

Chicago's Linda Bi Makes Good

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"I've always known that America is a land of opportunities. This is a place that would give anyone a chance, as long as you work hard - no matter what race or gender you are." With that, Linda Bi, an immigrant from China, sums up how she has succeeded in making a family-owned business into a reputable \$30 million import company.

Her path has been anything but easy and she admits to some mistakes, but Bi managed, in 2006, to be ranked number 29 in Crain's Top 100 Women-Owned Businesses in Chicago with her Chicago Expert Importers (CEI).

It's been 20 years since Bi and her husband Leonard moved to America, settling in San Francisco. They started a trading company to import casting parts from China.

"During the first few years we struggled as we tried to adapt to a new culture and language, while starting a new company. It was hard," she says. She administered the office, and her husband handled sales, customer service, purchasing and everything else. She says, with an eye on providing good service, the couple gradually built an axle manufacturing supply chain operation.

The future looked rosy. To better serve their customers, they moved from San Francisco to Chicago in 1996. They had two daughters. Then tragedy hit.

She recalls, "In 2000, my husband had a stroke and passed away suddenly at the age of 45, leaving me with two young girls and a company to run by myself. Friends and family urged me to return to China with my girls."

Her competitors offered buy-outs, but Bi believed that she could "make it" in America.

Within 10 years of her taking the helm of Chicago Expert Importers, it not only became a leading importer of axle components, but expanded into sporting goods and forklift components, among other products.

"Our company grew to a full-service company that provides sourcing, import logistics, warehousing and distribution," says Bi.

Bi has learned a lot about doing business on a global level.

According to Bi, the weak global economy, for instance, "has caused everyone to review their business format. For any company to survive and grow, one must review their own advantages and strengths, get out of their comfort zone and adapt to the changing environment [in order] to stay competitive." She continues, "Our company used to be in sourcing and trading. We made adjustments and emphasized the creation of additional services like warehousing to create a more complete service package for our customers."

She also learned the importance of quality control.

She explains, “Business in China is not as developed yet. They believe in basic product function over quality. They would rather conserve materials, as long as the product serves its fundamental purpose. Therefore, if there are specific qualifications a company is looking for or a special type of packaging, quality control is very important.”

According to Bi, there are two types of businesses in China. Government-owned businesses are big, with many layers of management, and thus inefficient. Privately owned businesses are smaller, so they have the potential to react faster with more competitive prices.

“However, many of their laborers and employees used to be farmers,” Bi explains. “Therefore, they are not used to a highly efficient and responsive attitude,” forcing CEI to keep strict communication with them. “We must follow up with manufacturers in China every step of the way.”

Despite CEI’s growth over the last 10 years, Bi is not self-congratulatory.

“My business achievements thus far are due to hard work and a grateful heart.”

She is aware of her weaknesses.

“As a business owner, I need to be more professional. At times, I make decisions based on my emotions. I tend to view my business associates as friends, so I tend to trust people too easily.” She adds, “There have been several cases when I tried to help and support my buyers and ended up stuck in their financial crisis, which caused me losses. To put it more positively, my friends often say, ‘You are being too nice.’ But I know they are reprimanding me.”

What would she do differently?

“At certain points, I wish I went with my brain instead of my heart,” offers Bi.

On the more positive side, she feels that she has built a great team of employees who feel like an extended family.

“We work hard to achieve our shared goal and our individual dreams. Even during difficult times, we remember to set work aside to celebrate holidays, birthdays, weddings and newborn babies together,” says Bi.

Actively involved in the local Chamber of Commerce and Chinese Business Women community services, Bi is challenged to balance her professional and family demands. She sees work, home and community as interrelated.

“For my family to enjoy a higher quality of life, I am motivated to achieve greater success at work.” She adds, “The community supports and contributes to my success, so to give back makes my life more meaningful and significant. Since they’re all connected, if I need to make sacrifices in one area, the others will be compensated sooner or later.”

To balance her work life, Bi enjoys spending time with her daughters – ages 17 and 13 – catching up with good friends and enjoying parties at work. Her biggest concern is to stay healthy to see her daughters receive a good education and build families of their own. When she retires, she hopes to travel to more places for pleasure and “see everything I’ve read about in books.”