



ARLETTE: Hi, I'm Arlette, your host, and welcome to "Give Me an H."

Together we'll explore the culture of The Home Depot through the eyes and experiences of our associates who live it every day.

Let's get started.

Pushing the Limits of Décor - Jose Barra



ARLETTE: Jose Barra the senior vice president of Décor Merchandising.

He oversees the company's strategy to provide customers with innovative and exclusive products across flooring, paint, kitchen, bath, appliances, décor, storage and organization.

Jose was born and raised in Ecuador, went to college in the U.S. and worked for the Education embassy in the U.K. at age 25. But he couldn't stay away from retail. Jose caught the retail bug early in his grandmother's stationary shop where product placement was everything.

Okay Jose, let's talk about the early days. You grew up in Ecuador, right?

JOSE: Yes, I grew up in Ecuador. That's where the accent comes from.

ARLETTE: [Laughs]

Jose: I was born in Quito, which is the capital. Then when I was 18 years old, I came to the U.S. for college.

ARLETTE: Now, where did you go to school?

JOSE: I went to the University of Notre Dame.

ARLETTE: Okay.

JOSE: So I went from very warm weather, which is probably one of the reasons I love Atlanta as well, to Sullivan Indiana which is pretty cold in winter.

ARLETTE: So that must have been a culture shock for you.

JOSE: First taste of snow was there.

ARLETTE: Wow.

JOSE: It was an interesting experience.

ARLETTE: So you grew up in Ecuador, came to the U.S. at 18 for college. What are some of your early memories?

JOSE: So some of my early memories, I would say I have two. The first one was around sports. I'm not the most athletic guy. I'm left-handed, but you would want to say that I have two left feet and two left hands.

ARLETTE: Oh no, so no dancing?

JOSE: No dancing, I didn't get that DNA. However, my sport growing up was swimming. When you think about swimming, it's less about ability and a lot about endurance and perseverance. I mean, literally how much effort you put into the water are the results that you get.

And I think that shaped me as a person, because when you're swimming, you're swimming multiple hours a week. It's a lot of sacrifice. Sometimes the water is cold, sometimes the water is super cold. But at the end of the day you know that the effort you put in is what you get out.

ARLETTE: So, it's more of a hard work pays off kind of sport as opposed to necessarily a talent or ability driven sport?

JOSE: Exactly.

ARLETTE: Okay.

JOSE: And the other thing that swimming forces you to do is to become very well organized in terms of time management. Because you spend so much time in the water, that you've got to be very organized to be able to accomplish everything else.

ARLETTE: Wow, I never thought of swimming that way. But you know, you think about the world of work, and certainly with so many competing demands I could see where that would be very useful even in your career today.

JOSE: Correct. The other experience that I think played a role into the end career that I've had, is the fact that when I was growing up my grandmother owned a small stationary store.

ARLETTE: Oh wow, did you work it?

JOSE: I worked there since I was twelve. I would go and I would help out and sell the pencil and notebooks, etc. Especially during back to school.

So I think now that I look back, it's when I started thinking about, you know, the basic things about "good, better, best." How you pitch that idea...it's going to make a difference between whether they purchase this product or that product. So those are probably two of the factors that have played a role in who I am today as a person.

ARLETTE: And I think about, you know, some of the important events that we think about in terms of providing excellence customer service.

We right now are talking about back to school and what that means for our customer and getting our stores ready for back to school. So, you were getting ready for that even when you were in elementary school and middle school working with your grandmother.

JOSE: Absolutely, yep.

ARLETTE: Now I know that you are a champion of feedback and development with your team, and your team often talks about how you engage in their development. Tell me about your approach.

JOSE: So, my vision to the team is to be a part of the best team to work with and to work for. And that means creating an environment of open communication, transparency and what I describe as fast-paced decision making.

ARLETTE: Why is that important?

JOSE: You know, in retail it's 95% execution 5% strategy. And sometimes you get bogged down in making decisions -- because of whether it is lack of information, too much information, too many people, etc.

And what I tried to do is, I try to create an environment where things are flat, make decisions fast, and -- although we might not get it 100% right -- if we get it 80% right, it is better as long as we move fast. I mean the retail environment is changing so fast..

ARLETTE: Rapidly, yeah.

JOSE: ...that we can't just wait and stare. We've got to move fast, and that's something I keep reinforcing to my team all the time.

ARLETTE: And, of course, we're moving fast because our customer expectations are...

JOSE: ...are changing, right.

And it's a fairly competitive environment. So if we just think and ponder too long, we might just miss the opportunity.

ARLETTE: It is interesting how the organization is very comfortable with failing fast and moving on, and trying and testing and learning so that we're getting it right for the customer. But at the same time, making sure that we are giving them exactly what they need.

JOSE: And I would say that speed in the decision making can only happen with empowerment, because you're only as good as your teammates.

So if your team knows what they need to do, you just have to empower them to go, go, go. And along the way you set yourself up as a safety net; as a thought partner to give them feedback along the way. And sometimes, you know, direction here and there to move as fast as we can to where we need to be.

ARLETTE: I love how you approach feedback with such a positive outlook. I'm sure it is inspiring to your team. In fact, even though you have to give tough messages sometimes, you're pretty well known as a diplomat. So you can balance the message with tack and make sure the associates really receives it in the manner in which it was intended.

JOSE: Correct.

ARLETTE: Now that's not really by accident though. Because you were actually a diplomat in your 20s, right?

JOSE: Yes, a long, long time ago I was a diplomat actually for the embassy of Ecuador in London. I actually have the honor, maybe still have the honor, of being the youngest commercial counselor of the embassy of Ecuador anywhere.

ARLETTE: Wait, what is a commercial counselor?

JOSE: So I was responsible for the commercial affairs of the embassy to the United Kingdom. That was a role that typically individuals of that role have a long tenure, a lot of experience. But I was in the right place and the right time and I ended up getting the job.

Right after college, I went back to Ecuador. I worked as part of a large conglomerate in the bank and I was a junior credit officer there. The chairman of the board of this big conglomerate was becoming the ambassador of Ecuador. He wanted to bring someone with a private sector mentality to be his right-hand person there. The CEO of the bank decided to nominate me. I went through an interview process and he ended up choosing me.

ARLETTE: Wow, that's exciting!

JOSE: Yeah, so it was pretty exciting. Obviously it was steep learning curve, but I did learn a lot about diplomatic skills and that how you say things do have an impact, and I try to apply what I learned there to my every day.

ARLETTE: Now, that's a long way from retail. How did you get to the retail industry?

JOSE: In a way, I've always been passionate about consumer facing industries, and it probably starts with the time I started working with my grandma in the stationary store. But when you think about retail, what I love is the fact you make a decision today you see the results pretty fast.

When you think of other industries -- think of oil and gas, or think of healthcare -- those are industries that have long lead times. I love the

fact that in retail you make a decision now and you get the impact right away.

The second thing is you get to interact with the customer. I get a lot of energy going to stores, I get a lot of energy from talking to customers and seeing how they love the decisions that we make, the products that we offer and how we help them with their lives.

ARLETTE: So now you were at Target for a period of time, you took a detour to another industry and then you decided to join the Home Depot. Tell us more about your decisions and how you ended up here.

JOSE: I was at target for about 11 years. I took a detour into the health care space, realized that the 5 year cycles...

ARLETTE: [Laughs] That's not your thing.

JOSE: That's not my thing.

So decided to come back to retail and the reason why I joined Home Depot is a number of things. One is I love retail. The second thing is I love the home improvement space. My father was developing houses growing up, so I've always had an infinity for home improvement.

ARLETTE: So wait a second, are you a do-it-yourself-er?

JOSE: Uh, to the extent that my abilities allow me.

ARLETTE: [Laughs] Uh-oh.

JOSE: I have the stiches to prove that sometimes my ambitions outpaces my skills and I end up in the E.R.

ARLETTE: Well, you know we have a services business and of course we can do it for you. But certainly, it is interesting to think about how your early experiences shape your affinity for home improvement.

JOSE: It has, and that is why I have loved so much of my time at Home Depot. But the other thing I have always been looking for is to be surrounded by people that are passionate about what they do.

ARLETTE: Mm-hm.

JOSE: And very importantly it's that not only do they like to win, but they like to win the right way.

ARLETTE: Okay.

JOSE: And to me that is about having a teamwork mindset. I love the fact that at Home Depot, it's about how we win and how we collaborate versus being the lone ranger.

And all styles work. And there are some retailers I'm sure are very successful with that. But Home Depot to me has the perfect component. A winning company in the home improvement space, with a lot of passion to do it the right way.

ARLETTE: I know. We are so fortunate that our values show through our actions. And not just a plaque on the wall, or a part of the script, but instead you see it every day.

JOSE: Absolutely, absolutely.

ARLETTE: Now what has surprised you since you started working for The Home Depot?

JOSE: A couple of things. First of all is how welcoming everyone was when I joined. I mean, I expected that, but not to the extent that it was. I mean having individuals show up into my office to say, "Hey I just want to welcome you to The Home Depot. Let me explain to you how we use the acronyms here."

ARLETTE: [Laughs]

JOSE: Sometimes companies obviously have a different way of doing things. When you're new to a company, understanding that takes some time. But when you have individuals who are committed to your success and are willing to help, that learning curves flattens pretty fast -- which is what happened to me.

ARLETTE: And when you think about the uniqueness of our culture, does anything else stand out to you?

JOSE: The Homer Fund.

So, the Homer Fund basically is a trust where individuals that work for the company -- associates -- out of their own paycheck, they contribute to this trust. And when one of us should have some sort of financial need then it's your peers, it's your colleagues, it's your associates that help you out.

They will contribute to help you out, whether there's a storm and you lost your house, help you stand up, etc. And to me, that's incredible. I didn't know of the Homer Fund until I joined and obviously, I knew that HD is a very generous company that contributes to a number of different worthy causes like the veterans.

ARLETTE: Mm-hm.

JOSE: But what I didn't know and that was a great, great blessing and surprise, is that the employees pool their resources together to help employees at a time of need.

ARLETTE: And when you think about our values being taking care of our people, it's one thing for the company to espouse that, but the associates decide, "No we're going to take care of each other."

JOSE: Personally, correct.

ARLETTE: That definitely changes the game, and it is a uniqueness about our culture. Now, let's talk about the business a little bit.

You are our Décor Merchandising senior vice president. What are you and your team working on that gets you excited?

JOSE: So, to your point, we're focused on growth. When you look at some of our competitors or when you look at retail broadly speaking, a number of companies are focused on cost reduction, cost optimization - it's really about focusing on the bottom line. At Home Depot, we're working on growth. And within my team we put a lot of effort into innovation.

ARLETTE: What kind of innovations are out there?

JOSE: All kinds of product innovation. When you think of appliances, right now you have smart appliances. I mean when you think about flooring, now we have products that are easier to install, so think about luxury vinyl plank or lifeproof vinyl plank that is a lot easier for the pro to do their job. Think about stain resistant carpeting for those of us that have pets or small kids. Those products are fantastic.

ARLETTE: Mm-hm.

JOSE: So there's a number of innovations coming up and what we're focused on is to be the first to market. To really create a platform for our suppliers who are great partners to be able to launch into the market their innovations using The Home Depot.

ARLETTE: So again reinforcing the importance of speed, the importance of being customer focused, and the collaboration with the suppliers seems to be the message that continues to permeate.

JOSE: Absolutely... absolutely, and empowerment. So the merchants can go and identify those opportunities and to pave the road for them to move as fast as they can.

ARLETTE: Fantastic. Now, tell me your favorite day at the Home Depot. What makes you say, "this place is special?"

JOSE: My favorite day at Home Depot happens every other month. We have two events that, every time I see it on my calendar, I'm excited. I'm looking forward to coming into the office.

ARLETTE: What are they?

JOSE: The first one is called the bi-monthly anniversary lunch. My VPs and I have a lunch where we sponsor individuals that their anniversary is in that period of time. And then we talk about what they like about Home Depot, why they came here, etc. And we recognize tenure, which is a big deal.

ARLETTE: So people get an opportunity to tell their story.

JOSE: It's a great time. And then right after that we have another meeting, which is our product innovation meeting. Where you have the merchants who come and present to all of us a new product that is coming into our stores that they're most proud of.

ARLETTE: Oh, wow. So they get to generate some excitement.

JOSE: Oh my god, it's so exciting. They're sharing their innovation, why they think it's going to work. We have the opportunity to test it. We ask questions. It's a day where we celebrate people, we celebrate talent, but we also talk about the new products coming up; the ones that are the life blood of our business.

ARLETTE: Wow, that's pretty exciting. It's such a blessing to be able to be a part of a company that's investing from a position of strength.

And so when you talk about the innovations in flooring, the innovations in appliances, and the other things that you and your team of merchants are working on, it really gets me excited. Not only about the business today but the future of our company.

Thank you so much for sharing some insight into merchandising and what's happening in the business. I look forward to sitting down with you again.

JOSE: Oh, it's been a lot of fun, thank you for having me, Arlette.

ARLETTE: And thank you very much for listening.

This is Arlette signing off and hoping you'll join me again for our next episode of Give Me an H.