

CONEXION

Advancing Latino Leadership/Adelantando el Liderazgo Latino

September 2007

Our country and our workforce are becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse. By 2025 there will be over 60 million Latinos living in the U.S. That number will grow to 100 million by 2050 – one out of every four Americans will be Latino. Over the next fifty years Latinos will account for 68 percent of our country's population increase.

Phyllis Barajas founded **Conexion** two years ago. A Latina visionary, Phyllis wanted to make a difference in promoting talented Latinos and in advancing Latino leadership. She envisioned Conexion as a program that would attract, retain, and develop emerging Latino talent. Individuals selected for this innovative and creative initiative must have five to seven years of professional experience and must be willing to share their career goals, interests and work experiences.

The first year Phyllis asked fifteen of us to be mentors for a year. The mentors and mentees met every month as a group at MIT. These group sessions focused on leadership, the Latino experience, cultural differences in the workplace, career development strategies, methods of building life long professional relationships to enhance personal and business growth, techniques to uncover and evaluate opportunities, and *networking* – always networking (Phyllis should have a honorary PhD in networking.)

The mentors, who represented a broad spectrum of professions and industries, had monthly one-on-one meetings with their mentees. The third group of fifteen Latino professionals began this year's program last week. Some of the original mentors are back for their third year with Conexion.

Before I tell you what I got out of my mentoring experience with Conexion, let's have a Q&A with Phyllis Barajas, the Executive Director of Conexion (pbarajas@comcast.net 617-923-2555.)

Why the name, Conexion?

"Conexion" is from the verb *conexionar*, and means to connect with, or to put in touch. The life blood of business is connections. In business and in life, it's all about who you know. Conexion is a leadership program focused on putting the right people together for a mutually beneficial outcome.

A major reason for Conexion is that companies are desperate for talent. The talented Latino professional is practically invisible to corporate America. Conexion's goal is to change this dramatically by making top talent available to companies and organizations.

Why did you start Conexion?

Simply stated: to respond to the demand for Latino talent.

The Latino demographics are staggering and will continue to grow for at least the next fifty years. Companies and organizations know this but many do not know how to deal with it. Conexion was created to build the next generation of Latino leaders and to make this talent available to business, education, and government.

Are companies interested in participating?

They sure are. They are challenged by a today's culturally diverse workforce. Companies want to market their products and services to the Latino communities but realize that they need Latino leaders to accomplish this. Our partner organizations and companies work with us to identify, network with, recruit and retain Latino/a business leaders who can provide insight into emerging opportunities in an increasingly global market place.

Conexion seems to be the perfect tool to support and retain mid-career Latino/a professionals seeking advancement. We provide rising Latino professionals with a network of peers which truly benefits them and the companies where they work.

Do you have any specific growth plans?

There is a real need for Conexión. People in the program and our corporate partners know this. We are talking to interested companies in New Jersey and I have been invited to present Conexión to a number of organizations in my home town of Omaha next month.

What do you look for in mentors? What are your expectations?

We recruit mentors who have a demonstrated track record of talent development and who are genuinely interested in helping people to grow and thrive in their organizations and careers. We expect mentors to provide career support, guidance, and access that will help folks to broaden their networks. We want them to meet with their mentee once a month. We invite the mentors, if they have the time, to serve as presenters during the course of the year's program.

How can people get more information about Conexión? What's your website address?

Things have happened so fast that we have not completed our website. It should be up and running some time in October. I'll let you know the exact address. I'll be happy to talk about Conexión to anyone who is interested. Just give me a call at 617-923-2555 or email me at: pbarajas@comcast.net.

My experience as a mentor with Conexión was worthwhile, meaningful, rewarding and fun.

Mentoring is an exchange, a give and take, a reciprocation. Before Conexión I had a pretty good idea of how mentoring could help a young professional's career and growth. I didn't have a clue about how much I would gain and learn from the experience. I shared some business experiences, career and job campaigning tips, networking contacts, ideas and practical suggestions but I learned so much more.

I gained significant knowledge about the Latino culture, the Latino experience in interviewing with corporate America and with recruiting firms, the stereotypical reactions to Latinos when they are interviewed by people who have no awareness or sensitivity to cultural differences. Even after all my years working in the diversity arena, this Conexión mentoring program helped me to stay grounded in recognizing the hazards (gauntlets?) that some young Latino professionals face.

The honest and direct feedback I received from the young man I mentored taught me how to communicate in a better way with young Latino executives and how to be of more service to them in their job campaigns. I hope I have a better understanding of the deferential, respectful and self-effacing behavior of the Latino professional.

I enjoyed the frankness and honesty, the many laughs, and the poking fun at each other. No questions, comments or observations were off limits.

One when I was pushing him to be more aggressive in recounting his accomplishments he reaction was memorable and jocose, "The Irish sure know how to advocate for themselves!"