

Session: “Executive Perspectives”

This candid session offered attendees a chance to ask Hispanic executives how they made it to the upper echelons of supply management. Three top-tier executives shared their personal challenges and triumphs along the way to inspire the audience to make day-to-day changes for career success.

Panelists:

- *Mario Munoz, staff vice president of procurement operations and accounts payable, WellPoint, Inc.*
- *Rafael Marrero, vice president of global procurement, Willbros*
- *Rene G. Rendon, associate professor, United States Naval Postgraduate School*

Mario Munoz

Mario Munoz came to WellPoint in 2003 as a category manager in IT. Although he had no sourcing experience in this area besides desktop computers, he said, “WellPoint took a chance on me.”

By the time Munoz was appointed staff vice president of procurement operations, he had sourced almost every category. In his current role, he is responsible for all procurement processes, systems, policies and accounts payable for WellPoint. He indicated that in every position in his career, he has acquired new experience and new responsibilities, and has never said no to new assignments.

Apparently, this has paid off, because Munoz can now look back on his career and pinpoint a handful of factors that contributed most to his professional success. The first of these: education.

“It’s the basis for everything you do,” he told attendees. “Get the best education you can, even if you can’t afford it.”

Second, he credited work experience. “Take the opportunities you’re given, and ask for others you’re not given,” he advised. “Tell your boss your goals — even the tough ones — and do your best to achieve them.”

Finally, he asserted that execution, building relationships and maintaining work/life balance are all critical to career advancement. “In the end, these people are your customers,” he explained. “And, you *must* have balance. Be ready to take time for yourself and your family.”

Rene G. Rendon

As Rendon G. Rendon pointed out, the U.S. Department of Defense is the largest purchaser in the world. It is not surprise, then, that graduates of the United States Naval Postgraduate School — where he teaches — go on to become supply management executives and strategic sourcing experts.

Rendon recalled wanting to work in procurement ever since he was a boy. “I’d watch planes take off, and I wanted to buy them, not fly them,” he said. Later in his life, when he went into this line of work, he quickly discovered that military procurement has different rules than corporate procurement. “Laws are first, and business is second,” he told attendees. “Our laws are written as a public-policy initiative. In government procurement, you sign contracts as the United States of America.”

Rendon spoke firsthand when he encouraged attendees to find their professional passion and act on it. “Otherwise, it’s a long life,” he said. “No passion, no action.”

Procurement remains a passion for Rendon, who regards it as a challenge because the profession is constantly changing.

To this end, he also emphasized the importance of maintaining professional competency. “You’re only as good as the knowledge you’ve acquired and can apply to your career,” he said.

Yet, there is no substitute for experience, Rendon contended: “It’s the most important part. Always accept challenges.” His own challenges included buying everything from airplanes to satellites.

Rendon also encouraged a “boundary-free” career — one that offers upward mobility and freedom, and allows a supply management professional to act as a free agent.

This mind-set should especially be applied to mentorships and training, Rendon added. “Seek out training on your own; don’t rely solely on your employer to provide it,” he cautioned. “Also, mentors should be inside *and* outside your organization.”

Finally, he recommended that attendees become subject-matter experts. In his case, it was a necessity: “If I was going to tell my bosses ‘No, that’s illegal,’ I also needed to be able to say, ‘But, here’s a way you *can* do it.’”

Rafael Marrero

Born in Puerto Rico, Rafael Marrero graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy and received his master’s degree in acquisition and procurement from Webster University. As the vice president of global procurement at Willbros, Marrero credits his professional success with execution, first and foremost.

“To execute change management requires you to first create a vision,” he explained. “Then, you must establish a sense of urgency, create a coalition of change-influencers, communicate the vision, remove the obstacles as the change leader — including people who are resistant — and, finally, institutionalize the new approach.”

Second, Marrero said leadership has played a critical role in his career trajectory. In his words, leadership includes the ability not only to attract and retain talent, but also to empower them. “You’ll never get promoted until you can be replaced,” he cautioned.

Next, Marrero zeroed in on the importance of strong interpersonal relationships. “Nothing works without trust,” he explained. “Encourage open dialogue — and be sure to listen, not just talk.”

Finally, he has relied heavily on thinking and judging aptitudes to propel his career forward, especially as it pertains to developing financial acumen. To hone this skill set, Marrero suggested setting up Google alerts on suppliers and competitors, as well as keeping a global perspective.

Questions and Answers

Following their session, Munoz, Rendon and Marrero took time to answer a few attendee questions.

Q: Who were your mentors?

Marrero: A colonel and a chief supply officer. I’ve never been afraid to ask anyone — peer or subordinate — what they’d do in a given situation. I like collecting data points before making a decision.

Rendon: No one formally, but I've definitely had relationships that developed into mentor/mentee situations.

Munoz: I've had several mentors, and I mentor at-risk youth myself. I also seek mentors for my direct reports because the manager/employee dynamic doesn't really allow for mentoring.

Q: What one piece of advice would you give someone just entering the supply management profession?

Rendon: Be prepared for change.

Marrero: You've got to love the profession.

Munoz: You *do* have to love it; otherwise, you'll go insane. [laughs] Also, relationships are critical. Keep a small-world perspective because it's not the last time you'll deal with these people.

— Reporting by RaeAnn Slaybaugh