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Speaker 1:

The future of business is responsible.

Speaker 2:

[foreign language 00:00:06]

Speaker 3:

Conscious co-mingling of growth and impact.

Speaker 4:

[foreign language 00:00:13].

Speaker 5:

[foreign language 00:00:13].

Speaker 6:

[foreign language 00:00:13]

Speaker 7:

The future of business is intentional and transparent

Speaker 8:

[foreign language 00:00:18]

Sandhya Sridhar:

Welcome back to Future of Business, a podcast run by a bunch of Oxford MBA students at Saïd Business School where we take you on a journey to explore the diverse range of sectors, stories and expertise embedded in the Oxford MBA cohort and beyond, and how they will shape the future of business. My name is Sandhya Sridhar, and today we'll talk about the world of family business and how they navigate through various challenges they face along the way.

Joining me is Shwe Yee Win, who is also an MBA student from our cohort. And prior to the MBA Shwe used to run her family business of garment manufacturing and retail operations back in Yangon, Myanmar. Shwe, thank you for being here. And how are you doing today?

Shwe Yee Win:

Great. Today's Friday, so I'm just looking forward to the weekend.

Sandhya Sridhar:

Aren't we all. Now that it has been more than two months, what has been the highlight in the Oxford so far for you? Any place you love particularly or any experience you've enjoyed the most?

Shwe Yee Win:

Yeah, so there are two things I've been enjoying. Firstly is rowing. So rowing is quite commitment intensive. So I've been trying to commit to rowing at least once a week. And another thing would be cycling because back in my home country, cycling along the main roads is generally not safe, but it's so different in Oxford you can just cycle to anywhere. So I've been enjoying the experience so far.

Sandhya Sridhar:

Yeah, and cycling is so famous here in Oxford, so I'm glad you're loving that experience. Okay, Shwe, so why don't we start by you touching upon your background, your industry and what is something you have learned during your time in Oxford so far that has challenged a preconception you had about the future of business in your particular industry?

Shwe Yee Win:

So my background is in garment manufacturing and the fashion retail operations. It's my family business, which I have been working on for the past five years from manufacturing until distribution. And my experiences span across strategy, implementation, operations and distribution.

So one thing that has challenged a preconception about the future of the business in my industry would be the climate impact issues and the concept that is quite popular here, which is a de-growth concept. So for us where Myanmar is especially one of the low income countries, we rely generally on the manufacturing and agriculture export for our economic growth and we need to rely on the growth of the fashion retail brands. But at the same time, I also understand the impact of the fast fashion that has upon the environment and the changes that is generally taking place in the future. So as the business owner in this industry in the future, I was thinking how I can partner with the clients that put ethical sourcing and also balance, the climate impact issues and the de-growth concept that we'll be facing in the industry.

Sandhya Sridhar:

Amazing. What crisis did your business face and the measures you took to overcome it?

Shwe Yee Win:

So there are two parts in my business line. One side of it is the manufacturing, the garment manufacturing factory, and the other part is the retail distribution. So I think I'll focus on the garment manufacturing and the challenges that we face as a factory and how I overcome it. So firstly would be the challenge when the country opened up because our country was under the military rule for the past 60 years and when it opened up, a lot of the international brands come in. So that means a lot of the imports from a neighboring country like China and Thailand, they also come into the country at the same time as well. Prior to that, my family business was solely manufacturing our own in-house fashion label brand. So the factory was just focusing on manufacturing that brand. And when the imports come in, we have to also ramp up our production to be more efficient and to be more cost effective.

So there was this competition challenge that our factory faced. So what I did was I changed the business model by making it more resilient and agile by changing our product from in-house label to manufacturing for other local label brands and also adding on different product lines such as uniform, pants and kids' clothing, so that we are more resilient and agile. So from pivoting the business model from only manufacturing in-house label to manufacturing for other fashion label brands and adding on different product lines gave us an advantage during covid. Because when the first wave of covid hit, there was no business and the activities stopped for the first few weeks in our country because nobody

knew what to do or how to figure out with the covid and how to move forward, especially in the manufacturing facilities where there was no space to just do safe distancing or where there was not enough equipment to just make sure all the staff are safe.

But I took this challenge as an opportunity where I started manufacturing reusable cloth masks. And because I managed to take up that opportunity fairly fast, it gave us a first mover advantage where we acquired a lot of the major clients including international clients like UN, ICRC. So it gave us a lot of advantage in gaining that sector.

So the main thing I did here is just to prioritize the staff safety throughout the covid and ensuring that they adhere to the measurements and guidelines that we as a factory has implemented, like safe distancing, wear masks all the time, make sure that they wash their hands when they come to work and make sure that they have enough protective equipments to come into work. And also at the production part, we ensure that we are rapidly making design changes according to our client feedback so that we can produce the mask as what our clients wanted. Because it was our first time, it was everybody's first time manufacturing, such reusable masks, we didn't know how to proceed with it, but collaborating with the clients and receiving feedback from them how to improve on it and rapidly incorporating throughout, make sure that we succeeded in this entire process.

Sandhya Sridhar:

That's really interesting Shwe. So you mentioned some of the crisis you faced in the manufacturing line of business, but can you also touch upon the kind of crisis you might have faced specifically during the covid times in the retail distribution side of things?

Shwe Yee Win:

Yes, of course. So retail distribution also took a big hit during the covid because during the first few weeks all the shopping malls closed down and we have a lot of outlets at the shopping malls where we sell our fashion brand. So what I did was I changed the business model from retail distribution to online sales department where we do Facebook Live streaming to sell clothes online.

So during those period, rather than asking the sales staff to just stay at home during those periods, we upskilled their skills to do live streaming and sell clothes online. Initially there were quite a few challenges. Before Covid, everything was done very traditionally, which means we only sell clothes through the retail stores. We don't have a Facebook page, we never have to sell through the other channels. So this was a very big challenge for the entire retail distribution department.

There were shy sales staff who didn't want to go on live on Facebook to do Facebook Live sell, and also setting up a Facebook page and managing it to setting up a new entire department to handle the sales coming through that channel was a big issue for us as well. It was a deep learning curve, but I'm glad that we did it because right now that online sold department represents at least 30 to 40% of our entire revenue.

Sandhya Sridhar:

Thank you so much for sharing all those experiences with us. And what I loved hearing too was how you changed every challenge into an opportunity. Also, we are all aware that your country went through a military coup recently and I'm sure your business would have also faced many challenges during those times. Would you like to share some of those experiences with us?

Shwe Yee Win:

Yeah, so after the first year of covid when we all thought our country was on the right track from recovering the covid, then the military coup happened. It happened on the 1st of February 2021. So there was a lot of instability in both the politics and the economic. There were a lot of increasing urban violences, very unstable infrastructure to conduct business on a daily basis and not knowing which rules and regulations to follow because there was so many changes with the regulations within a day.

For example, one day there can be a cap on how much money you can withdraw from your bank account. The next day there can be a petrol sales limit, so there is a limit on how much a patrol you can buy. And the next, you can also have a day where everyone decides to do a silent strike. So you'll have to arrange all of your staff to take a day off so that they can all participate in the strike where you have to just prioritize what the general consensus want and take swift actions to whatever information you have and play it by ear. And also you will have to know your priorities during those moments so that you don't get swayed by whatever instabilities that you will face throughout the entire time.

Sandhya Sridhar:

When we connected sometime earlier, you did mention that almost around 85% of your staff were women. So it would be really interesting if you could also talk more about how you promoted women empowerment in your business and the ways in which you encouraged them to get to the forefront of management.

Shwe Yee Win:

Yeah, of course. So initially when I joined the family business, only two were women in the managerial positions and the rest were men. So that doesn't accurately reflect the entire workforce. And also there are other issues such as high absenteeism and turnover rate. And when I deep dive into the reasons why there were such issues, firstly there were cultural issues of afraid to speak up, especially to their male managers. And also for women after a certain age, they are expected to give up their career and just focus on raising their families. And another effect would be that women only come into the garment industry as a temporary stop and they don't generally see any future because the trend in the industry is that a lot of the men would be in the manager positions and that's the reason why they do not see any progressions in the career as well.

So how I come around to solve the issue was initially I set up a proper structure from the trainee to manager level with monthly check-ins. So for the trainees part, I would only promote internal hires, especially for the operators who were manufacturing the clothes. So we would only hire juniors from outside, from the internal referral programs, so we already know when they come in, they already have a partner to buddy up in the factory and also they will be a higher tendency to stay within the factory because they have somebody that they know in the factory. And that's how we trained up our trainees. And the second part would be the supervisors. We would start giving them more responsibilities. Initially they were very reluctant to take up the responsibilities because they were afraid of the consequences of the mistakes. So in our culture, even in the education, we were raised not to speak up to against elder or we were raised not to question our teachers.

So that comes along with the reluctance to take up responsibilities or ask questions in the workplace. So how I did it was for the first three months, the factory will incur any cost or losses that come from taking up new rules. Because of course when you take up the leadership positions, there will be mistakes you make along the way. So there'll be wastages or errors that might be along the learning journey. And of course from our side we will incur any cost or losses from that. So they were more confident to take up the supervisor roles. And also in terms of the quality insurance wise, we bring all the supervisors to the client meetings whenever we can so that they see how hard we have to work, especially on the sales

and marketing side to acquire all these clients. And they know that they have to prioritize qualities to retain these clients.

And also if there were any challenges or issues that they faced during the production, they will also have to come along with the client meetings to explain to the client so that they feel more confident speaking up and they really start to understand why the quality is important. And another way how I build up the confidence is also to bring along them along to the client meetings. Whenever we face our challenges during the production phase, then they'll come along to explain and collaborate with the client to solve whatever issues they have faced in the production line. Then that's how the supervisors understand what clients actually want rather than the sales team communicating to the production team. Then the production team will actually understand how the clients prioritize the quality.

Sandhya Sridhar:

Thank you so much. And this was very relatable because coming from a country where women are not encouraged to speak up much, that was a brilliant approach from your end. And after having implemented this, like what changes could you see in actuality?

Shwe Yee Win:

So the changes that we saw was tremendous and amazing. Right now 80% of our managers are and production line supervisors are all internally promoted and they actually reflect the gender equality in the management level. Now 85% of our management is all female, and we have actually brought down the absenteeism by really questioning the managers and the leaders the reasons why the staff are absent and now they can communicate better both from the manager side and both from the operator side because there is this collaboration and trust among the team. And also it makes the managers become more aware of their team and really collaborate to produce quality products.

Sandhya Sridhar:

That's brilliant. Shwe. Also, as you are the co-chair of Family Business Club for this year at the business school, what plans and vision do you have as a theme for the club?

Shwe Yee Win:

Yes. So we have two main goals. The first goal would be to build a lifelong network with the people from family business backgrounds who have done family business or people who are interested to go back to the family business to work with them. So how we are doing is to plan speaker sessions, networking events and brown bag lunches to discuss hot topics around the family business such as intergenerational conflict management or succession planning. And the second goal would be to start discussion around the family businesses, both within the SBS community and also with the wider University of Oxford and also with the other business schools. So this means we have to create events to increase clubs' interaction with the SBS alumni and also with the other SBS programs such as EMBA and MFE candidates.

Sandhya Sridhar:

That's lovely to hear. So any of you who are interested in family business, you know who to reach out. And lastly, our podcast is called The Future of Business. So what do you think the business world would look like in a hundred years, let's say in 2122?

Shwe Yee Win:

I cannot predict what is the future going to look like, but this is what I hope how the business world would look like in a hundred years. I hope we collectively would've achieved at least half of the or almost all of UNSGG goals such as no poverty, zero hunger, quality education, gender equality, and affordable and clean energy for all parts of the world. And coming from a Third World country where we are going through a military coup right now, I hope all the developing countries would've successfully transformed themselves to develop countries where they will be enjoying economic prosperity and freedom.

Sandhya Sridhar:

That's very exciting and hopeful and I think all of us as future business leaders, this is what we should strive to achieve. Well, that's what we have for today. Thank you so much Shwe, for taking out time to talk to us and it was an absolute pleasure to have you here today.

Shwe Yee Win:

Of course, thank you for having me here and giving me this opportunity to speak up. This is my very first time going on air and such it's an amazing opportunity to do it together with you.

Sandhya Sridhar:

Oh, likewise. And thank you to all of you listening. If you don't already, please make sure you're following Future of Business on Apple Podcast, Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts from. So you'll be the first one to know whenever we roll out an episode. I hope to have you all back for our next episode. And until then, take care.