

Verizon-Rima Qureshi
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>> Welcome back to Up to Speed, a Verizon pod cast where we share stories about technology and the media. In today's episode, Marie McGehee sat down with Rima Qureshi, Executive Vice President and Chief Strategy Officer at Verizon to kick off women's history month. Rima talked about navigating a constantly-changing tech landscape, how strategy in a company is everyone's job, and the importance of mentoring and sponsoring women for the future.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Hey everyone, it's Marie McGehee. And I'm thrilled to welcome Rima Qureshi, Verizon's Chief Strategy Officer, who is in our studio today. Welcome Rima. Thanks for joining us.

>> RIMA QURESHI: Thank you, Marie. It's a pleasure to be here.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: As we typically do with our episodes, let's start with your personal story. You've discussed that you're originally from Pakistan. When you think back to your childhood, who were some of your early influencers, and how did they help make a difference in your life?

>> RIMA QURESHI: Well, I was born in Pakistan, but we left Pakistan when I was quite young. So I was eight when we moved to Canada.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Mm-hmm.

>> RIMA QURESHI: And I guess as most people, the people that influence us the most are our parents. And definitely my mum and my dad have had a significant influence on my life. But specifically I would say my father. He has been such an important figure in my life in so many ways. And in critical points in my life, whether it be when we first moved to Montreal, to Canada, where I grew up, and the decisions that he made about where we would study, for example. I think I may have mentioned this previously, but, you know, he was the one who decided that we're going to move to

Canada. He spoke to us in English. We went to French school because it was important, he said, for us to integrate into the society. So from a very young age, I was exposed to many languages, which I really consider a gift. And I thank my father for that. I remember when I was 15 or 16, or actually even earlier than, that it was probably around 11 or 12, as girls as that age would do, he was going out. And he asked if we needed anything. And I said daddy could you pick up a fashion magazine. And he came back and brought me the magazine that I had asked for, but he had also brought me a science magazine. And he said I want you to read this, as well. And, you know, going forward I kept asking him to bring me science. And it was the approach that he took. It was never about forcing you to do something. It was trying to kind of lead you to something and show you the interest of it. And in that way, he influenced me to take decisions about what I would study at university. And has always been a great sounding board all the way through my life and still is today.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: That's great. You know, you were born in Pakistan, you moved to Canada when you were eight years old, you've eventually moved to the United States. How did all these different experiences impact your life?

>> RIMA QURESHI: Um, yeah. (Chuckling) There's a lot of different experiences that kind of shape who you are. And I would say maybe I would pick on a couple of them because of course being born in Pakistan, there are certain cultural norms that you are expected to live by. And moving to Canada, it was I would say probably a little bit of a struggle of those.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Mm-hmm.

>> RIMA QURESHI: But then as you are a new immigrant to a new country, you want to kind of surround yourselves with things that are familiar. I remember what my parents did. It's a very vivid memory for me still. For those who still remember phone books, they literally opened up the phone book and they picked the first name out of the phone book that sounded Pakistani, and they called those people up. And those people became, if you will, part of our family, our community, and they helped us introduce us into the Pakistani-Canadian community. So even though I left Pakistan at a relatively young age, it was a result of being part of that community, there were certain expectations, which were adopted from the place that we left and, you know, sort of imported and put it on top of Canadian expectations. So the first part of my life, it was the sort of struggle about what are the expectations, especially as a woman. And as a young woman.

So unfortunately, that name that they found within the phone book, those people, they had children similar age to ours, and to myself and my sister. But they were a little bit more religious than my family was. But they did influence our upbringing in some respects. So I remember having discussions that my mum would have with me during when we were growing up about, you know, you will marry and your husband will decide whether you will go to school or not. Whether you will go to university or not. And again, my father was a very strong influence in that. And he said no, our family has

always gone to university. And our daughters will go to university. So I mean it was a very good way to ensure that there was more integration and more focus. But that pressure was still there. That pressure to not only as hard as it is to be a woman in this society, but also have to deal with all of the pressures of a society that's even much more closed than the challenges we face as women here. I remember stories of staying up at 2 o'clock in the morning and my mum would walk into my room and she would say Rima, don't study. Just get married. I want to have a granddaughter or a grandson. And I said mum, for me, it's not important to get married now. For me, I want to make my own place. And then afterwards I'll decide what I want to do.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: So did you have a particular dream job growing up? I mean you mentioned that you're interested in fashion and then your dad exposed you to the sciences. Where did that net out as far what you think about your childhood as a kid? And was there a dream job that you gravitated to? And was chief strategy officer anywhere on that list?

>> RIMA QURESHI: No, not at all. I wouldn't have even known what a chief strategy officer was at the time, but I would say a dream job, it depends how far back you go. At one point it was definitely a ballerina. And then afterwards very quickly it became an astronaut, until I realized that I was completely nauseous, so I don't think I would have been able to go through half the tests that you need to, to become an astronaut. But again, with the influence of my father and the influence of my family, everybody within, as he had said, we have been doctors. And we've always been doctors. So he had almost an assumption that I would go into medicine. And why did I end up where I did is because I have a very stubborn streak from my mom. So I was going to do anything other than what my dad said I should do. So he said somewhere in the sciences, so that's when I decided to go into computer science.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: So as chief strategy officer, it's your job to really dive in and ask the tough questions. So in doing so, how are you sort of carrying out those conversations and, you know, really challenging people to sort of take on a different mindset, even when it's uncomfortable?

>> RIMA QURESHI: It's a learning process. It's a journey, if you will. I would say what I'm most curious and interested about are facts. And logic. And I guess you could say I'm probably quite analytic. So if somebody makes a marketing pitch, it is a natural reaction for me to ask details and ask questions of why. And why do we believe that we're going to be successful at something? And prove things to me. So in some respects it comes naturally because I'm trying to understand. I think also it is important that we don't fool ourselves. It's important that we don't ask, you know, come up with simple answers and a very high level approach to something. We need to be able to challenge ourselves. And I guess it also depends a little bit on personality. So from personality, I don't need to have people like me. I like people to like me. But I think it's most important that I'm respected.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Right.

>> RIMA QURESHI: And from my perspective, I am trying to do what is right for the business. So whenever I ask these tough questions, it's not to bring anybody down, it's do it with dignity and respect. And it's to do it for the good of the company and for the good of the customer. So it's to try to put myself in the eyes of the customer, or in the eyes of what is best for our shareholders and to ask the questions in that context.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: So given the fact that Verizon is not only one of the most successful, but also one of the most influential companies in the world, how do you ensure that the company doesn't get complacent and how important are things like agility and also culture? How much does culture play into it?

>> RIMA QURESHI: Very much. And one of the interviews that I had prior to joining the company was somebody asking me during the interview process, somebody from Verizon asking me during the interview process, so what is Verizon's strength. And I said your financial position. And what is Verizon's weakness? Your financial position. Because you do have a sense of complacency when things are good. Now it is fluctuating and there are challenges. And people understand the challenges and the importance of change. But it isn't as bad as it is in other industries and it isn't as bad as it is in other environments. So there is a danger of being lulled into a sense of everything is good and everything will continue to be good. That's tricky. I want things to be good, but I want people to have that sense of urgency. And the best time to change is when things are good. The hardest time to innovate, and the hardest time to disrupt is when things are good. And it's not necessarily because people are complacent, but it's also because you don't want to destroy a good business. So the challenge is to figure out how do you make the change? How do you get people to understand just because something is successful now, it will not continue to be successful? And also to get people to understand the best time to make a shift is when you have the financial capabilities to do so.

So it is a process. It is a journey. There isn't one right right way of doing it. And you are never done. I think that's the one interesting thing about working with strategy. You are never done. We have been working very hard right now. There is a big milestone coming up next week, beginning of March, where we will have our strategy session with the Verizon board. And I remember as we were doing the preparation for all of the different things that we were presenting to the board, I mentioned in some review, you know, we are never done with strategy. And there was like a collective groan in the audience, because everybody was very much looking forward to the day after the board meeting where they could say okay, now I can put this aside and now we can go back to doing my job. Strategy is everybody's job. It's not my job. My job is to be the chief orchestrator.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Mm-hmm.

>> RIMA QURESHI: Of the work that everyone else needs to do. Strategy isn't done in my office or in a conference room with a couple of people. It is getting down there and getting dirty with everyone and figuring out what are the challenges and trying to come up with solutions together. And the solutions aren't easy. It's just, you know, you make a decision. You make a choice. And the choice isn't always straightforward. But you move forward and then you course correct as you go along. That's why strategy is never done.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: I know you're just back from Barcelona where you were attending Mobile World Congress. Did you have any ah-ha moments when you were at the show? Did anything surprise you or catch your eye?

>> RIMA QURESHI: Um, I had not much time to walk around, obviously, because of course things are so busy and the show is so big. It's hard to get a sense of it. But, you know, as you were walking around, there was definitely much more focus this year on 5G than there has been in previous years. And I guess the ah-ha moment is we're not just talking about 5G, but there are a lot of very interesting use cases. And the way the different partners that I met with are bringing those use case to life. You know, you see the stuff that you would of course expect. So I tried on the AR and VR headset. I tried on a VR headset. And it was extremely immersive. Much more than I would have thought and much more than I experienced before. And that was fascinating. But what was equally fascinating were all of the enterprise or industrial applications of 5G. And how 5G would allow you to get rid of so many technologies and so many barriers or things that hold you back.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Mm-hmm.

>> RIMA QURESHI: Those were the most interesting ah-ha moments for me. So it's not necessarily the most, the coolest consumer application of 5G. It's really the ah-ha moments of some of the industrial use cases and how interesting those will be in terms of what we think about the future and the strategy of the company.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: So you've worked in technology for over 30 years, and it continues to evolve and change at a really frenetic space. What excites you the most about that?

>> RIMA QURESHI: I'll step back for a second and go back to my father. So if you remember what I answered earlier when I said everybody within our family had been doctors and he wanted me to be a doctor, as well. And I was recently in a doctor's office thinking what would it be like if I, 30 years ago, had made the decision to go into medicine. And I was sitting in this one room coming out of every 15 minutes to bring the next patient in, and spending 15 minutes before the next patient would show up. I am so happy to be in the industry where I am. It's an amazing industry. If you just think through what has happened in the last 30 years, I mean that's even hard to fathom. What's happened in the last 10 years. To think Twitter wasn't around,

Facebook wasn't around, iPhone wasn't around. Maybe not exactly ten years, but you get the general idea. It's so much change we have gone through. I think that's the most exciting part of being in this industry. It is constantly changing. It is scary and challenging because it's also constantly disrupting and you have to be very careful because the ground can easily just disintegrate underneath you. But I think that's the fascinating part about being here. And every day is a challenge and extremely interesting.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: You've described yourself as someone who is innovative and pushes boundaries and pushes the envelope. So with the pace of change at which technology is changing, how do you ensure that your team is making the right bets?

>> RIMA QURESHI: Well, I think there is no right bets necessarily because if you look at some of the strategies that our competitors have, you can be successful with having very different bets.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Mm-hmm.

>> RIMA QURESHI: I think what we need to really do, which is what we are in the process of doing is determining where we truly have a right to win. Where we have assets and capabilities that might differentiate us and make sure that we can be successful with those bets. But the pace of change definitely I agree with you. It is tremendous and it is going to continue to continue to be fast. And I think in that context, what we're trying to do is to make sure that we get enough outside-in thinking, that we are giving ourselves the opportunity to learn from others that are seeing it from a different perspective, that we challenge ourselves, as well. So as part of the strategy process, we have a very important part of that process to make sure that we removed all the biases. Because you wouldn't even, I mean it's amazing how many biases we have. And we may be removing possibilities and opportunities just because we personally may have a bias against it. So we have a process that we use in the overall development of the strategy, which is called red teaming. And specifically to challenge the biases that we don't even know that we've put into the work that we are doing. And then I think it's to go things like Mobile World Congress, or to CES, and I have as many internal e-mails as I have external news feeds to keep track of everything that is going on. And I usually have about 10 books by my bedside and I'm trying to get through all of them on all of the different developments that are going on there. And it's a personal passion. Going back to that initial science magazine that my dad got for me, I'm interested in learning. I'm interested in discovering new things. And I'm trying to stay as abreast of it as I can. And trying to get that sense of interest and learning in everyone.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: What book are you currently reading?

>> RIMA QURESHI: It's a book called Homo Deus. And it's about, it says it is for anyone who is interested in the future. It's by the same author who wrote Sapiens

And basically the premise of the book is the future of mankind will not be determined by natural selection. It will be determined by us as human beings in terms of how we engineer the world around us as well as how we engineer ourselves.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Fascinating. Since we are in women's history month, let's talk about women and leadership. When you think about that, what is the most significant barrier that is holding women back?

>> RIMA QURESHI: Uh, well I will say it is not necessarily the most significant, but definitely an important barrier are the limitations that we put on ourselves. The first time I was asked to interview for a position for a role outside of Canada was when I had an opportunity to move to Sweden. And I was asked to interview for the role. And when I went to the interview, I started by talking about all of the capabilities I didn't have and the person who I was replacing who was interviewing me said why do women do that? Why is it men will walk in, and even if they only have 50% of the capabilities, they play up their capabilities that they have. And women, almost without fail will always talk about all of the things that they could improve.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Right.

>> RIMA QURESHI: And I hadn't even thought about that. But I do realize that I do it. And I'm trying to be more cautious. I think I will never be the one that boasts about my capabilities. But I think it is important to balance. It is important not automatically to start with belittling ourselves and playing down our capabilities, but also being confident enough with the capabilities that we do have. And what we bring to it. You know, the other thing that I would say is when should you blend in? And when should you stand out? I think that's an important balance that we need to learn to do. We will always stand out, regardless of how much we would like to just blend into the wood work sometimes. But it is a balance between the two. There are times where it is important for us to express our diversity. Our diversity of opinion. Our diversity of thought. I think it's important. But there are other times where it is better not to stand out. Because then you are perceived as being too different. So it's important to understand that balance. And to leverage where it makes sense. At the same time, as we need to stand up for each other and to help each other bring forward the capabilities that we have. So I am doing a lot of mentoring, and in that mentoring, I try to help women that say "I'm not sure if I should apply for the job. I don't have this. I don't have that as a capability." As much as possible to ask them do they want the job. Do they believe they could do the job? And then give them an approach on how they take the interview and the next steps.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Mm-hmm.

And in environments where it's happened to every woman, where you're sitting in a meeting and you look up and you're the only woman in the room.

>> RIMA QURESHI: Right.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: In fact we did an episode about that. How do you make sure your voice is heard?

>> RIMA QURESHI: Uh, I think it's when you have something to say. And to not be afraid to say it. But in some cases you don't have something to say, so you don't necessarily have to have your voice heard all the time. I find myself often in meetings where I'm the only woman. I found myself often in meetings where I was the only woman in Barcelona in Mobile World Congress this week. And in some cases I didn't even notice it until after. And in other cases it was very obvious to me that I was the only woman in a room of twenty men. But it's to feel enough confidence in yourself, be comfortable in your own skin to know when is it that you need to have your voice heard, and when is it okay just to be? Because frankly you will be seen. You are the only woman. It is important to make sure, though, that when you find yourself in these situations that you focus on where you feel comfortable. And when you do need to have your voice, to make sure that your voice is heard in something that you feel comfortable expressing.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: And what do you think about labels? There are a lot of labels that are thrown our way. Whether it's passionate or emotional, sometimes bossy or bitchy, just to name a few. So if you're mid-career or early in their career, what is advice for women who are early in their career or mid-career to rise above those labels?

>> RIMA QURESHI: By the way, I think I've probably been labeled all of those things at some point in time in my career. I think it's not to let the labels bother you. It's no be comfortable within your own skin, to have a good support network, to have a good self-awareness. Because we are guilty of all of those things at times. And not automatically write off those labels as just somebody treating women a certain way. But also being very open and aware when those labels are actually accurate. And we need to do something about them.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Mm-hmm.

>> RIMA QURESHI: Because sometimes we may be taking the wrong approach. We are guilty of that as much as men are. We have to kind of separate out the valid feedback from the overall bad perceptions. And I think that that is where mentoring is helpful, creating a strong network of people that you can turn to, to balance ideas and get feedback from, to really find out was I really being bitchy, was I really being aggressive? Or is it just the perceptions that people have? And adapt as you go.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: In terms of mentorship, when you were mentored earlier in your career and somebody sort of held the mirror up to you and gave you some feedback, how did you handle it?

>> RIMA QURESHI: I have a very good example of that. And it was very early on.

And this was a woman I never actually meant. I spoke with her over the phone. And she was assigned to me as a mentor. She was about ten years older. I had a lot of respect for her. Very no-nonsense, you know, hard-working, direct woman. And I remember talking to her about the fact that I thought it was really unfair as being the only woman that I wasn't being invited to the hockey matches that everybody else was going to. Obviously I was living in Canada, so hockey was the thing that people did. And I remember saying it's really not fair that, you know, I don't go to these things and all the guys go. And then they all talk about all sorts of work stuff and I'm not part of it. And she said just get over yourself. That's the reality. First of all, are you going to go? Are you going to join them in the locker room? Are you going to be able to sit there, you know, drink and swear the way they are? I said no. She said do you even want to? I said no. Are there other ways that you can make your voice and be part of the conversation that feels more like you? And I said yes. And she said well focus on it. Life isn't fair. The environment around you is not going to be perfect. Figure out what actually works for you and what fits with you. And work with it. Frankly, the world we live in, and the environment that we face is not perfect. We have work to do to make the environment for women better. And we have to figure out how we do that, not only all together with women, but with men, because they're part of the solution. The people who have influenced me have been men. The people who have helped me have been men. So they have to be part of the solution. And I think we need to figure out how we get that type of mentorship and that kind of straight feedback from others, whether they be mentors or bosses. Whether they be men or women.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: So on the topic of men, what responsibility do men, particularly those in the senior management do they have to continue to mentor and sponsor in a really meaningful way?

>> RIMA QURESHI: It's a very important responsibility. And I think it is an important responsibility also in some respect for senior management to be mentored by others. You know, it's like reverse mentorship is also something that people should think about. People further on in their careers should think about being reverse mentored by younger people so they understand the challenges and changes that are happening within the younger generation. And senior men, senior leadership, men in senior leadership should really take a very serious responsibility in mentoring women. But I think it also depends a little bit on, I think it depends a lot on just chemistry a little bit. Just because you are a man in a senior position doesn't mean that women will nationally feel comfortable wanting to be mentored by you. There has to be a connection. It may work with some, it may work with others. I have mentored women who only want to talk to other women. Because there are certain things that they don't feel comfortable talking to men about, like is now the right time for me to start a family? And how much time should I spend at work versus how much time I should be spending with my family? So I think it is important that men are mentoring women. But also that women should have a say in who they want to be mentored by. And in some cases, women feel more comfortable being mentored by women. And I have mentored quite a few men who wanted to be mentored by women. In some cases they feel more

comfortable in that environment because there are certain things that they would like to discuss well about their jobs, but also maybe more about their personal lives, as well.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: As you've mentored women, what do you say to those who sort of approach work by saying I'm just going to focus on the work and, you know, let the work speak for itself? And how do you get them to think more broadly?

>> RIMA QURESHI: It is again probably one of the natural tendencies that we have. That again, we don't want to talk openly about all of our accomplishments. It's probably a little bit cultural or societal the way that we are raised. I think it's to explain to them that it's not only about the accomplishments, it's about the network, and it is about making sure that you share your capabilities. And it's about playing the politics. Because the politics are part of the job. You may not like it. But you have to do it. So it's to get people, it's to get women a little bit out of their comfort zone and help them to develop those capabilities. Because they're a skill. And they're a skill similar to the skills that they've developed in the work that they've done. So it's to help them develop that type of skill.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: So the theme for International Women's Day this year is "Press for Progress." What do you think of when you hear that? And what does that theme mean to you?

>> RIMA QURESHI: Well, having two daughters who are just starting university and starting to work, I want them to have the same opportunities and the same compensation as their male counterparts. So for me it is personal. Not only for myself, but also for my daughters to make sure that they have what they deserve for the work that they do.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: So based on what you know today and everything that you've experienced, if you could go back to your younger self, maybe the eight-year-old who had just moved to Canada, what would you say to her?

>> RIMA QURESHI: Study hard. Believe in yourself. And do the best job possible.

>> MARIE McGEHEE: Rima, thanks so much for joining us today.

>> RIMA QURESHI: Thank you for having me.

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>> Thanks for listening. Stay tuned to Up to Speed for more conversations about technology today.

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