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Lessons from the Top: Fireside Chat with Vinod Mahboobani

Interviews and Profiles



On July 8, 2021, the Association of Corporate Counsel Singapore and Bird and Bird had Vinod Mahboobani, chief legal officer of KFC Global and Pizza Hut International, share his life lessons and experiences from trainee lawyer to globally successful general counsel — all in 60 minutes.

Here are the key takeaways from the inspiring fireside chat. The chat was hosted by Christopher Y. Chan, ACC Singapore board member and EVP legal at the Lazada Group, and moderated by Lijun Chui, partner at Bird and Bird.



Vinod Mahboobani



Chan

Christopher Y.



Lijun Chui

Put in your best into every task, because even the smallest doors can open up great opportunities.

The session kicked off with a throwback to Mahboobani's first day as a trainee lawyer in Hong Kong. Clad in a brand-new suit, Mahboobani recalled his disappointment when asked to do the most mundane task of punching holes and paginating documents. But with the benefit of hindsight, his advice to young lawyers in that situation?

"Whatever you are given, do your best at that task. Doesn't matter what task it is, you don't know what doors will open up."

Mahboobani later learned that it was his positive attitude towards this first task that earned him an invaluable opportunity to work alongside some of the most prominent counsels for the entire duration of a landmark trial. Hard work and good attitude do pay off.

Surround yourself with "truth tellers" regardless of seniority.

Even as Mahboobani moved up the ranks and became more senior in the organization, he never

failed to keep himself grounded to reality. One of his secrets to success is to be open-minded about how, when, and from whom to seek guidance. The key is in appreciating the diverse perspectives that people in different roles can bring, even those who are less experienced in the field. What matters more is that such persons are honest and direct when providing their feedback and views. In Mahboobani's own words:

“Surround yourself with what I call ‘truth tellers’ — who will tell you things as they are, and not things that you want to hear.”

In new environments, have a thorough understanding of the audience and a good grasp of the situation.

As someone who has stepped into both legal and non-legal roles throughout his career, Mahboobani has had extensive experience dealing with different stakeholders and individuals with varying management styles. To connect with persons of different backgrounds, he believes that it is paramount to have a deep understanding of the other party's wants and needs. To put it simply:

“You need to understand the audience, and that's how you will be guided on what message, in what way to target and deliver to the intended audience.”

Another tip that Mahboobani shared was to develop a sense of situational awareness and be flexible enough to adapt on the fly. For example, a presentation may have been scheduled for one hour but if it is before a group of jet-legged foreign guests, and has overrun into lunchtime, one may be better off trying to compress the presentation to allow for the well needed break. (In this instance, they had a flight to catch right after!) Drawing from that experience, Mahboobani advised that having the ability to work around contingencies is a useful skillset to demonstrate competence in new environments.

Invest in yourself — do not be afraid to step out of your comfort zone, but still remember to carve out your own space and be authentic.

During the entire conversation, it was clear that Mahboobani's biggest asset is his personal conviction and beliefs. Mahboobani is a strong advocate of seeking diverse opportunities wherever possible to maximize personal growth and development, whether it be a new role in a different country or a new global project within the same organization. And he himself walks the talk. Mahboobani's work has brought him across various portfolios traversing continents — from Hong Kong, to Singapore, to New Delhi, and now to Dallas, TX.

Yet through it all, Mahboobani remains steadfastly family-oriented with a keen sense of harmony between his personal space and his work life. In Mahboobani's view, taking time off for a “reboot of the system” is essential to staying in the race in the long run. Leading by example, Mahboobani himself does not send emails over the weekend out of respect for his team's personal time to recharge.

His parting advice to young professionals wanting to make an impression?

“Be original — you don't need to put up a front, what you are is what you are... You need to be true to yourself, you cannot compromise on your values. When you show that your values

are fundamental to yourself, that is how you gain trust and form relationships.”

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[Christopher Y. Chan](#)



EVP of Legal and Government Affairs

Lazada Group

[Christopher Y. Chan](#) is an EVP of legal and government affairs of the Lazada Group (part of Alibaba) and a director of the [ACC Singapore Chapter](#). For Lazada, he manages over a dozen attorneys and the Tech/Product/Marketplace/Marketing portfolios along with the businesses in Singapore, India, and Thailand.

Chan unconventionally left his prestigious US Federal Circuit clerkship in 2014 to backpack around

SE Asia. While traveling, he served as GC and angel investor in a Silicon Valley startup, DoxIQ. DoxIQ later successfully exited and Chan joined RedMart shortly after they closed Series B funding to be its first lawyer and head of government affairs. In 2016, Chan later led the M&A to sell RedMart to the Lazada Group.

Chan has been honored with the Association of Corporate Counsel's 2018 [Top 10 30-Somethings award](#), South East Asia's In-house Lawyer of the Year 2017, NAPABA Best Under 40 2015, and his law school's Distinguished Recent Alumni of the Year.

Currently, he can be found after-hours at an indoor rock-climbing gym or cruising around in his sailboat. He is also a frequent tour guide for those visiting Singapore and loves sharing his favorite food products from RedMart.

[Lijun Chui](#)



Partner

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Lijun Chui is a Singapore and English qualified lawyer who is a partner in the Singapore Dispute Resolution team. She handles a broad range of complex commercial litigation and arbitration matters, specializing in cross-border disputes involving parties from different countries. She also advises on contentious regulatory issues, including data privacy, competition, market misconduct and corruption legislation.

Before joining [Bird & Bird](#) in 2020, Chui spearheaded the Singapore Tech Dispute & Regulatory practice at a Magic Circle firm, which was developed to a sizeable practice ranging from tech disputes and investigations to advising on cyber crisis handling and data privacy.

Chui has been recognized and recommended in various directories including, for Dispute Resolution in the Legal 500 Asia Pacific 2021 Edition.