

## **Don Roberto Palomo, Lion of Central America**

In the days following his death Ted Kennedy was described by many as “The Lion of the Senate.” Don Roberto was “The Lion of Central America Entrepreneurs” and a great inspiration to those of us lucky enough to have known and worked with him. He’s one of the business giants not just in El Salvador but all Central America.

In the 1970s he was already a legend at INCAE for having made ADOC, his shoe company, one of the big success stories of the Central America Common Market. ADOC was vertically integrated, making everything from rubber heels to the shoes it sold in its own stores.

Throughout the turbulent 1980s he added to his legend by saving and growing ADOC in spite of massive devaluations, civil war, personal threats to his life and a regional depression greater in magnitude than that of the Great U.S. Depression of the 1930s.

When the region adopted a new economic strategy, replacing “import substitution” incentives for “export promotion”, Don Roberto modified both ADOC’s strategy and organizational structure to survive in the new business environment. He continued to grow his chain of stores adding new concepts. He continued to make shoes not just for local use but for export to the markets of the U.S. And he adjusted to the wave of imports from China.

Three things made don Roberto a role model and inspiration to those of us who worked with him:

- 1) **He loved his business.** Everything from the design and production and sale of shoes fascinated him. His happiest moments on vacations to other regions appeared to be visiting other shoe stores and factories. He had a reputation for being a workaholic, but when you love what you doing, 10 to 12 hours a day is not work, it’s pleasure.
- 2) **He had charisma and inspired great loyalty.** He made you feel like he was your second father; you wanted to do anything you could to help him. He was fun to be around. Though at time I disagreed with him on some key aspects of strategy and we both argued our positions with passion, this in no way affected the warmth I felt from him or for him. And that was true of all my colleagues at

Bain/Mesoamerica (Matthew Meacham and Luis Javier Castro in particular). To have a meal with him or visit his home was always a pleasure, a time of much laughter.

- 3) **He had and continues to have a wonderful family whom he loved and who loved him.** It has been inspiring to see the way Jaime Roberto has picked up his mantle these past ten years. And it has been deeply moving to see Maria Eugenia and his other daughters at his side helping him through his last illness. We treasure the continuing relation with his family which he has left us.

Like the Strong Lion that he was, the Giant among men, don Roberto has left in ADOC and all its people, and in his children and grandchildren, a wonderful legacy. His stamina and energy to the end was phenomenal. The warmth he radiated a special treat for all who felt it. And the example he leaves us of a leader, an entrepreneur and a friend will inspire not just our own but also future generations.

Harry Strachan and the  
Bain / Mesoamerica family