

INTERVIEW OF AMAL SALAH EL DIN

Amal Salah Eldin Mahmoud, Managing Director

Diwan Bookstore

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Amal S. Mahmoud, Managing Director of Diwan Bookstores received a BA in Psychology from the AUC with a minor in Computer Science in 1986. Although she graduated with highest honors, she decided to spend time with her family during her two sons' early years. In 1991, along with her brother, Mahmoud co-founded Prosoft Information Systems, a family software development company. For a decade, she led a team of software developers, to offer tailored software systems for many companies across different industries. In 2000, she moved with her husband to Saudi Arabia for three years. Upon her return, she wanted to diversify her professional experience and follow her passion to work more with people and books, and that's how her career shift started.

She joined Diwan Bookstores as a bookstore manager for three years during which she gained new experience regarding retail and cultural services. Mahmoud quit her job in 2009 to join her husband in another move to Dubai. During that period, she pursued further studies and obtained certifications in Positive Psychology, Wholebeing Institute, Ma, USA and a certification in Dialogical Coaching, Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, Spain. In 2017 she rejoined Diwan Bookstores as a board member and a managing director. Moreover, Mahmoud has a grandson.

WIB: You started working at Diwan as a store manager in 2007 and within 13 years you became the managing director and a board member. Tell us about your journey and what are your current roles and responsibilities?

AM: Being a booklover and an avid reader, joining Diwan was a decision driven by this passion of mine. My first role was as a bookstore manager where I learned a lot about retail business and customer relations. During that period, I was part of the managing team that led the growth of Diwan from one independent bookstore into a chain of bookstores with multiple locations in Cairo and in Alexandria. Due to family obligations,

I had to be relocated in Dubai and I kept my relation with the co-founders. I rejoined Diwan in 2017 as a board member and managing director where I put my experience as a Positive Psychologist and a life coach into leading a positive change in the company, changing the culture, enhancing the brand and driving sales and growth. With the help of my partners and board members, we managed to stop the bleeding of the company's capital and, ever since, we have been able to achieve yearly profit after continuous years of loss. We worked on diversifying the product mix at the stores and enhancing the customer experience. To be able to achieve all this, I worked hard on learning business aspects; finance, marketing and human resources and attended many workshops and programs with EBRD and AUC School of Business.

WIB: Over these years, what have your contributions been to Diwan?

AM: I put my knowledge and experience into building a positive culture where morals and values are communicated and well-guarded. I am happy to realize that I have managed, with the help of my partners, to create a safe environment for the employees to grow, innovate and flourish. I used my knowledge and respect for technology to upgrade the systems and follow the latest trends within the capacity of our limited resources.

WIB: What motivates you?

AM: I am motivated by helping people achieve and acquire further knowledge of themselves and what makes them happy and successful.

WIB: What's your vision for the future of Diwan and how do you work to achieve it?

AM: My vision for Diwan is to be a leading company in setting a model of how a medium size company can grow by attending to the internal culture and empowering teams to innovate, create and achieve while keeping focus on the customer needs and world trends and playing a major role in the transformation of the work culture in Egypt.

WIB: As a board member, what are the challenges you face?

AM: On a personal level, I don't have a challenge, but as a board team we face many challenges with the unstable market, changing laws for taxes and workforce.

WIB: Is Diwan taking any steps to increase the number of female employees, especially in management positions. If yes, what are they?

AM: Diwan was co-founded by females and now the executive board members are all females. Our focus is not on hiring by gender, but rather by proficiency and capabilities. However, we are keen to ensure that female employees are empowered and enabled and have the flexibilities within the company's policies to work within suitable hours and locations. We also adopted the policy to offer the option to work from home where the job allows and a family need arises for any employee regardless of the gender. I believe that by valuing the father's role in the family we are contributing to a culture where the mother has the support at home and at the work place.

WIB: You are also a certified life coach. Are you a practicing life coach? If yes, how do you balance between both jobs? How do both professions complement each other?

AM: I am a practicing life coach and I have clients in Egypt and abroad, however, I am giving full priority to my role at Diwan, so I keep my scheduled coaching sessions in the evening, early morning or on Saturdays. In fact, both professions do complement each other, as my knowledge and experience in life coaching enabled me to build a coaching culture in Diwan with positive outlook and safe environment for the employees to feel valued, mentored and being listened to. Furthermore, I have used my knowledge and learning of Psychology to enhance the selection of books offered at Diwan for leadership, management, wellbeing and personal growth. I partnered with ICF, International Coaching Federation in Egypt, to offer talks and workshops on these topics in Diwan bookstores and online on Diwan's social media platforms.

WIB: Why there are no major bookstores in cities other than in Cairo and Alexandria? Are there plans for Diwan to open more bookstores across Egypt?

AM: In fact, yes. We already opened a bookstore in Elgouna and we have a short-term plan to re-open in Alexandria and long-term plan to open in Mansoura, Aswan and other Egyptian cities.

WIB: Egypt mandates women on boards of publicly traded companies, but without government regulations, the road is still challenging for many.

a. How can we engage more men to support women's equal role in the work force?

AM: By including them in the conversations and discussions. This will illuminate many aspects that they may not be aware of, will eliminate any negative beliefs towards women's equality and equal roles and will make them part of the solution to overcome the challenges and obstacles that women face in the work space.

b. How can women grasp this opportunity to advance from there?

AM: Women should know their value and worth and take serious and focused steps towards enhancing their knowledge and experiences, continue learning and aspiring to advance in their careers and to be confident to show their value and achievements. For the rising women in any company, they should communicate this message with the higher management whenever there's an opportunity and to be role models as conscious and capable leaders.

WIB: Egypt has several appointed female ministers. What impact, if any, do you think this will have on the issue of women on boards?

AM: I believe this has a huge impact on trusting women to lead companies, as they are already succeeding in leading ministries.

WIB: Should the government institute policies that ensure more women given the opportunity to be senior managers and board members of companies? What could be in your opinion a useful measure? (legal quota or recommendations, data base, more data transparency, etc. Why?

AM: Although I value how regulations can enforce companies to conform to the direction of enabling and empowering women in the workforce, I am not pro setting legal quota as it may lead to appointing women to meet the quota regardless of their value or experience and it will do more harm than good. I believe that the best approach would be through public deliberation where the issue is discussed, successful experiences, locally from the region and internationally, are shared and all challenges and obstacles are discussed.

WIB: How can companies be motivated to add women on their boards?

AM: Again, through sharing more statistics of success stories and transformations of companies with women on board. Also, maybe by laws that give some privileges and benefits to the companies which take this initiative.

WIB: How can we prepare women in general for a board position? What are useful measures or networks?

AM: I think that the successful model of Women in Business program can be replicated to serve more women and cities, with more rounds of training and offering mentorship for women. Maybe more cooperation with key business associations and entities to offer programs for developing skills and networking.

WIB: Why do you think it is important to have women on boards? How could you as a board member help other women in business?

AM: Having women on boards leads to diversified point of views and insights. Women in general are more sensitive to many human issues through their other role in society and this can be a very good asset in keeping the moral and human aspects always in perspective when taking decisions for the business. I believe that women can lead the moral revolution that the world of business needs.

WIB: What are in your opinion the strengths of female leadership and the possible impact of this leadership? Can you please give us examples?

AM: I believe due to women's role in the family, they tend to be more embracing and tolerant to the needs and pains of those they manage and lead. This is very much needed to create a workplace where the human side is valued equally with the profit and business growth. Also, female leaders can have a major role in contributing to and maintaining a moral approach to business growth with a positive impact on the society and the environment.

WIB: Many highly educated, intelligent and motivated women are pushed aside in managerial positions. How can we put women on the radar of companies and people with power to become noticeable for these positions? Who are important players to involve, from the public and private sector, to help accomplish that?

AM: I don't know the statistics but I see women already progressing and being appointed as ministers and judges. I believe if we can invite and engage more public and private

institutions into this public deliberation with funds for intelligent media coverage, we will be able to raise awareness to the misconducts and pave the path for women to rise in any organization. What comes to my mind is the role of trade unions and business chambers and I wonder how much they are involved in this challenge.

WIB: Women represent more than 40 percent of the global labor force, yet they don't have proper representation in business decision making. How can women step up to overcome the stereotype that a certain gender and profession can get on board.?

AM: First by believing that their value and worth come from hard work and continues self and professional growth. By not shying away from showing their ambitions and working hard on growing their networks within the organization and outside. By showing readiness to take on projects and different tasks.

WIB: What do you advise young women who want to become entrepreneurs and reach their potential?

AM: To do good research and gather as much information as they can, to study and learn from successful stories of entrepreneurs, to work on growing their network and seek mentorship, and most of all, by not being afraid to try and fail to gain the right experience.

WIB: From the professional qualifications, what are important qualities and/or skills for success in management positions? What are useful measures or networks?

AM: Human or interpersonal skills, forward planning and strategic thinking, problem solving and decision making, good knowledge of the financial aspects and emotional intelligence.