Breaking new ground

The chief group general counsel and company secretary of Emirates NBD leads with grit and grace, mastering her skills to drive her passion to support the UAE in achieving its global ambitions.

When we asked Lubna Qassim what it takes to cultivate career success, she had five words of advice, "Take ownership of your career." She added, "Do not expect anyone to just hand you a promotion. It takes consistent and credible hard work to progress in your chosen profession."

Lubna Qassim's extraordinary career trajectory is a testament to her inspiring mantra of success.

Qualified as a lawyer in the United Kingdom, she began her professional life with Clifford Chance, spending eight years at their London and Dubai offices. Over the years, she has taken on significant influential roles in line with her passion of helping the UAE achieve its global ambitions. The list of accomplishments and activities to her name is incredible. Prior to her current role, she was appointed by the Minister of Economy HE Sultan bin Saeed Al Mansoori to oversee the passage of legislative reforms significant for the economy of the UAE.

Her collective experiences of having worked in the private and public sector led her to her current role. In 2014, she took on the responsibility of being the executive vice-president, chief group general counsel and company secretary of the retail and corporate banking group, Emirates NBD.

"In 2014, the bank adopted a renewed ambition and it was important for the legal function to be in line with this vision. I was tasked to restructure and it was my ambition to built a 'fit for purpose' legal function for the bank," Qassim said.

The remit of Qassim's role is vast as she wears a dual-hat being the general counsel and company secretary. She has two different teams running mandates for both these roles. "What's exciting about my dual position is that the work is extremely varied and I enjoy striking the delicate balance the needs of these distinct roles. Although, I am disciplined to ensure that I have Chinese walls between these two roles - one foot in management and the second in the boardroom."

TEAM ENBD

The first thing she did was to ensure that the legal function sat at the nerve centre of the institution i.e. the corporate HQ of Emirates NBD. It was critical for her to build a solid infrastructure for the legal function. "Three years into my role, I can proudly say that we do have a solid infrastructure in place, a credible driven legal team which has added immense value to business and saved huge legal costs for the Banks."

To create a 'fit for purpose' legal team, Qassim hand-picked her lawyers focusing on seniority and skill-sets specific to business needs. Qassim didn't restrict herself to the region to build her team, going as far as New York, London and Singapore to find the right talent with strong values to provide best services to ENBD.

So, what does it take to be a part of the legal team of Emirates NBD? "As lawyers, we are required to navigate through different territories and interact with colleagues who come from various cultural backgrounds. Hence, along with technical legal expertise, I sought lawyers who would understand and appreciate the multi-diverse culture of our institution, which has employees from over 60 nationalities. It was also about bringing lawyers who had the ability to deal with the pressures of in-house work and adapt accordingly. Most importantly, they had to have a commercial outlook and be solution-driven."

The team is structured as per the dedicated segments of the bank with heads of units directly reporting to Qassim. She said, "We are not just a group of lawyers providing legal advice, we have strong business acumen as well." One of the challenges the team had to deal with was changing the way the legal team was considered by other units of the business.

"By creating and implementing different tools and processes, the legal

function is adding value to the business along with providing sound advice," she said. Through immense collaborative efforts, the team has managed to transform itself to being the go-to legal function for the entire group spanning three banks, 211 branches in the UAE, six international operations and six companies.

One of the ways they tackled that was by spearheading an initiative to provide legal awareness training to their business colleagues on various hot topics through the 'GCCS Legal Talk Series'.

The team's goals are driven by the bank's strategic objectives for the year. Qassim strongly believes in empowering her team to collaborate and be in sync with the rest of the business to achieve those goals.

External counsel play an integral role in assisting the legal function hence Qassim seeks lawyers who can be a true partner – provide sound quality advice while bearing in mind the organisation's best interests. Though the UAE's legal market has evolved, the challenge according to her often remains in being unable to find the expertise at a local level for a specific need. "Law firms are readily available to offer us services, however that service maybe located in a different geographical location and another time-zone. Often for us, the time factor is critical to the business," she elaborated.

THE FUTURE OF LEGAL SERVICES

When we asked her about her thoughts on the future of legal services, Qassim talked about the transformative power of technology and how it is accelerating and progressively affecting the way business is done across the globe and in various sectors. She added, "The banking industry is not immune to it either. Take Emirates NBD for example, as a bank we have pioneered and championed innovative solution-driven tools for our customers." In that regard, Qassim stressed on the need for regulators to introduce and put in place legal parameters for digital banking and fintech in the UAE, considering rapid developments in this space.

As for the future of legal services, she opined, "In the next five decades, I envision greater use of technology be it in courthouses, in-house teams or law firms. I also strongly believe business models will have to be re-engineered to adopt to the accelerated technology. We are already witnessing the changes

LUBNA QASSIM'S BEST PRACTICE TIPS FOR GCs

- Be a trusted advisor – GCs need to have the ability to use different skill sets such as communicating, collaborating and partnering to support the business
- Be courageous – It is important for GCs to rely on their judgment and be brave enough to express their opinion as and when required.





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through consolidated machine-based processes and automated contracts. Here at the bank, we have recently introduced a sophisticated system in the legal function that tracks our cases and and keeps us up to speed on the progress. Of course, the human element is still vital for legal services. The incorporation of technology will result in smaller, more efficient legal teams."

A PROFOUND EXPERIENCE

Qassim narrated an interesting incident she experienced as a private practice lawyer that proved to be a learning curve for her. Early in her career, she was advising a multi-billion dollar Japanese company based out of Japan and operating in the UAE, who was struggling to understand certain ambiguity in our legislation and the distinction between the law and the practice here. She recounted, "I probably exchanged 50-odd emails and eighteen phone calls across different time zones before they finally decided to make a trip here to comprehensively understand what I was trying to convey to them. At the end it turned out to be a successful meeting. They appreciated my advice. It was a truly enriching experience as I learned three things that day."

Lesson #1 – Never underestimate the value of a face-to-face meeting. In spite of all the amazing technology and fantastic tools we use, personal interaction still holds a lot of value in doing business.

Lesson #2 – It is key to have the ability to use different skill-sets for different clients. A lawyer needs to adapt his/her presentation style based on the client's needs and their business culture.

Lesson #3 – A good lawyer is one who has the ability to explain to his/her clients not only what they want to hear but also be able to honestly advise the client on the risks involved if any.

PAVING THE PATH

In the year 2015, Qassim was elected by the ruler of Dubai, HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum to the Dubai Women Establishment to increase the number of women in leadership positions in the UAE. She is also the founding chair of the 30% Club GCC Chapter. She credits the ambitious leadership of the UAE for appreciating the importance of inclusiveness and taking bold, game-changing efforts such as appointing women to senior positions at the workplace. Thereby, the UAE has set the tone at the top and is enabling others to follow lead. "I am encouraged to see many senior female leaders across the board, the globe across different industries. However, if you ask me - Have we met gender parity? Are you happy with the numbers? – I'll have to say no, the numbers are inadequate." She added, "I feel extremely privileged to be the first woman in fifty years to sit on the executive committee of one of the largest financial institutions in the UAE, however the story doesn't end there. It doesn't end with my appointment. We need to nurture talent and ensure that there are other senior female leaders in the pipeline."

Having started her career twenty years ago in a profession that is still largely tilted towards men, Qassim talked about how being the only woman in the room or being the minority in the room has become a norm for her. She has never let it intimidate her. "I have never felt intimidated simply because I don't see the difference. I have been gender blind – I don't focus on the differences between men and women. I don't believe I am any less ambitious or work less hard than my male colleagues. We are here to bring value through our roles in the organisation. When I want to put across a point, I use a loud, firm voice and have no reservations in expressing my opinion when I have to."

REFLECTIONS

Qassim reflected on the year gone by describing it as a challenging yet rewarding year for her and her team, "There were many lessons learned in 2016 and I take pride in knowing that I have a team with strong values and high team spirit. Personally, I have learned to never doubt my judgment calls and make sure it is expressed firmly and clearly and I take pride influencing good governance to business."

The chief group general counsel is also an international speaker and is regularly invited to forums to talk about governance, women in leadership and the role of youth.

If we had to describe Lubna Qassim is one word, it'd have to be limitless. She combines her passion with skill by effortlessly pushing boundaries, leading change and shaping future leaders – thus proving time and again, there is no limit to what she can accomplish.