

Turknett Leadership Character Awards Nomination

Nominee: Ralph de la Vega (one of three submissions)

Organization: AT&T Mobility

Category: CEO/President/Managing Partner

Eighth Annual Awards: September 15, 2011

Background:

As President and CEO of AT&T Mobility and Consumer Markets, ***Ralph leads AT&T's largest and most profitable size of the business:*** more than 65,000 employees, 81 million subscribers at the end of 2009, and \$53.9 billion in 2009 revenues. He has been directly involved in two successful mergers and integrations: Cingular Wireless' acquisition of AT&T Mobility, and the integration of Cingular Wireless into the new AT&T as a result of the merger between SBC and BellSouth.

Ralph has had a long and distinguished career with AT&T and its family of companies, starting in 1974 as a management assistant in Miami with Southern Bell. From there he assumed positions of increasing responsibility, arriving in the C suite in 2000 when he was named President of BellSouth Internet. He later served as President of BellSouth International and, later, Chief Operating Officer of Cingular Wireless.

Ralph's ***leadership extends to industry and social organizations***, as well. This year he assumed the role of Chairman of CTIA, the Wireless Association (formerly called the Cellular Technology Industry Association), which encompasses all providers, manufacturers and vendors.

Most significant is his leadership in ***non-profit, community organizations***. He serves as the ***Chairman of Junior Achievement Worldwide*** and as the ***Chairman of Hispanic Initiatives of the Boy Scouts of America*** – organizations with which he collaborates very closely in their outreach to Hispanic youth. In fact, he led the development, funding and creation of the Hispanic Initiative of Junior Achievement of Georgia, designed specifically to help at-risk Hispanic youth stay in school and graduate. Since then, JA has expanded that program nationwide. Over the years Ralph has taught JA classes himself, encouraged AT&T employees to volunteer as JA mentors/instructors and given many motivational talks, stressing the value of education and encouraging students to graduate. Meanwhile, he worked with the AT&T Foundation to partner with JA in the creation of a robust ***AT&T/JA Job Shadow initiative*** that will host 26,000 students this year alone (100,000 in five years). All students who participate in an AT&T Job Shadow experience this year receive a copy of Ralph's book *Obstacles Welcome*.

Over the years Ralph has been a strong supporter of ***The United Way***. He gets personally involved during AT&T's annual drive to ensure that his employees know what good work the United Way does. He makes it a priority to his leadership team so, in turn, they make it a priority for their organizations, as well. In my case, I would tell

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stories to my work groups about how the United Way helps. My call centers set a challenge to beat other departments and it was an incredible story of the creative ideas that each center did to raise more money. On payday they would sell Krispy Kreme donuts for a dollar, or host dunk-the-leadership-team events where employees paid a lot to dunk me (several times over) and others. The generosity of those who made the least money always amazed me, and I know it happened because of Ralph.

Ralph also gives numerous talks every year to **college students**, to whom he tells his story of overcoming adversity and encouraging them to dream big and pursue their goals (Arizona State University, Georgia Tech., Darden and Harvard are recent examples).

Integrity is defined by honesty, authenticity, and truth telling. Some examples of behaviors that typically illustrate integrity would be: always telling the truth even when it is difficult, keeping all promises, never twisting facts for personal advantage and being willing to stand up for what is right. Give up to three examples of how this person demonstrates Integrity:

Ralph is known as a leader who **does what he says**. He is aware that his credibility as a leader depends on him adhering to his promises, even if it requires personal sacrifice (such as the time when he crossed the country to speak at an employee event, as he had promised, even when the night before he had returned home from another cross country trip). He is mindful that if he were to break a promise, small as it might be, he would open the door for employees to do the same, which would undermine his efforts to get commitment and buy in from employees to reach common goals.

Ralph **expects his team members to do their job ethically and walks the talk himself**. When he assumed the presidency of BellSouth Latin America, he created a director position to be in charge of ensuring that compliance was instituted and adhered to consistently across 11 countries in region, regardless of cultural differences. Since that time, he makes it a point to have a one-on-one integrity talk with all his new direct reports, obtaining their commitment to leading the business ethically and in compliance. Most recently he has **demonstrated his own integrity** by going to great lengths to avoid the perception that AT&T and its resources might be used in the publication and promotion of his book (*Obstacles Welcome*, 11/2009). Instead, he has used his own time and resources, scheduling meetings and interviews on the book after business hours and on weekends; and paying for promotional consultants, travel and even postage out of his own pocket. (To avoid the perception of conflict, the book was never mentioned in employee media. Despite that, hundreds of employees bought copies and sent them to his office for him to autograph.)

But perhaps what most vests Ralph with an **aura of integrity is his candor in telling his story of overcoming adversity** to get where he is now. Unlike many leaders who pretend they were born great, Ralph talks openly about his struggle as a young immigrant, about the difficulties that he and his family had to endure, and the choices he

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made to get on the right track in order to achieve his goals. He shares this story with employees, associates and students nationwide, and his message of “if I could do it, you can, too” resonates with audiences young and old.

Being familiar with his story makes employees relate and want to be part of this his team. At the same time, his **humility** in telling it renders credibility to his goodwill gestures, being seen as from “a man who’s been there,” rather than from a “suit on a photo op.”

This was evidenced following the devastation of **Hurricane Katrina**. Having led, years earlier, the restoration of the South Florida network following Hurricane Andrew, Ralph traveled to New Orleans, La., and Ocean Springs, Miss., shortly after the incident. He brought with him a team of his top leaders, including me. Upon arrival he immediately began to activate a playbook he had put together by himself. He knew, from previous experience, that employees could not be called to restore the cellular network until their own most basic needs had been met: food, water and ice, shelter, clean clothes, child care and money. Tent cities were soon erected in our call center parking lots, with network trucks providing the fuel to power the generators that would be needed for a long time. There, we were able to provide shelter, showers, meals, washing machines, kid activities and loans to cover the immediate needs of about 500 employees and their families for five to six weeks. With those needs met, employees were able to then focus on helping Cingular restore service to its customers and get back in business.

After Ralph set the tone, various members of his leadership team wrote large personal checks to Cingular Cares, the company’s employee support fund. When you are handing out water, peanut butter or bread to employees and their family members in 100-plus degrees, it’s easy to give freely of your own money. The leadership lesson for me was that by being on site, witnessing first-hand the devastation and experiencing our employees’ reality, we were able to respond better and faster and in ways that we might not have been able to had we opted to manage the crisis from the comfort of our offices.

The quick actions of an honestly caring leadership team encouraged sincere employee involvement company-wide.

Respect helps create a state of partnership and teamwork. Respect is defined by the qualities of humility, empathy, lack of blame and emotional mastery. Some examples of behaviors that typically illustrate respect would be: listening and being respectful of others, not blaming others, welcoming suggestions, being willing to compromise, admitting limitations, and maintaining composure by expressing disagreement calmly. Give up to three examples of how this person demonstrates respect:

Ralph is one of the most respected leaders I’ve ever met. That is evidenced by the **long line of people who want to work for him and be on his team**. They know that he is an approachable, direct and engaging leader, who communicates a vision and gets

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people committed to reaching it. After a recent webcast with his entire organization, dozens of employees sent him emails expressing their excitement.

Ralph is known for ***the way he treats people***. He remembers people's names and the projects they work on regardless of their station in the organization. He is known for responding to all the employee emails he receives (as was the case following a recent webcast with his entire organization, when he personally replied to dozens of employees emails). For sharing the good and the bad news with employees and for communicating extensively and, in person when possible. (At the many employee events he hosts to talk to employees, he stands at the door, greeting and shaking hands with every single employee as they arrive.)

There are many examples I could mention about the way Ralph demonstrates respect and, in so doing, instills that important value among leaders on his team. I'll share one. When he took over as president and CEO, he made sure that the retiring CEO, Stan Sigman, was honored. He scheduled time for his direct reports to meet with the two leaders together: to say goodbye to one and to express their support to the other. I was one of those direct reports who took part in such memorable experience -- and took note of it. ***Later, when my time came to retire, I took a page from Ralph's playbook*** and asked for two week's time to properly introduce my replacement to my call centers and position him for success with a large group of employees who had been loyal to me for years. Ralph went the extra mile, affording me the time and the means to do handle my transition well.

Those simple lessons are powerful because they make us focus on our core leadership values which, in turn, will inspire others to do the same when the time comes. ***Ralph taught me an important lesson about grace and respect in leadership. When it was my moment of truth, I was able to show my employees that this is how a leader focuses on making others successful.***

Responsibility is the acceptance of full responsibility for the success of the project, the team and the organization. Responsibility is defined by the qualities of accountability, self-confidence, courage and a focus on the whole. Some examples of the behaviors that typically illustrate responsibility are: taking initiative and being willing to act to get things done (whether it's your "job" or not), delivering on promises and holding others accountable, being willing to express an opinion, and sharing information across the company. Give up to three examples of how this person demonstrates responsibility:

Ralph demonstrates responsibility with ***his level of engagement in the business***, its products and services, and the people who make it happen. By being engaged with the financial, marketing, human resources, information technology, and customer service aspects of the business he creates an environment of accountability: if Ralph knows about it, has taken the time to familiarize himself with the issues, has pledged his leadership in getting it done, it follows that the employees who are actually responsible for the project will want to be similarly engaged.

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Knowing the business well gives him **self confidence and authority– and earns him the respect of** others. At the same time, by being involved in the business and engaged in its many aspects, he demonstrates that he, too, is responsible for each group's success – and not just the people in it.

I'd like to share a story that shows Ralph's commitment to doing what it takes to educate and motivate employees to take **responsibility** for their own actions: Our call centers were typically staffed by young, entry-level employees who, not being steeped in our culture, kept doing things that were against our Code of Conduct. That resulted in recurring terminations and, for me, a turnover problem. Our head of internal communications pointed out that my preaching the code did not resonate with those young employees. She suggested we create a series of MTV-like videos, which would be more in line with the way that generation liked to receive information.

The "Do The Right Thing" video training series featured Ralph and me simulating situations that employees might encounter -- and the consequences of not acting responsibly. Despite his busy schedule, Ralph would take the time to make the videos every time because **he knew he needed to positively influence an important segment of our employees and make them realize they needed to behave responsibly**. It worked. Code violations went down to almost nothing. At the same time, call center employees began to relate to Ralph, coming up to him on his visits as if he were a rock star.

In the area of **individual responsibility** Ralph has made an important contribution to the company's culture by bringing in a fun concept that reminds everyone to add an extra scoop of service for good measure. It's called **lagniappe**, a Creole term Ralph learned while running the company's operations in Louisiana. It describes the extra scoop of flour or rice that shop owners there typically give to customers "for good measure" as symbol of appreciation. Ralph encourages employees to do the same. "Give the customer a little **lagniappe** when you do your job and they will rave about you," he asserts. Lagniappe is now part of company culture at AT&T and is reinforced consistently in employee media, reminding employees to throw in a little extra good service to make the customer feel appreciated.

*Please relate an incident or tell a story that shows how this person demonstrates **Leadership Character**. Examples may include professional or community involvement:*

There are many situations I could point to demonstrate Ralph's leadership character, but I'll choose one that, while small, was very significant to me.

It happened on my retirement day. Unlike other leaders who had become invisible as my date neared, Ralph suggested we get a burrito from Moe's and go back to his office for a chat while we ate. He could have hidden behind his busy schedule but, instead, he

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gave me the respect I needed at that time. It was only a \$4 burrito but the gesture was priceless.

I later told the story to Dan Kramer, who had worked for me as a Regional VP and who had also retired a few months back. Apparently he, too, had received an invitation for a last-day lunch from Ralph after sending him a farewell note. We shared our appreciation for Ralph's gestures on our last days. However, Dan said his experience was even more significant because, ***while I had been an officer, he had not, and yet Ralph took time to lunch with him.***

This reinforced to me that character and respect for people should not depend on a fancy title but on a person's genuine character. I learned from that experience that if you treat others as you would want to be treated you can change a person's life and create lasting memories.

Ralph taught me that no one can take away your reputation except yourself. Thanks to him, those words are always in my mind. I am a leader with character, integrity and high values because Ralph demonstrated those every day!

These are examples of why he's such a good leader, why others want to work for him, why he is able to lead teams to incredible success, and ***why he deserves to be named CEO of the year.***

Ralph certainly has made a difference in my life and I try to pay it forward through my leadership. By nominating him for the CEO of the Year, I hope others learn of his story of how doing that "little extra" in everything we do in life, can really make a huge difference.

Ralph certainly made a difference in my life and he will always be my CEO of every year.