

Breaking the glass ceiling at Grundfos Thailand

Monicca Yan | May 7, 2019

Porthip Nat Viphatanaporn joined Grundfos in 1993, soon after the company launched operations in Thailand. After working in a supportive capacity alongside five country managing directors in not so many years, she took a shot at the top post herself and proved her worth in a traditionally male-dominated industry, delivering growth and stability for the next 25 years.

Executive Summary

- **Focus on Targets** – Set attainable, ambitious targets. Stick to decisions when you know they'll pan out, but change course quickly as soon as poor decisions come to light.
- **Show Determination** – Demonstrate confidence in your abilities by proving and strengthening your capacities daily and don't be afraid to break with convention by leveraging innate qualities.
- **Interact and Nurture** – Interact with coworkers compassionately. Those who feel cared for will take more initiative and produce quality work in a timely manner.
- **Exude Confidence** – Senior leadership roles are not inherently or exclusively male, though some industries may be dominated by men in senior posts historically.
- **Communicate Clearly** – Continuous communication can gap the bridge between employee and employer. Setting clear expectations and achievable targets will determine the level of success that is achieved.

Porthip Nat Viphatanaporn was one of the first employees to join Grundfos when the international pump manufacturer launched operations in Thailand in the early 1990s.

Hired in 1993 to support the managing director, Viphatanaporn served as interim MD after her first boss was promoted and transferred to China and five replacements came and went, each of them unable to deliver.

Eventually, the regional managing director suggested Viphatanaporn apply for the position of managing director herself, given she had demonstrated her commitment to the company and had brought stability to its operations in Thailand. Initially, she was hesitant to apply for the post given she lacked an engineering background and planned to have more children. After much persuasion from the regional MD, however, she decided to give it a go and was offered the job, but not without a gruelling interview process in which her credibility and capacity were challenged and in which she was assured she would be given no special treatment for being a woman. The group human resources director questioned her commitment and ability to meet the demands of the role “in addition to her household chores”. Invigorated by the challenge and the waves she was creating just by virtue of her interest in the post, she plodded on without allowing the blatant gender bias to deter her.

Once her leadership of the Thai operation was formalized, Viphatanaporn began to develop her own management style, taking pains to communicate expectations and goals clearly. Rather than adopting the stern, heavy-handed approach of her predecessors, she fostered an open, compassionate dynamic with her direct reports. Grundfos began an extended period of steady growth in the country that endured throughout her 25-year tenure. Thailand was consistently among the top three in the Southeast Asia region under her leadership, delivering double-digit growth year after year.

Find Strength in Adversity

Viphatanaporn was given a shot at the top post in Thailand after being the most steadfast force in the country for several years, but she was initially offered only a one-year contract as a test of her ability to perform, drilling home the message that many of her superiors at headquarters were sceptical she could succeed. Every other country managing director was offered a permanent contract, and the managing director who'd encouraged her to apply for the position was shocked.

Grundfos already had a presence in 52 international markets, but Viphatanaporn had become the first female managing director, a fact she learned only after attending her first global sales meeting, where she faced snide remarks and uncomfortable stares. She was automatically assumed to be the spouse of one of the men in attendance and had to search high and low just to locate a female restroom. Her interaction with other

members of the global sales team was uncomfortable initially, as they were accustomed to it being a gentlemen's club.

Despite the internal and external challenges she faced, Viphatanaporn was determined to push the company's products with an aggressive sales strategy focused on ambitious targets, and she paid little attention to those who attempted to stand in her way or drag her down. She was determined to prove the naysayers wrong and make Grundfos Thailand successful and made this goal the driving force behind her tireless work ethic. Customers and distributors challenged her on her knowledge of the company's products, but again, she saw it as an opportunity to learn about the pumps inside and out, from the underlying physics to calculations of flow and all the possible applications. She made honesty, gratitude and dependability hallmarks of her leadership style and interaction with the market, which gained her trust.



Porthip Nat Viphatanaporn, former Managing Director at Grundfos, Thailand

When she was first promoted to the managing director position, female employees within Grundfos' European operations wrote congratulatory emails expressing their shared joy at seeing Viphatanaporn break the glass ceiling. Viphatanaporn retained her position not because her employer was determined to diversify its ranks, however, but because she delivered unprecedented growth. She put in the time required to build strong relationships with clients and other company employees, garnering respect across

the board. Viphatanaporn's passion for the job was contagious, and over the years, she built a reputation for being a hard-working leader who cared about her colleagues and industry peers. The team in Bangkok quickly embraced her leadership and customers and dealers soon came around.

Sacrifice for a Good Cause

Viphatanaporn made a conscious decision to develop her career, knowing it meant sacrificing time with her family. She worked long hours, including early mornings, late nights and weekends, straining her relationship with her husband and child. Her son grew noticeably closer to his father, distancing himself from her, a price, she said, was too high. Though Viphatanaporn expressed no regret for dedicating the time necessary to develop her career and make Grundfos a market leader, she said she recognised in hindsight it was a mistake to allow herself to become attached to her employees emotionally at the expense of her family relationships. She put her heart into the business, and though it paid off, she realised she'd been over-protective of her team in her effort to build morale and nurture the family spirit.

Confidence is a necessary ingredient for leadership success, especially as a woman breaking barriers in a male-dominated industry. Viphatanaporn recognised early in her career that she would need to be confident in herself to develop hard and soft leadership skills on the fly. After seeing a slew of men fail in their attempt to lead Grundfos in Thailand, she realised she could and should embrace her female qualities rather than emulate the attributes she saw in male counterparts at the company. Her "female touch" became one of her greatest assets in handling her team and connecting with her customer base, she said and directing her passion by investing herself emotionally served the company well. Female leaders should be prepared to work hard, to give more of themselves and put their heart into managing their team. Feminine qualities are assets when it comes to coaching, nurturing and developing teams, which, when appropriately applied, can boost morale and employee retention. Wear these qualities proudly, Viphatanaporn advises aspiring women leaders, don't try to "be like the guys". Ultimately being a woman in a male-dominated industry was irrelevant, Viphatanaporn said. It only reinforced her need to gain comprehensive knowledge of the company's product portfolio, hire good people and communicate effectively with her team to ensure Grundfos would be successful in the Thai market.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for Viphatanaporn was letting go. In December 2018 she retired from Grundfos Thailand after serving the company as managing director for 25 years. Her successor has big shoes to fill and the same company that begrudgingly made

her its first female managing director will be challenged to maintain its track record and uphold Viphatanaporn's legacy.



Monicca Yan

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Monicca has more than twenty years of executive search and consulting experience. She was based in Hong Kong and Shanghai for some 6 years before returning to Singapore. During that period, she supported clients in their expansion in Greater China region.

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