



Anna Escobedo Cabral



Alma Morales Riojas



Elizabeth Lisboa-Farrow



Rebeca Barrera



Ruth Sandoval



Nina Vaca

# Latina Leadership in the Boardroom!

By Gloria Romano

Over the past decade, Latinos and Latinas have made significant strides and contributions in the areas of academia, business, politics, government, and Corporate America. On corporate boards however, Hispanics continue to be underrepresented. According to the 2003-2004 Corporate Governance study published by the Hispanic Association on Corporate Responsibility (HACR), measuring inclusion on corporate boards at the executive level and ranking Fortune 1000 companies in America, 148 Hispanics and foreign national Latinos serve on boards of 166 companies and hold 202 board seats –1.97 percent of total board seats (10,314) at Fortune 1000 companies. Because Hispanics are woefully underrepresented, HACR decided to take further action in its mission to advocate for greater inclusion.

In 2003, HACR developed a partnership with the Harvard Business School (HBS), creating a comprehensive executive education program geared to Hispanics with the goal of increasing the effectiveness and presence of Hispanics in corporate boardrooms. The HACR/HBS Executive Education Program on Corporate Governance: *Leadership in the Boardroom* is part of HACR's overall initiative on corporate governance, which includes research on Hispanics serving on major public companies' boards, relationships with executive search firms, and a database of Hispanic board candidates.

"Education is the most important issue affecting the Hispanic Community," says Carlos Orta, president and CEO of HACR. "This program has trained dozens of Latinas and Latinos from all over the country on how to be effective board members. Latinas from business, academic, public and private sectors have participated in this program and have expanded their circles of influence. Latinas have incredible influence over household spending decisions, both when it comes to consumer goods and big-ticket items. If Corporate America is to fully understand the buying power and preferences of the Hispanic community, having a Latina on their board provides that company with a strategic and competitive advantage."

Overall, 38 percent of the participants have been Latinas and over 150 Hispanics have graduated from the program. As participants, they have explored critical issues ranging from board composition, director selection, and compensation, to the board's role in strategic planning, overseeing financial reporting and disclosure, and top-management succession. Participants leave the program with skills and strategies for adding significant value to their boards and specific ideas for improving them.

Here are the personal voices of seven Latinas who have participated in this program.

Anna Escobedo Cabral, Treasurer of the United States, was a member of the first class (2003) and founder of the HACR/HBS Executive Education Program on Corporate Governance: *Leadership in the Boardroom*. "Our goal in creating this relationship with the Harvard Business School was to prepare individuals who are at different stages of their career, for board service," she says. "There are a number of Latinos, for example, that serve currently on board of directors for non-profit organizations, privately held companies, and Fortune 500+. We need to continue to encourage and prepare more Latinos and Latinas to serve in boardrooms or the largest companies of America."

According to Escobedo Cabral, it is important to prepare Latinas to serve in leadership positions, whether in the boardroom, in senior management positions, the non-profit sector or government. "It is absolutely critical that we are prepared to serve at the highest levels, including corporate boardroom," she says. "Clearly, Latinas are going to bring with them a particular set of skills and expertise that is going to be valuable to a company, but I think we also bring two very unique perspectives, that of being a woman and that of being Hispanic."

Because Latinas are taking leadership positions across the country, there is a need to make sure that they are prepared to be effective at all levels. "The great news is that increasingly more women serve in the boardroom, more women are opening and leading their own companies," she says.

Even though she does not yet serve on any corporate board, she states that the Harvard program provides invaluable insight that proves helpful in any workplace. "It is valuable to me in my current job," she says. "So for anyone who is considering participating in this program and who is at a point in their career where they believe it will be helpful, I encourage them highly to attend and participate because it is the best investment they can make in themselves."

Alma Morales Riojas, HACR's chair for the national board of directors, president and CEO of MANA, A National Latina Organization, is the liaison to the alumni association. She is responsible for conveying issues from the alumni to the board, and helping raise awareness on the program to Latinos and Latinas in the corporate world. She is also an alumna of the class of 2003. "The program facilitates the recruitment of Hispanics for corporate board of directors by providing a pool of already experienced and talented Latinos and Latinas, who will

also have a Harvard Business School credit to show that they completed a governance program and strengthening their ability to qualify and subsequently, becoming greater corporate board candidates/members.”

According to Morales Riojas, there are many benefits to be gained from participating in the program; even, if the person does not get to be on a board of directors immediately. The new contacts and friends made are an invaluable network both personally and professionally. “There are a lot of talented Latinas and Latinos who are exceptionally qualified. Participating in the program helps them to be more rounded in their current job because it gives them a bigger picture of the corporate world,” she says. “I think we’ve done well to raise the awareness of Latina potential. We now have more women in corporations, more women on the hill, and an increased number of Latinas elected to office. This program can help accelerate the progress of Latinos and Latinas on corporate and other boards of directors.”

“We need to find creative ways to build an environment where our community can succeed,” Morales Riojas says. “As leaders of national organizations it is important that we remember to do the things necessary to help build our community and to promote opportunities for Latinos and Latinas.”

Elizabeth Lisboa-Farrow, chairman and CEO of The Oliver Group, Inc. and alumna of the class of 2003, believes the program is very beneficial and she highly recommends it. She currently serves on the board of Group

Hospitalization and Medical Services, Inc. (doing business as CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield).

“The program explores critical issues ranging from board composition, director selection, and compensation to the board’s role in strategic planning, overseeing financial reporting and disclosure, and top management succession,” she says. “Participants leave the program with skills and strategies for adding significant value to the contributions of their boards and specific ideas for improving these boards.”

As an HACR/HBS alumni board member, Lisboa-Farrow is working to enlist more participants in the program, while maintaining and advocating for the contacts and relationships in the program. “After over 15 years of service on many non-profit boards, for example, as chair of Southeastern University, chair of the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and chair of the DC Chamber of Commerce, to name a few, the HACR program offered me an opportunity to participate in a corporate board training program to better prepare and position me as a potential member of a corporate board.”

According to Lisboa-Farrow, it’s essential to have diversity within any corporate board, especially if they want to do business with the fastest growing market segment in the United States. “In the case of Latinas who continue to drive the growth of Hispanic-owned business, corporations will be well served by electing Latinas to these boards,” she states. “Corporations can develop

a successful business strategy with insight from diverse groups, including Latinas who can assist these businesses in successfully reaching these market segments by bringing their business, technical and cultural experience to the boardroom, at the table of dialogue, debate and policy.”

“Latinas today, whether working within corporations, in academia or other fields of endeavor, are not waiting to be ‘discovered’” she says. “They are taking on challenging positions to advance their experience and show their leadership. *Adelante!*”

Rebeca Barrera, founder of the National Latino Children’s Institute and former director of the Gateway to College Program at Palo Alto College, is an alumna of the class of 2004. Currently she is in the process of opening her own Latino flavored retail business *Dicho y Hecho* in downtown San Antonio. Though Barrera worked in an academic environment, she wishes she could have had the experience 10 years earlier when she first joined the board of Scholastic.

“The four class days at Harvard Business School prepares Hispanics to serve on corporate boards, or in my case, to be a more effective board member,” she says. “Every class has had a group of strong capable Latinas. The program opens one more avenue for participation at the highest levels.”

As Barrera says, Latinas provide a different perspective on corporate boards. “Although much of our work is finance, and policy directed, when it comes to discussions about products, marketing and investment, I contribute in ways other board members can’t.”

“When doors start opening, Latinas use their incredible talent to make business better, to make television more interesting, to make classrooms more relevant,” Barrera says. “Whether it’s in publishing, business, entertainment, public service... Latinas are shaking off old stereotypes and designing forward thinking.”

Ruth Sandoval is chair of the HACR/HBS alumni association and alumna of the class of 2004. The association’s mission is to further advance via engagement of the alumni, the HACR mission in the areas of inclusion, corporate governance, and senior corporate leadership; and to serve as a constructive entity which enables networking, relationship building, skill development and member success. Sandoval believes that the HACR/HBS Program can and has impacted Latinas in a substantial way.

“First, when you have participated in the HACR/HBS program you leave with a sense of empowerment, of knowledge, and a networking team of your fellow alumni,” she says.



Hispanic Association on Corporate Responsibility  
Program on Corporate Governance  
August 13 - 16, 2006  
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“You are empowered because you have the Harvard name behind you, and that’s a great credential in the business community. To be able to say you attended Harvard, has tremendous brand value and educational value that will benefit you as a business owner or in a corporation.”

Sandoval’s observation of Latinas is that they are taking further steps in Corporate America. “I think Latinas are coming into their own, they are becoming more empowered and astute about what they can and can’t do to be successful in the work environment. They are willing to take the risk and accomplish their dreams, which is why there is such a growth in women entrepreneurs. Latinas use all their talents, culture, family, education, history in their work environment, which Corporate America is not familiar with. Their employment and promotion growth has been slow... but it’s changing. The HACR/HBS program can get us there faster.”

Diana Echevarria is manager of Corporate Contributions at Altria Corporate Services, Inc. and an alumna of the class of 2006. “I was in the program this summer and it was a wonderful experience, incredibly informative,

very well structured and it was a great opportunity to gain valuable information about the realities of being a member and joining a corporate board,” she says. “It’s also a fantastic networking opportunity.”

Echevarria sees the program as an additional tool and resource, a training piece. “It’s one tool and resource to better prepare Hispanics to join corporate boards, and I commend [HACR] for taking the initiative and the lead in doing something that is so important.”

Having Latinas on boards is a great advantage according to Echevarria. “Just diversity in general, I think is enriching for the board, and it strengthens its role to reflect the population. It is imperative to have as much diversity as possible because it’s also the diversity of viewpoints that they bring to the table that is real value added.” she says.

Nina Vaca, CEO of Pinnacle Technical Resources, Inc. is an alumna of the class of 2006. For Vaca, the program is extremely beneficial to any executive who is interested in serving on a corporate board. “U.S. Latinas are powerful,” she says. “Harvard’s executive program fits nicely with the increasing role that Latinas will play in Corporate America.”

As both a business and civic leader, Vaca has spent a decade of her life giving back to the community, not only through her business, but also as an advocate. “As a successful business person, I have a responsibility to advocate for others. The best way I can do that is to have a seat at the table.” Vaca says. “This program supports those goals and provides participants with the tools to accomplish them.”

Vaca believes strongly that the educational opportunities provided to Latinas today will directly determine their influence in the decades to come. “That is why the Harvard Business School, HACR, and similar programs are so important,” she says. “The most important tool we can provide ourselves is an education.”

Evident as well is the fact that Harvard greatly benefits from hosting a group of accomplished Latinas and Latinos. Their contribution to the program brings to Harvard an experience and a point of view that is seldom heard in one of the most prestigious educational institutions in the world. 



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