



Formula for success

Ruthia Wong

Ruthia Wong knows there's no shortcut to ambitious targets.
John Cremer talks to the VP and GM of Mead Johnson Nutrition (HK)

HIGH-FLYERS

Every executive makes a few mistakes along the way, and Ruthia Wong is not afraid to admit that her career got off to a false start.

Fresh out of university and ready to change the world, she was taken on by a local lighting company. After just a month, bored and believing her talents were unappreciated, she resigned, and set off for greener pastures.

What followed was a protracted job hunt, which included two years with an NGO, before she finally secured an entry-level position with an FMCG firm.

This time, she decided to knuckle down, learn the ropes, and take the rough with the smooth. "Looking back now, I feel ashamed of my own arrogance and ignorance," says the vice president and general manager of Mead Johnson Nutrition (HK), which specialises in infant milk formula. "Getting into college doesn't guarantee doing well in the work environment. You must go step by step and equip yourself to be a good employee."

As one of six siblings growing up in cramped quarters in Kennedy Town, Wong had seen her father working shifts at China Motor Bus and her eldest sisters obliged to give up further education to help make ends meet.

With the family's support, she got into an elite secondary school in North Point and surprised everyone by stating an interest in business.

In due course, there were high-profile marketing jobs with Herbalife and then Bausch & Lomb, for whom she took up a regional role in 2001, based in Sydney and covering Asia. The time in Australia was, in many ways, life-changing. It taught her, for instance, that Hong Kong's characteristic focus on money and efficiency is not the only way to get by.

"I could leave the office by 5.30pm, get home when it was still light, and sit on the balcony with a glass of wine," Wong says. "Ever since, I have tried to find the good things in life in different ways and not just fall back into the old Hong Kong-style [habits]."

However, open to a new career challenge, she negotiated a switch to Mead Johnson and, for six years from 2007, was stationed at the company's Chinese headquarters in Guangzhou. In a senior marketing role, she travelled extensively, visiting more than 50 mainland Chinese cities, and was instrumental in doubling market share generating a five-fold increase in sales.

"When approached about the job, I saw it as a golden opportunity as I wanted to gain more in-depth experience in China," Wong says. "I also wanted to create an impact and was able to do that by working with a talented team."

The transfer to her present post in mid-2013 offered career advancement, new leadership challenges, and a return to the family circle in Hong Kong. And while sales of infant formula are relatively stable, it was still essential to keep pace with changes in the broader retail environment inspired by the use of apps and newer methods of brand building.

"However, in good or bad times, I keep reminding myself that the first challenge is to manage people well. If you do that, then the rest of the business operations will come right."

The most recent move was also a chance for greater involvement in the company's CSR initiatives, particularly its "Feeding Hope" programme for underprivileged families, and its efforts to promote awareness about metabolic diseases in newborns.

When off duty, Wong likes to keep physically active. A champion sprinter in her youth, she is now in the gym by 7am every day. She also loves cooking, enjoying the chance to create different dishes for her kids and seeing certain parallels with business in the way it is important to plan, synchronise and bring the various elements to the table together.

"If you want to be an effective leader, you can't be working 24/7," she says. "For me, every day is about finding a balance and taking the opportunity to create something new. There should be self-fulfilment and enjoyment otherwise you are not getting the most out of life."

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LEARNING TO LEAD

Ruthia Wong shares her management strategies

Be an example "Aim to influence others as a person, not by virtue of your title or position, otherwise your IQ and whatever you try to do may not count for too much."

Stand at the fore "Show ownership of projects and problems and be ready to lead from the front. You can't just delegate or dump things you don't want to do on to other people."

Own up "Dare to admit you can make mistakes and be prepared to say sorry."

Adapt and improve "Embrace change and actively make yourself a change agent."

Share your strengths "While trying to make yourself the best you can be, also help others to be the best they can be. You want your future memories to be about the people you worked with, not the difficulties of the job."