

Interview with Veera Johnson CEO ProcServe

By Sheree Owen



In May 2009 Veera Johnson was named Business Woman of the Year at the Asian Women of Achievement Awards. We interviewed Veera, one of the keynote speakers at the AC's fourth international forthcoming conference 'Going Global 2010'

Veera, what would a typical day look like for you in your role?

I try not to have a typical day! And this is exactly why I love the role and working in ProcServe - it's a business that demands the best of you. This is particularly the case as a leader in the business, where you are responsible for large teams or large assignments - you have to be able to deal with change and in particular changing customer needs. One minute I could be discussing what enhancements should be included in the future releases of our systems and the next I could be presenting a proposition to a potential customer.

How did you come to found ProcServe?

It came about as a result of a project that I had led and worked on whilst I was at PA Consulting.

In 1997 I joined PA and worked on a number of key government projects mainly around using electronic systems to drive change. This included working with Cabinet Office on putting government services and information online and also the Office for Government Commerce on electronic procurement. It was through this most recent work that we established ProcServe in August 2006, and I became the CEO at that point. In the few years that ProcServe has been in existence, we have gone through tremendous change and are at the

heart of many organisations' plans to deliver procurement and supply chain related savings.

As a successful award winning business woman, what would you say has been your driving force?

I can't actually point to a single thing on its own that has been a driving force. There have been a number of things that I feel very passionate about, one of them is that I have a fundamental belief that what we are delivering to customers through ProcServe is absolutely of its time, particularly the need for savings in this current climate. The other is an overwhelming desire and drive to strive for the best in everything that I and my team do. I absolutely believe that everything we do, we must do to the best of our ability, doing an ok job is just not good enough. Stubbornness and an unwillingness to give up probably also play a strong part!

How did it feel to win your award in 2009?

I'm really thrilled and proud to receive the award.

I think the Asian Women of Achievement Awards are important because they're a great showcase of the amazing talent and business skills that exist in the Asian community in the UK.

Awards like these and their increasing recognition across the UK means that all of the finalists and winners are true role models of what

Continued on page 16

Continued from page 15

can be achieved through hard work and determination.

What key factors or influences do you attribute your success in business to?

There is not one thing that I can point to say that this is why I have been successful – I think there have been a number of things. One of the most important has been that I have had a number of great sponsors who have believed in me and have given me a ‘can do’ attitude. The other is that I have a great team at ProcServe who are all passionate about what we do and they play a huge part in keeping me motivated and driven to make ProcServe really successful.

I wonder, how did you come to discover coaching?

I was introduced to it during the latter stages of my career at PA Consulting. The Executive Chairman of PA Consulting, Jon Moynihan, is a firm believer in personal development and often leads PA’s leadership development programme. When I became a member of PA’s Management Group, he took on the role of my sponsor and also recognised the diversity in my approach and introduced me to personal coaching as a way of continuing my personal development alongside PA’s formal leadership development programme. It is through this that I met and have continued to work with Aspire.

How has coaching been of benefit to you personally from a leadership perspective?

Coaching has been a real revelation to me. In particular it has provided a framework in which I can challenge myself and continue to invest in my personal development. Of many of the things that I never believed I would be able to do, I now look back and realise that the tools, techniques, guidance and most impor-

tantly encouragement I have had during the coaching process, have helped me grow both as a leader and in personal confidence. There is not a week that goes by now where I do not continue to surprise myself with the decisions that I make, the challenges that I deal with and where the company has got to.

In your organisation, where and how does coaching fit?

There is a real ‘can do’ attitude and a culture that we have tried to develop that focuses on enabling individuals to succeed. Coaching and mentoring are a huge part of this approach. This included nominating a mentor and ‘buddy’ for each person, working with their line managers to develop individual action plans and half yearly appraisals. We also try to provide as much training on the job as we can.

ProcServe has a lot of very talented individuals at all ranks and there is real challenge and excitement of working with them and seeing them grow and develop.

This approach is not just limited to staff, it also applies to the leadership team. In 2009, we took the entire leadership team through a coaching programme, with the objective of preparing the team to take on the challenges of continuing to grow the company and dealing with some of the issues that this often brings with it.

Would you describe ProcServe as having a coaching culture?

Yes we do. Although we do have to work quite hard at this, as the day to day challenges can sometimes mean that its easy to forget about checking back on personal development. We recognise this and ensure that we have built into our processes at least two formal ‘check-points’ at the mid-year and end of year. This

Continued on page 17

Continued from page 16

allows us to look at every single person in detail, consider their performance in role, what additional support they need and what actions need to be taken by their line manager and the individual concerned. All of our processes are geared towards providing the individual with the tools and guidance they need to help them succeed.

What would you say have been the key benefits of developing a coaching culture?

Because of our coaching approach and focus on continuous personal development, it has had a great impact on, not only the way we work as a team, but also on the standards that we expect of each other and the ambitions for the company.

In what way is it important for you to embrace and celebrate diversity within ProcServe?

I do believe that all organisations need to work really hard to break the barriers to progress regardless of whether its about gender, age or language – so making sure that we have diversity in the way we work, the way we recruit people and the way we reward people is really important. We have a saying in ProcServe that we continually remind ourselves of. It's by Anita Roddick, the founder of Body Shop:

“Every successful business will have a moral compass – a gut sense of what is right and wrong. Our challenge is to put these values to work both on and off the

job. The best teams walk their talk, are quick to jump up, confront tough issues head on, speak passionately about what is right. And your biggest tool is communication. Make it bold and enlivening and passionate – if you can't communicate, you are just not there. So BE BRAVE, BE BOLD, and BE DIFFERENT and if any one of you are told by anyone else it can't be done, that the business case doesn't work and the customers don't really give a toss about anything other than the products just say ... “Up yer bum!”

— Anita Roddick

What do you wish for in 2010, for yourself and /or for your company?

Well for ProcServe, the ambition is to be a leading global provider of trading network solutions. If everyone signed up and traded over the network we could get there very quickly and we could help organisations save money faster – which in this climate must be a good thing!

For me personally, I want to continue to have enough energy and spark. I love seeing other people grow; I do a lot of internal mentoring and coaching. I get my satisfaction from seeing the organisation and the people in it continuing to grow.

*Veera Johnson is the CEO of Procserve, and a keynote speaker at the forthcoming AC international conference **Going Global 2010** being held in London on the 11th and 12th March 2010.*

www.acconference.com