **“Align the people”** – Make sure everyone knows what the company expects of them.
5. **“Execute, monitor and adjust”** – Fine-tune your projections when necessary.

“Be comfortable with being uncomfortable.”

**As you work to achieve success, keep three basic concepts in mind:**

1. **“Any journey needs a road map”** – If your attitude is “we’ll figure it out as we go,” failure is certain.
2. **“A goal without a clear plan will tempt people to take shortcuts”** – Carefully outline how you want to proceed to meet your objectives.
3. **“Your...credibility as a leader is at stake”** – Provide clear direction to help your people attain the goals you have set for them. Inspire “people to reach for a vision.”

## How to Lead

Leaders should draw from their knowledge to create a set of principles for their employees:

1. **“Experiential”** – Your experience educates you as a leader. Reflect on events around you, learn from them and apply this knowledge to your future pursuits.
2. **“Executing”** – To deliver positive results, make sure your actions are moral and ethical.
3. **“Enabling”** – Help those you lead achieve their goals. Establish successful teams.
4. **“Empowering”** – Make sure people can grow and become leaders. Set clear directions and expectations. Motivate your staffers by giving them the freedom to solve problems.
5. **“Extraordinary”** – Develop an “inspiring vision, a sound plan and a strong focus.”

# About the Author

**Ralph de la Vega** is president and CEO of AT&T Mobility and Consumer Markets. He also serves as Chairman of Junior Achievement Worldwide and as Chairman of Hispanic Initiatives for the Boy Scouts of America.

