

GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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Breaking Barriers

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Maria Costa-Smith should be an NFL coach.

You can picture her on the sidelines during a game, all 5 ft., 2 in. of her petite frame, headset on, playbook in hand, determined look on her face, making the tough decisions and calling the right plays.

She's got all of the qualities that a good coach should have: a strong history and passion for the game (in this instance, the hort game); the ability to motivate her team by empowering them to use their strengths; supporting them during tough losses by sharing their tears and celebrating with them during victories; and constantly thinking about what she can do to help them win.

Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry (if they were alive today) would only hope to be as good a coach as Maria. Plus, if they had to juggle motherhood, all while breaking gender and cultural barriers at the same time? Forget it.

If they had a Hall of Fame for strong, inspiring female leaders in our industry, Maria would be inducted on the first ballot.

A family business

When we chose to feature Maria as the subject of this month's cover story, I knew that a regular, old phone interview wasn't going to be enough. So I took a trip down to Costa Farms' main headquarters in Homestead, Florida, right outside of Miami, to meet with Maria face-to-face on her own turf.

Pictured: Maria with her puppy Sammy.

The oldest of four children, Maria, who with her brother, José, and husband Joche, is part of the third generation to run Costa Farms, which has grown from a small tomato grower to one of the largest ornamental plant operations in the country. With 11 locations around the U.S., Costa grows potted plants, tropicals, annuals and perennials for its mass market customers.

Currently, Maria is head of the Horticulture & Planning division, but before that, she ran the Color division (annuals and perennials operations) for 20 years.

But don't think because she was born into her grandfather's business that she got a cushy management job right

away. Maria and her siblings had to earn their way into the business by working for it.

“Ever since we were very young, both my dad and my grandfather were very adamant of us working out in the field,” explained Maria. “There was no favoritism; no silver spoon.” In fact, Maria said that one of her earliest memories growing up in the business was learning math by working with a potting machine.

The industry has changed a lot during the time of Costa’s existence and the company has evolved to reflect these changes. Maria’s grandfather emigrated from Cuba and opened his tomato business when he settled in Southeast Florida. During the heyday of houseplants in the 1970s, they started growing foliage and tropicals. Then when Maria, José and Joche joined the company in the ’90s, they added annuals to their product mix. Six years ago, Costa became a perennial grower, too.

“One of the things that Joche always preaches is we either change or die,” said Maria. “We constantly work on evolving and improving, so a lot of exciting things have happened on the operational side of our company, and on the marketing and consumer-facing parts, as well.”

It’s a (Cuban-American) woman’s world

Another thing that’s changed since Maria started full-time at Costa: women’s roles in the workplace. As a woman in a male-dominated industry, it’s only natural that the topic comes up, so when I asked her about it, she gave a knowing chuckle and said, “I could talk about this for two or three hours.”

For Maria, her role in the company—and usually being the only woman in the room—has been an evolution for her. She’s had to learn and adapt to certain situations to have her voice heard, trying to stave off what she calls “The Little Lady Syndrome,” when men can be patronizing if a woman is cute enough to chime in with an idea, falling just short of patting her on the head and saying, “Thanks, Little Lady.”

Maria said she’s never felt purposely discriminated against, but at the same time feels like she’s had to work harder to earn her spot with the big boys. And three things she’s done to do this is play to her strengths, know her weaknesses and not get hung up on perceptions.

“Traditionally, women are more detail-oriented, more emotional, and that’s not a negative thing,” Maria is quick to point out. “So how do we leverage what our strengths are and not focus perhaps on what some of our weaknesses are in comparison to males?”

Add not only being a woman, but a Cuban-American woman, into the mix and it makes for a more interesting and challenging position to be in—especially when you grow up in a patriarchal culture, as many Latino ones are.

“It goes hand-in-hand with a woman working in a man’s world; the Latin culture’s tough, historically,” said Maria. “That was an extra hurdle, at least for me personally in this business. I remember being young and bringing the growers together, and having a discussion about fertilizers and soils, and I’m thinking, ‘All these old Cuban men sitting around the table—they’re thinking, “Who does this little girl think she is?”’”



One of Costa's goals isn't just to be the best vendor to their customers, but to be "the employer of choice" and having a female leader at the helm has helped the company attract more talented female employees, especially during the last three to five years. Maria said she's been blessed to have been able to mentor some of the women in the company and hopes she's able to pass on what's she's learned as being the only woman in the board room.

"If I were to give advice to women, it would be don't get hung up on thinking that you're either being

discriminated or that you're anything less than anybody else in the room," Maria said emphatically. "Make your voice heard. There's everything to be gained by being confident, and know what your strengths and weaknesses are.

Pictured: Maria in the field with Mike Rimland, head of R&D for Costa and someone who Maria says she couldn't do without.

"The older I get, the more I realize don't spend energy on things that don't matter. You do your best, period. And what comes of that and what people perceive of you, history will write."

So, not only has Maria had to work through gender and cultural challenges, but also balancing running a business along with motherhood. Maria's three boys are now in their early to mid 20s, but trying to raise them while helping to run a large growing operation was a daunting, and at times guilt-ridden, task.

"By far, [being a mom is] the most important job that I have. And the most difficult thing a woman in the workforce deals with is having to balance being Super Mom, Super Wife and Super Woman at work," she said. "The guilt probably took years off of my life because no matter what, you feel guilty. At the end of the day, you have to make a choice—am I going to go to this meeting or not? What are the consequences to my career? And it's a balance. Did I do it all right? Probably not. But did it turn out okay? I think so. God gives you these children, you do your best and they're going to go out in the world and make it a better place."

Maria's advice to working moms is "do what's right for you. Find the balance. Let go of the guilt because the guilt that we all feel is absolutely counterproductive."

Operator, motivator, mentor

Mike Rimland, who's been a close friend and colleague of the Costas for years and is now head of R&D, calls Maria an "operator"—someone who's mind is constantly working, a natural decision-maker who won't stop until the job is done. She agreed with that assessment.

"We are in a business of small margins and I love figuring things out in a team and winning," Maria said, excitedly. "And that's what being an operator is all about. Operations is about empowering your team to come up with solutions that make a difference in processes. I love working as a team to figure it out. Many times, that's the difference between making it or breaking it."

When asked how her family would describe her, she laughs and says they would say "relentless." This means that Maria's passion runs deep, but it also means her expectations are high and that it takes a lot for her to be satisfied. Maria acknowledges that part of her motivation comes from a fear of failure and that it can permeate into her staff's psyche, something she's had to keep in the back of her mind when she's leading a team.

"I have been criticized that way and I have to humbly look at that—and I think I'm changing—but sometimes I don't

take the time to celebrate the victories,” she admits. “So I have to be very careful because it could demotivate people. But I have worked very actively to turn that into motivating people to want to win more. The day you get complacent is the day you begin your downfall and I don’t care what industry you’re in. So I struggle with my inner motor that doesn’t allow me, ever, to be satisfied and motivating people [at the same time].”

Motivating and inspiring people is something that Maria is very passionate about, spending about 10% to 20% of her time recruiting new talent and mentoring her employees. She’s dedicated a lot of time to learning about what young people look for in a business and what’s important to them. She knows the days of being a “farmer” are over; if you want to succeed in this industry, you need to be more business-minded and hire those who can help you move forward. Nowadays, that means more IT people, math majors and engineers.

“We’re now dealing specifically in our industry with more SKUs than anyone [else] in the retail stores,” said Maria. “We’re dealing with Big Data and understanding the dynamics of logistics of replenishment and what’s selling and what’s not. And having the right product at the right time is a huge part of our business and a huge differentiator from a traditional farmer.”

Costa Farms is known for creating and following trends in the marketplace with their products and consumer brands, but they’ve also molded themselves into a company to emulate with how much they value their employees. They’ve worked to create a flexible, all-inclusive, supportive work environment, where people feel like they’re a vital cog that makes the Costa machine run smoothly. Even during the worst of times (like after a hurricane), Maria looks to her staff to come together and work through it as a team, which they do because they feel like they have ownership in Costa Farms and their role in making the company successful.

“It’s absolutely our job to make sure the culture stays about the people and not about making money or about what our investors think,” stated Maria. “If we take care of that culture, we will win forever. And as I move on, because one day I will retire, it’s important that the people who are here recognize the importance of that.”

It’s this culture that Maria thinks of like a fragile crystal she holds in her hand and she takes great pains to ensure that it never cracks or breaks. She understands the weight of that responsibility and embraces it because her employees depend upon it.

“When you’re running a company and there are very difficult decisions that have to be made or if you’re going through a hard time, there are days that are excruciatingly lonely. And that is part of the price you pay,” Maria said in a serious tone. “That is part of the responsibility you take. But that’s the bad part. What’s the good part? I feel so blessed to be able to be able to work and make decisions with a team that affect 5,000 people, 5,000 families, every day. That’s a blessing.”

Unbreakable sticks

At the crux of their business, Costa Farms remains a company with strong, binding family ties that comes with many challenges, but also numerous achievements. Maria, Joche and José may have disagreements, but their teamwork mentality has been one of the primary reasons they’ve been so successful.

Maria likes to tell the story about when her father took her and her siblings camping one day. He made each of them get a stick and bring it back to him. When all of them had one, he told them to break it in half. Then he told them to go get another stick about the same size. They came back with new sticks that he said to put together in a bunch and try to break them in half. When the sticks were together, they were able to bend them, but they wouldn’t break. It was a valuable lesson Maria will never forget.

“You’re always going to have differences; we’re human, everybody has different perceptions,” she said. “But it’s critical to do everything in our power to communicate and be a united front.”

And she's in the middle of passing on what she's learned to the next generation; her son, Joche, Jr., started working full-time at Costa over a year ago after earning his undergraduate degree in engineering. He plans to go to graduate school for his MBA while working his way through the company, similar to what his mom and dad did when they were first starting out.

Of course, Maria is proud of the business she, her husband and brother have carried forward for their grandfather and father. But she's also proud of the opportunities she's been able to provide for her employees, from developing new processes to empowering them to be decision makers to leading the charge toward improving protocols. And she's extremely proud of the literacy program that 300 Costa employees have gone through to learn how to read and write. She says it brings tears to her eyes every time she talks about it.

"When those ladies and gentlemen stand up and say, 'I have self-confidence. I can read a note from my son's teacher.' The ability to be in a position to make a difference in people's lives like that ..." She pauses and says, "It's where God wanted me to be. I had a hard time discerning what God wanted me to do in the world and one day I just woke up and said, 'Stop looking! You're here.'"

But Maria's greatest achievement is her family. For her, it's the most important part of life.

"I want to be remembered for always doing the right thing and helping people," said Maria. "And being a good mom."

Costa Farms & Markel: One Year Later

In late summer of 2017, Costa Farms sold a majority share of their business to Markel, whose primary business is underwriting insurance products. However, Markel's Ventures division focuses on investing in companies in other markets, including construction, trucking and food processing.

The goal for the Costas wasn't to "sell" the company, but to "partner" with someone that could help them grow and continue their success by providing the capital they would need to do that. It's an interesting dynamic that has proven to be one of the best decisions the Costas have made.

"When we made the decision that we wanted to move in that direction, we were very specific, we wanted a very specific type of partner," explained Maria Costa-Smith. "We did not want a private equity firm that would come in and basically take over and want to churn and burn, cut costs or make acquisitions. [Markel] is an insurance company that has cash to invest and is looking to just have a steady return. And they don't really buy companies, they buy teams. As long as we continue to deliver the returns, they don't get involved in our business."

Markel got its first taste of how it is to be in the horticulture business when 11 days after the ink dried on the contract, Hurricane Irma hit, causing significant damage and losses to Costa's Homestead location. Maria's husband Joche called Mike Heaton at Markel to break the bad news and to the Costas' relief, Mike just asked, "What do you need?" Two days later, Mike was there in the thick of things with his sleeves rolled up, helping to pick up overturned plants.

"That's the kind of people they are; they're just good people that believe in us and that are really excited to be a part of the Costa team and to work with us. It's even exceeded my expectations," said Maria.

Any anxiety or uncertainty with the new Markel partnership didn't last long and it's been a pleasant and exciting working relationship—one that will allow the Costas to take advantage of more opportunities and be even more innovative.

“We were doing well, but now we have unlimited capital to go and grow in whichever way we want to,” said Maria. “And that motivates our team, so it helps us to continue to attract really good people and that gives us the flexibility to grow when we feel like we’re prepared to. The horizon of opportunities is just a lot broader than it was before.” **GT**