

August 2015 Issue MARTIN GLOBAL LEADERS

Global Insider Interviews

Conversations with leaders around the globe

Hi ,

Hi << Test First Name >>,

We are very excited to launch our **Global Insider Interview Series** with this profile of **Aziz El-Azarifi**, Managing, Director Middle-East, Africa & Turkey, at General Mills in Dubai, UAE.

In this series we learn how increased cultural diversity among top leaders is shaping contemporary leadership philosophy and practice in today's global enterprises.

We hope you enjoy reading about Aziz's fascinating story of the leadership lessons he learned growing up in Morocco, and how this has shaped his career as a senior leader in the food industry. He was interviewed by David Howells, MGL EMEA Region Head, from our London office.

We welcome your thoughts on this topic and suggestions for future interviews!

Sincerely, Craig & David





Aziz El-Azarifi on suspending judgement as cross-cultural leader.

Aziz El-Azarifi, Managing Director, Middle
East, Africa and Turkey, General Mills,
Dubai, UAE



"...It's essential to suspend judgment and to keep your own baggage carefully stowed away..."

Q: WHO WERE YOUR ROLE MODELS WHEN YOU WERE GROWING UP?

Aziz El-Azarifi: My early influences came from three sources: my parents, my grandparents and my primary school teachers. Each of these had an impact on my values and as an 8 year old boy I was like a sponge for their ideas. They all symbolized to me the

importance of wisdom and thinking positively, they helped me to become an eternal optimist. My teachers in particular helped me to see what I could not see in myself - I quickly learned that if I pushed myself hard and focused on my ambitions then I would achieve.

WHAT VALUES FROM YOUR CULTURE DO YOU BELIEVE HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO YOUR CURRENT SUCCESS?

Within my Moroccan Berber cultural heritage, the importance of working hard and striving with a purpose was highly valued and has had an impact on what I do nowadays. Perseverance was also recognised as a key talent. Additionally within my Berber culture, and of course within my religion, we believe that “right always prevails” and that doing the correct thing is of critical importance. It has given me a moral compass with which to steer my actions. As a Berber you never complain about your situation, as you always recognise that there are inevitably others who are in worse situations than your own.

HOW HAS YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE EVOLVED WHILE WORKING ACROSS A RANGE OF ORGANIZATIONS?

In moving across a number of organizations I guess that my leadership has become more transformational rather than transactional, I have recognized that I cannot manage every aspect, so I now set the direction and help others to manage the detail. Additionally my style has moved more towards “we” rather than “me”, but within that I have also extracted myself from the centre of the “we” circle and now see myself as much more integrated, rather than the traditional “hub and spoke” model with me at the centre.

HOW HAVE YOU HAD TO DEAL WITH DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NATIONAL CULTURES?

I have worked with and for many cultures and lived in the USA prior to moving to the Middle East. So with national cultures I always ask myself to be both sensitive and curious. Whilst working in Lebanon I was curious about what is different and this helped me carefully step through a number of difficult and potentially challenging situations – a more rushed and less sensitive approach would have been disastrous for me and my organization.

Listening is another Berber characteristic – if you speak less you can listen more. This has helped me to be more sensitive and to appreciate the differences and similarities between people of different cultures. Quite simply I have found that if I suspend my judgement on situations, and particularly people, I will get a better result. Giving people the “benefit of the doubt” has brought me success when working across national cultures and I partly attribute this to my keen interest in understanding them.

WHAT APPROACHES HAVE YOU USED TO LEVERAGE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE?

My most recent two employers have been quite different in terms of their organizational culture. What I learnt from this was the importance of adaptation to the culture in which I found myself – there is little point in hankering for “what was” - I had to deal with “what is”. I had to adapt my style to get things done, recognising that organizations are strongly anchored by their cultures and that this was unlikely to change - in at least the short term.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ARE THE KEYS TO INFLUENCE AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF AN ORGANIZATION?

Central to building influence at a senior level is the requirement to build trust - you have to possess an active interest in doing so. Building a track record is key to building that credibility, if you do what you say you are going to do then this becomes foundational in building trust within your senior network. I am also very careful to communicate a story about the journey which we are embarking on. If this story is clear then people find it easier to trust and follow you.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR LEADERS TRANSITIONING FOR THE FIRST TIME INTO NEW INTERNATIONAL OR GLOBAL ROLES?

We all carry too much excess baggage and the danger is that our baggage overwhelms our true impression of what we see in new and different situations. It's important to keep your baggage closed - store it away while you try to absorb what you see and what you hear. This again allows you to suspend judgement and get a clearer picture of the new environment. Curiosity and interest help us understand new situations and environments,

but they can only do so effectively if we “park our assumptions”. What’s important is to build new assumptions and then test them in the new environment.

LOOKING OUT 3-7 YEARS, WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU EXPECT GLOBAL LEADERS WILL HAVE TO FACE?

We all talk about how the world is changing, but what I see as most significant is the emergence of the so-called “Millennials Generation”. Millennials are not just customers and consumers, but they are also becoming clients, employees and soon even employers. Many organizations, particularly those in the food industry in which I operate, are having to radically re-evaluate their assumptions about consumers and check the efficacy of their business models.

In my early and mid-career most of us rightly assumed that we would have to put in a lot of effort particularly in our early years so that we got our foot on the bottom rung of the ladder to success. Today’s Millennials however are much more focused on work life balance and on what’s “good for me” rather than on what’s “good for my organization” - this even extends to what they consume. Loyalty to brands or companies can’t be taken for granted nowadays - a new trend/fad emerges to replace an outdated one with little changeover time and almost no warning. Its dealing with this type of fast paced challenge which I think will begin to tax global leaders and the organizations in which they work.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR DARKEST HOUR AND WHAT STEERED YOU THROUGH THIS?

Like many leaders, I guess I have had to face many “dark hours” perhaps even on a daily basis at times in the past. What’s proved to me to be important is the regular self-reminder of one’s purpose and the need to truly empower one’s team, to allow them to make small and hopefully unrepeated mistakes and thereby to learn. Priorities can either be selected by one or imposed on oneself, hence as a leader one always has to be ready for this dynamic - what has been important to me is to pursue priorities with all my vigour.

My father gave me the wise words “work for your company as if it was your own” and as I mentioned earlier in this interview I have a strong belief that “good will prevail”. It’s ideas like these that have steered me through many a crisis.

THANK YOU AZIZ, WE REALLY APPRECIATE YOU SHARING YOUR INSIGHTS WITH OUR GLOBAL INSIDER COMMUNITY.



Note to Readers: Our interviews with global leaders, as part of our Global Insiders series, offer personal insights from widely experienced people on the issues that have impacted them, do not necessarily represent the views and positions of neither their current organization nor those in which they have worked.

Each month, Martin Global Leaders interviews top executives from diverse backgrounds across industries and regions to illuminate how culture informs leadership philosophy and practices in today's global business environment.



Share



Tweet



Forward

Copyright © 2015 Martin Global Leaders, All rights reserved.

You signed up for Global Leadership Insiders at <http://martingloballeaders.com>

Please contact us at:

Martin Global Leaders
1670 S. Amphlett Blvd. Suite 214 #40
San Mateo, California 94402 USA
USA: +1 415 706 9328
UK: +44 7808 947576

[Add us to your address book](#)

Want to change how you receive these emails?

You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe from this list](#)