

Inspiring Women

Episode 22: Maritza Diaz

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years, I've come to learn one thing, women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at InspiringWomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening and I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to another episode of Inspiring Women. We are speaking today with Maritza Diaz. She is the chief executive officer and founder of ITJuana, which is a technology firm serving the digital technical needs of companies in California. Now, Maritza comes from a long history, over 25 years of experience in IT and software engineering. She's worked at Fortune 500 companies like Thermo Fisher Scientific, where she was responsible for growing the company's digital capabilities in North America, India, and Mexico. She is a thought leader in the field of cross-border collaboration in the software industry between San Diego and Baja, California. She's the member of the boards of several organizations and recently elected to Forbes Technology Council. Maritza, I'm really excited to be talking to you today.

Maritza Diaz:

It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much for the opportunity, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, great. Well listen, thank you for being on Inspiring Women. I'm really excited about having this conversation. Now, you have a technical career, a global background. You started as a software engineer from Ecuador. You came to the United States, I understand, on a one-year assignment and you've been here for over 20 years. You've now founded and formed this IT company, ITJuana. Really, really terrific background and I'd just like to maybe start with what are you doing right now?

Maritza Diaz:

Absolutely. I can tell you, I am very fortunate to be doing what I love to do, which is essentially impacting people's lives by generating jobs for people in Latin America. These jobs are not just any job, they are very impactful jobs that are not only very professional and well-paid, but also they're solving very difficult problems of the future. COVID taught us that companies need to be digital-ready now in order to survive. Some of these problems are very difficult and some of them, we don't even know the answers yet of what is going to be a few years from now. I'm very excited to be able to generate this jobs for people in Latin America and at the same time,

contributing to make this region that you mentioned, San Diego and Cali Baja, I want to make them a mega region. We are geographically uniquely positioned to really become the new and most powerful bio-med tech hub of the world.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, generating jobs and job growth is obviously a huge, important thing for just growing the economy and providing opportunity for so many people. As a woman, as a woman who grew up in Ecuador and got your degree there, is software engineering a usual thing for women to go into? There are not a lot of women in STEM, or not enough, but was it unusual for you when you started out?

Maritza Diaz:

Absolutely. Imagine this is more than 25 years ago. Yeah, it was very unusual, not only because of the career itself, but the cost of education is not very accessible. It's a male-dominated industry, as well as culturally. It wasn't an easy or a logical choice for me to go into this career.

Laurie McGraw:

How did you make it? Why did you take that leap?

Maritza Diaz:

One thing that I learned is that my parents very early told me, "Maritza, you do not have a choice. You have to go to college." They didn't necessarily ask me to go to computer science. They just wanted me to go to college. I come from a first-generation that graduated from college. For my parents, it was very important that I get my education because they knew that was the biggest gift they could ever give me and it turned out that way.

Laurie McGraw:

Then you, later on, after all of your engineering background and having some jobs, you also went on to get your MBA. Why was the business side of things beyond technology also important to you?

Maritza Diaz:

When I coded for so many years, I loved it. It was me and the computer, but as I did it more and more, I realized that I needed to know more about the business. I needed to know more about why or what I was trying to solve. By me sitting behind the computer, I wasn't going to get that. I felt that me to go and explore and learn more about the business and really the true problems in the industries so that I can bring even better solutions.

Laurie McGraw:

Maritza, just in terms of being pushed by your parents to go to college, how did technology become a thing that was so important to you? I mean, I have to imagine there were not a lot of role models for you or other women that you were working with were pulling you into it. How did that become a thing of such interest and obviously success for you?

Maritza Diaz:

It was almost I stumbled by accident into the computer science. The day that I needed to go out and pay the subscription for the college, they asked me, "What career?" I just chose computer science. I didn't really know in advanced, but I knew I needed to take... I love math and that was one of the careers that was intriguing to me. There are no women, but back in the day, I can honestly tell you that I had no women that could be a role model for me. It was just life. It just happened. I chose the right thing at the right moment, but throughout my life, I would say my mother for sure has been my inspiration, not because of technology, but more about hard working and do whatever it takes to accomplish your dreams.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that confidence that you have because obviously and following your dreams, you've had some success with that. I don't want to put challenges out there that weren't there, but did you find being one of few women in the area of technology a challenge, or was that helpful to you to be one of few in pursuing your career?

Maritza Diaz:

I won't lie, it was a challenge, especially for a girl that was very shy. When I started my first year, we were only two women in class. In fact, when I graduated, I was the only one. It is not easy to be in this environment with all of these male friends and you're the only one, but I never think about that as something that's pulling you back. I try not to think about it. I try not to think I'm a woman. I'm trying to just think that I am a student. I'm a professional, just like everybody else in this group and I just need to do my best.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, and then you've taken it to the next level so that... When you were at Thermo Fisher, you were leading a team and you were doing business development across different countries for technology jobs before you then started ITJuana. How did you make that leap and where did you get the courage or the idea from to start your own company?

Maritza Diaz:

Thermo Fisher was a fantastic company. It gave me an awesome opportunity to really explore what it is to scale software engineering at a level that we grew from 2 to 1000 in just four years.

Laurie McGraw:

Wow.

Maritza Diaz:

It was global, right? We did it in the US, in India and the last one was Mexico. Through that experience, I learned a ton about what it really is to build teams at scale and that are high-performing. Now, the inspiration for "leaving and pursuing my dreams," when the company asked me to open a center of software in Mexico and the only logical choice was Tijuana. Before 2014, I had never been to the Tijuana, but I only heard of the perception. By far, it was not a tech hub perception. We took this trip. It was a day trip. The company's 40 minutes from the border

there. It was very unique to be able to be in two countries in the same day and come back for dinner. We ran an experiment about hiring 30 engineers there and it went great. I love that. I love that because I found a new passion of generating these jobs for people who really need it, but also very high quality talent. I figured this is an awesome opportunity. More companies like Thermo Fisher should be doing this, but they didn't. In five years that I did this for Thermo Fisher, companies would come and visit us and ask lots of questions and seem very intrigued, but they actually never did it. That's the gap I wanted to fill. I wanted to really bring thousands of companies to leverage the same talent and the same opportunity that Thermo Fisher did.

Laurie McGraw:

At the same time, it's a big leap to do it from the, I'll just say the luxury of a big brand, like a Fortune 500 company to go to striking out on your own. Did that take a lot of courage? Was it a natural progression for you? I mean, how did you gain that courage to take that big leap?

Maritza Diaz:

It was very difficult. I must tell you this. Back when I was at Thermo Fisher, I was the breadwinner of the household. I have a family, two kids, husband, mortgage to pay and so you can imagine the conversation with my husband wasn't easy. He was like, "Why would you want to leave this job that is stable and provides." To me it was, "I need to do this. I know it's great." I was at the point in my career that I want to pursue legacy. I wanted my kids to remember me by something meaningful. I wanted to be able to tell them to my kids, "Mommy is touching people's lives. Mommy is helping others to get a new job that is very impactful as well." I love it. I never look back. I think that was the best decision that I could have ever made. My husband is a full supporter and now we work together. He is part of the business, so we're super, super excited.

Laurie McGraw:

That's wonderful. I've heard in some of your discussions and interviews, some of the accomplishments with ITJuana already. You're very proud of already creating 100 jobs. I don't know if that was this year or the end of last year, and you're working on creating the next 100 jobs. Economic growth is a great thing to be proud of. How are the job creation, where's it coming from? What are the most exciting fields you're focused on?

Maritza Diaz:

Absolutely. In fact, the 100 jobs was in the first year, 2018. Today, we have 400. I thought I would do 100 more and we ended up doing 300 more. It's been fantastic. Now, the growth is coming from mainly three industries. San Diego is very well known for their biotech, their medtech and technology. Those are the three industries that we are focusing on, and because the large hub of innovation in San Diego with biotech, medtech and technology, and the talent available on the other side of the border, I created this term called biomed tech hub. I believe this region should be the most prosperous in the world in those three, the biomed tech industries.

Laurie McGraw:

What are you seeing in terms of the talent pool? That's a lot of jobs to be creating. How many of these jobs are for women? Where are you finding women, in terms of where their interest is in

tech and how do you also create that interest so that other women like yourself can follow in your footsteps?

Maritza Diaz:

My secret goal behind all of this hiring is to bring more women. I want to achieve 50% ratio. We are, today, at 22, so still a lot more work to do. Nevertheless, we do hire a lot of women. Where and how I find them... It hasn't changed much since I graduated, meaning there's still very few women going into these careers. What I do is I give them the opportunity at early on. When they're in their first few years, or they're still in high school, we sponsor several programs with UCSD and local universities. In fact, this year alone, we have 60 students in our internship program. Most women come from those programs. Then I work with my customers because I also want them to be my partners in this. I talk to them about the importance of diversity and bringing women. Fortunately, they're very flexible as well to give the chance to young women that perhaps are not yet there with a skill, but they know they have the potential. We've been able to attract and hire more women through early stages in high school and college.

Laurie McGraw:

I think 22% is actually a pretty good percentage, just in terms of the numbers and that's fantastic to hear that your goal is 50%. I like the feeder programs as well. How receptive are your customers in terms of just hiring that diversity as you bring them the resources from ITJuana?

Maritza Diaz:

I work with them. I [inaudible 00:14:42]. They're very perceptive after some time. I think the key is gain their trust. Once they see the potential, once they see the deliveries of the teams, they are a lot more open to working with me and take a little bit of risk. Once, let's say we have released one or two iterations of the product, they see how it works, they're trusting us. Then they are open to bring in early talent, young talent, and they're never disappointed. Of the 60 students, my expectation is that we will extend full-time offers to all of them. So far, we are in a really good track to accomplish that.

Laurie McGraw:

Fantastic. Fantastic.

Speaker 2:

Well, Maritza, for you as leader, as a CEO in that kind of role, do you perceive, or do you find challenges with just being the female leader at the table when you're either conducting business or working with other companies, or has that not been a challenge for you? I'm just curious because just when you talk, you're speaking with such confidence and achieving many things. I'm not hearing that there've been challenges there, but what's your reality?

Maritza Diaz:

The reality is that there are challenges out there. It varies depending on the country, depending on the industry, depending on the groups. However, I chose to ignore that. I know it's there because I see it, I feel it, but I chose to ignore it. Again, I don't want to be seen as a woman CEO, I want to be seen as the CEO, as the expert in building software centers of excellence. By

showing what I'm capable of doing, showing results, nobody can take that away from me. I think that's where my confidence comes from and my ability to block those bad energies, if you will. I just don't think about it. Don't see it. I choose to ignore it.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that's an amazing skill in and of itself to be able to do that also, I think fantastic advice for people who are listening here. It also seems, Maritza, that you're always striving for something next and something more. You serve on boards. You were just recently named to the Forbes Technology Council. Where's that passion for learning and doing more when already seems like you're pretty busy? Where's that coming from?

Maritza Diaz:

Always, for me, it's about my family and inspiring my girls. I want them to be very proud of mommy. The more I can do, the more I can bring my expertise, my experience and getting involved in the networks, in the society, the better. As a computer science engineer, one thing that we learn in this career is that we have to be open to learn very often. Technology changes every few months and so people who don't have that learning agility in this career, won't make it. I do have that. I do love learn. I believe we learn something new every day and yeah, it has always been part of who I am.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I bet it's something that your girls are probably very proud of. Maritza, this has been a very interesting conversation. I really appreciate you having it here on Inspiring Women. As we close out today, what are your words of advice for others who might also aspire to achieve CEO levels or build their own companies? What advice would you give other women who are listening?

Maritza Diaz:

I would say to them, focus on doing a fantastic job. Show results and once you do that, you will gain trust. You will be able to influence others. Don't ever let perceptions take you back. Filter that out. That's noise that is not helpful. Just think of you as a professional that can achieve, that can deliver and that can be trusted. If you do that, there's nothing really that's going to get in your way.

Laurie McGraw:

I think that those are great words of wisdom and they certainly sound like ones that you are living by. This has been an Inspiring Women conversation with Maritza Diaz. Maritza, thank you so much.

Maritza Diaz:

Thank you for this opportunity. Thank you, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been an episode of Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. Please subscribe, rate, and review. We are produced by Kate Crews at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on InspiringWomen.show. I am Laurie McGraw and thank you for listening.