

# Alan Bechara

## Building Character

Beirut to Brussels went as planned. Brussels to New York City, however, was delayed. As a result, young Alan Bechara missed the final connection of his journey—the flight that would take him from New York to Washington. “I had never been to this part of the world,” he reminisces today, several decades later. “There were no cell phones, and I remember scrambling for change to call my brother from a phone booth to let him know I had missed my connection. I got ahold of his wife, who didn’t speak Arabic, and through broken English, I found out he had already left for the airport. That was quite a process.”

Though he was only 22, however, Alan had already learned that, in those moments that test us most, character is built. It was a new life, and in the JFK airport, he made up his mind to embrace it. “I realized there was a reset button on life, and I pressed it,” Alan avows. “I had been a smoker, but I threw my cigarettes and lighter into the trashcan in that airport and never smoked again. With the exception of a short trip to France, my entire life until that point had been spent within a twenty-mile radius. I had known everyone, and everyone had known me. On that day, I realized I didn’t really know anything, but I was ready to learn.” Now the President of PC Mall Gov, Inc., that’s exactly what Alan did, and he continues that learning process today.

PC Mall Gov, a subsidiary of a California based company called PC Mall, Inc., is headquartered in Chantilly, Virginia, and was formed in 2002, shortly after Alan first joined the enterprise. It focuses on public sector business from the federal, state, local, and education markets across the U.S., offering IT products and services including design, installation, and consultation. From the Library of Congress to Oregon school districts, Alan and his team provide product and services across the spectrum.

Alan first found his way to PC Mall in the wake of 9/11, when investment in government technology and infrastructure escalated and opportunities for growth in the public sector space were multiplying. Recognizing the untapped potential of expanding into that market, and knowing that PC Mall’s expertise in selling to consumer and corporate America could not prepare it for selling to public players, the parent company launched a search for a seasoned executive to create and expand the new business, building the pieces and infrastructure that would allow it to thrive.

Having served as Vice President at both GTSI and Insight Public Sector (formerly Comark Government and Educations Sales), two IT services companies serving the public space throughout the DC metropolitan area, Alan possessed just the background that PC Mall was looking for. In the six years he had spent at Comark, a \$1.5 billion company operating out of Chicago,

he had run their public sector space. During that time, he was instrumental in building up that business from \$20 million to \$200 million—a feat that initially attracted the search firm looking for PC Mall’s next big thing. “I dismissed the call in the beginning, but the recruiter kept in touch with me, and as time passed, I started to sense that Comark was pulling back from the public sector space,” Alan explains. “They had stopped investing, which led me to question whether it was the right place for me in the long term.” Two weeks after he left to take his place at the helm of PC Mall Gov in April of 2002, Comark was sold to Insight.

When PC Mall Gov’s public sector revenue was first teased out from the parent company’s pot at the fledgling business’s outset, it amounted to about \$50 million. After ten years of Alan’s leadership, it is now a \$200 million business. “We



had strong growth through 2009 and have seen a few stagnant years since, but I see the company reclaiming that upward trend in the future," Alan remarks.

Though contemplating the company's future is intriguing in itself, a look into Alan's own past is even more riveting. Born in the suburbs of Beirut in Lebanon, he was raised the youngest of seven children by his mother and older siblings, as his father had died when Alan was nine months old. By age four, he had developed a severe case of asthma that forced him to miss school several days a week, but he continued to pursue his studies and enjoyed the support of an extensive family network. "I probably have around three to four hundred people who I would consider family," he laughs today. "First cousins, second cousins, acquaintances—in a small country like Lebanon, you've got family branches everywhere. It was very hard to get away with any bad behavior, and there was a strong sense of community." That sense of community was permeated with work ethic and values. Everyone graduated high school, and everyone was bilingual. Alan himself grew up speaking Arabic and French, though English is his first language now.

Situated on the Mediterranean Sea, Lebanon enjoys a mild climate and thriving tourism industry, yet growing up there was not without its hardships. Alan still remembers the civil war that erupted after a crisis displaced 600 Palestinians into Lebanon, which escalated into a conflict that divided the country for decades. "Neighbors were killing neighbors—it just depended on your affiliation at the time," Alan recalls. "School was disrupted, and there was no water and electricity for months at a time. We lived in bunkers and underground shelters for extended periods of time to avoid the shelling that would occur. It builds character—you have no choice but to defend your home, your family, and your business."

Alan was in his late teens at the time and worked a night job in a bakery throughout the conflict. Situated on the main highway that bisected Lebanon from Israel to Syria, business was good even in wartime, and Alan ran the bakery from ten at night to six in the morning selling bread and pastries. Then, during the day, he would attend high school during the academic year or go to the beach in the summers. "None of

us ever thought about leaving," he reminisces. "There was a strong sense of nationalism, and I knew that, as the son of a widow who didn't have a job, I would hunker down, get the best education I could, find the fastest way to make a living, and raise a family. Studying abroad was not even part of the dialogue."

As luck would have it, however, one of Alan's half brothers had been living in America and returned to Lebanon just before the war broke out. Alan was around fifteen at the time, and the brother invited him to come visit the U.S. in the future. Alan agreed without thinking anything of it at the time, but before he knew it, his brother had launched the immigration process for him. "At the time, when I'd look into the future, my questions were 'Are we going to the beach tomorrow?' or 'Is this girl interested in me?' Four years later, however, the paperwork went through, and my visa was processed," he remembers. "By that time, my perspective had totally shifted. With no future in sight, rampant killing left and right, and no functioning government to speak of, that visa was like a miracle." Thus, in 1980, Alan set out to see how else he might build his character in the world.

His friends bet he wouldn't last more than a month overseas away from his family and country, but his brother welcomed him into his home and gave Alan a job sweeping up at his small TV and video repair shop. At work, Alan would watch the technicians and began begging them to let him try something. He had never seen the inside of a TV or VCR, and the head technician, amused by Alan's enthusiasm, gave him a chance.

Alan began to learn the technology, the trade, and the geography, going out to do house calls with the team and learning English through the snippets of shows he would catch on the same TVs he serviced. He also enrolled in night classes to study engineering. He immersed himself in the culture, the language, the material, the newness. Acclimation bred affinity, and by the time his relationship with his current wife had grown serious in 1986, Alan realized he was here to stay. "I had built a life here," he affirms. "I had transformed into someone completely different, and I was marrying someone from a different culture. I had come to a fork in the road, and I made a choice."

Alan's brother had wanted him to stay on and expand the business, but in 1984, he found a

job as a technician for a company in Herndon. He finished his degree in 1986, and in 1988, he accepted a position as an engineer for a government contractor. That position immersed him in bid proposals, tech specs, and program management, and Alan saw himself evolving away from the technical and toward project and program management. He then transitioned over to a company called Zenith Data Systems, where he worked for four years managing systems engineers until joining GTSI as a program manager for a newly-won contract. After moving from program manager to director to vice president to general manager in the span of five years, he accepted a position at Comark as the Vice President of a business unit. That ascension then culminated in 2002 when Alan became President of PC Mall Gov.

It is clear that Alan built his career the same way he built his character, and with the same sturdy foundation of innovation, patience, resolve, and self-reliance. "Growing up in the environment I grew up in, you have to fend for yourself," he explains. "You have to step up. For me, there was no doubt that I would have to make it on my own. As a result, I've never expected anything from anyone. Of course delegating is important in business, but equally as important is the ability to build whatever it is you need."

Now, Alan remains a man of deep principle and rigid commitment. Whatever it is he plans to do in a day, he rises at six and gets started early. In ten years, he hasn't taken more than four sick days. And above all else, he maintains a steadfast commitment to honoring the promises he makes to his employees. "I have a philosophy that goes against the concept of traditional business efficiency, and it's that laying people off is a failure of management," Alan poses. "I do anything humanly possible to prevent it from happening because, if you promise someone a job and then decide you can't afford them, that's not their fault. If I am forced to lay someone off, there had better be a good, unavoidable reason."

Beyond these accomplishments, Alan's greatest pride and happiness are derived from his

role as a father to a daughter and son who are incredibly smart, extremely honest, and accomplished in their chosen fields—a winning combination that would make any parent proud. His wife, an environmental biologist, has also been fundamental in shaping his concept of self by asking challenging questions and cultivating a strength of conviction that is apparent in both Alan and his children. His legacy and self-development, however, are far from over, and when Alan looks to the future, he will either move into a CEO position or launch a company of his own.

In advising young entrepreneurs entering the business world today, Alan echoes the advice best learned growing up in a war-torn country, but equally as powerful and imperative when applied in times of peace and prosperity. "Remember that nobody owes you anything," he urges. "The best gift you can possibly be given is an education, so use it wisely. The world is a place of tremendous challenge, but also tremendous opportunity. It's up to you what you want to do with those challenges, those opportunities, and that education. Don't feel entitled. Build the best you can with what you have—the future is up to you."

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