

Don Alberto Motta's Recipe for the Stew of Life

Harry Strachan, 2006

In 1981 INCAE was dying in Nicaragua and a group of us were trying to implement a strategy that would save it. A key piece in the strategy was a second campus, one where students and faculty that weren't comfortable in Sandinista Nicaragua would come.

Don Alberto Motta was showing us an Army base near Colon, Panama which looked like it had been bombed. Don Alberto was probably the only one of us who could visualize an attractive INCAE campus in all the debris but his enthusiasm both on the tour and later at lunch in his home was contagious.

When at the end a campus in Costa Rica was chosen as the site, he not only supported the decision he made us all feel what we were trying to do was both important and going to be a lot of fun. This is probably my first really clear memory of Don Alberto.

It's now around 1996. Stanley has agreed to bring his good friend, Mariano Puig, a renown businessman from Barcelona and President of the Family Business Association of Europe to give a short speech on how he managed succession in his global business. We are going to build a live case discussion with the MBA students around the topic. I've tried without success to get Don Alberto discuss the his case, how he has organized things with his two sons, Stanley and Pancho. Whether from modesty or privacy, Don Alberto adamantly says no.

So I have prepared an alternative "composite" case from situations I have known in the region. The father in this case, Don Carlos, is bypassing his eldest son and making his second son the President of the business. There are two younger children, a brilliant daughter and another son, who haven't yet had the opportunity to show what they can do who are feeling marginalized. The oldest son, a successful politician, is also wondering what it means. The case is made complicated by business problems and the need for a potential multinational alliance. It generates lots of discussion on several tough decisions. The father-son topic touches many nerves in the class.

I had wanted the live case to be about the Mottas because for years I think the way the three of them work together is "beautiful". Others who are also close to the Mottas agree that "beautiful" is the right word. The sons do the heavy lifting now that Don Alberto is in his senior years, but they invite him to all the meetings and keep him involved. It's inspiring to be in a meeting with them and see the mutual

respect, the affection, the teasing, the honest disagreements. We all wish we could have had that sort of relation with our fathers. If we ever work with our sons this is the model we want to follow. But while there is lots of love in Don Carlos' family the composite case we're discussing is not "beautiful"; they haven't found the structure and roles to avoid friction. The discussion in class reflects this.

Finally Don Alberto, who has a seat of honor in the front row, and has been listening to the discussion, can no longer contain himself. "No, no" I remember him saying, "what Don Carlos needs to do is ..." After some very wise advice he goes on "Now in our family ..." The students are captivated by his observations and sharing. He even mixes in some of his "dichos" and humorous stories that bring forward lots of laughter. The class is a huge success and Don Alberto is its "star."

There are many other photos:

Don Alberto waiting for us on the 13th tee of the golf tournament in his honor. I make a terrible approach shot and he orders the girl at his side to get me a rum and coke to improve my play. Later at the Hole #19 Party, when most of us have run out of energy, he's still dancing with the younger wives, full of life and energy.

One has him in his corner office telling me stories – humorous, full of wisdom, full of life and fun – and then as I leave, he reaches under his desk and gives me a lovely set of perfumes and skin creams for my wife Sandy.

Everyone in Central America knows of the amazing business success of the five Motta brothers, who lost their father at an early age. Everyone also knows that the youngest of the brothers, Alberto Motta with his own sons, may well have been the most successful businessman of the group. There is the trading company in the free zone, the bank, the insurance company, the airline, the real estate projects and many more.

But what many don't know and I only learned after a number of the strategy decisions is what I think may be one of the secrets of his success. When I first became aware of it, it struck me as most unusual. Most of the rest of us in discussing the right strategy focused on "financial returns", the IRR, on risks, on cash flow, on competitive pressure.

Don Alberto invariably would ask me at the end of a presentation, "How many jobs will it create in Panama? Will it destroy jobs?" My first reaction was "This can't be the criteria he's going to use for the decision, is it?" But I came to realize that creating jobs was one of Don Alberto's principal missions in life. It genuinely was a critical factor in his business decisions.

This impacted me deeply. And I think I have come to see some of the wisdom underneath this approach. Jobs are where products and services are created. Done well this is where wealth is created. You make much more money in the end when you are making the pie than trying to grab a big piece of it for yourself.

I've been searching for a title for my book of memories of Don Alberto. I want something that captures his legacy, that describes how much he has given me and the many like me who consider him a mentor. I can't think of anything short, the way a title should be.

So I've decided on **“Don Alberto's Recipe for the Stew of Living Well: have fun; solve problems; create jobs; raise a great family; make older women feel young and attractive; make younger men feel they can be successful and have impact; but above all tell great stories, laugh a lot and have more fun!”**