The Business Guru: Weili Dai of Marvell Technology

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Weili Dai is co-founder of Marvell Technology Group, a global semiconductor company that she started with her husband, Sehat Sutardja, 20 years ago.

When Dai moved from China to the US at 17, she spoke no English. She took a summer job at Bell Labs, the research company, after she had graduated in computer science from the University of California, Berkeley. Dai subsequently worked in software development at Canon Research Center America, the information technology company, before she co-founded Marvell in 1995. Today, she is president of a company that counts Apple and Google among its clients.
“I started thinking about the Marvell concept after I met my husband. We are both technology people,” she says. “I encouraged him to get a PhD. I said, down the road, when it’s the right time to start something I’ll be there to support him and do it together. I believe entrepreneurs need to have good experience and a technical foundation. Then you can start your own company. That’s when you can truly be creative and have the freedom to create whatever innovation or product you like.

“Collaboration is a must. Today, it’s no longer about standalone products. It’s about developing technology and working with the ecosystem. You have to collaborate to make smart solutions. We’re in the era of smart lifestyle. Moving forward, [our vision for the future] is the “Smart Me” device, which should combine the smartphone with wearables, for example the smart-watch and smart glasses. All this I believe should be combined in one device.

“When we started the company we always had a vision that we want to be the technology leader and we want to drive technology to the masses. If we collaborate with partners and customers, and all work together to accomplish more, that’s a great thing. In the early days, I even partnered with Intel. Everyone knows Intel. We pushed the industry together. You co-operate with the competition. I focused on the success of the industry overall.

“Each stage [of Marvell] has [had] its own challenges. When we had just started, people looked at the risk. But we are crazy entrepreneurs — we believed in ourselves. Whenever anyone shows me the risk, I ask them to flip the page and take a look at the [other] side — I read this as opportunity. They think I’m crazy because start-up companies are very risky, but when companies are big, there’s still a risk. People say, now you are big players, how do you manage the risk of losing market share? As a big player, how do you see growth? This is why a company like us is always thinking ahead. In the last few years, I’ve been driving our business and strategy towards the ecosystem play. The technology has got to be user-friendly and it’s got to be fashionable. Collaboration is going to be key.
“Being a co-founder, for me it’s such a joy. I was born in Shanghai and grew up in the French quarter. I used to play basketball for the district. Boy, it’s all about teamwork. Basketball is a fun sport, but at the same time it very naturally taught me to be a team player. To me, team sport is a lot more meaningful than individual sport. If you apply that to the business world, [being] a co-founder is more fun than just a founder. In my case it’s even more exciting because the co-founder is my husband! On top of that, our skillsets are very complementary.

"[If I could give one piece of advice to my younger self] it would probably be that you need to delegate more. I look at my schedule and think, you probably should have a recipe to spend more time enjoying life and vacations.

“I always believe women are just as capable as men. Now that this new era of technology is part of our lifestyle, women in technology are even more important. The opportunity ahead of us is huge. Women should get more involved in technology because we have the responsibility to push the world of smart technology forward — our natural talent is very much needed. If we are more involved, we can make the technology more beautiful and easier to use.

“For entrepreneurs, you must be passionate, whatever your project or idea. You need to be fully committed and believe in yourself. In the technology field, you must think about the lifestyle and the smartness that you need, [particularly] in this era of the smart lifestyle. Try to go with the simplest approach possible. The moment you think [in a way that is] too complicated, you know technology — it’s going to be harder to deploy and take off. Keep it simple and smart. Do something that will have an impact and make people’s lives smarter and better.”