

Karim Lahlou - General Manager, Iberma, Morocco (May 2020)



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Karim Lahlou of Moroccan pharma manufacturer Iberma discusses the firm's evolution in recent years, the abundant opportunities for Iberma in the African market, and why strong international partnerships will help the company thrive in the future.

You took over the reins of Iberma from your late father who was also the founder of the company. How did you manage the transition?

Leadership transitions are crucial and remain by far the most consequential decision for any business founder or leader. Luckily, my late father started this process very early during his tenure and punctiliously identified how to develop and prepare Iberma's next generation of leaders. He candidly shared with the team and me his perspectives on the business, which helped me grow in many ways. I also spent plenty of time carefully understanding his views, and we arranged many sessions to discuss industry dynamics, competitive trends, and best practices. Even today, I continuously try my best to achieve the best possible version of his leadership style.

I also met with managers and board members from ASAC, our parent company, who shared with me valuable advice that adds more clarity to the industry's global growth patterns and opportunities, contributing to the strategic direction of the organization.

But as we all know, improving organizational and operational structures always remain the most significant challenge in transitions, and it's not as simple as it sounds to emerge as a new leader and begin implementing changes or reshuffling management teams – it takes serious prep work before getting to that point.

This is the reason why I scheduled working sessions with all the departments' heads during my first six months at the company, including manufacturing, quality control, finance, and marketing, to name a few and met with them individually to get their thoughts and ideas. We would also later assemble the rest of their staff to share our new strategies and discuss how they project themselves in the future at Iberma and what vision they have for the firm. These meetings helped me make sure that everyone at Iberma gains a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities and, most importantly, to foster a company culture in which everyone feels valued. I also met with key representatives from all our partners and customer accounts to hear about their hopes and concerns, and we quickly found common grounds to address most of the unresolved issues and determine new priorities.

The thoughts and insights that I received from all these discussions helped me realize the early changes that needed to be introduced, such as shifting mindsets to acclimate a data-driven approach that would set the tone for our manufacturing calendars, re-distributing roles and responsibilities, and defining clear specific performance goals. The substantial amount of work and efforts deployed during this time helped Iberma go through a smooth transition phase that strengthened its leadership team, helping improve their incredibly strong client relationships, which is an extraordinary vote of confidence around the business value we provide and the quality of our products

How has the company evolved since its foundation?

Since its founding in 1994, Iberma was always exploring ways to play a significant role in the Moroccan pharmaceutical industry. Today, the company's contribution is recognized by all its peers, prescribers, and pharmacists.

The roadmap that Iberma laid out to attain this position involved three main phases. The initial stage was focused on getting the lab all the necessary certifications to ensure the optimal quality of its drugs and create an African site that meets European standards. This step was crowned with the obtention of various GMP (Good Manufacturing Practices) certifications and recognition from the Spanish Ministry of Health, which have propelled us to the rank where we currently stand.

The second phase centred around the 'business' part through the expansion of our portfolio. Thanks to our reliable quality processes and high standards, we were able to approach new European partners and expand the portfolio of our pharmaceutical specialties, which resulted in exclusive representations of the most prestigious Spanish pharma laboratories.

Today, while we continue developing new business ideas, we are capitalizing on our stable structures and partnerships to fulfil a larger role for the community's greater good and provide safe, cost-effective healthcare services to all Moroccan patients. In this continuity, we launched the "Koullouna Maâne" initiative, a corporate social responsibility project that aims to advise and educate patients -via awareness campaigns- on how to take medication correctly. Deploying this program throughout the country also offered doctors and pharmacists an additional platform to communicate with their patients, and we are committed to further joint efforts with various voices and health actors to magnify our educational programs.

Where does the company stand today in Morocco and what is your current strategy?

Iberma today is the absolute market reference in Morocco in several therapeutic areas, specifically urology, gastroenterology, and psychiatry. We pride ourselves on delivering high-quality products that answer the specific needs of Moroccan patients.

Our strategy consists of continuing to focus on growing our market share and becoming a leading contract manufacturer for pharma MNCs.

We also took significant steps to enhance our production capacity in new manufacturing areas, adopting an ambitious investment plan for the upcoming decade to capture and secure new markets, namely in Europe and Africa.

We have successfully formed a joint venture with the Spanish subsidiary of Italfarmaco, an Italian pharma group, which gave birth to Versalya, a pharma lab exclusively devoted to women's and children's health. In this continuity, we are considering new joint venture ideas in therapeutic areas where we see the potential to make a valuable contribution, grow our portfolio, and become market disrupters

Like many Moroccan companies, Iberma has already started to venture outside of its borders to serve the African market. How important is this for you?

Iberma prides itself on being a Spanish-Moroccan entity that serves a sizeable market in Africa with a coherent geographic portfolio, which enables us to share key learnings and strategies with our African partners on how to stimulate growth opportunities. We have a strong presence in Senegal, Cameroun, Ivory Coast, and Mauritania, and we are adding two new markets this year.

Even though Morocco continues to be the engine of our business, our steadfast intention is to continue developing our activities in other African countries, and we hope that this will represent 30 percent of our global revenue within 10 years.

I also think that Africa's potential as a growth market for MNC pharma remains both underestimated and misunderstood. Thus, African pharma entities, such as Iberma, have the responsibility to play a transformative role in solving some of the continent's most pressing health issues.

There are over 26 Moroccan pharma companies, and many predict a strong consolidation trend in the coming decade. Is Iberma ready for this?

Local mergers could change market dynamics and reinforce the position of some companies, especially those who will gain more extensive distribution facilities.

Iberma is ready to face these challenges as we believe we are on the right track to grow the business in the coming years, which will increase both our portfolio and market share. We already started expanding our specialty areas via new partnerships and joint ventures, and we are opening our doors to new connections that could help us diversify our offerings or bring additional skills and know-how.

I am also confident that Iberma's robust structure and partnerships will help the firm go through market adjustments early on and adapt to all sorts of scenarios. Of course, not everything always goes according to what we plan – irrespective of how hard we work on forecasting, as now more than ever, unforeseen economic changes happen at a global scale and impose quick strategic shifts. But I believe Iberma and its international partners are well-positioned to leverage new product licenses to develop markets and grow. As the great Spanish author Cervantes once said, “the man who is prepared has his battle half fought.”

What are the three concepts that define Iberma today?

High-quality standards, Citizen Enterprise, People empowerment.

And those for tomorrow?

Innovate, digitalize, and internationalize

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