

Dario Marquez

The Strategist's Perspective

Aboard the plane home after a notably demanding mission in Honduras, Dario Marquez couldn't stop thinking about a particular passage from Jay Levinson's *Guerrilla Marketing*. "If you can't predict your sales in the future, you're a ship without a rudder," he recalled to himself. His mission critical services company, MVM Inc., was founded in 1979 and had experienced considerable growth in the ten years since, developing an impressive client list that included the Rockefeller family, Henry Kissinger, Kellogg, Time Magazine, and several wealthy clients from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait. Since leaving the secret service after ten years of employment and joining forces with two other former agents to create MVM, their incremental success was a testament to their industry experience and unique perspective on executive protection. Dario, however, feared the company was at a standstill, and could not help but ruminate on the stagnation as the plane gained altitude.

On this flight that some would call serendipitous and others would call fate, Dario happened to mention his apprehension to a fellow passenger who suggested he target government contracts, pointing out that the U.S. government is the largest procurer of security services in the world. It was a time of political tension—Reagan had just come into office, the Iranian hostage crisis still hung in the air, and Bobby Inman had just been commissioned to do a study on the security of individuals working in Foreign Service. His research culminated in the Omnibus Diplomatic Security Anti-Terrorist Act of 1986 and proclaimed that American embassies were victims of terror, ill-prepared to deal with potential threats. This prediction was rendered a painful reality when U.S. officials discovered that the Moscow embassy had been built by the KGB and was riddled with bugs. A contract to protect the embassy was open for bids in 1987, and

because of Dario's conversation on the airplane, MVM won.

Launching the company into a heightened domain of competitive edge, MVM went from revenues of \$400,000 one year to \$10 million the next. Always the forward thinker, however, Dario's previous fears dissipated just as new ones took shape. With one contract in the bag and the company expanding to meet its needs, he noted that all the eggs were essentially in one basket. Thus, diversification became the theme and lifeblood of MVM, with four major divisions eventually taking shape: security, professional services, global support services, and a training facility.

With diversification largely completed, MVM is now primarily concerned with the two goals which Dario terms "transformation" and "transition". The transformation he refers to is the effort to develop the professional services, global support services, and training facility divisions of the company, aiming to elevate them to the strength that their security program already possesses. In terms of transition, Dario and his staff are training his son, Kevin, to serve as his successor as chief executive officer and president. Acutely aware that many family-owned businesses fail in the face of the discontinuity and disarray bred from the passing of the torch to the second generation, Dario is facing this challenge with the same strategic superthinking he applies to other areas of business. He describes the process as "a constant conversation"—everyone is involved and encouraged to give feedback, and the team is committed to an orderly and systematized process in which the expectations of all parties are streamlined through communication.

Now, several decades after the fortuitous conversation on the plane from Honduras, MVM



has exploded into a \$200 million company, aiming to reach \$500 million within the next five years. Despite its rapid expansion, Dario and his family have made a concerted effort to maintain a genuine compassion and connection with MVM's 3,000 workers, keeping the human aspects of management in focus. His late wife, Karen, had started a tradition of sending a card to each staff member on their birthday, and the practice which has become integral to the company's identity. Dario also attributes this management philosophy to Mary Furlow, a mentor who had served as his supervisor earlier in his career. She exhibited a tremendous sense of empathy but, at the same time, didn't hesitate to make the tough decisions that life sometimes requires. Her direct nature and charisma were fueled by a courage of conviction that Dario strives to emulate as a leader today.

Just as seminal as his relational skills, however, is Dario's impact as a strategist and long-term planner. Truly effective strategy requires 360-degree vision, and this is what Dario has aimed to deliver from day one. One might argue that he began building this vision during his first high school job working as a cook's helper in a state-owned senior citizen's facility near Morristown, New Jersey. Says Dario of the experience, "It showed me what I *didn't* want." Equipping him with a strong drive for success that fit well with the incredible work ethic inspired by his mother, he attended Southeastern University at night while supporting a wife and children at the same time.

The most integral aspects of his education, however, were gained during the ten years he served as a secret service agent. It was during this time that he acquired the tools to both broaden and hone his vision, gaining exhaustive expertise in executive protection, a very specialized area of law enforcement. When faced with the prospect of leaving the service to start his own company, he considered his options in the strategic manner that has become his hallmark. Could he picture himself content with his boss's job? What about his boss's boss's job? What about as the director of secret service? When the answer to each question was in the negative, he directed his attention to several of the entrepreneurs his work brought him in contact with. His admiration for their very individual accomplishments was undeniable, and he noted that he was still young enough to find another job if he attempted a venture and failed. His wife

provided exceptional encouragement, and the voice of his mother's entrepreneurial spirit compelled him onward. She had always dreamed of owning her own business, and the example of her tenacity inspired Dario to pursue his own dream—among the best decisions of his life.

Despite such positive support, however, it is unlikely that Dario's venture would have proven so successful if not for his strategic personality. In addition to the 360-degree vision that allows one to identify past trends and predict future pitfalls, his position as a leader and innovator relies upon his capacity to ask the right questions. What are the threats and opportunities inherent in a given situation? Are we prepared to capture the opportunities as they present themselves? To Dario, working is like a big chess game in which one must carefully analyze and envisage the moves of one's own team and one's competition.

It is interesting to note that this process of strategizing draws heavily on a keen perception of the world around you. Without the assistance of scientific and technical research aimed at predicting the future, Dario and his colleagues were able to plot their moves by making detailed inferences in light of the current political and technical climates. One must also note that mistakes should not unravel an agenda, but should rather be utilized as valuable learning tools. As Dario points out, human beings learn far more from their mistakes than they do from their successes. This system of learning from experience is formalized and optimized through business coaching programs in which executives can learn from their peers and from keynote speakers from all disciplines and backgrounds. Dario participated in one such specialized coaching program, Vistage, which provided him with invaluable learning opportunities and is an experience he would recommend to any young entrepreneur today.

One other valuable piece of advice he offers is his perspective on how a successful strategist treats reality. While the truth can sometimes engender anxiety and unrest, it should always be viewed as an ally instead of an adversary. Maintaining a clear and informed conception of the world around him helps Dario to operate under reasonable and conservative constraints that would safeguard MVM if a given worst case scenario ever came to fruition. Though the coming years look prosperous for the

company, with a number of acquisitions in sight that could provide the transformative force necessary to change MVM from a federal security support company to a full-fledged professional services enterprise, it is certainly prepared to weather storms along the way if necessary.

As MVM now prepares Dario's son, Kevin, to assume more and more responsibility, Dario himself is looking to the future. He's currently taking flying lessons and eagerly anticipates the earning of his pilot's license—an almost metaphorical expression of his work toward the success of MVM. "I think my role, which I enjoy doing, is to look out over the horizon and say, there's many ways we could go, but we're going in that direction," he explains. Communicate your vision in strategic detail—how it will be accomplished, why you need others to follow your lead, what the outcome will look like—and people will be moved by that vision. When one pictures the former secret service agent flying his single-engine high above the clouds, one recalls the plane flight home from Honduras that helped to shape his vision. One considers the many times throughout MVM's development in which he was able to see above the clouds to lead his company toward success, and one can only wonder about what opportunities the organization will seize down the road.

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