

The MAN Behind The MIRACLE

An Interview with **Laurence Golborne**, Chile's Minister of Mining

When Laurence Golborne made it to the San Jose mine in a desert area in the north of the country, he found not only a mine that had collapsed, but also hundreds of people camped out. These people, relatives of the 33 miners who were trapped underground, were without water, food, heat or sanitation facilities. They were waiting to learn about the plight of the miners, and they were skeptical of anything that might be told to them, especially by the government.

Golborne's first priority was to respond to the needs of the miners' family members, win their trust and dispel the rumors that were circulating. Only after the family issues were addressed could he focus on the technical problems of a rescue.

Golborne had to act quickly. The approach he took was to be open and honest with the families of the miners and to empathize with their plight. He ate meals with them, moved to the desert and stayed with them, and continued to keep them informed. Shortly afterward, President Sebastián Piñera authorized him to supervise all aspects of the rescue.

Golborne oversaw the rescue under the watchful eyes of 1,400 journal-

ists who had come from around the world to cover the crisis. Frequent reports detailing the plight of the miners were sent out via television, radio, the Internet and print publications. At the time of the rescue, 70 days after the mine entrance collapsed, the global audience for information about the trapped miners was estimated to be around three billion people.

While politicians often try to distance themselves from a disaster or a relief effort, because of its often-adverse effect on their popularity, Golborne embraced the challenge, head on. Not only did the rescue succeed, but at the conclusion of the rescue effort, Golborne was the most popular politician in

Chile, with an 87 percent approval rating. He also had 54,000 followers on Twitter, and a steady stream of visitors to his Facebook page.

Trained as a civil engineer in Chile, with advanced studies in the United States, Golborne was uniquely qualified to manage the complicated task of rescuing the miners. Before his appointment as minister of mining, Golborne was CEO of Cencosud S.A., a South American retailer with \$10.5 billion in revenue and 100,000 employees. Golborne also did stints in the software and utilities industries, where he excelled at managing complex projects.

What follows are excerpts from a conversation between Laurence Gol-



The miracle team: Laurence Goldborne (with radio) helps direct the rescue of the Chilean miners.



borne and Joel Kurtzman, editor in chief of *The Korn/Ferry International Briefings on Talent & Leadership*, about the rescue of the miners.

Briefings: How did you learn about the disaster?

GOLBORNE: I was in Ecuador accompanying President Sebastián Piñera when we heard the mine entrance collapsed. The president asked me to go back to Chile and see what we could do to help. It wasn't that easy getting from Quito, Ecuador, to Santiago, Chile, and then to the mine. But I caught a flight and eventually got there. What I found was a situation that was very complicated. At the entrance to the mine there were hundreds of people – the families of

the miners. No one knew at the time how many people were in the mine, and we didn't know their condition either. We also didn't know how the collapse happened and what needed to be done. So the lack of information was tremendous, and there were a lot of rumors. People said things like: "They know that the miners are all dead. They found them and they don't want to tell." So the situation was difficult.

Now, normally in Chile when there is a problem like this, it is the responsibility of the company that owns the mine to address the emergency. So, my first reaction was to get in touch with the responsible people who ran the mine and find out what they were

doing and find out how we could help them. But very quickly we began to understand that the rescue would be complicated and beyond the capabilities of the company.

Once you saw the rescue was beyond the capabilities of the mining company, what did you do?

GOLBORNE: In the first hours we did not focus on the technical issues. Instead, we took action in two areas. First, we

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acted with regard to the welfare of the families. The mine was in the middle of the desert, and the place was not prepared to receive hundreds of people who had come there and were now waiting to find out what happened. People made fires at night and didn't have food. They didn't have sanitation or water. So our first response was to provide food and shelter to the families and to give them wood for fires so they would keep warm at night. We also had to bring in restrooms to take care of their sanitary needs. We worked with the Ministry of Interior Affairs to create ways to protect the families and to give them support.

While we were doing that, we tried to establish good communications links with the families, and I made a commitment to them that I would be very sincere and would give them information as soon as I had it and that I would not lie to them. I made it very clear to them that I would give them correct information. More than speeches, it was important for them to hear this commitment. Telling the truth was a very important practical issue. It was how I fought the rumors and won the trust of the people. Keep in mind, putting out correct information is not what politicians normally do. So the people had a negative attitude toward us at the beginning, and I had to change that attitude by being honest and sincere.

How did you create a feeling of trust?

GOLBORNE: First, by living there. And I empathized with the people, with their grieving and their suffering. I really did. Not only me, but everybody who was working with me. We all empathized with the families and their situation.

Then, I established the open communication policy. I used government resources to find out how many people were in the mine and how many families were there in the desert and we

made an inventory.

You see, among the rumors that people were circulating were those that said there were illegal people working in the mines. So, in the first hours, our activities were focused on building a communication bridge and surveying the situation. After that, when I informed the president about what we knew, and he visited the mine, he instructed me to take over the management of the situation. That's when I was empowered to act.

Now, I want to emphasize that this is not a very common decision. Normally, in other disasters, the political authorities keep a distance because it's risky for them to get involved. So I'm highlighting the president's decision because it was made without political considerations and it enabled me to take control, which was very critical to the operation. From that moment, we started to make decisions and take part in all the technical meetings. We started to drill holes in the ground — probes — to get in touch with the miners, and we also got in touch with all the mining companies in Chile to get access to their technical expertise.

How did you structure the work?

GOLBORNE: It was a complex situation, and I divide it into two separate stages. The first stage took place during the initial 17 days, when we didn't know if the miners were alive and we didn't know anything about the conditions they were in. In the first 17 days, there was a lot of uncertainty and tremendous pressure from the families, as you might expect. The second stage came after we found the miners and we learned about the condition they were in. The second stage lasted 53 days, right until the moment the last miner was brought up to the surface. In each of these stages we faced different situa-

tions. The first stage was much more stressful because we were dealing with life or death questions and with tremendous uncertainty. The second stage was complex, but it was less stressful and painful.

Why less stressful? You still had to find a way to bring the miners out. Wasn't it still risky?

GOLBORNE: Yes, that's true. But it was less stressful because we knew what it would take to bring the miners out of the mine, and we knew that it was only a matter of time and money and resources — assuming there were no major medical emergency underground. We felt the second stage was the technical stage, and we felt we had a lot of good technical expertise and experience.

Did the families have access to the media?

GOLBORNE: Yes. The media problem was one of the key issues we had to deal with. They got involved in the process from the beginning, and they created a lot of expectations. They established themselves in the desert with the families and they had contact with the families. I have to say, some people in the media even tried to pit the families against us. In addition, there were political issues as well. So the situation was very complicated. But we did a good job and the families gave us their trust.

Then what?

GOLBORNE: When we found out the miners were O.K. physically and psychologically, we were suddenly in a different state. We changed. You know, what really surprised me was the level of strength of the miners and their discipline. The first time after we sent a telephone down into the mine and I called and said, "This is Laurence Golborne, minister of mining," the miner



at the other end said, “Hold on, I will put you on with my boss.” It was very funny, but what he said showed me that the miner who was in charge down in the mine kept his organization intact and that he was still managing his people.

Didn't you expect the miners trapped underground to remain disciplined and organized?

GOLBORNE: Well, you have to remember that the people down in the mine had a crisis too. Their first 17 days were awful for them. They didn't know if anybody was looking for them. They didn't know if they would be found. So they had their own crisis. And yet they were able to manage it and to keep the group together. Now keep in mind, the people in the mine were not a group of friends who worked together. Many of them didn't even know each other. So it's interesting how the dynamics of the miners worked out and how they stayed

together, and how the supervisor was able to keep the group together.

How did you organize the rescue operationally?

GOLBORNE: In the first few days, we established an organization in four main areas. First, in the area of family support. Second, in the communication and management of the media. Third, in matters relating to the medical aspects of the situation, through our Ministry of Health. That included planning how we would manage the situation when we found people — keeping in mind we didn't know if anyone in the mine was even alive. And fourth, we established an organizational structure in the technical area.

Now, in the technical area I asked for help from Codelco, the world's largest copper mining company, because it has a lot of experience in underground operations. So I called Codelco's chairman

and asked him to send his most experienced people to help us, which he did.

We then set up a technical team that was separated into three groups. The first group focused on the general coordination of the rescue. The second group was in charge of sending in probes — drilling narrow holes through the rock, which you normally do for testing purposes. This team was led by people who were from specialized probe companies. We set up a third group and put it in charge of evaluating all the technical alternatives and of evaluating any idea that we received from any person, anywhere.

Now, I have to say, the probe team really did an amazing job. They cut six-inch diameter holes through 2,300 feet of solid rock. They did it with incredible

Top: Associated Press. Bottom: Ministerio de Minería de Chile

accuracy, well beyond what is normally done. The people who made these probes are the one who did the miracle.

Did you get a lot of suggestions and advice?

GOLBORNE: We got a lot of suggestions from around the world, and some of these ideas were quite bizarre. For example, one that I remember quite clearly was from a person who said we should send 1,000 mice into the mine with panic buttons tied to their bellies. The mice would run into the mine and find the miners who would then press the panic buttons. The person, of course, did not explain how the signal would get up to the surface from thousands of feet below the earth, or how the panic buttons would work. We received a lot of those suggestions and answered each of them, always politely, but sometimes simply with “no thanks.”

What happened after you found the miners?

GOLBORNE: After we reached the miners and found out they were O.K., the president gave me permission to go ahead with the rescue plan. We ordered machines and we started to work. At first, we had two different alternatives. But then the group that was making the holes for the probes designed a third alternative that was very different. We

called it Plan B. The probe team was very very creative, and they suggested we could use one of the probe holes that we had already dug and enhance it and use it for the rescue. It was a very radical idea, but I approved it. So we started the rescue process with three plans operating in parallel.

What were the other two plans?

GOLBORNE: Plan A was designed around a machine that was used in the mine to cut ventilation shafts, and Plan C was designed around a drilling machine that was usually used to explore for oil. For Plan B, we had to build another machine in Canada with hammers that would widen the probe holes. Plan B called for widening the probe hole from 6 inches to 12 inches and then to 28 inches. Plan B was the fastest, and it was the plan that succeeded in rescuing the miners.

Did you continue with all three plans at once?

GOLBORNE: Yes, we started in parallel with the three plans. It was a matter of life and death. In addition, we didn't know for sure which would succeed, and time was of the essence. While we didn't foresee any crisis, we always knew that there could be a medical emergency in the mine at any time. We also knew it was very psychologically

and physically stressful for the miners. It was more than 80 degrees Fahrenheit with 95 percent humidity down there. We could keep the miners in good shape and well fed, but if we had an emergency, we would really have a problem.

So, we started with all three groups working separately, and we used all the resources we had available for the rescue. We didn't spare any effort. There were three teams working 24 hours a day on all three plans. Plan B was the fastest. The cost of the rescue was in the range of \$20 million, so it wasn't cheap. But human life has no price and the president told us that.

What did your experience rescuing the miners teach you?

GOLBORNE: The experience taught me two things. First, the single most important message we got from the miners was: Never give up. The same was true for the hundreds of people who worked on the rescue. We never lost our faith and we kept trying, even when we had failures early on. The second thing I learned relates to how we did what we did as a country and as a society. What I saw was that the whole country unified around the goal of saving the miners. Everybody felt it. They put aside political considerations, religious considerations and social considerations. Nothing got in the way of the rescue effort. Everybody wanted to cooperate during this time. It was amazing, and it taught me that if a country or a society gets unified around an objective, it can do very important things. So this is a lesson that I think we as a country can apply to other challenges.

What was it like having three billion people watching your every move?

GOLBORNE: I didn't pay that much attention to it. I was focused on — and devoted to — the rescue process. I was much more concerned with the lives of the 33 miners under the ground than with the three billion people who were watching.

INTERESTING...

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A new study finds those who are poor are better at empathy than the wealthy. Researchers say the reason may be that people with low income or low education have to be more responsive to others to get by.

Source: *LiveScience*, 2010

