



Interview Bradley Lalonde, Executive Director of AmCham Vietnam HCMC & Danang

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INTRODUCTION

Bradley Lalonde has a long professional and personal association with Vietnam for over 30 years having arrived in April 1994 as the first head of Citibank in the country. Bradley Lalonde established branches of Citibank in both Hanoi and HCMC and became a founder of AmCham Vietnam in Hanoi as its first elected Chairman. Bradley also played a leading role in furthering the normalization of political and commercial ties between Vietnam and the US, which led to Vietnam's accession to the WTO in the early of 2007.



In the mid 90's Brad testified before the U.S. Congress on the need to normalize trade and investment ties with Vietnam. Prior to Vietnam, Brad was involved in start-up banking franchises in Bahrain, Turkey, Tunisia and Vietnam. Mr. Lalonde grew up in Michigan and was educated at the University of Michigan and Columbia University with a Masters Degree in Development Economics. Brad has a keen personal interest in education and training, entrepreneurship, start-up business, alternative energy, sustainable agriculture and creative solutions to the challenges facing the planet.



QUESTIONS/ GREETINGS;

1/ Can you please tell us your first impression on the first day you arrived in Vietnam? What memories are still in your mind?

Well, my first impression of Hanoi were so many bicycles with little bells on them, other memories are the sound of the street life, humidity, muggy and how quiet Hanoi was after dark. Above all, I feel a very warm reception from even people on the street who seem to welcome me just because I was an American. That's very contrary to what I thought before coming here. In 1995, when the 41st President of the U.S. George H. W. Bush visited us, there's one question he asked me which was surprising to me "Brad, how were you treated here in Vietnam?" - My answer was "They treated me exceptionally nice and it seemed that Vietnam is a great place to be an American, which to me was a big surprise while looking back at the history."



2/ We are talking about cultural agility, that is the ability to work respectfully, knowledgeably and effectively with different people in other countries. How important is it to you and other U.S entrepreneurs and firms when doing business in Vietnam?

There's two things on the cultural side of living and doing business in Vietnam. Actually, one of the advantages of living in Vietnam as a foreigner is that the people are very flexible and welcoming. You're not forced to really understand and live by the rules of Vietnamese culture but that sometimes makes foreigners lazy and they rely on their own culture and they never really experience the fine aspects of Vietnamese culture. I think to be successful in a foreign country whether you're the Vietnamese doing business in other countries or you're the American doing business in Vietnam, you have to adapt yourself to the local culture and be a part of its living lifestyle. I think that is a very important one to have a truly successful business here.

3/ Did you get any cross cultural training before coming to Vietnam? Did your experience in Bahrain, Turkey, Tunisia and overseas business trips help?

Well, I have no training. But I did have experience of living in several emerging markets like Turkey, Bahrain, Tunisia, traveling around Africa and other countries in Southeast Asia are also a part of my work. So that was on the job cultural experience and I think traveling is a very good way from even as a student to young business people traveling more frequently which opens your eyes and your mind. So far, Vietnam is becoming a spotlight for all global travelers to discover significant culture and lifestyle, exchanging from that experience as well. Also, we can see Vietnamese traveling more often around Southeast Asia, the United States, Europe and bringing back new ideas for transforming and boosting the dynamic of Vietnam's economy.

4/ Any tales of your own cultural conflict, U.S businesses when living and working in Vietnam? What is the biggest difference between American businessmen and their Vietnamese entrepreneurs? How did you and your peers overcome such challenges? With help from other AmCham colleagues and even federal staff for instance.

Actually, I've had very little cultural conflict in Vietnam for over 30 years. However that doesn't mean there are no cultural differences or differences that may be caused by misunderstanding or miscommunication oftentimes in language. But normally if you make a mistake and you apologize for it, Vietnamese people are quite understanding and their culture avoids conflict as I believe. That's a little bit unique and Vietnam prioritizes common goals or business first rather than arguing about who is wrong or right, whether you have



the right to be here, or not here or you can do this or you cannot do that vice versa. It's all about the culture, if we have a deep understanding of Vietnam and we will benefit a lot on your business and personal life here.

What is the biggest difference between American businessmen and their Vietnamese entrepreneurs?

I don't know if I could find a single big difference, as I think entrepreneurs are very similar wherever they are whether they're in America or they're in Germany, Cambodia, Vietnam, Singapore or China. The word entrepreneur is becoming very fashionable since nobody talked about that much when I was young and in college. Today, entrepreneurs become almost a mission or a goal that everybody admires. Why, because entrepreneurs generally start their own business and it's very attractive for a genuine solution to become a successful business. We've seen many examples in the technology world and now in the digital economy we see more and more entrepreneurs emerging.

I think it very similar whether you're American or you're Vietnamese what's different is the environment that you're operating in the United States it's a different legal, regulatory and environment than what we have and very much behavior culture of the entrepreneur to be successful in Vietnam, you have to be a pretty good political one. In contrast in the U.S. It's almost entirely business so the politics and regulations don't really matter that much in some respects, so starting a new business in the U.S is easier.



How did you and your peers overcome such challenges?

You don't really overcome challenges, you become better educated, more knowledgeable of what the issues are that are affecting your business. So, I don't think the cultural element really plays a big role and oftentimes with an entrepreneur you're a problem solver. You'll find a way to overcome and have lessons learned at the same time.

With help from other AmCham colleagues and even federal staff for instance.

Like The Beatles song 'With a Little Help from My Friends'. Of course, you can never do anything important alone by yourself. You must have good friends, good allies, good customers, good employees working together to create a good result. I'm a firm believer in the idea that good people make good things happen. If your business fails, you usually look back and see it as a human failure. Maybe you didn't have the right person in the right place, maybe you hired some bad people for a lot of reasons but it goes back to the people so that should be your focus. How do you build the people's resources to catch human capital, the intellectual capital that is the true driver of economic success.

5/ Nearly three decades in Vietnam, what do you consider as your achievements or thorough knowledge of Vietnamese people, culture and business culture?

Well, the number one is I haven't been killed crossing the street, hahaha!!! Obviously, yes there's so many things when I look back on that I take pride in and I have many warm memories of unique opportunities and things that have happened that today I'm very thankful for and if I had to do it over again I wouldn't change.

So in that sense, I've been very fortunate and very happy to have those experience and even when I look at Vietnam throughout the last 30 years, I can break it down into three periods with 10 years of each. Today here we are - actually the impression is that time has gone so fast, I cannot believe I've actually been here



nearly three decades. Somebody told me that the best job you have is the one where you never look at your watch. Because you're so busy doing your work, you don't have time and don't even care about the time. Those are very interesting so I always felt Vietnam made me enjoy every minute of it, whatever problems or challenges.

I always tell my children about choosing their career, I always feel the most important thing is to get experience. Don't try to get the perfect job but take whatever job you get and do it very well. I don't care if that's washing dishes in the restaurant or if you're working as a hard-working accountant at a local firm. Once you get it, you go in with an attitude that you're asked to do, you do it well and I trust that attitude will carry you anywhere in the world. You can accomplish whatever dreams you have, but you have to start and you have to do the best of your capability.

6/ Vietnamese firms and conglomerates are now going global. They are investing in other countries, including North America and Europe, in different sectors including EV production, telecommunications and trading. In your opinion, what are they really lacking? How can they solve those?

I'm a believer that trade investment is a two-way street that both countries are importers, exporters and investors. Foreign countries invest in Vietnam and Vietnamese conglomerates invest in foreign markets, because that strengthens their business or whatever reason that might be that's the way the best economies in the world operate.

China has been a big investor in the United States for the last 15 years and also certain sectors are exceptionally competitive. So when you're thinking about investing abroad, as a Vietnamese company, you've been very successful in the home market but does that guarantee you'll be successful in the foreign markets? So when you venture abroad, you really need to do your homework before you go. You need to very closely evaluate the economics in that new market, the industry competition and determine the capital resources that you need to operate long-term in that new location.

7/ Any random thought or suggestion. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between US-Vietnam, linked to your new appointed position at AmCham....

Regarding the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) announced couple weeks ago by U.S. President Joe Biden and Vietnam's General Secretary, this is the highest relationship that we're proud to gain and appointed to the position of Executive Director of AmCham Vietnam HCMC & Danang also another remarkable milestone since I worked on the initial process in the very beginning of this relationship (1994-2024). I really look forward to seeing how AmCham can help our members take advantage of this new relationship and new opportunity which I think will benefit in a significant way both Vietnam and the United States.

Thank you and ending.

