

Hispanic Executive

JAMS' dedication to its associates has kept Laura Martinez at the company for more than thirty years. Now, as CHRO, she's helping the organization reach new heights by doubling down on its commitment to its people.

A Provider for People

BY ZACH BALIVA

THE CLOUDLESS SKY AND CALIFORNIA sun had Laura Martinez in a good mood as she arrived at an Orange County hotel for a strategy session with the JAMS executive team. Martinez, who joined the dispute resolution services provider in 1989, was excited to join eleven of her colleagues gathered in the hotel's conference room. For the next three days, the team worked with a strategic consultant, completing surveys, brainstorming sessions, and group projects related to the future of JAMS. All ideas were welcome, and no topics were off limits. At the end, Martinez walked away more confident than ever in the company's strategic direction.

That was 2016. Since then, Martinez has seen her hopes for the company—and its hundreds of associates—come true.

Martinez, who currently serves as JAMS' chief human resources officer, says her department mantra hasn't changed since Hispanic Executive featured her in

2014. "JAMS is still about providing first-class service, and any success we have can be largely attributed to our people. HR at JAMS has always been all things people, and that won't ever change," she says.

While JAMS culture remains strong, the 2016 strategy session reinforced the organization's commitment to investing in its talent. At that session, company leaders drafted a new formal strategy based on five pillars. As they began suggesting pillar categories, Martinez knew she had to speak up.

"Developing our people has always been a value here, but I wanted our leadership team to really understand how important our people are to fulfilling our mission," she says. "If we invest in our people, we send a strong message to them and we create a competitive differentiator for ourselves." There was some push back, but most felt like it was the right move. Martinez was persuasive—and other leaders agreed

to formalize “Invest in Talent” as one of the five pillars in JAMS’ new corporate strategy.

The move was significant because time, finances, and other resources flow to each of the five pillars in the plan. With Invest in Talent in place, Martinez unlocked funds to work with her team to develop “The Agile Leader,” an official leadership program that replaced a more informal model. Encompassing a series of workshops, conversations, and classes, the Agile Leader program was designed to give JAMS managers the tools they need to lead effective teams amid constant change. “Navigating turbulence is key, and providing tools for our leaders to do that meant they could effectively support their teams. It’s vital to take care of our managers and people this way. If we take care of our people, they take care of our clients,” Martinez emphasizes.

Agile leaders are also prepared to pivot and adapt. Those skills were crucial in March 2020 when COVID-19 forced JAMS to move from a 100 percent office workforce to a remote work model in just forty-eight hours. As Martinez states, “It was a remarkable thing to witness. The entire workforce mobilized and worked together cross-functionally and across the nation to achieve this. The timing of the [Agile Leader] training was almost a foreshadowing of the things to come, and allowed our leaders to put those tools and skills into practice.”

Martinez helped JAMS leadership guide their teams through the change by drawing upon lessons learned during previous challenges. “All organizations face tough times as they navigate economies and world events,” she explains. “I’ve seen our high-quality associates and leaders weather other storms, and that allowed me to project a sense of confidence and maintain a sense of possibility that JAMS associates could trust.”

As CHRO, Martinez worked with the executive team to usher JAMS associates through the challenges brought on by the pandemic. Initially, she worked with her team and other departments to both enhance the company’s virtual platforms and increase the velocity and regularity of communication, which helped keep remote workers connected. The CHRO next organized town hall meetings, while her team built a remote work tool kit and enhanced wellness and mental health support.

Martinez and other JAMS leaders and associates worked around the clock to get associates set up in their home offices and provided a monthly stipend to cover additional remote work costs. To date, no JAMS associates have been furloughed or laid off due to the pandemic.



Laura Martinez
CHRO
JAMS

Even as JAMS navigated the pandemic, other national events begged a corporate response. “Companies can’t ignore the racial divides and civil unrest that have always existed but that we’ve recently seen erupt in our nation,” Martinez says. “These issues impact not only organizations but the people working within them.” Motivated by a desire to further support their associates, the company created an ongoing diversity and inclusion program called CLASS (Conversation, Listening, Acting, Supporting, and Sustaining). CLASS is available to all JAMS associates and panelists.

These events helped Martinez grow as a leader, but also solidified something she’s known since 1989. “JAMS is a special place. We truly do value our people,” she says. “If you value your people and truly care about their well-being, you’ll go far in business and in life.”

The JAMS Wall of Thanks underscores Martinez’s belief that the company is a special place that appreciates the company’s efforts to support its people. This is evidenced by the three hundred associates that have sent more than five hundred messages of gratitude since the Wall’s inception in 2012.

More than one hundred of those messages came in the first nine months of 2020. □