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# Positive leadership

## Interview with Enrique Servando Sánchez González

July 2012

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# “Transparency, professionalism and innovation are the characteristics that leaders should not forget in order to set an example to others”

Enrique Servando Sánchez González, CEO of CEOSA

Enrique Servando has dedicated his professional career to the expansion and development of the Spanish National Organisation for the Blind (ONCE). The paths of ONCE and Sánchez González merged in 1980. Sánchez González is an indefatigable fighter, characterised by tenacity, and an executive who sets a benchmark for leadership on a professional and personal front where obstacles go beyond the economic sphere.



**You were appointed Managing Director of ONCE in 1982. How would you say organisations and leaders have changed since then?**

Much progress has been made. In those days Spain was a fledgling democracy and organisations of this kind are generally one step behind political processes but, in the case of ONCE and of Spain, we have gradually made positive progress, with future expectations and a greater degree of professionalization. These have been years of continuous work, but the results have made the efforts and commitment worthwhile.

**In the fundamental case of ONCE, could you describe this journey for us?**

In the early days ONCE was a small group that evolved in tune with the situation in Spain and with the habitual complications that arise from a new project. By successfully overcoming the obstacles in our path we ultimately achieved very good results. ONCE represents bravery and dedication, we continuously strive to obtain the resources required to help those in greater difficulty than others. Training our young people entails added difficulties and a need to excel so that we stand out.

**The youngest human capital will be our business fabric of the future. What is your view of these young people who encounter more difficulties in facing up to the world of employment? What future do you think the job market holds for them in Spain?**

The current economic climate is poor for everybody, opportunities are hard to come by, young people, and particularly the disabled, represent a small percentage of the working population. Curiously, people with difficulties generally have jobs that require less training or skills. This is something we should think long and hard about, as it seems that the more we demand of people, the greater the obstacles hindering access to the job market.

**What message could you give to young people so that they do not lose faith and continue to overcome these obstacles?**

In the first place, I would stress to them the importance of the most comprehensive training possible and, above all, the need to start acquiring experience from the bottom. Times are changing; in Spain we are used to expensive labour and a broader labour market. The shift towards a less flexible market is something that will affect both those with and without a disability. In the past, young members of ONCE felt over-protected and thought that they would be inundated with opportunities, but this is not the case. One must enter the job market from the bottom, with humbleness, enthusiasm and a knowledge that we are experiencing difficult times, regardless of whether you are disabled or not.

**What kind of outlook do you think the cutbacks and economic adjustments will give rise to in the future, above all in the job market?**

When past errors are corrected, extreme measures are often taken. And this is particularly the case in political circles. This is generally unwise and does not always yield positive results.

“A leader’s mistake is a massive step backwards for an organisation as a whole”

A large number of radical measures are currently being taken, such as excessive cutbacks, which will later lead to a period of necessary reconstruction.

In any case, I am convinced that cutbacks are not the only means to achieving growth. We have to opt for a combination of the two. We cannot live beyond our means, but we cannot forgo the possibility of achieving economic growth. Without growth, there is no development, and this is where the authorities, companies and organisations have to coordinate themselves.

We at ONCE have a firm commitment to growth and are basing our four-year strategic plan on one clear objective: we must grow. We are aware that there are problems, but we have to compel our people to put their ideas on the table because, as we make adjustments, we must also grow.

**What part will innovation play in this strategic plan?**

Innovation is in the blood of ONCE and forms part of its organisational objectives. It is essential for our development that we are able to adapt as disabled people to new challenges, not only from a business standpoint, but it is also fundamental that persons with difficulties do not get left behind.

**Is technology a key factor in not missing the boat when it comes to growth?**

Undoubtedly. I often say if Braille opens the door to culture for the blind, digital systems adapted for the disabled have

“We have to have faith in order to overcome the current economic crisis, and I mean active faith. You have to push things forward and work on them; otherwise you will never achieve them”

opened the door to the information era for us. This represents major progress. Ten years ago I was unable to even think about reading the press by myself as there was no adapted access to the Internet. Today I can read a digital newspaper whenever I like. Although these things seem somewhat trivial, for us they represent a revolutionary change.

**Can we then look to the future with optimism, despite the economic pitfalls that lie in the way for both companies and leaders?**

We must have active faith, and by that I mean that things do not happen on their own, but rather you have to push them forward and work on them.

Clearly, if we do not buy a lottery ticket, we will never win the lottery. Either we strive to achieve our goals, or we will never attain them.

However harsh the current climate might be, we will never stop believing in human creativity or in the desire to work. This is how to overcome the current bad times and speed-up recovery. Of that I am sure.

**Many people continue to strive to excel. This is clearly demonstrated by all the young people who are participating in the Paralympic Games. Is this an example that you can identify with?**

The case of the Paralympics is exemplary. The fact that a blind person can skate out onto the ice following only the instructions of a guide is an example of bravery and exertion. People are capable of anything if they push themselves and persevere to achieve their goals, training and working unflaggingly until they achieve them. However many hurdles lie in the way or however impossible things might seem, if you do not try you will never know what the result could have been. That is why I believe in the future and that we should have hope. The Paralympics prove that there are no obstacles, only challenges.

**What messages can you send to the leaders who manage companies and institutions so that they improve the opportunities for people who put in the greatest efforts?**

There are a whole host of factors that should be strengthened or recovered. In the first place, transparency. Second, professionalism. To choose the right people for the right jobs one must act professionally and demonstrate a sound temperament without discriminating against anybody. Sadly this does not happen every day, and there is a lack of proportionality between professions and their related salaries. There must not and cannot be such big differences. Leaders must be people who lead by example every day, stand up for justice and fight for what is right.

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