

How Lubna Al-Olayan Broke the Gender Barrier in Business

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How Lubna Al-Olayan Broke the Gender Barrier in Business

Lubna Al-Olayan, a Saudi woman, became the CEO of a multinational business (Olayan Financing Company Co or OFC) with its operations based in Saudi Arabia as early as 1983. She was the only female employee in an organization that had employed 4000 people (Fry, 2015). This situation made her feel privileged upon considering that surrounded by the progress made by women in terms of engagement in paid labor in other parts of the world, Saudi women of the time remained widely discriminated. Lubna did not seat contented with the privilege. She began contextualizing how she would involve more women in paid labor in Saudi Arabia against the then taboos and norms. Her leadership efforts, which emphasized the inclusion of more women in the company's workforce, led to the employment of 400 female workers in a highly conservative society that kept this class of people out of the workforce. These successes justify the importance of Lubna Al-Olayan's leadership that demonstrates the value and the role of the Centered Leadership Model (CLM) in driving individual achievements with the outcome of attracting others.

Research Question

Lubna Al-Olayan stands out as a leader who changed the role and position of the Saudi women in a conformist society. Within the context of CLM, the society would require her to have the emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual strength to make it possible to influence and inspire others. This paper seeks to answer the research question, "How and why did Lubna Al-Olayan's leadership effort within the paradigm of CLM break the gender barrier in Saudi business?"

Investigating the Leadership Topic

Women have experienced inequality in the workforce since time immemorial. Wolf (2017) demonstrates how women came out assertively to address gender barriers, starting with early

female workers such as Jane Austen and progressing to modern women who include Lubna Al-Olayan. While many women have contributed to the fight for equal inclusion in the workforce across the

world, only a few stand out, owing to the nature and characteristics of their societies. For example, in the context of the Arab world, Lubna Al-Olayan demonstrates an impeccable breakthrough in overcoming societal norms that had historically proved impossible to triumph over.

Lubna Al-Olayan's success demonstrates five integrated approaches to the CLM framework. She clearly understands the meaning of the role and the need for integrating women in the workforce. As the CEO of her father's enterprise, she knows her strength, which she puts into action with the goal of inspiring others. To achieve this goal, she manages her energy by understanding where it originates, where it needs to go, and what she can do to guarantee its management. She frames her world positively contrary to various traditional norms, which advocate for the non-inclusion of women in the Saudi workforce (Fry, 2015). She envisions a new Saudi where women progress in their career tantamount to other male employees. Indeed, after a long struggle and having persuaded and won a resistant OFC partner, she brought one more female before letting 56 others later in leadership positions (Fry, 2015).

The fourth pillar of CLM, namely, connecting, requires the identification of people who can enable one to achieve goals in leadership. Up to date, Lubna Al-Olayan relies on her family's support to change gender issues in her organization. Lastly, as demonstrated by Lubna, a leader needs to demonstrate the ability to identify one's voice to facilitate the development of self-confidence and the acceptance of opportunities while being fully aware of the underlying inherent risks and the need to collaborate with other people.

Discussion

Lubna Al-Olayan adopted various strategies and efforts to ensure that she broke the gender barrier in business in Saudi Arabia congruent with the stipulations of the CLM. Such efforts and strategies responded to the question of why and how she managed to accomplish her leadership goals. She endeavored to break the “woman barrier” in business since appreciated that it was not

necessary to remain at the top of success in the Saudi workforce alone while other women continued to face inequalities. How did she achieve her efforts?

Lubna Al-Olayan relied on her family’s support to influence those who resisted the integration of more women into the workforce. This strategy was meant to change their (those who resisted the change) narrow-minded view to embrace gender diversity. Indeed, an effective leader must influence and inspire others (Erskine, 2012; Loon, Lim, Lee, & Tam, 2012). Lubna’s efforts are strongly founded on the pragmatic belief, “meritocracies are better for business and that letting talented women find employment is better for the economy” (Fry, 2015, para .5). Nevertheless, she was keen to embrace and support Saudi traditions and religious values and norms by clearly articulating and expressing her support for diversity for those who deserved it. Hence, she constantly pushed for the modernization and empowerment of women by providing them with a platform to display their talents, giftedness, and knowledge that could facilitate the development of the Saudi economy when integrated into the workforce.

Conclusion

Lubna Al-Olayan is an influential Saudi woman leader. She pushed for the integration of women in the workforce against traditional norms, which advocated for such inequalities. Lubna began with her father’s multinational conglomerate. She demonstrated the importance of

meaning, managing energy, positive framing, connecting, and engaging the tenets of CLM in bringing about the change of breaking the gender barrier in business in Saudi Arabia.

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