

# *Family Business*

## *Heir and Global Citizen*

### *Flavia Zhong*

■ By David Yu

**M**BA 2018 student Flavia Zhong is a truly global citizen. An avid traveller, she has been to 24 countries and regions over the past 12 years, attending school and working in four of them. She returned to China in 2015 to help her family start a private aircraft and yacht manufacturing business, and is also developing her own business, a healthy restaurant chain called BeneFit Innovative Healthy Diet.

Her time abroad has expanded her knowledge and her vision. “These experiences helped me to understand different people and environments, making me more active and open-minded,” she says, adding that they also benefited her career. “I can use my imagination to conceive a new business idea. For example, when designing the restaurant, I incorporated many elements from different countries including all kinds of cuisines, operational models, service details, and decor. This made my restaurant excellent, taking in all the best ideas from around the world.”

“Sometimes friends see an Italian or an American in my personality,” she says with a smile. “Travelling in various countries and talking to people from different cultural backgrounds enabled me to learn about the good qualities of others and their unique wisdom. Because my living environment was changing so often, after meeting all kinds of people, I gradually came to realise all people share some common characteristics underneath our so-called cultural differences. This allows me to better observe the characters and feelings of others.”

Strong people skills is one of the most important elements of leadership as truly understanding people is a valuable tool for every leader. Flavia admits it’s currently her most challenging problem. The University of California, Davis graduate began her career as a project analyst at the private merchant bank Forbes & Manhattan in Toronto, Canada. After returning to China in 2015, she began helping her family start their manufacturing business, and found she needed a different set of leadership skills.

“Compared with being a bank analyst, setting up a family business requires more interpersonal interactions,” she says. “Although I could participate in some of the decision-making during the start-up phase, I was still protected by senior family members when dealing with the local governments and investors, so I have been kept away from the most challenging problems, for instance how to handle the relationships between me and my immediate family and other family members both inside and outside of the company.”

Flavia’s leadership skills were not evident until she started her own business. “I am trying to set up my own chain of restaurants. The word ‘entrepreneur’ indicates I have to be a leader in decision making, and an executor who knows how to carry out these plans,” she says. “I have to be independent, get used to living with pressures from every side, and consider every single problem comprehensively, whether big or small, including site selection, investment, products, operation and promotion.”

*“My business focuses on a healthy diet aimed at women who want to eat light meals.”*

With the experiences of family business management and entrepreneurship under her belt, Flavia believes women leaders are a precious commodity for the business world. Compared to their male counterparts, women in leadership positions must have at least five core competencies, she says. These include being detail-oriented, insightful about other people and issues, having good communication skills, as well as toughness while confronting challenges – knowing how to conquer the unyielding by yielding to overcome difficulties and challenges.

“For example, we can add more consideration for social responsibility into the business decision-making process,” she says. Social responsibility is, without question, the key to knowing whether a catering company is good or bad, she explains with an example from an industry she knows well. “I believe that women are born with an empathy that helps us know ourselves, so we can better develop and improve others,” says Flavia. “For instance, my business focuses on a healthy diet aimed at women who want to eat light meals.”

“Of course, though women make-up half of the world’s population, we must remember business today is still ruled by men!” Flavia says. “I have found that in such a male-dominated world, we are badly in need of women to communicate and come together, to build bridges and smooth out contradictions – and I want to be one of them”

