

Chapter 20 – Arnolito – Businessman Who Hit The Glass Ceiling, Monterrey, Nuevo Leon

Prologue

Arnolito (a fictitious name because he didn't want his boss to see his comments, which could result in his being fired), is in his mid-forties. He was born in, and lives in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico's third largest city with about four million inhabitants.

While people from Monterrey (known as *Regiomontanos*, a title shared by people from the former Königsberg, Prussia, now Kaliningrad, Germany, or simply *Regios*), are known for having a greater affinity for the United States than for Mexico City, the city is representative of modern Mexico and today's middle-class. The city has a high standard of living, has a low crime rate and has more hustle and bustle than a city twice its size.

Although the reputation of people from Monterrey is that of being very *codo* (cheap), they have fueled the retail explosions in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas and Laredo, TX with their weekly shopping trips. Long weekends see thousands of *regios* flocking to San Antonio, TX to spend money as well. The southward surge of tourists from Texas comes from people who want to see some mountains and a cosmopolitan city. The economies of Texas and Monterrey are closely linked.

Monterrey Today

Monterrey has developed into a world-class city with little help or encouragement from Mexico City. The city has always been independent and gone its own way. These people are proud to be from the North and have no love for the centralized government in the South.

Arnolito is an engineer with a degree from Monterrey Tec (*Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey*), a well-respected university with branches throughout the country. An engineering degree is an all-purpose degree that traditionally opens many different doors for working within an organization. Mexicans with an engineering degree put the abbreviation for engineer (*Ing.*) in front of their names, as do doctors (*Dr.* or *Dra.*) and those with advanced degrees (*Lic.* or *Licenciado*). At one point, it was actually a criminal offense to present yourself as someone with an advanced degree (either *Lic* or *Ing.*) and in the 1990's one politician's downfall was attributed to his using *Lic.* in front of his name, when he did not in fact earn anything more than an undergraduate degree.

People all over the world (certainly in the United States) pad their resumes with a few extra letters behind their names and the occasional fake physician foists himself on an unsuspecting town, but in Mexico respect for education makes such falsifying more serious.

So Arnaldo really is an engineer and really earned his degree. He came from working-class parents who, while they could contribute to his education, could not do it all. He worked and went to school. Early on, he discovered the world of multi-level marketing. This was perfect for a student. He could make his own hours and if he was a good salesman, he could make a sufficient amount of money for his needs. That would have been hard to do with a regular job, so it was a perfect marriage.

What makes Arnaldo's story so illuminating is that, while quite successful in corporate Mexico, he knows first-hand the limitations of that success. Yet, rather than many in the same situation, he has chosen to stay in his country and find a solution, rather than emigrate to Canada or Europe, which is a popular option for many Mexicans who have touched the "glass ceiling" of advancement.

Unlike in the United States, the glass ceiling is not gender-specific. Mexican men and women who have advanced as far as they can are stopped at a certain point, regardless of gender, education or ability. This is not specific to Monterrey or any one region of Mexico. It's not even specific to Mexico, only more obvious. There was a similar ceiling decades ago in the United States (and to a certain extent, still is) in certain where you can be as bright as a newly-minted dime, but if you are not family, you will never enter the highest echelons of management.

It's been said that one hundred families run Mexico. To an extent that is true, though this is not an ironclad fact. The next echelon of ownership of corporate Mexico is an old-boy network of very close friends of those families. It's rare that someone new is admitted to this network.

Arnaldo has worked for three corporations in his career. They have all been multi-nationals; one based in Mexico City and two with roots in Monterrey. His experience was the same at all three.

Naturally, there is always the danger of one interviewee simply having had a run of bad luck or of having a fear of success that should negate such stories. Arnaldo's story, while unique to his life, is not an isolated instance. Several Mexicans told me of similar experiences in their lives. Arnaldo's story seemed most interesting in his way of dealing with the limitations of working for corporate Mexico.

Arnaldo's Story

I thank you for talking to me and respect your request for anonymity. You asked me to change your name, change the type of business and use your story in a way that it would be hard to recognize you. These stories are meant to present an image to Americans of what Mexicans are like, they are not investigative reporting. So feel free to say whatever you truly think.

Thank you.

Why do you feel you have peaked in your management career?

I would not say that I have completely peaked, as you say, but that I am very near the highest I can go. The general manager above me is the only step left for me. Then I will have peaked. There are top executive positions beyond that, but they are reserved for the family members or the 'juniors.'

[Juniors are the children of the rich. This term is often used in a derogatory sense, since most juniors are perceived to be wastrels, living lives of abandon and privilege, often appearing in the tabloid press for their escapes. Naturally, like all generalizations, there are exceptions, but as a general rule, calling someone a junior is not a positive accolade].

Is this unique to the company you are with, or have you experienced it elsewhere?

I will tell you, I have worked for three corporations since getting my degree. The first was based in Monterrey. I felt very lucky to find a good-paying job with a good company in my hometown. After several years there, I noticed that no one ever seemed to advance higher than general manager from the ranks. I saw executive positions come and go, but they were always filled with members of the board's family. I thought that this was unique to Monterrey, so I started looking for a job in Mexico City, which is more cosmopolitan.

Did that change things?

At first, yes. I got a very good job, with more salary, more benefits, more respect than I had in Monterrey. I traveled to the United States a lot. I thought that I would continue to advance. But there, I learned that there was an upper limit, both in salary and responsibility, beyond which no outsider could advance. I should not say 'no outsider,' since I saw some senior staff hired from Spain. I talked to the other guys who had been there longer and they felt the same way.

They talked about their friends who left Mexico to work in Canada because there, they could get good jobs with lots of chances for advancement professionally and no apparent limit on how far they could go.

It's like Mexicans get more respect in Canada than they do in Mexico. I felt this especially when Spaniards were imported to fill top positions.

But no, we still feel inferior to the Spanish. Our racial memories are still strong and the Spaniards convinced us that the mestizo was below the white-skin on the evolutionary scale. We applied that to our own race and the darker the skin color, the less status someone has in our society. You don't see many Indian people selling products on TV. When I was a kid, you only saw white-skinned, blue-eyed Criollo families depicted on

TV or in print ads. Today, there are some mestizos, but we still equate the products from the white-skins with quality, whether it is toothpaste or Bimbo bread.

[Bimbo does not mean what you probably think it does. Bimbo is the brand-name of the most popular white bread sold throughout Mexico. Although wheat bread or pan integral is making headway, white bread is still the bread of choice among those who can afford it. Tortillas are considered by many to be food of the lower classes. When your family has moved up to eating white bread (or now wheat bread), you have arrived in the middle class].

You found this same way of thinking in the corporate world?

Precisely. Mexico City is as diverse as New York City and has influence all over Latin America and the world. The best and the brightest go there to make their mark and they can. Don't misunderstand me, a Mexican with a lot of drive, good political skills and business understanding can do very well in our large cities. It is just that there seems to be an invisible hand or ceiling that pushes us back when we reach a certain point. You had this in the United States last century. You still do, to less of an extent. But I am sure that if you were on the East Coast of the United States and your name was Kennedy or Rockefeller or DuPont, you would be promoted over a guy named Nelson, no?

Quite likely.

And you are not a color-blind society either, though you are changing, perhaps faster than we are. I do not see an Indian or Negro president in our near future. The aspect of color awareness shows how our societies are dissimilar. Perhaps our most revered president was Benito Juárez, a dark-skinned Zapotec Indian. But from the beginning of the overthrow of the Spanish, our generals and presidents have been mestizos. In a sense, our revolution was a racial uprising.

*AUTHOR'S INTERECTION – If you wish to show the Mexicans you meet that you do not respect their culture, be sure to mispronounce or Anglicize the name of their national icon, Benito Juárez. There is an accent on the “a” and ignoring that is rather insulting. While no one would shoot you for saying “**Waar** ez,” like most Americans pronounce the Mexican city across the Rio Grande from El Paso, TX, your Mexican friends will get a pained expression on their faces.*

*I learned this valuable lesson in my early travels in the nineteen sixties. I was lost on the streets of Zacatecas, Zacatecas [It is common to include the name of the state when referring to a city. In this case, Zacatecas city is the capitol of the state by the same name.] and asked an old crone how to get to Calle Juarez (“**Waar** ez). She looked perplexed. I repeated it and said something about, “El Paso, Tejas” (at least I knew enough to pronounce the “x” in Texas as a soft “j”). She looked disgustedly at me, took my hand, pulled me eye to eye with her and said very slowly and clearly, “**WAHr** ez. Benito Juárez. El héroe de la Revolución. Presidente de la República.” While I have butchered other words in the ensuing forty years, I have never, ever mispronounced that one or insulted Presidente Juárez.*

The grammatical rule (subject to exceptions as are all grammatical rules) is that the next to last syllable is generally accented in preference to the last syllable, unless there is an accent mark somewhere else. So it would seem that the accent mark on the Presidente's name is superfluous, but is probably placed there just to avoid confusion.

But while we threw off our chains of colonialism, we didn't free our minds. We still believed that we were inferior, that Mexicans should be a subservient race. For example, we use the term '*su servidor*' or 'your servant' or 'your humble servant,' when referring to ourselves. It is an expression of humility. In the United States, many powerful men signed their letters, 'Your humble servant,' in the last century. I think it was meant as a way to show that the writer was not too egotistical or impressed by his position. In our case it is meant to show that the speaker or writer knows his place, that he is humble.

Our racism is perplexing, because we Mexicans were originally the Indians we now discriminate against. The *mestizo* race came about because the white-skinned Spaniards raped our Indian ancestors. It could be that because we sprang from such beginnings that we carry this feeling of inferiority, I don't know. I am not a psychiatrist, but I have read such ideas.

You don't see many Indians in the corporate world. This is probably due to the lack of educational opportunities for them. While higher education in Mexico is available to all people, many indigenous people speak only rudimentary Spanish, so even if they could have gotten a high school education and could afford to go, they would have difficulties.

Where you see the discrimination is on lower levels. In agriculture, harvesting is done by both mestizos and Indios. I read that forty percent of the agricultural workers are Indians. The Indios are paid less, or not paid at all. There were precise corollaries of this in Spanish colonial times. Back then, there were courts and safeguards for the Indios written into the laws. Of the cases that actually made it to the courts, the majority of times, the Indians won. I don't know what the situation is for them now.

One place you see less obvious, but apparent, discrimination is in advertisements for jobs or all levels. Quite often you see the phrase, '*con buen presentación*' in an ad. That could be literally translated as 'good-looking' or 'good-appearance (nice dresser),' both of which are true, but everyone knows it also means, 'not Indian-looking.'

So it is like the chickens in the barnyard. The big ones peck the littler ones and the littler ones peck the littlest ones.

So why did you leave the job in Mexico City?

AUTHOR'S INTERECTION – (Mexicans call Mexico City by different names. Most common is simply Mexico, occasionally DF [Day f fay], sometimes La Ciudad, or La Ciudad de Mexico or La Capital. As a foreigner, you will feel really cool if you say Mexico, but you are likely to get confused when you are referring to the rest of the country, so stick to DF. People from Mexico City are called chilangos [though technically it means someone who lives there, but was not born in the Federal District], although some consider this an insult if used by a foreigner or even someone not from the

city. Some people use capitalinos, or defeños. Your best bet (as with any slang or regionalism) is to throttle back your coolness until you hear the person you're talking to use the term. That said, calling someone from Monterrey a Regiomontano is perfectly acceptable. However, another term used for people from Monterrey, codo (usually accompanied by touching your elbow, since the literal translation is "elbow") is not likely to win you any friends there. Codo means cheap.

Mexico is a great place to be if you are young and ambitious. But it is no place to raise a family. Yes, it is true that it is dangerous, but I feel that is overstated. We Mexicans like to accentuate the negatives about our own country. One kidnapping becomes one hundred in the stories that follow. We are a nation of *corridos* (folk songs generally glorifying the outrageous or extraordinary). Yes, there are problems, but our media is even more outrageous than yours. We glorify gruesome aspects of accidents with pictures of blood and dead bodies. Sure there is street crime, burglaries, corruption and murder in Mexico City, but that is true of any big city in the world, except perhaps Tokyo. Personally, I felt more fear of attack in some cities in the United States, but I do not want to insult you. It is just what I felt. I was never attacked. Not even in Mexico [City]. I liked Mexico, but eventually living there wears you out. I wanted to come home. I met my wife there and she was from Monterrey too. We both had good jobs, but felt that a family was more important than a good job. We wanted to raise our family in a city big enough to offer opportunities, but less stressful than Mexico. So we stared looking for jobs here.

We Mexicans have a closer connection to our home than I believe you Americans do. Even if we are educated and worldly, we always dream of coming back to our home town. Of course, that is not everybody, but I think it is most of us.

So I searched and found this job in Monterrey. Naturally I took a cut in salary to come home, but it costs much less to live here than in the capitol. The pace of life is so much more real here. In Mexico everything was rush, rush, rush. Here, things move faster than many parts of Mexico [*Here, he is referring to the country, which you would not know if you were not Mexican or at least had been around Mexico for awhile*] but it is more like Texas than New York.

Of course, I would not be honest if I did not say that the safety factor is important. Monterrey has one of the lowest crime rates in the world, much less than most cities in the United States. Yes, we have had some publicized incidents with drug gang violence, but name one city in the United States that does not have gang violence. I am sorry; I do not mean to offend. It is just that sometimes I get emotional about how Mexico is portrayed in the American press. I read that there is a European company that ranks all the cities in the world for safety (The Mercer Rankings) and in 2005 Monterrey is considered safer than Atlanta.

I remember the first time I went to Chicago. I was afraid that I would get mugged. I guess I thought Al Capone and the boys were still in charge. People are going to believe what they want, regardless of the facts.

It is true.

So you came back to Monterrey?

Yes, both my wife and I found jobs we liked. We began our family and have been very happy. We have two kids, a boy and a girl. We are hoping they will go to the TEC, but that is a long way off. Meanwhile, we enjoy them as much as possible. Every weekend we go somewhere together. There are mountains, forests, caves and lots of natural attractions to explore close by. And there are cultural activities in the city, so there is always something to do. Even though I have to travel some for my job, I am always home for weekends.

So how is the job going?

It is as I expected. I am in charge of a department that develops new products. It is very challenging and demanding. The pay is good, about \$3,000 US dollars a month, which allows me to be comfortable. But I know that there is only one level above me that I can achieve. No more. The business (like most of the big businesses in my country) is owned by one of the old rich families. It would be nearly impossible for me, or anyone like me, no matter what my education or qualifications, to become part of top management. That is reserved for *la familia*.

It is for this reason that many of the people like me are immigrating to Canada, as I said before. It is for this reason that I also have my business. I do not think my bosses would like to know that I have a business on the side, so I must be careful in talking about it.

I understand. I gave my word. Don't worry.

Arnoldo, it would seem to me that you have a pretty successful life. You have a good job. Like most middle-level jobs in Mexico, it has benefits. Yet you also sell a multi-level marketing product. Why?

I worked my way through college selling [a multi-level marketing product]. It was a very positive experience. The meetings with other agents were like a support group for positive-thinking. I found that it helped me in my studies and helped me to develop what you Americans call a 'can-do' attitude.

I think that is one of the differences between our cultures and frankly, one area where I admire the United States over Mexico. This is becoming less true, but many people in Mexico, while unhappy with their situation, have a fatalism, an acceptance of their lot in life. 'No matter what I do, nothing will change,' seems to be their attitude. It's very easy to fall into that way of thinking, that way of life.

Entrepreneurship in Mexico is not as easy as it is in the United States. Capital is not as freely available for one thing. And, on a grander level, it could be that there is a conspiracy to keep people from becoming entrepreneurs in the traditional sense. I don't know, that is just something I feel. For example, in your country, a man can work hard and earn more than enough to live, so that he can save money to start a business. Here it is difficult to make too much money.

I am lucky. I make a good living and support my family, but there is little left over to save to start a business. All my friends are the same way. We live in nice houses, drive decent cars, wear nice but not extravagant clothes and on the outside, we seem to have it made. But we know that our savings would not last very long if we lost our jobs. From what I read, this is similar to people in America.

Not every Mexican wants to start a business. Most of them are more comfortable with a regular paycheck and a boss to answer to. But some of us want to live a life that has no limits on how much money we can make and rewards us with more time with our family. That is the attraction of owning your own business, but not just any business. A restaurant, for instance, would take too much of your time away from your family. A business like multi-level marketing gives you more freedom as well as more money.

In the United States, someone who wants to start a business can get a loan from his bank, or the Small Business Administration. He could even finance it with his credit card. I see the commercials from American TV when I travel. I read magazines like *Entrepreneur* and *Fortune Small Business*. There are stories of people who were successful using some of those means, including credit cards.

I know that the interest rate on credit cards is high in the United States, but it is double that here in Mexico. And credit limits are not as generous.

So does this explain the attraction of multi-level marketing, which is growing rapidly throughout Latin America?

I believe so, yes. A person can start his own business for only a few dollars. You buy product, you sell that product and you buy more with the money. Even if you do not succeed in selling it (we never use the word 'fail'), you don't lose. You have soap, cleaning materials, cosmetics, and health supplements, whatever it is you are selling.

Of course, most of the agents are women, who just want some extra income. That is fine. It is easier for someone to make money with this type of selling because of our family structure. In the United States, a person soon exhausts family members and must prospect strangers. In Mexico, our extended families make it easier to sell.

In conclusion, is there anything you would like to convey to the readers of this book about your country?

Certainly. Our peoples are not so much different. We both want a good life for our children foremost and share economic concerns. It is true that there are good and bad people in every country, but I think that the good people outnumber the bad ones in my country. We have social problems, but is that not true everywhere? Do not let the dramatic news stories keep you from visiting us. Mexico has much to offer and friendly people. Please, come to visit us and make up your own mind.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Since I interviewed Arnaldo, we have lost contact. He was let go from his position, perhaps because of the economic downturn, or perhaps because the company owner's son took over his department and has become more hands-on. That, too, could have been a result of the worldwide recession. Mexican businesses have made cutbacks and let people go. Although the very rich have not been affected significantly, some of the sons and daughters have made a show of returning to the family businesses.

Either way, I am glad Arnaldo has his multi-level marketing to fall back on. Although I had my doubts about such ventures, I can now see that Arnaldo knew what he was doing. The glass ceiling hit him and bounced him down, or the economy affected him as it did so many others. Either way, Arnaldo proved what others have told me when I asked them what effects they thought the recession would have on them.

We Mexicans are resilient people. We have learned to live on less, and if things change, it will not be hard for us to go back to living on less. We have our families to depend on. When Americans face an economic crisis, it seems to us that they face it individually. We see the news stories about individual families and how they lose their homes and their jobs. They don't know what to do. Mexicans in the same situations know that it is a time of retrenchment, a time of going back to our families, of helping others in our families. We are more fortunate, because we are never alone.

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