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Dear Reader:

I have been in many meetings, where OD and HR professionals were discussing how to get closer to the business, how to become more involved, supportive, and aligned, so as to contribute to achievement of the company's strategic business goals. I recently had the opportunity to pursue this topic with Dr. José Maria Zas, a former HR professional, who recently was appointed President and General Manager of American Express in Argentina. This interview shares his insights.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

Quote of the Month

*"If you don't risk anything you risk even more."*

*Erica Jong, Author*



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## AS CLOSE AS HR CAN GET TO THE BUSINESS

Interview with Dr. José Maria Zas,  
General Manager of American Express Argentina

**LIM News:** *You are one of the rare examples of an HR professional to be designated President of a corporation. What do you consider is the impact of your previous training on your present role?*

**JMZ:** The knowledge, skills and experience developed in the areas of HR have allowed me to have a broader perspective of the organization, and to keep permanently in mind that it is people who are the key to success. This is a simple concept, repeated frequently, but in my case it was deeply rooted and allowed me to focus my attention on people, to keep that priority in mind, and to see them as core to the business.

**LIM News:** *What are those competencies that you brought with you that you found most useful in your current role?*

**JMZ:** Well, my past helped me to easily adopt the role of facilitator, of coach and motivator of my team, something that otherwise is a rather new concept for managers coming from other areas. Understanding team dynamics was important, as well as negotiation which are really useful in my day-to-day work.

**LIM News:** *In a country that has faced so many obstacles throughout its history, the priorities of investment in corporations are examined very carefully, and training and development programs are normally not seen as investments that will have a visible impact on the business. What is your opinion about this?*

**JMZ:** Argentina has a distinctive characteristic: the talent of its people. Argentineans are always leading with innovations, and excel at working in teams. I think the challenge is to expand their potential by constantly promoting professional development. This can be achieved through training and development activities. To me, the impact is very visible.

**LIM News:** *What are, in your opinion, the challenges of leadership today?*

**JMZ:** I see the main challenge of a leader is creating a vision of the future and orienting the whole organization in the new direction. This requires creativity, innovation, teamwork and a winning attitude.

**LIM News:** *One topic that is often overlooked concerns the challenges of transitioning into a new role. What was your experience of the transition, stepping into your current position of President of American Express in Argentina? What were your challenges and what priorities did you set for yourself?*

**JMZ:** Well, after 15 years in this company I was very familiar with the organizational culture, and we planned a 6-month transition, which was helpful to make this a successful process. I consider this an example of best practice. So we developed a shared vision, we built a proactive team and we acted promptly. These actions converted the obstacles into new opportunities for success.

**LIM News:** *You have indicated that the client and the employees are what make an organization successful. How do you see this happening in American Express Argentina?*

**JMZ:** We have in Argentina the most loyal customer base in the industry, which is a unique advantage. On top of that, our employees evaluated us as the second best company to work for in the country. Now we are working to become number one this year!

**LIM News:** *You have taken personal leadership in a number of nontraditional activities, inviting substantial participation of the employees. Can you share with us what they were and what the purpose you had in mind for them?*

**JMZ:** I love to walk the hallways of the company, especially talking to the employees who do customer service. That way I keep in touch with the reality of our service. Our goal is to exceed the clients' expectations, so I also have frequent meetings with clients to listen to their needs, feedback and recommendations.

Other activities I have led are related to collecting and integrating the contributions of the employees, so that we can add individual efforts and enrich our picture through the diversity of perspectives and opinions.

**LIM News:** *You have described your organization as a culture of team success. This is the wish of a large number of corporations. Can you share with us what are the obstacles that need to be overcome to achieve this, and what made it possible for you?*

**JMZ:** I see team success as nothing more than a project on which people work together, contributing both individually and collectively to generate a team dynamic, and to try to exceed established goals. Celebration is a key part of it, as well as the sense of pride in belonging, in realizing the collective belief, of making possible the impossible.

**LIM News:** *What advice do you have finally for the HR professionals who aspire to making your journey?*

**JMZ:** That success is a long road of humility and excellence, where I can learn something new every day. 

**Silvia Leon, Learning Coach from LIM Argentina who supported José Maria Zas**

**with his teams, reports on the experience.**

"We started a team-building program in 2004 with the top Executive Team, designed to create a vision for the organization. Following that, in December we organized a meeting with the senior management level. Eighty managers and Business Heads came together with the goal of fostering integration and developing greater synergy between the business units.

We co-designed this meeting with a planning team composed of the direct reports of the Executive Team. The planning was key: we met several times, and worked ourselves into becoming a high performing team.

We thought that the best way to role model and cascade best leadership practices throughout the organization was to use the Executive Team members themselves as facilitators for the event.

I supported them in the design of the sessions, ensuring the activities would reach the established outcomes, and coached them individually on their different coaching roles during the meeting. They did a great job! They used many of the tools of high performing teams they had learned before, fostered participation of everyone, invited reflection, facilitated decision-making processes by consensus, and gave feedback to one another.

One of the key activities during the meeting was that the participants divided up into teams and worked on real, current business challenges, which had been previously defined by the Executive Team. The projects were related to recent legislation that reduced their revenue by 50%, so everyone had a chance to reflect and to brainstorm ways to anticipate the impact of the legislation, with the aim of converting the obstacle into an opportunity. At the end of the day each team presented their conclusions and a suggested action plan.

A second large meeting took place some months later, in another offsite location. The purpose was to continue with the process to report progress in the implementation of some of the recommendations, and to share the success of several of these. Other key outcomes of the meeting included cross functional networking, becoming more open to change, learning new tools for working in teams, and communicating the goals for the immediate future. Added outcomes included the generation of new ideas collectively, as well as promoting the "winning attitude".

To accomplish these, this time we used an Open Space design, where several new projects were presented and the managers could choose on which one they wanted to work during the event. We also used an outdoor activity to enhance integration and teambuilding, and at the end of the event each team presented their conclusions and proposals.

The next step will take place by mid-2005, with another off site meeting for the same large group. For this next step we formed project teams that now are working on the implementation of the recommendations, so by June they will be reporting on their progress.

All these initiatives were revolutionary in the organization and the participants expressed great excitement and enthusiasm. The feedback was excellent and in both events the evaluations indicated 100% met expectations. Everyone valued the interaction, the design, the opportunity to contribute ideas, to feel an important actor in the development of the business, to be listened to. There was high motivation to succeed and people enjoyed hearing and learning about the different lines of their organization's business, how they perform and how they could create synergy between them.

It was a wonderful experience, and the Executive Team truly modeled the role of a leader coach. That is what I call cascading change."



**ASTD 2005 International Conference & Exposition**  
**June 5-9, 2005**  
Orlando, Florida, USA • Orange County Convention Center

A Global Assembly of Workplace Learning and Performance Professionals

**Attend This Session!**

**"Designing for Learning that Lasts"**

**Ernie Turner, LIM; Urban Skog, AstraZeneca**

**June 7, 2005 - 1:45-3:00 p.m.**

**Practice-Oriented Education (POE) Conference -- Boston, Mass.**

**Attend this Session!**

**"Action Reflection Learning"**

**Tony Pearson , LIM – Beena Vilas, LIM**

**Conference Overview, June 14-17, 2005**

**<http://wace2005.waceinc.org/overview.html>**



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