

A PUERTO RICAN IN THE WHITE HOUSE

An exclusive interview with Dr. J. Gerald Suárez



Dr. J. Gerald Suarez

During a span of nine years Dr. Gerald Suárez tenure at the White House has taken him through some of the most intense and dynamic periods of the modern Presidency. This Puerto Rican native, has served two Presidents, has flown aboard Air Force One on numerous missions and served as the Presidential Transition Military Office liaison during the most contested Presidential transition in history. During this time, he spearheaded the redesign of the White House Communications Agency, supported the Executive Office of the President Management and Administration, and became Director for Organizational Development at the White House Military Office. Dr. Suárez is also a certified Chief Information Officer, graduate school professor, published author, consultant, and lecturer.

ZC: What can you tell us about the genesis of your professional development?

In the mid 1980's while pursuing my Masters in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) I attended a summer session offered by the Navy Personnel Research and Development Center located in San Diego, California. I met and conducted research on the management approach of Dr. W. Edwards Deming, one of the most influential worldwide figures in quality, productivity, and competitiveness. After a few short months I was offered to return to San Diego on a permanent status. I took the job and for five years I contributed to develop and disseminate innovative business practices within the Navy and the Department of Defense. Later, I accepted a position at the newly created post of the Undersecretary of the Navy Total Quality Leadership

Office in Washington, DC. After a challenging and rewarding year in Washington, I was selected to lead the first Presidential Quality Office in the history of the White House.

ZC: How did you feel after being selected to work at the White House Communications Agency and in later years' work in the White House Military Office?

In a sense it was surreal because of all the novelty, power, and symbolism surrounding the White House. This is not a place you would think about when you are setting your career goals. The White House is undoubtedly one of the most recognizable icons in the world. The nation and the rest of the world view it as a symbol of democracy, as a museum, and as the home of the nations first family, yet the White House must also function as an office for the President, his staff, and its support entities. Joining this setting is

certainly an intimidating experience. You feel an enormous sense of responsibility and an unwavering pressure to perform to the best of your capabilities. For nine years I've felt part of something unique and very special and I will always be grateful for the opportunity to serve the President and witness history in the making.

ZC: How would you describe those corridors of power?

During these nine years I've come to understand what gives this powerful place its soul. The White House is a crucible of creative thought, a force for progress and democracy, a place where dreams of generations are funneled and transformed into reality. It is an epicenter of the seismic shifts in our economy, politics, and society. At the same time, the contradictions, paradoxes and ironies are astounding and engaging. The White House is a place where the monumental and the mundane coexist. There is no other place in the world like it! The margin for error is razor thin; it is fast paced, stressful, demanding yet compelling.

ZC: What do you see as some of the most pressing problems affecting businesses?

First let me say that I believe that each organization has a unique reality. However, there are some problems that I consider are endemic in most organizations. Some of those include: a shortage of trust and pervasive fear; a short-term orientation-people taking care of the present at the expense of the future; use of ineffective planning methods; development of myopic and meaningless visions; measuring what is convenient not what is rele-

vant; an emphasis on getting rid of what is wrong instead of creating what is right; unidirectional communication; incentives and rewards that destroy morale and teamwork; the adoption of panaceas-hoping for a quick fix; and lack of investment in employee learning and organizational learning. But most importantly I see lack of appreciation that no problem and no solution to a problem can be entertained free of context. I've seen many trying hard without knowing what the real problems are. They become good at solving irrelevant problems. In other words, they become good at doing the wrong things right. And the better they get at it, the more problems they create. I believe that defining the right problem is more important than developing the right solution.

ZC: What are your views about personal and organizational resistance to change?

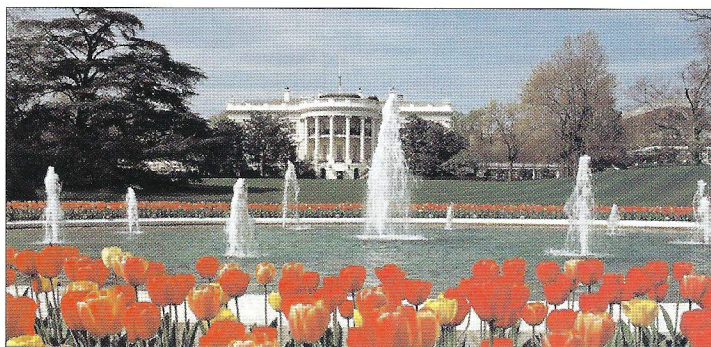
Resistance to change requires a great deal more than we can cover in an interview, but let me hit on some general observations. Organizations and people that can't learn how to adapt and change in this new era will not survive in this environment where change happens abruptly, non-linear and unpredictably. Today, change has changed in terms of speed, pace, type, and purpose. Every organization has change resisters—people who are uncomfortable with anything that threaten their comfort

zone. Fear of change reinforces the attitude that "We've always done it this way, why change now?" And that attitude maximizes sameness, which in term stifles innovation, wealth, and development. People resist change because they are generally content with what is familiar. The main thing is to first give people an opportunity to participate in decisions that will affect them, let them be architects of the change not victims of it and reinforce that change does not mean loss but instead it means opportunity.

ZC: Why would you say so many are cynical about the role of Government and frustrated by its inefficiencies and ineffectiveness? Do you think that Governments can really reinvent themselves?

The proportion of people that trust government "to do the right thing" has declined sharply since the mid-sixties in most developed countries. This decline is attributed to a myriad of causes ranging from growing public distrust to increasing cynicism about the motives and values of elected officials. But people will not have trust and confidence in their government until they see improvements in the way it makes decisions and delivers results. Better government performance is a key to rebuilding public trust. When governments fail to deliver citizens become dissatisfied and disengaged. This is why

the last 12-14 years in the United States has been a time of serious introspection in government. The enactment of public laws aiming at seeking more efficiencies in service, the introduction of the Performance Results Act, and the efforts of



Reinventing Government, are emblematic of the growing perception that government had become confused in its objectives, lethargic in its response time, and inefficient in its operations. As we move in the new millennium it is imperative that we take proactive action to redesign our governments and society as a whole. Because the deeper we get into the consequences of the direction we are currently taking, the more difficult it will be to make the transformation. Transforming government is a challenging endeavor because today's generation of public officials are panacea-prone and the more complicated the problem, the simpler the solutions they look for. Also, many government agencies have bureaucratic monopolies, which provides little incentive for improvement.

ZC: What impact do you envision the terrorist attacks and the con-

tinual technological breakthroughs will have in the organization of the future and the world of the future?

The attack of September 11, 2001 caused in my opinion the single most dramatic paradigm shift in American history. Our vulnerabilities were exposed and our sense of immunity to attacks in the mainland was dispelled. These will have tremendous long-term psychological, social, political, and economic implications. As we enter the world of our tomorrows at this remarkable moment in history we will unfortunately see how these terrorist events will continually influence the way we live.

In terms of technological-breakthroughs, I think high technology will revolutionize even more the way we learn, the way we communicate and how we work. These changes will demand of us a new intellectual

flexibility and new and different skills, along with a holistic understanding of the world in which we live. The times will change, technology will change, and methods will change but at the end of the day success will only come from the human spirit. It will be crucial to grasp that this is not merely the era of the global economy or the era of technology, this is the era of interdependencies. To move ahead in the future we must value our diversity, we must put our differences to work so we can become a synergistic society. Technology is necessary but insufficient to help us address the problems of people.

If you feel Dr. J.Gerald Suárez expertise can be of help to your organization. Send an email to: jgsuarez@erols.com. The opinions expressed in this interview are solely those of the interviewee. **Z**

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