

One In a Million

A veteran leader talks shop

By Anna Campitelli, editor

Jose “Pepi” Diaz beat out more than a million candidates to become a contestant on season five of NBC’s *The Apprentice*. While he started off strong, he was “fired” in just the second episode.

When a finalist brought Diaz back to help with the last *Apprentice* task, most viewers were shocked, given his early exit. However, it came as no surprise to us at Student Leader. After bearing witness to his exceptional collegiate career, we’re used to seeing Diaz “trump” expectations.

In college, Diaz became the first-ever Hispanic president of the Southern Interfraternity Conference—despite being told that a minority would never garner enough votes. During his term as the *University of Miami’s* student body president, Diaz received state, national, and even international accolades when he won Florida Leader’s 2002 Florida College Student of the Year Award. He later graduated with honors from *Columbia Law School* in New York and currently works for the largest law firm in Miami.

Although his reality TV stint was brief, Diaz chalks it up as another valuable learning experience. He recently shared his thoughts with Student Leader.

Q: How did your previous leadership roles prepare you for being a contestant on *The Apprentice*?

JOSE DIAZ: Over one million people applied for the show, a large percentage of which had more real work experience than me. I wasn’t too concerned about that, though, because I’d been actively involved with student activities since I was in high school. My decade of student leadership roles gave me the experience, self confidence, and decision-making ability that were needed to make the cut.

Q: In what ways did leading a team on a reality show differ from your real-life leadership experience?

JD: It was different because everyone was not only analyzing all your decisions so they could have fodder for the boardroom, but they were also working against you a lot of the time to make you look like a flawed leader. Plus, having cameras on you at all times makes you second-guess most, if not all, of the decisions that you make.

I made tough choices when I was a student leader, but I knew that if they turned

out poorly, I could learn from the mistakes and apply those lessons to future decisions. On the show, I knew that every mistake I made would be seen by millions of people.

Q: What does it take to earn colleagues’ respect in a short amount of time?

JD: When you come into a group of new colleagues, I think that it’s important to demonstrate unique skills that will set you apart. It’s equally important to be self-confident in front of your peers. One of the quickest ways to lose someone’s respect is to be unsure about your decisions very early. Something that I always appreciated in my teammates was if they were honest with me from the onset. No one wants a teammate that they can’t trust. If you are yourself and you work hard, people will see that and respect you.

Q: Is it important to be passionate about projects that you’re working on? Or can good leaders “fake it” to get a job done?

JD: It’s very difficult to fake passion. Most leaders have a unique ability to advocate for their projects and learn to truly believe in them. If you’re morally or ethically opposed to a project, then you will never be able to be passionate about it. That’s why you need to become involved in a profession or with projects that you can really care about. Those who lead with conviction inspire others.

Q: Why should a leader be a good listener?

JD: If you don’t listen to your team, you might miss a big ticket idea. Worse yet, you could make someone feel like they’re being ignored—it’s important to hear everyone out. I’ve dealt with so many people that have a difficult time accepting anyone’s ideas but their own. These are usually the first people to make enemies in a new environment and the first to get ostracized.

I’ve also learned that no matter how important people are (i.e. Donald Trump), they will respect and listen to you if you have something productive to say. But, that doesn’t mean you need to speak just to speak. Listening is so important in a group environment, and sometimes the smartest people are the ones that are speaking the least. That way, when they say something worthwhile, people take note.

Q: How do you resolve conflicts?

JD: I try to be detached (so as to not choose sides) while being empathetic about other people’s feelings. Many of our best leaders are really vulnerable and concerned about how other people perceive them. If you come off as choosing one side over the other, most people will naturally become defensive.

On *The Apprentice*, I actually had to handle a major conflict between two of my teammates. I chose to keep them away from each other, and this ultimately caused us to lose a lot of precious time. I learned that in the future, it’s important not only to deal with the conflict, but also to do so efficiently.



JEFF NIEMERMA

Fired up: Jose “Pepi” Diaz shares his passion for leadership at ASGA’s 2006 National Summit.

Q: How has your life changed since appearing on the show?

JD: Not only did I come out of the show with a whole new group of business contacts, but my professional life at home was impacted in an amazing way. Right off the bat, I was able to start a successful Internet networking site for Cuban-Americans (www.eltikitiki.com). I was also able to meet people at events that would have been beyond my pay scale for quite a few years. My friends, family, and law firm embraced my experience and supported me throughout. I couldn’t have asked for more. **SL**

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To read the full-length interview, go to www.studentleader.com.