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MIDDLE EAST



WOMEN IN RECYCLING



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Treading the difficult path to success

It's been commented by earth911.com and with good reason that women are better for the planet - they recycle more, they are more keen to be green, they drive slower and shorter distances, they eat less meat and make more eco-purchases. With this, there is now a growing trend of women joining the recycling industry.

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With Women's Day being celebrated in March worldwide, Waste and Recycling Middle East would like to recognise those who have shown strength, tenacity and discipline in recycling industry to improve our planet. Women now are setting a new trend in the recycling industry with their positive contributions to the sector.

One such professional is Mae deLa Cruz, who discussed with Waste & Recycling Middle East key lessons she has learnt since starting to work in the region's recycling industry. With a dual degree in business management and psychology she moved in 2003 to UAE to work for Sayed Metal. When faced with adversity in the traditionally male dominated recycling industry, she chose to take initiative to create her own future and is now an executive director at Sayed Metal. Her company is focused on providing high value service to its niche clients and thus gave her an opportunity and edge in excelling at customer satisfaction, says Mae.

What inspired you to join the recycling business?

I have always been interested in ideas that focus on repurposing waste. I have occasionally pondered over the idea of doing something interesting about turning waste into treasure and at the same time generating employment. I also worked at a multinational company that focused on reducing carbon footprint for a couple of years prior to joining Sayed Metal. So I think it was a blend of several ingredients which lead to a perfect timing.



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So you mean you were looking to join the recycling industry?

Well, not straight away. When I moved to Dubai way back in 2003, I just wanted to accept any new assignment for a breakthrough in my career in the Middle East.

But women and recycling, sounds odd isn't it?

Yes it does. When I decided to join the recycling business I did get cold shoulders from my social circles. Fieldwork, operational work, recycling scrap commodities, etc. did seem exclusively masculine tasks to them. But the idea that it's stereotyped as a male oriented industry made it more appealing to accept the challenge.

Not many women make it to the top in Middle East recycling firms. How did you do it?

The journey hasn't been an easy one. It is actually the corporate culture that restrains a woman in a glass ceiling that she isn't able to succeed in a so called men's job. I had to deal with negative comments after succeeding to a management position. Recycling business requires one to be thick skinned and I had to get tough to succeed. Because I believe there is no gender barrier when it comes to success.

It wasn't a smooth ride, but I had good support for my leadership and our corporate culture promotes women empowerment. I had to come out of the academic realm to take charge at the executive level. Currently we have the highest female ratio in this industry and we proved the sceptics wrong when our long term strategies and policies generated sustainable profits.





So you basically hire more females to prove your point?

The first step to generate sustainable profit is building a team. For that you need to have a good selection of people who are passionate about recycling. We have a strong network of professionals who are excited about recycling. As there is diversity in the team, naturally it will lead to more chances to succeed in our goals. So basically having gender balance simply amplifies the accomplishment factor.

Middle East recyclers for the past several months are seeing challenging times, is it a macro issue which is affecting your business as well?

Well, I think you are referring to several recyclers in the

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positioned now. It is always tough in the beginning and later it would work to your advantage.

What kind of sceptics?

At a director's level, my daily role requires dealing with senior managers who are almost all males. I am involved with corporate management teams. Perceiving that a female cannot match the capabilities of a male was a big challenge for me. They always wanted our male counterpart instead and felt more comfortable dealing with the same gender.

Well, males are right in judging so owing to our biological nature. I succeeded when everyone told me I would fail. Most females give priority to family over career, but I tried to balance the same. Initially I had to work extra hard and go the extra mile to achieve the same result that a man can, but over the years I am improved and am better



Middle East booking negative records. Apparently, this would give a general impression that recyclers are facing tough macro environment, but it isn't the truth. On the contrary we made a record five year gains in 2014.

The firms that are facing losses or bankruptcy are actually those that are highly leveraged. Trading with others' money is a dodgy and murky business. Once a firm gets used to high debt ratio, it indulges in highly risky and unknown derivatives like commodity hedging, currency hedging, selling futures and what not to book intangible profits to show a rosy picture to its lenders. Such bogus financials provide an attraction to lenders in investing with them, thus creating a vicious circle backed by gluttony.

So what makes your company different?

We are a cash based company and refrain from credit trading; the interest saved, technically speaking, is profit earned for us as compared to our peer firms. Our management is well versed with financial instruments and hence its implication. We do not indulge in trendy futures instruments that are quite charming during boom period but prove disastrous otherwise.

Rather than speculative businesses we focus on efficiency, effectiveness and enhancing our value addition to our clients. Of course, this is a long term strategy and it should fit within the company's goal and mission.

As a woman, what lessons have you learnt during your career growth?

I have been working in the recycling business for over a decade and can confidentially say I have learnt a lot from my mistakes. Women could focus on emotional intelligence which can lead to the path to success.



■ **Prioritising the work** - As a female we give priority to all tasks delegated to us. With limited resources we must prioritise our tasks so we can do the important work first over unimportant things. We have to be good at time management.

■ **As a person** I have changed a lot - Before reaching this position I always felt the need to be polite. But now I am firm and decisive in my actions to get the job done. Obviously I had to learn to say No when and where required. We have to stand up for what we believe in.

■ **I have learned the value of communication** both internal and external - You have to be frank and communicate with clients and colleagues so that one can perform and deliver better results. We have to be objective in each networking in order to get the job done. It is very vital to develop oneself and the business.

■ **I have learned to see the big picture** of an assignment rather than focusing on each detail. As a part of the management team I focus on numbers that eventually matter to the bottom

line rather than checking anomalies of the each process. By this I mean we have to forego details to achieve greater sum.

■ **I learnt how to negotiate** and do it really well. After all, the value of any service can be improved by good negotiation skills.

■ **I have learnt to cope with uncertainty.** Decision making is all about making choices and of course it cannot go right all the time.

■ **Finally, I have learnt to trust and delegate** to my team without which I cannot achieve my organisational goals.

What advice would you like to give to other aspiring young women to succeed in the recycling industry despite it being stereotyped as a men's industry?

Believe in yourself despite everyone trying to convince you otherwise. It is nice to incorporate their criticism as your performance check and balance but stick to your goal. Be persistent. There is no other solution than to ignore those who are hostile and get your act together 🌱