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PMI Executives' Point of View on
Project Management in Latin America Today
(An Interview with Gregory Balestrero, CEO, and Linda Vella, Vice Chair
of the PMI Board of Directors)

By Ana Maria Rodriguez

During the PMI® Global Congress Latin America 2006 at Santiago, Chile, Gregory Balestrero, CEO of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) and Mrs. Linda Vella, Vice Chair of the PMI Board of directors, shared a pleasant conversation with PMForum.org international correspondent Ana Maria Rodriguez. This interview was recorded by Mrs. Rodriguez on 7 November 2006 in Santiago.

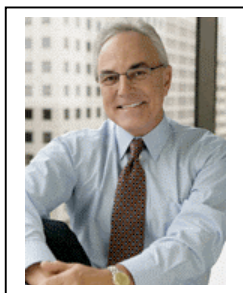
Rodriguez: After several attempts to contact Mr. Balestrero, we finally made contact on Monday evening and he cordially invited me to share a breakfast the next morning. We enjoyed breakfast at a wonderful location, Hyatt's 16th floor restaurant, with a beautiful view of the Andes Mountains, still covered with some snow that lasts from winter. Mrs. Linda Vella, Vice Chair of the PMI Board of Directors who was also in Santiago to speak during the Congress, also joined us for breakfast. I had a wonderful opportunity to meet them, learn their points of view, and even share my ideas regarding Latin America. While the congress was being held, they have also been having meetings with local project managers, business leaders and media. They have had a very busy week, so it was really valuable that they agreed to meet me as a representative of PMForum at the congress. And they were willing to answer some questions, as a message to all PMForum readers.

PMForum: *How did Latin American project managers answer PMI's invitation to this congress?*

Vella: *The ones that I have met have been so enthusiastic, they are just really anxious to make a difference, to get some help, to spread the word about Project Management, to get their companies and other companies to understand how important it is and how much it might help them as an organization to become better and to deliver their results in a better manner.*



PMForum: *What is your opinion about Project Management today in Latin America?*



Balestrero: I think there has been a change in the last two years. I think that there is far more interest in project management not only in the private sector but also in the government sector. In Peru, and in Brazil, there is much higher interest and activity in project management than there was ever before. Not so much in Chile yet, but I think that will come as well because Chile has many plans both in Santiago, Infrastructure construction as well as in the country in healthcare and education, that project management will become very important here in the government as well.

PMForum: *What do you think are the main Challenges for Project Managers in Latin America?*

Balestrero: I think if you look at the Latin American countries, as you said earlier, the cultures are so different, there isn't an accepted practice to work between countries. They are very focused in their own countries. Even in Chile, which is accelerating work with other countries with free trade agreements, they have free trade agreements now with China and the USA but their primary exports are natural resources: mining, wood, paper. The challenge is going to be when Latin American countries begin to look outside of Latin America and become part of the global supply chain. I think Brazil is beginning to feel that, they have factories from manufacturers from all over the world.

They are adopting global standards for the practice of project management. I think the biggest challenge is for Latin Americans to begin to focus on global practices, to become part of the global supply chain. To do that, they have to have global credentials, they need to speak English because, it is not that it is the United States but, it has become the global language. It allows them to protect their national language while at the same time dealing internationally. And I think these are the biggest challenges: one is to focus outside of Latin America; number two, to build their competency in English so they can be part of it; and three, to make sure that what they are learning is globally applicable, not just regionally. It must be a global standard, because then they are prepared for global interaction.

And it is only a matter of time. China signed the free trade agreement with Chile; they need copper so they are going to have to work out an exchange of what the products are going to be. I know they want to bring the Chinese automobile (the Cherry automobile) here. The next step might be to put a plant here, an assembly plant; then you are part of a global supply chain.

PMForum: *So we need to be under the same rules*

Balestrero: That's right.

PMForum: *Any other message for Latin American Project Managers?*

Balestrero: I think their energy and passion is evident everywhere and I think that one of the greatest applications for project management is in the area of social welfare. Poverty is a problem not only in Latin America but world wide. Many of the countries as they become more prosperous are beginning to build programs to raise the level of social welfare in the country. And I think this should be a primary focus for all Latin Americans. They should find ways to encourage their governments to do that and then, when working with the government, apply good project management techniques.

There is a gentleman from Peru who is working in a national program where money is going to be granted to do special programs for the poor. But they require that experienced project managers take the job, but they do not have any. So they are training like crazy to prepare people for that. And I think that is crucial: To help prepare the governments for the change because building an intelligent educated workforce is going to bring more business here.

And I think the Project Managers are going to be right in the middle of making that happen: good effective use of money and resources for the benefit of the whole country. They cannot turn their back on that. And I think it is very exciting to see the passion that is there to want to make that happen all over Latin America. There are so many differences: I think in Brazil 40% of the population is below poverty and they have such large indigenous population from Amazon and other areas of Brazil. Here (Chile) it is 20% percent below poverty. That is a target of opportunity for them. And they can apply themselves, both from a business point of view and from a government point of view.

Vella: Ultimately, project managers can be working with the education system to start training students in both primary school and secondary school about project management, to increase their skills so that when they do join the workforce they are immediately able to contribute at a higher level. We are seeing in Buenos Aires that the chapter is working with local school parties to try to provide some training and get a curriculum in place for Project Management. And to change the way children are learning, to be more project-based and not just a regular curriculum.

Balestrero: And that is what the chapters can do. Chapters can take it upon themselves, devote efforts to educating because as the world becomes more project focused, graduates of high schools will need an understanding of project management, at least how do you work on a project team. It is good to have a Bachelor degree or a Masters degree but then how do you build the competency in the people who work on the Project team? We have a new credential called the CAPM (Certified Associate in Project Management). It gives the individual the understanding of at least what a project is, what are the terms involved so that they can part of the team, they have the language at least, and I think that is crucial for them. There are many exciting things for Latin Americans in the future of Project Management. They can learn from everybody else's mistakes.

Rodriguez: After this brief interview, I bid farewell to Mr. Balestrero and Mrs. Vella and ran into the congress' last day, while they were going on a deserved relaxing day trip to Valparaiso and Viña del Mar ports. I was positively surprised at finding out how aware Mr. Balestrero and Mrs. Vella were of the reality in Latin America. For sure their leadership will provide many benefits for the development of PM in the region. I want to thank them again for their time, openness and sincere answers to my questions in Santiago.



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