



Why Corporate America Couldn't Change Carla Vernón at Her Core

Carla Vernón describes herself as “a very malleable piece of clay” with a sense of pride and self-awareness. She has used that singular strength to rise from associate to executive at General Mills. She reflects on her long tenure there, being among the first in her Afro-Panamanian family to venture into the business world, and setting and keeping her own standards as she gained success and status.

Alicia Menendez:

I get to talk to so many incredible women on this show, but Carla Vernón is a straight up unicorn. An Afro Latina who spent 22 years in corporate America. She went from being the last person in her General Mills cohort to be promoted to president of the company's \$1.5 billion snack portfolio. Carla just stepped away from all that, so we're taking a look at her rise to the top, the value of being coachable, and the advice, good and bad, that shaped her along the way.

Carla, I love that we were both up at midnight emailing and prepping for this. That says so much.

Carla Vernón: Yes. That's the story behind the story.

Menendez: You just announced that you're leaving General Mills after 22 years. Right now, the go-to practice, buzzy thing in career advancement is zig zagging, changing jobs every two to four years. Your career is sort of a case study in the opposite, taking the long road to the C-suite. How were you compelled to stay for so long?

Vernón: I'm probably kind of an old fashioned person and I was very intentional in picking the first company that I would join out of business school. Before business school, I was not very familiar with careers in corporate America. My parents were both educators, and we didn't really have any businesspeople in our family, largely probably because my family is Black and Afro Latina, Afro Latino for my dad, and so segregation really prevented us from being able to have a path through corporate America.

So, when I got to business school, I had so much to learn about how does one even navigate, and find a company, and find a career path. When I realized that my skills were really well suited for marketing and strategy, then I went about making it my business to figure out well, where are the best of the best marketers going? Where are the best of the best strategists going? And back then, the area we called consumer packaged goods, food companies, companies that make your household facial cleansers, the things you wash your dishes with, the products you see every day in the main part of the grocery store, those were the companies where marketing was the absolute core, most important skill of driving the success of the company.

My intuition told me that if I could find a company that welcomed and embraced diverse styles, then I was more likely to see leaders who'd blazed a successful trail that weren't cut from a cookie cutter. And so, when I found that in General Mills, there was plenty of

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learning to do and plenty of career path runway for me, and so I really played the long game there.

Menendez: You said you partly went into marketing because you felt it matched your natural skillset. So, I both wonder what you were assessing as your natural skillset, but then also how, as you began to work inside of General Mills, you got really good at the thing you were already naturally good at?

Vernón: When I arrived on the doorstep of business school, I didn't actually know what the career paths were inside of a company. I didn't even know what the job titles were. So, all I could try to correlate when I went to business school was what am I passionate about and what do I seem naturally skilled at. I have always been a creative person and I've always been attracted to the arts, and I also like associating new ideas, and connecting dots, and reaching new conclusions. Over time in business school, I got to learn that the people who love the creative work in business, that's often called marketing, and the people who love connecting disparate ideas and reaching a new conclusion is often called strategy.

I've also never been a very shy flower. I'm fairly direct, maybe a little bossy, and so I also wanted to know what are the jobs that people go to when they like being in charge, so I found out where are the industries where people who do marketing and strategy are in charge, and that led me to learn more about consumer products and that industry that's so dependent on those skills.

Menendez: What were you doing that began to open doors to bigger and better opportunities at the company?

Vernón: I got great feedback from one of my best bosses, and he said one of my best skills, which is an underappreciated skill, is that I'm very coachable. It's weird kind of feedback to get, because you want a boss to tell you, "Oh, you're great at analytics." Or, "You're so sharp. Your ideas are always the best I've ever heard." For someone to say, "Wow, you seem to take direction well," didn't seem like the compliment. What I think he was getting at was I'm a very malleable piece of clay. I already know at the outset that I don't know everything, so I remain curious and I remain open to the knowledge that comes my way, and I am willing to continue to grow my own skills, and so I don't want to be the person that's too proud to ask a question. And I've always been willing to be a learner.

Ad: *Miss Juleyka, nice to have you on. Must be a special reason.*

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Yeah, yeah. You know it's a special reason, since I like to be behind the scenes. All right, so when Cantu Beauty decided to come on board, I rushed.

Menendez: *You rushed to volunteer to try the products.*

Lantigua-Williams:

Yes, I know. I did. And it's the first time, I know. But I've already been using their Coconut Curling Cream for years, so I figured I wasn't gonna miss a chance to try out sister products.

Menendez: *I like the photo you sent me the other day. Your hair looked really good.*

Lantigua-Williams:

And that was just after one shampoo and conditioner. My curls were shiny and smooth, man, and my comb was not full of my own hair after I detangled it in the shower.

Menendez: Even in pictures, it's coming through, like your hair looks shiny, and hydrated, and just so healthy.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thanks. I really appreciate that you let me send you those, because I'm really excited about the change.

Menendez: So, how many products are you using all told?

Lantigua-Williams:

Right now, I've got like four, so I'm using the shampoo, the conditioner, the leave-in cream, and then can I just tell you what my favorite is?

Menendez: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lantigua-Williams:

The Wave Whip. First of all, that name is everything, but I love how my waves and my curls just are fuller, they're more touchable, they're less frizzy. I mean, I know, I sound like an ad, but let me tell you.

Menendez: Well, you can enjoy the benefits of the Cantu Beauty haircare line, picking up your favorites or ordering them from Target.com.

Menendez: Were there pivotal moments in your rise up the ranks from that first job to overseeing a \$1.5 billion snack portfolio that included brands I have in my pantry right now? Nature Valley, Fiber One, Larabar. In fact, I feel like you owe part of your success to me for the number of bars I have consumed.

Vernón: I know. Thank you.

Menendez: Over the course of my life and my motherhood. But there must have also been bumps along the way, so can you recall both those pivotal moments and those bumps?

Vernón: So, when I was in that first job at General Mills, that first career job title we call associate marketing manager, when I was in that job, I was the very last person in my class to be promoted to the next level, marketing manager. We all arrived from our various business schools, we all started at General Mills in around the same summer, and maybe there were 30 of us to begin with. A few people left to go to other companies, and some of us stayed and got promoted, and it was sort of like watching people get picked for the kickball team. I was the very last person to be promoted, and I remember-

Menendez: Which as an unathletic person is literally my experience with kickball and being picked for teams, so more sympathetic I could not be.

Vernón: Right. I mean, it just brings back all kinds of emotional feelings just saying it. My class, we were good friends socially outside of work, and after a while, I started... My ego really got very, it was starting to really shrink, and I was having a sense of low self-esteem, and I was paranoid a little bit that people were judging me and my own class was maybe thinking I was inadequate. And I remember my husband, when I didn't want to go to some party and I said, "You know, I just don't want to be around all those people. Everybody's having

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success and they probably just think that I'm... Who knows if I'm even gonna get promoted?" And I was in a dark space. And my husband said, "Those people are your friends, Carla. They are not judging you by the rate at which you're getting promoted. They care about you as a friend and you're gonna go to the party, and have fun, and you will get promoted. If you don't get promoted at General Mills, there's a place you will get promoted, but I'm not gonna have you crumble because you assume that there's this whole energy of judgment coming at you."

I really had to shake off my own projection that I believed other people were now thinking I was inadequate. And so, sometimes one of the things I have to do even to this day is have my own mantra of whatever is my confidence building, my fight song, my get in there and get after it, when I might be feeling a little small to the task or small to the situation. Because it can happen to us multiple times.

Menendez: I think part of what is also confusing is sometimes when we're not seeing the level of advancement that we want to see, there's a question of is this based on merit? And is there a reason that I am not advancing that truly is about me, my performance, my results? Or is there something more nefarious at play, right?

Vernón: I have gotten specific feedback multiple times in my career about ways that I am, styles that I display at work, that at the time were judged as not being cut from the main mold, where I was not looking like I was built from the template of other people. One time when I was an associate marketing manager and I was reporting to a marketing manager, I got the opportunity to have... We used to call it one-over-one feedback. You would go to a meeting not with your boss for feedback, but with your boss's boss, to really get a more executive lens on things you needed to evolve, tweak, improve, in order to continue being successful.

And I went into this meeting with my boss's boss, so I was an associate and this person was a director, and the director pulled out a piece of paper and drew a line on the piece of paper and said, "Let me tell you a little bit about why it's gonna be difficult for you at this company." And then the person proceeded to draw a circle in the middle of the line and said, "Most people who work at this company are this circle." And then the person drew farther at a distance on the line, not connected to that circle, a square, and then the director said, "You're more like this square. And so, the circles don't understand you. So, you just might want to think about how you can make the people who are more like the circles more comfortable."

Menendez: Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! That is a loaded piece of feedback, period. It is a particularly complicated piece of feedback to process when you're a woman, when you're Black, and when you're Latina.

Vernón: The person who gave me the feedback was a woman.

Menendez: So, how did you interpret it?

Vernón: When you're in a meeting and someone is two levels higher than you, or someone is in a significant position of authority and control over your career, and they basically kind of lop you off at the ankles, it's hard to have any kind of wherewithal in the moment about standing strong, you know, fuerte, just having that fortitude in the moment to know yourself and be your own advocate.

Menendez: Absolutely.

Vernón: It's very hard. And I find that sometimes the best thoughts and the best responses don't come to you until you're driving home that day. So, it was concerning. I got the message that sometimes if you want to be successful within a certain culture, you do need to understand the language, the behaviors, the styles of the culture. It goes to show you that it is easy to have philosophies, and overarching statements about a culture you want to build, but culture is owned and executed in the hands of individuals. And whether or not those individuals are actually clear in the moment of their biases and their hidden biases, that's a lot more difficult for a company to manage and curate. The good news about being Latina, Afro Latina, daughter of an immigrant, daughter of people who grew up in segregated America, is that I was raised to know that the world is not going to affirm me, and that I'm gonna have to have so much confidence. My backbone needs to be made of steel, and I'm gonna have to just keep going after success repeatedly, and continue to take the feedback and know if I need to look more familiar and more comfortable in this culture, I have a choice of saying, "Do I want to actually fold into the system in order to rise up in the system, and adopt some of the norms of the system? Or do I want to reject that and see how well that will go? Or do I want to exit stage left and find a new canvas to paint my art on?"

At the time, I thought it's fair that this person is coaching me, that there is a predominant culture in this company, and I will have more success if I know how to make the people in charge of your success comfortable that my differences can work within the system. And we have to be honest. We won't help our community members break all these barriers if our only mindset is the system has to change to accept me. Let me be clear, though, Alicia. I was a change agent inside of that system, so I wanted to be both successful in the system, to reach positions where... I've heard the phrase said before, "I want to be able to sort of infect the system with a little bit of Carlaness." And in order to do that, you have to have a strong balance of being appreciated, getting into positions where you can affect the outcomes for others in a positive way, and so it was always a line I was balancing.

Menendez: You've said that when you were growing up, people weren't using the phrase Afro Latina. Was it one that you identified with?

Vernón: I grew up in the '70s, and I don't even think Afro Latina, Afro Latino was an American term. I think it might have existed only because of the language in South and Central America, to talk about how you're gonna refer to the Blacks in those cultures. But it didn't even exist here, so when my father came to the United States, he raised us in our home to always know we were Panamanian, and to always know that while our culture might be nowhere around us, we were going to have little tidbits. He taught us to pray in Spanish. He taught us to advocate for the accent over our O. Before typewriters had any accent. There was only typewriters. There were no accents over the O. So, I knew I was. Back then we just said Hispanic. Although my dad always told me, "People from Central America don't like the word Hispanic because we're not descendants of Spain." He taught me that little tidbit.

But Latino still hadn't entered the culture, so even in corporate America, right away, I was most mainlined into being Black, especially because when those first Latino affinity groups were created, the notion that Latinos or Latinx look like many things was still not recognized or practiced. But as Afro Latinos, we have been erased in a way, and Asian Latinos, and Asian Blacks. I mean, we're so intersectional, it's gorgeous, and we have to embrace what our intersectional brothers and sisters teach us about the culture that we might not be a member of. As an intersectional Afro Latina, I feel like I can tell you about the Civil Rights Movement. I can give you some ideas of how our people can band

together inside of this company and make pressing demands for what we need in order for this enterprise to serve our needs. Because I grew up in the Civil Rights Movement, and that's a Black movement in America. Even today on my social media, I follow a bunch of Afro Latina, Black Latino things on Instagram. I love them. And there's been this dialog on Instagram, because some people during this moment we're in with Black Lives Matter say Latinos for Black Lives, or Latinos for Black Lives Matter-

Menendez: And there's some feeling that that's an erasure of *Vidas Negras* Important?

Vernón: Yes. And some people are feeling like you can't say Latinos for Black lives. It implies that there are no Latinos with Black lives. It's just... It's complicated.

Menendez: There's also more radical notions of just getting rid of Latinidad altogether for people who don't feel... who feel that the system of Latinidad is so inherently racist that it cannot be inclusive to Black Latinos.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hey, Latina to Latina listeners. It's Juleyka, executive producer of this show. I want to invite you to listen to How to Talk to [Mamá and Papi] About Anything. It's my show, that I host, and every week I talk to adult children of immigrant parents, like me, and you probably. We talk about things that are difficult, especially conversations that we've been avoiding with our loved ones. Things like mental illness, being the first to go to college, politics. We get into all of it. Subscribe to How to Talk to [Mamá and Papi] About Anything wherever you listen to your favorite, Latina to Latina. Thanks!

Menendez: We do have to talk about your mom, because she's got an amazing story of her own.

Vernón: My mom is my hero. My mom is so funny, because she's very under spoken about her accomplishments, but don't be confused. You will recognize these accomplishments. And she always declares them. But my mom is a microbiology PhD. She's this little, petite, light-skinned Black woman. She's about five feet tall on her tallest day, and she's so gracious. She welcomes everybody. She's of good spirit. She loves a party. She loves Las Vegas. She loves the theater. She loves jazz. She is a wonderful daughter of New Orleans. She went to a historically Black college in the days of segregation and when she graduated from school, the Civil Rights Act had not yet been passed, so she had to find a job that a Black woman could find. She went to her career office at Xavier University and saw this one lone job posting on the bulletin board to go work at NASA.

And so, she always fancied herself as someday getting out of New Orleans and seeing the bigger, broader world, so she thought she had nothing to lose. She applied for this job and my mom basically became a hidden figure at NASA, working in the Slidell, Louisiana operations of NASA, in one of the Chrysler plants that was a collaborative effort between Chrysler and NASA. And she was, unlike the movie, my mom was the only Black woman in that Slidell, Louisiana location. But the craziest part about the fact that my mom worked for NASA as a hidden figure, taught herself how to use computers, because she'd never seen a computer, because back then her college didn't have a computer, so her job was the first time she ever saw a computer and much like in the movie, she taught herself the computer language, because there was no one training these new employees, and especially the Black woman, on anything.

But the craziest part about my mother's story of being a NASA hidden figure is that I grew up my whole life, she never told me she worked at NASA. I never knew that my mother

had an undergraduate degree in mathematics, in education, and a third one in physics. I grew up and I knew my mom was a public high school math and science teacher. She was always passionate about teaching in urban schools, because she felt that kids in the inner city, the urban schools, deserved math and science teachers who cared about them and were passionate about making them feel that they could be good at math and science. Now, fast forward, I'm a mom, years later, my mom comes to live with us because she's the last living grandparent, and states away. She was in Tennessee; we were in Minnesota. We built a house, we built a little apartment for her, and she moved in with us.

My mom came with us to see this movie, called Hidden Figures, because we thought it'd be fun to see a movie about something positive about Black people breaking the color barrier. We go to the movie. I still have no idea my mother ever worked for NASA. We sit through the movie and so the credits are rolling, we're looking at the black and white pictures of the real Katherine Johnson, and the real hidden figures, and my mom whispers to my kids, "I used to have a job like that when I was young." And I said, "What?" And I said, "Why don't you tell the kids what you're talking about, mom?" As my kind of cover for trying to find out what she was talking about.

And she said, "Well, I used to work at NASA. I used to do a job just like that woman on the computer." She tells my kids. I get so upset with her. I go to the car, I'm like, "I have to see a movie with you to hear that you worked at NASA? Are you kidding me? Do you understand?" And then my mom is like, "Carla, you're making too big a deal of this. It's no big deal. It was a long time ago." How come you never told me? So, we go into this whole thing. Anyway, I write it up, and I write an article, and I post it on social media. My mom goes completely viral. Everybody thinks she's amazing.

Menendez: I want to talk about something that you have talked about publicly before. In the middle of all of your professional success, you were trying to have children, but you had two miscarriages. And you went to HR and asked for a medical leave of absence, which I just don't think occurs to a lot of us as we're trying to build our families and running into challenges, so I wonder both what you remember from that time and why that was the path that you chose.

Vernón: When I was married and it came time to start a family, I was so thrilled about imagining getting pregnant and having a baby, and I had my first miscarriage, it was heartbreaking for me because it was after we'd already told people that we were pregnant, and so that is really emotionally difficult. We got pregnant a second time and of course in all of those early doctor's appointments, I would get very nervous, but we'd seen a heartbeat with the second baby, as well, and then I found out I miscarried the second baby. It was devastating, and I came home, and I was almost unable to see other people with babies when I would go out. It would be hard for me to be happy for people. It was just too heartbreaking. So, I went to my doctor to try to understand if we try to do this a third time, am I gonna go through this again?

And so, my doctor took me through a course of tests, and we found out that like many African American women, many Black women have a propensity to have fibroids in our uterus, and that I had fibroids. My doctor said, "We believe you're gonna have to have them removed surgically if you're gonna want to try to get pregnant again." And so, my husband and I really wrestled with is this the time to just say adoption is for us, or are we gonna try? And when I knew that I being a mom was so important to me, and I wanted to have these fibroids out anyway for my general health, so I had a boss who gave me the

confidence to know that I could ask for this time, so I went to HR and I said, “I’d like to have some surgery. I’ve had these miscarriages.” And that was really no problem at all.

I believe that HR organizations legally must support you in this regard, but you do need to know about things like the Family Medical Leave Act and understand the HR policies of your organization. It was a surgery, so for me it was an abdominal surgery, so it was covered by disability.

Menendez: And now you have two kids..

Vernón: Well, the amazing thing is we didn’t... Then, after I had the surgeries, we didn’t get pregnant quickly. We did go down the path of adoption, because I thought maybe that was just God telling me that that original mission was the purpose. And like so many people, as we’d gone down the path to adoption and we had written our letter to adopt potentially, moms who would choose us as an adoptive family, and we’d put ourselves in the binder, please choose us. Then I got successfully pregnant with my now almost 15-year-old son, who’s taller than me, but is still my baby.

Menendez: Your son’s 15. Your daughter’s 12?

Vernón: My daughter will be 13 soon, so yeah.

Menendez: Okay, so an almost 15-year-old, an almost 13-year-old. What is next?

Vernón: I am so excited to say that I have just been recently appointed to the board of trustees for Princeton, and I love that, because my late journey with Princeton as an alumni is different than my early journey with Princeton as a student. And I now know how much rebirth, and renewal, and reimagining our old Ivy League universities must do. Some people don’t know that schools like Princeton are older than the United States of America. The United States of America was founded in 1776. Princeton was founded in 1746. Being able to reimagine and restructure institutions like that, and constantly evolve them, eventually to welcome Black people, eventually to welcome Asian people, eventually to welcome students from other countries, and women, and then evolve the curriculum, and rename buildings, and maybe tear down statues, or add new departments, or build new buildings, so that new, modern forms of learning can happen.

All of that helps set the bar high for other enterprises, like corporations, and like public school systems on the local level. So, I’m very excited that I’ve decided to free my plate a little bit, to allow myself to be a leader at my university. I am hoping to have the opportunity to serve on some paid boards for maybe other big companies that are ready to introduce a new generation of voices to advise the CEOs on what a modern company and a modern multinational needs to look like and how they need to show up. One, in order to meet the needs of the marketplace today. The marketplace is demanding more purpose-driven enterprise, and I believe eventually Wall Street and the investment community will also incorporate these purpose-driven metrics. But the employee base and the consumer base of the future are going to be demanding more visible change from enterprises.

I’m also really diving into my writing. I’m trying to do speaking. I’m trying to do writing. I have a notion to write a book and see where that takes me. And eventually, I’m probably gonna be ready to jump in and run another enterprise, run a team, and lead a team in this new way, with both high standards and high values.

Menendez: Carla, I'm so excited for you. I'm excited to watch whatever's next.

Vernón: Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you so much.

Menendez: Thanks, as always, for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you are listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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