



STRIKING THE PERFECT BALANCE

Lakshmi Harikrishnan Nair



As humans, more often than not, we predict our future from our past events. It's normal to imagine life that way, where all the dots are connected. It gives us a sense of control, to be able to envision the next course of affairs. But somewhere between all this, destiny takes its course and we find ourselves in a situation we never may have imagined, let alone prepared for.

A twist to her tuned life

Born and raised in Trivandrum, in a nuclear family where both her parents were scientists, Mrs Lakshmi Harikrishnan Nair of 'Wenders Cashew' was accustomed to her tuned life.

However, she was in for a change when she married into a business family and had to live in a joint household, a stark contrast to her earlier life. As it is with all new things, she eventually learnt to adapt and enjoy the changes in her life, and when asked, she gushes that her husband and his family were very supportive, be it allowing her to finish her studies after marriage or otherwise.

The first step

Mrs Lakshmi was used to travelling extensively with her husband and the experience she gathered during those days, she realized, helped her later when she joined work. It was quite a big change and a new move in her family because no one in the cashew business had a lady family member working in the sector. Her husband had come into contact with a fellowship program by the United States Department of Agriculture on food safety and she was selected through the interview. It was around that time that the business was also taking a new route, focusing on quality and food safety. The training she received in the US was an eye opener for her which changed her perspective of how things could be done differently in the traditional cashew business.

When she joined the business, she only had the training she got in the US but she discovered that there was more to the quality and food safety aspect which was unknown to the cashew industry. Of what she has seen, she summarizes that the American and European systems were way ahead in the field and this was and still is unknown to many processors in the cashew industry.



A herculean job that she eventually managed

After careful examination, Mrs Lakshmi concluded that while some systems were being followed in her company, her main focus was centralized to upgrade the factories to a world class facility. She knew it would be a herculean job and it did consume a lot of her energy and time, but she was determined to reach the goal she had set. Besides, to instruct workers and show them the actions that needed to be carried out was easier because they were

willing to follow the directions, but to make the supervisor level and middle managers do the same thing was the challenge she faced.

Elaborating on this, Mrs Lakshmi further adds that working in a factory environment was tough and understanding the people and motivating them was even tougher. But the important aspect she picked up in all these years is that, if you are convinced of your good intentions, then everything else will fall in place one day.

Her assumptions went wrong and she couldn't be happier

Today, she takes pride in saying that they are way ahead in the Quality assurance systems in the industry. In a company of 550 employees, she is in charge of processing and operation monitoring as well as technology selection. The fact that a few years back she imagined herself nothing more than a housewife, this is a mighty achievement!

Some of the courses she has done so far include Training on food safety from Michigan State University, USDA Cochran fellowship program, Snack Nut production course by European Snack Association and training in Quality management and technique by Warwick University, organized by CII.

Employee growth remains their priority

Speaking of the labor activity in her region, she says initially, the cashew industry was such that women willingly came forward to work. But today, in Kerala, which is an educationally and socially forward state, it is difficult to get people to work in this labor intensive job. Despite the situation, she is glad they have managed to retain their workers and are able to attract them because they maintain their corporate social responsibilities, creating a safe and sound working atmosphere for everyone. It had always been and still is their priority to offer their employees a steady monetary security which they carry out through their ethical responsibility. They are also encouraged by providing incentives.

Attracting or retaining – What's the challenge?

In her opinion, cashew industry is the kind where majority of the work force is women. But as we see the hierarchy, we realize the big positions are all occupied by men. Mrs Lakshmi admits that even in their factories, 80 percent are women but more than attracting, retaining the work force is the challenge. However, it is overwhelming to see that in spite of the strict hygiene and manufacturing practices they follow, they are able to attract and retain their employees.



Managing through knowledge and experience

As an organization, they believe in gender neutrality and have women officers at the processing units and corporate level in finance, administration and quality.

But despite this, she admits it has always been an area of concern for women when it comes to working with men. Certainly she has had issues and tensions but with experience and the knowledge that she gained in the field and by learning ways to keep good interpersonal relationship, she is able to manage well. Out of her experience, she thinks in every level, men have the feeling women 'do not understand math'.

Staying firm in her established foundation

From day one to now, she received the complete support of her family and they are also the reason why she is able to do justice to her work. As a mother, initially her working hours depended on the school timings and at times of need, it extended to late nights. With her husband as the director of the company and brother in law the CEO, she has a good backing but at the same time, has her own stand.

Women are just as capable as men

Speaking of the kind of support women in cashew industry need, she says that they must be encouraged to be entrepreneurs. The government and bankers should not have any reservations against extending financial assistance to women entrepreneurs for they are equally capable of running an organization like men. They are ready to take risks, ready to experiment and ready to adjust to any changing demands. Thus, they become good managers and should be given opportunities as well as the freedom to let their talents flourish.

Staying in touch with new innovations

Since their business believes in continuous improvement, adopting new technologies has been the key focus. This has been the aim since the last 10 years where they continuously update their business model, which means adopting better and efficient technology. Today, their factories have the state of the art technology which caters to the business



demands. When new technology is introduced, the challenge is to have people who understand them and work along to improve the production.

The company also has many proprietary processes which meet the demand for food safety. However, Mrs Lakshmi discloses that understanding these and developing them were a challenge, but training the people who operate these systems required patience and in depth training.

Bagging the mighty awards

Furthermore, in the company, processing equipment, monitoring and packaging systems are in tune with the latest technology. In this way they offer a wide range of superior products which the customers can choose from. They are also regarded as the first in the industry to introduce the bulk packaging system from the traditional tin packing which has now become the industry standard. This introduction of an innovative technique also helped them receive the National Award for excellence in packaging machinery design from the Indian institute of packaging in 2000.

Proving her worth

Speaking about being a part of such a huge company whose current turnover is 180 crores, aiming for 240 crores this year, she says in the beginning, people asked her if she opted to join the factories just for the sake of it while all the work was taken care of by others. However, with time she was able to prove herself and demonstrate her capability by adapting well with the environment. By building a good team of people, the changes and improvements which were made in the factories were recognized and accepted by customers. The systems they adapted have now become a habit among the workers, rather than an act.

Beating the unbeatable

As a final note, she advises that enjoying the work you do convinces you of the results you are looking for. It took her sometime to get her employees to understand that what they could not do, could be done through a collective effort but eventually, she accomplished it.

Hard work, perseverance, the belief in others and yourself and with good team work, it is possible to beat the unbeatable, she smiles, making us believe that if we truly try, we aren't that far from achieving our dreams, after all!

