



Rosa Santana

# Rosa Santana

leverages relationships to build Texas-sized workforce, automotive empire

BY MELISSA LOWERY

**In the heart of Texas, Rosa Santana** is building a business empire. A true visionary, she is president and CEO of Santana Group, a conglomerate of companies providing innovative workforce and business solutions in the United States and Mexico.

## **In the beginning ...**

Santana began her career in 1981 with Kelly Services Inc., a Fortune 500 company. She rose to vice president and area manager, thanks to a consistent record of delivering staffing solutions for clients and their bottom lines. She convinced Kelly Services executives to allow her to use her extensive knowledge of Mexican business culture to expand Kelly Services into Mexico, a successful venture. Years later, she accepted a senior vice president position at Weststaff and again successfully established operations in Mexico.

In 2002, downsizing presented Santana with a unique and unexpected challenge; in her case, new opportunities. The time was right for her to start her own company. Using the proven cross-border business model, she simultaneously launched a joint venture company, Integrated Human Capital LLC in El Paso, Texas, and a Mexican affiliate currently known as Workforce Management de México. The companies had unprecedented growth during the first couple of years. However, despite her ambition, knowledge and experience, she soon encountered challenges that hamper so many new businesses — limited resources. The bulk of the responsibility for establishing and building the fledgling company fell to her. Doing so without the support of a multimillion-dollar business behind her was unfamiliar territory.

“I was always great at building teams and generating business,” she said. “I knew how to deliver extraordinary service and how to make a profit, but I

hadn’t been in a position where everything fell on my shoulders. It’s easy to build a business when you have all of the resources to grow it, but now I had to build those resources myself. It was a challenge, but it was also rewarding because I learned a lot about myself.”

Santana enlisted her daughter, Lisa Navarro-Gonzales, vice president, Santana Group, to establish all back office, service delivery, information technology and human resource operations, as well as standard operating procedures. Together, they built IHC into an international operation with a rock-solid reputation for delivering quality service to both clients and job seekers. Nicole Navarro Velesiotis, her other daughter, joined IHC after graduating from college, and now oversees IHC while Navarro-Gonzales oversees a different Santana Group company.

## **Relationship-building**

If you speak with Santana about business for long, you will hear the word “relationship” frequently. One of the cornerstones of her success is the ability to establish and nurture long-term relationships to achieve her goals. She spent 10 years building a relationship with Toyota, after establishing IHC in San Antonio. Working tirelessly over

the course of those years and through networking events like the National Minority Supplier Development Council and Women’s Business Enterprise National Council conferences, she began working with their Tier I suppliers, proactively communicating to them any continuous improvement and innovation initiatives happening within her companies.

“I knew that eventually I wanted to expand to San Antonio because my girls were here, but also I’d made it a goal to become a supplier to Toyota,” Santana said. “Toyota had just announced that they were building a plant here, and they were looking for local suppliers, so I had to make myself local. I started as a Tier II supplier to Toyota, working with its Tier I suppliers. We started making a name for ourselves, networking at events, rubbing elbows with all of the Tier I suppliers, and, most importantly, demonstrating how we could deliver value to them through our staffing services. We also made sure that they were aware of our minority- and women-owned certifications.”

In 2014, all that hard work paid off.

“Toyota approached me about two-and-a half years ago about the potential of doing something different from what

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**— Rosa Santana**

## ■ cultivating strong relationships

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I have been doing all these years,” Santana recalled. “It had decided to outsource the Tacoma truck bed assembly. Toyota knows and trusts us, and it knows we are experts at hiring. So, it presented me the opportunity to assemble the truck beds. We agreed; and after extensive training with Toyota leaders and continuous coaching on the technical processes, we now have our truck bed assembly facility under the same roof as Toyota’s Texas manufacturing plant.”

In 2015, Forma Automotive LLC became Toyota’s first Hispanic woman-owned direct Tier I supplier. The company celebrated its first anniversary in August and is looking at opportunities to expand under the direction of Navarro-Gonzales, who serves as general manager.

“Rosa’s story is a testament to the ingenuity of diverse businesses, reinforcing Toyota’s commitment to engage those who believe there is always a better way,” said Jim Holloway, general manager of supplier relations at Toyota Motor North America Inc. “Rosa began as a Tier II to Toyota by helping address staffing needs and spent a significant amount of time cultivating solid relationships with Toyota suppliers.”

### **Certification: a tool for success**

Since the beginning of her second act as an entrepreneur, certification has been an important tool for Santana.

“Having worked in the corporate world where certified [minority and women’s business enterprises] were embraced, I knew how important and how critical it was to become a certi-

fied MBE,” she said. “I was already Hispanic and a woman business owner, so why not take advantage of it?”

Establishing her new business kept Santana busy for the first two years, but as IHC entered its third year, she made certification a priority. She received minority business enterprise certification through NMSDC at the end of 2003 and became WBENC-certified in 2007.

Santana has been involved with the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce “almost from the beginning” and in 2015, was named to the organization’s board of directors. From 2005-2012, she served on the board of the Southwest Minority Supplier Development Council, an NMSDC affiliate, convincing the council to open an office in El Paso to serve diverse suppliers there. Under her leadership, SMSDC launched Diversity at the Border, an initiative bringing together suppliers who wished to expand operations across the border into Mexico and U.S. companies operating in Mexico.

“We have a lot of minority companies on the border who would like to do business on both sides of the border, but they don’t know how to meet the people who might help them,” Santana said. “So, we invited corporations with supplier diversity initiatives to participate and be exposed to all of the MBEs we have in El Paso.”

The annual conference focuses on matchmaking, building capacity and business opportunities for minority business enterprises within the maquila or manufacturing industry on the U.S.-Mexico border.

For the last three years, Santana has served on the board of directors of the Women’s Business Council - Southwest, a WBENC affiliate.

### **Mentorship**

Santana places a premium on another type of business relationship: mentors. She credits several people for providing invaluable guidance, particularly as Santana Group transitioned into manufacturing.

Heriberto “Berto” Guerra Jr., a Tier I supplier and chairman and CEO of Avanzar Interior Technologies Ltd., volunteered to mentor her from the production standpoint, as Forma Automotive was becoming a reality.

“He not only became my personal mentor, but he also offered to have his senior leaders mentor us in different ways,” Santana said. “These are the people who taught us how to see this business differently than how we saw our staffing business. I am forever indebted to these folks who have embraced us and helped us. It’s amazing.”

Santana’s experience, skill at building and maintaining relationships and ability to leverage resources like minority business certification and mentors helped her build Santana Group into an international business success. Her companies include Integrated Human Capital, which now includes staffing services in 11 U.S. states and eight cities in Mexico; Workforce Management de México; Diversa, a managed services provider; Oveana, a business process outsourcing company; and Forma Automotive.

The road to success has not always been easy, but Santana is understandably pleased with what she and her daughters have accomplished so far. Yet, her ambition and drive continue to propel her to accomplish more. She has plans to continue growing both the automotive and staffing sides, with an eye toward more opportunities in Mexico.

“We’re approaching the 15th anniversary of IHC and Santana Group,” she said. “We’ve accomplished so much already, but I’m not done yet. There are always more opportunities and more ways to improve and serve our customers. Come back in 15 years, and I’ll have even bigger success stories to share!” ■

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# Lisa Navarro-Gonzales

steers Forma Automotive through historic first year

BY MELISSA LOWERY

In 2002, Lisa Navarro-Gonzales joined her mother, Santana Group President and CEO Rosa Santana, to form Integrated Human Capital LLC, a staffing company serving clients on both sides of the United States-Mexico border.

With a background in the staffing industry, she was an ideal candidate to develop a strategic back office that supported company growth and profitability. Navarro-Gonzales established and implemented cutting-edge tools to ensure optimum delivery of human capital solutions, building IHC's reputation as a source for reliable, qualified personnel.

In 2014, Toyota selected Santana Group to assemble Tacoma truck beds through the company's latest enterprise, Forma Automotive LLC. A proven leader and innovator, Navarro-Gonzales was the obvious choice to steer the company into production as Toyota's first Hispanic woman-owned direct Tier I supplier. She is now a vice president at Santana Group and general manager of Forma Automotive, where she oversees production, accounting, material management and quality assurance.

Navarro-Gonzales underwent extensive technical training with Toyota to create Forma's production environment, learning every aspect of Toyota's manufacturing process, while simultaneously developing the company's accounting, finance and human resources departments. In August 2015, Forma Automotive launched into full production, meeting Toyota's demand quickly and efficiently. She credits the company's phenomenal first year of production to the qualified team she assembled.

"Toyota is very happy with our results and our ability to quickly get our team up and running," Navarro-Gonzales said. "I'm proud of our accomplishments and the experienced team we've assembled. Our team is committed to our culture



Lisa Navarro-Gonzales

and to growing with Forma, which isn't always easy when you're asking people to buy into a new company."

## Leveraging strengths

Navarro-Gonzales' next project is working with her sister, Nicole Navarro Velesiotis, to transform a building Santana Group purchased that will house a training center for Forma, as well as an office for IHC, streamlining operations between the two companies and keeping with the plan to continue to grow the businesses.

For Navarro-Gonzales, this project

exemplifies the benefits of working with family — leveraging one another's strengths to build a successful company.

"The three of us working together is dynamic," Navarro-Gonzales said about working with her mother and sister. "Each one of us brings something different to the table. My mom from the sales and leadership perspective, Nicole from the client relations, communications and marketing perspective and me from the operations side, now knowing the Toyota Way. It's amazing how we all bring something different that complements one another." ■

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# Nicole Navarro Velesiotis

helps turn IHC into global staffing powerhouse

BY MELISSA LOWERY

**Nicole Navarro Velesiotis** launched her career with Integrated Human Capital LLC, a Santana Group company, in 2005, joining her mother, Santana Group President and CEO Rosa Santana, and sister, Lisa Navarro-Gonzales, in the family business.

Recently graduated from the University of Texas at San Antonio, Velesiotis was not sure what she wanted for her career, but agreed to help out at the newly opened San Antonio branch of IHC, a staffing company specializing in providing human capital solutions to clients on both sides of the United States-Mexico border. She quickly discovered a passion for working with people, identifying client needs, winning accounts and delivering innovative solutions; within months, she took over as branch manager.

“Initially, IHC wasn’t my plan, but it’s turned out to be a great fit for me,” she said. “Every day is different, and for me, the constant challenge is what I enjoy the most.”

During her 10 years at IHC, Velesiotis worked in several positions within the company, from the front desk to recruiting and sales to managing strategic client relationships, ultimately, earning her the position of vice president. One of her greatest achievements is building the company’s reputation in the San Antonio market, growing revenues year over year. She was instrumental in nurturing the relationship with Toyota and its suppliers that eventually led to a unique collaboration with the automotive giant.

“We put in a lot of work with Toyota,” Velesiotis said, “and it paid off with the birth of a new company, Forma Automotive [LLC]. Seeing Forma emerge because of our success with all of those Toyota suppliers is insanely rewarding.”

As IHC approaches its 15th anniversary



in 2017, Velesiotis continues to lead the company through continuous improvements to meet changing market demands. Currently, she is working with her sister, Lisa Navarro-Gonzales, to make ready a recently purchased building that will house both a training center for Forma Automotive and a new office for IHC in San Antonio, keeping with the growth

trajectory of the group of companies. “Leveraging available resources, we’re able to remain competitive and differentiate ourselves from the competition,” she said. “I work with an exceptional staff that ensures our clients are receiving the best possible candidates and service on a daily basis. I’m so proud of the results we deliver for both clients and job seekers.” ■