

Media Alert

For Immediate Release

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Leading Ladies: Building inclusivity in the workplace and career lessons learned

Manulife Philippines' top female executives share their experiences in creating a supportive work environment, plus some tips for a successful career in financial services.

Manila — In today's highly complex world, the importance of a more inclusive workplace has become increasingly clear. New ways of working have presented challenges and opportunities in fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Socioeconomic implications of COVID-19, like loss of jobs, changes in living situations, and diverse family structures that can be disruptive with daily work, can bring about inequities in ways unlike before. So, it is important to practice inclusive leadership now more than ever, as we seek to carve the best path forward and build the "next normal."

Esteemed organizations such as the United Nations (UN) Women, the World HRD Congress, and Stars of the Industry Group have recognized companies that build a safe and supportive workplace culture, which ensures fairness, respect, value and belonging, and confidence for employees.

One of the companies recently recognized by these organizations is global life insurer Manulife. The company's innovation for talent management and organizational culture, which aims to encourage employees to thrive, celebrate, and care for each other, was honored at the 2020 Best Employer Brands. The UN Women 2020 Asia-Pacific Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) Awards also recently lauded Manulife Philippines' gender-inclusivity efforts, and Manulife is the only life insurance company to have been recognized by the inaugural awards.

Championing young women to succeed at work, at home and in the communities where they are present, Manulife Philippines' leading ladies shared their insights to inspire fresh graduates and young women to take charge of their lives and careers. What does it take for women to succeed in their careers? What does it mean to be an empowered Filipina?

Learn from Manulife's Atty. Fritzie Tangkia-Fabricante, Chief Legal and Compliance Officer (CLCO); Melissa Henson, Chief Marketing Officer (CMO); Candy Suarez, Chief Financial Officer (CFO); Anna Villamor, Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO); and Aira Gaspar, President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Manulife Asset Management Trust Corporation (MAMTC), as they share their stories and experiences in being women-in-charge.

Building an inclusive workplace culture

In her years of experience doing corporate counseling and commercial practice, including formerly leading a universal bank's legal services group, Atty. Fabricante fondly related that empowering team members to express their thoughts and share their ideas is at the core of building an inclusive workplace. "Every opinion matters in coming up with a holistic solution, regardless of background."

She likened the value of workplace inclusivity to the benefits of traveling. "When you travel, you appreciate the value of knowing different cultures, traditions, and perspectives. In the workplace, we need to create an environment where everyone is accepted and heard."

This is echoed by CMO Melissa Henson, who emphasized the importance of diversity of thought, because this offers opportunities to learn from each other and grow more together. "A growth mindset enables organizations to thrive in today's rapidly changing business environment, and requires welcoming possibilities and ideas that may be different from what we know. Diversity, and the inclusiveness that fosters it, allows that."

For CHRO Anna Villamor, knowing that the company puts a high premium on diversity, equity, and inclusion is a great push when hiring and developing talent, because an inclusive workplace requires a holistic approach. "Since Manulife strives to build a workplace where everyone feels included, respected, and comfortable with being themselves, imagine how much strength, energy and creativity an organization can collectively and effortlessly generate from such diversity!"

Breaking barriers in the financial services industry

As a CFO, Candy Suarez's role involves risk management and part of this responsibility is ensuring the company's capability to fulfill its promise of protection. She has also seen how the life insurance industry has evolved, and how her job contributes to the financial well-being of the customers it serves. "There is great fulfillment in working in the life insurance industry and definitely much to gain. Young Filipinas now are also more financially literate and aware than ever because of the wealth of information that is available to them. Fortunately, in Manulife, there is a conscious decision to empower women and help them advance in their careers. This has given me confidence to do the job at hand, without unnecessary distractions or worry from dealing with unproductive gender biases," said Suarez.

MAMTC President and CEO Aira Gaspar also shared the incredible sense of fulfillment in her role, as being an investment manager gives you more opportunities to learn new things. She started her career handling Philippine-based investment portfolios, and has since progressed to running an asset management company, which proves that investing in continuous learning is a springboard for growth.

"Young women can build a rewarding career in investment management. As they develop their knowledge and skills in understanding how financial markets work and the factors that drive the

movement of asset prices, they will find that investment management can be a fulfilling career. They will thrive in the challenges of applying informed views in portfolio management,” shared Gaspar.

“I hope to see more young women not only build a career in investment management but excel in it as well,” she added.

Finding courage, understanding people, and “getting on the balcony”

Getting customer insights and understanding the messages that will resonate with their needs, while bringing fun and flavor to an industry usually seen as traditional has been Henson’s bread and butter. Becoming a CMO is a long-time dream, and to this day, it continues to be her dream job. Henson believes that “marketing changes with people,” and her fascination with people and what drives them helps her find joy in understanding customers and their behaviors.

For aspiring marketers, Henson professed three important things: bravery, curiosity, and the decisiveness to speak up when needed.

“Courage helps in advancing your career because you need to step out of your comfort zone and try new things, both in personal development, as well as in exploring new projects and initiatives. Asking questions and striving to learn helps in becoming better professionals and leaders, because you’ll find different ways to deliver solutions.”

Henson added: “Speaking up shows that you understand the situation and could offer ideas. Earlier in my career, I was a bit hesitant to speak up at meetings for fear of making mistakes, but my boss and mentor encouraged me to be more vocal. Having the courage to ask questions and speak up means I understand the situation and can offer new ideas.”

Gaspar also acknowledges the value of being bold. “Do not let the possibility of failure keep you from pursuing your aspirations. When failure happens, do not allow it to define what you can achieve.”

In fact, as one progresses in their career, there is always the certainty of dealing with mistakes. Suarez offers the importance of turning them into learning opportunities, in the wise words of Nelson Mandela: “I never lose. I either win or learn.”

Suarez also cited the importance of choosing to see the good in people. “More often than not, people have good intentions. We only differ in the execution. If we choose to see the positive intent and understand where the other person is coming from, working and succeeding together becomes easier.”

When times are a little tougher, Atty. Fabricante believes that what one needs is to pause, take a deep breath, and assess the situation. “Get on the balcony,” she said, mentioning her favorite passage from “Leadership on the Line,” a book co-authored by her Leadership Course professor

at Harvard University. “I cannot overemphasize the importance of stepping back during a crisis to find a clearer perspective of the situation.”

Becoming financially independent

One of the first steps toward building a secure future is achieving financial independence. For Villamor, this independence is directly linked to the choices that one makes every day. “Gaining financial independence requires making endless choices daily—on how much we spend, how often we spend, and what we spend it on. It can be difficult, especially when money is tight, and there are competing priorities. It is important to be disciplined in how we manage our finances.”

Setting financial goals is another way to build a good habit. Gaspar added that this is a way to empower you to work harder because you have a clear goal in mind that you want to achieve. “Invest early and consistently, so you can achieve your dreams while also ensuring a comfortable life for you and your family.”

Empowered women who empower others

Gender diversity among leaders has been proven to accelerate organizational and financial performance, and inevitably, female talent has become more substantial to uphold fairness and equity in the workplace. Through leadership, mentorship and sponsorship, there is fairer access to opportunities and resources for all, as well as supportive policies and changes in attitudes, beliefs, and practices, to support gender equality.

“People find fulfillment in being part of an organization that enables them to realize their sense of purpose,” shared Gaspar. “No one has the monopoly of best ideas, so every member of our team is encouraged to share insights and collaborate with other team members to achieve set goals. This has fostered a culture of taking responsibility to make things happen.”

For empowerment to work, there is also a need for more dialogue, collaboration, and collective action, for a leader is nothing without a winning team. Manulife’s leading ladies working at the front and center to make things happen serve as an inspiration. When faced with a challenge or a roadblock that threatens DEI’s progress, they know that they can count on each other.

“The leader and professional that I am today is the product of mentorship and sponsorship. I was fortunate to have worked for many strong leaders – both women and men – who not only served as my mentors, but also sponsors who helped me navigate complex organizations, gain the right exposure, and progress quickly. It has been quite empowering for me as a leader, and has given me a clear guidepost to follow, as I now work to develop individuals with great talent and nurture leaders among them, helping them find purpose, so we can make up a stronger whole,” Henson shared.

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About Manulife Philippines

The Manufacturers Life Insurance Company opened its doors for business in the Philippines in 1907. Since then, Manulife's Philippine Branch and later The Manufacturers Life Insurance Co. (Phils.), Inc. (Manulife Philippines) has grown to become one of the country's leading life insurance companies. Manulife Philippines is a wholly-owned domestic subsidiary of Manulife Financial Corporation, among the world's largest life insurance companies by market capitalization. Learn more about Manulife Philippines by visiting their website www.manulife.com.ph and following them on Facebook (www.facebook.com/ManulifePH), Twitter (@ManulifePH), and Instagram (@manulifeph).

About Manulife

Manulife Financial Corporation is a leading international financial services group that helps people make their decisions easier and lives better. With our global headquarters in Toronto, Canada, we operate as Manulife across our offices in Canada, Asia, and Europe, and primarily as John Hancock in the United States. We provide financial advice, insurance, and wealth and asset management solutions for individuals, groups and institutions. At the end of 2020, we had more than 37,000 employees, over 118,000 agents, and thousands of distribution partners, serving over 30 million customers. As of December 31, 2020, we had \$1.3 trillion (US\$1.0 trillion) in assets under management and administration, and in the previous 12 months we made \$31.6 billion in payments to our customers. Our principal operations are in Asia, Canada and the United States where we have served customers for more than 155 years. We trade as 'MFC' on the Toronto, New York, and the Philippine stock exchanges and under '945' in Hong Kong.

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