

Hispanic Executive

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FOOD & BEVERAGE

Ulises Romero Builds Trust at Sara Lee Frozen Bakery

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Ulises Romero has spent twenty years leading people, and now helps Sara Lee Frozen Bakery make it through unique manufacturing challenges



Photo by Mila Craila

For as long as he can remember, Ulises Romero just wanted to know how things worked. As early as middle school, he knew he was going to pursue a career in electrical engineering. He just wanted to understand how things were made, and the ways in which those interconnected relationships create the technology that powers our lives.

The current vice president (VP) of engineering and technology innovation at Sara Lee Frozen Bakery would ultimately get his master's degree in manufacturing systems, though, defying his initial pledge to be strictly a "science guy."

“Halfway into university, I decided that I didn’t just want to focus on research and development,” Romero remembers. “I also wanted to be part of a broader business and make business decisions. I liked the technical side but wanted that to be just part of my focus.”

The day he graduated with his master’s, Romero got a call to join the engineering team at a global company: he would spend eight years working for the company in Mexico City. But with a growing family, Romero’s priorities continued to shift, and he moved to Guanajuato, Mexico, to begin working for a US-based company.



Photo by Mila Craila

“I really thought that that was where we would be,” the VP says. “I had my family, we had our plans, but everything changed within a year.”

Romero and his family would ultimately move to the US, first to Tennessee and later to Chicago, as Romero kept getting promoted (four times over the next twelve years). That first decision to move wasn’t easy, though.

“We had no family here, and we knew we would be leaving everything behind,” Romero says. “My wife and I spent some very long nights trying to decide if it was right of us. Every career is different, but I understood that if I wanted to grow, I needed to be flexible and be willing to give it a shot.”

The decision to come to Sara Lee Frozen Bakery in 2019 was, essentially, a result of Romero’s desire for growth and for another mountain to climb. His previous company had been in operation for over one hundred years, but with Sara Lee Frozen Bakery’s recent carve-out from Tyson (for

the first time in sixty years, the company became independently owned), the iconic company offered Romero the opportunity to build some functions from scratch.

“This was almost like a start-up,” Romero explains. “I knew I could help this company grow, experiment, and be more of a key player in the equation. Obviously, that means taking more of a risk, but it was the kind of entrepreneurial experience that I was really looking for.”

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While some of the challenges of building from scratch were expected, others, like a worldwide pandemic, were not. Romero had to lean back on his past experiences to prepare for an unforeseen situation.

The challenges haven't stopped. For one, the supply of qualified manufacturing labor didn't magically increase once the pandemic “ended.” The job market was as tight, and likely more so, than it had been in decades. Additionally, a likely recession doesn't do a whole lot for morale, and Romero wants to ensure that his team's challenges are understood, validated, and resolved. Employee engagement is a regular focus for the VP, because he understands how quickly the world is changing and wants to make sure his people feel supported.

Along with hiring challenges, materials have, at times, been even harder to locate. “In one way it is very frustrating, but it's also fascinating to see how everything is interconnected in a globalized environment,” Romero explains, his early passions shining through. “Some equipment used to take between twenty and twenty-five weeks to get delivered. Now it's double.”

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Ulises Romero

But these are also the challenges that Romero signed up for. He stresses adaptation, and understanding, while also continuing to focus on those fundamentals that got him where he is today. He's spent twenty years leading people. He knows how to build trust, get buy-in, and work with others to solve complex issues.

Romero says building trust is tougher than it sounds. “Trust is not something you can delegate or dictate,” the VP says. “The way we build trust is a daily effort and can be those trivial or informal issues that really demonstrate who you are as a leader. You have to be motivated, you have to know your people, and you have to provide clear direction.” That trust goes two ways. Romero says he trusts his team to do their best work—because he's taken the time to understand not just how *things* work but how his people work too.

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