

# Interview

## Obstacles Welcome

An Interview with Ralph de la Vega,  
President and Chief Executive Officer, AT&T Mobility and Consumer Markets



Ralph de la Vega

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Ralph de la Vega was named to his current role in October of 2008. Before this, he served as President and CEO-AT&T Mobility where he was responsible for AT&T's wireless business since October 2007. Prior to that, he served as Group President-Regional Telecommunications and Entertainment, having been appointed to the post in January 2007. From 2004 through 2006, de la Vega served as Chief Operating Officer of Cingular Wireless. Prior to joining Cingular in January 2004, he served as President-BellSouth Latin America. He also has served as BellSouth's President of Broadband and Internet Services. In 1974, de la Vega started his career with BellSouth (then Southern Bell) as a management assistant. He has held numerous positions of increasing responsibility in Network Planning, Consumer Services, Engineering, and Operations, and was responsible for all BellSouth Telecommunications Network Operations in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. He holds a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from Florida Atlantic University and a master's degree in business administration from Northern Illinois University, and he has completed the Executive Program at the University of Virginia. He is also the author of the just-released book, Obstacles Welcome: How To Turn Adversity into Advantage in Business and Life.*

**COMPANY BRIEF** *Headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, AT&T Mobility LLC*

*(www.wireless.att.com) is the wholly-owned wireless subsidiary of AT&T Inc, and currently serves over 85.1 million subscribers, making it the second-largest wireless telecommunications provider in the United States, based on number of subscribers.*

**You have just written *Obstacles Welcome: How to Turn Adversity Into Advantage in Business and Life*. What made you feel it was the right timing for the book?**

The book came about because as I gave speeches, the message resonated with people who told me I should write the story. What motivated me to see it through was the impact I saw my talks having on young people. I saw a lot of people that were inspired to reach for higher levels to overcome the things they perceived as obstacles. I felt like if this book could help one young person today be the best they can be, I shouldn't wait any longer to write it. I've met several young people who have been positively impacted and shared some of those impacts with me. So it drove me even harder during those difficult times when there was something more to do to get this book out. I hoped it would one day help those who were struggling the way I was helped myself to get to where I am.

**Do you find that your message of hard work and sacrifice resonates with young people today?**

Yes. Invariably, someone comes to me after a talk in which I've discussed the obstacles I had to overcome in coming to the U.S., to tell me about a grandfather or uncle who struggled in coming to the U.S. So there is pretty wide appeal. The fact that you have to work hard and sacrifice is most impactful with young people who sometimes may think that it's easy to do these things. But nothing ever replaces hard work and sacrifice. You can prepare, but meaningful things hardly ever come without those two items.

**Do you believe these early experiences helped shaped your style of managing and how you interact with people, and do you attribute the success in your business career to them?**

My family made a sacrifice by separating from my sister and me to give us a chance at a better future, and that is what business is all about. When you can paint a vision of where you want to take a business, and people are willing to work hard and sacrifice to help you achieve it and you do, that is when you've hit the major leagues in

business. My best criteria for the highest levels of leadership is when a person can get a group of people so aligned, motivated, and inspired to be willing to sacrifice to achieve things they thought were impossible. I've had the opportunity to be associated with teams that have reached those levels. It emanated from some of the lessons I learned early on that you have to have a vision for a brighter future before you're willing to sacrifice. That is what my parents had, and that is the case for our employees. If we can do these things well, we will succeed and reach our goals.

**Where did your desire to give back and your focus on community engagement come from?**

My biggest inspiration came from my grandmother. From the way she influenced me, I realized it was possible for one person to have a fairly dramatic impact on another person's life by removing some of the roadblocks. When I went to high school, and asked them for career advice on what I needed to do to become an engineer, the high school counselor told me he had looked at my grades and my family history and thought I should be a mechanic. I started going to vocational classes to learn how to be a mechanic until my grandmother reminded me that I had wanted to be an engineer. She told me I could not let a person put limitations on what I could do, that only I could put limitations on myself. That message hit home and I did a control-alt-delete on that counselor's advice. The rest is history. If it hadn't been for my grandmother, I don't know what would have happened. There are kids in school every day that have limits imposed on them by others, and I think of the impact we could have on our society if some of those kids who don't see themselves as being able to accomplish much do have the inspiration and capability to make something better of themselves. So that event not only changed my life for the better, but it was also a powerful message to help others like I was helped.

**In leading a business, your time is pulled in many different directions. Do you take the time to step back and appreciate how far you've come, or is it always looking ahead to the next challenge?**

You can reflect for a bit to learn from what you have gone through, but we live in such a fast-paced world that it is a challenge to be reflective. But once in awhile you have to take a breather, in business or life, and decide if you're on the right path to achieve your goals. ●