

# A Woman at the Wheel

Feb. 15, 2012

**Broos Campbell, Staff Writer**

Grace Lieblein, president and managing director of General Motors do Brasil, is cheerful and gracious on the phone from Sao Paulo just before Christmas. You wouldn't know it was the eve of a major holiday, with all its traditional last-minute running around.

GM is renovating its entire Brazilian portfolio, she says.

"We launched two new vehicles in the last four months, and have seven more to launch (in 2012). A very exciting time!"

Her priorities when she arrived at GM do Brasil were fivefold: customer satisfaction, quality, competitiveness, team capabilities and ensuring that the company's portfolio meets the Brazilian market's needs.

"We employ about 25,000 people directly in Brazil, with over 600 dealerships across the country," she says. She declined to divulge the subsidiary's revenues.

She modestly attributes her success to having great leaders, taking stretch assignments, focusing on performance and loving what she does.

She doesn't say so, but lot of hard work had something to do with it, too.

## **Highest-ranking Latina**

Ms. Lieblein, 51, started her career with GM in 1978 as a co-op student at the GM assembly plant in Los Angeles, where her father was an hourly employee. She transferred to Oldsmobile in Lansing, Mich., in 1980, and was named industrial engineer in 1984.

She holds a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering from Kettering University (the former General Motors Institute and GM Engineering and Management Institute) in Flint, Mich., and a master's degree in management from Michigan State University.

She was promoted to Sao Paulo in June 2011 from GM de Mexico, which she had led since December 2008.

"Grace Lieblein has done an outstanding job leading GM in Mexico, managing through an incredibly difficult period during the global economic crisis and driving the operations back toward profitability," Mark Reuss, GM vice president and president, North America, said in an April release announcing the

appointment.

Like Mr. Reuss, Ms. Lieblein is a mechanical engineer by trade. The highest-ranking Latina at GM, she was the company's first Latina vehicle chief engineer and the first woman to serve as president and managing director at GM de Mexico.

She regularly picks up awards from industry magazines, the financial media, and alumni and professional associations. She's been recognized as one of the top women in world business, the second-most powerful female CEO in Latin America and one of the most important women in the auto industry.

**HispanicBusiness** magazine has had its eye on Ms. Lieblein for more than a decade now.

In addition to including her in this year's Corporate Elite 25, the magazine declared her one of the Top 50 Hispanic Businesswomen in the United States in 2007, the same year she was a finalist for Woman of the Year, and placed her among the magazine's 100 Influentials in 2009. Her string of recognitions with the magazine go back to 2001, when she ranked among the top 50 businesswomen in the United States.

Before the Mexico assignment, Ms. Lieblein served as GM's global vehicle chief engineer for front-wheel drive trucks. She led the team of engineers that created the 2008 Buick Enclave, marketed as the brand's first luxury crossover vehicle, along with the GMC Acadia, the Saturn Outlook and the Chevrolet Traverse.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

Ms. Lieblein faced challenges when she came to GM do Brasil, of course. She ticks them off: Learning the market quickly. Cost pressures in Brazil. Volatile market dynamics. Learning a new culture and language.

Plus, "it's hard to be so far away from family," she says. Her husband is with her in Brazil, but her daughter is at college in New York City.

On the other hand, there is "huge opportunity and potential in this market," she says. "It is the second-largest market for Chevrolet in the world, (and) one of the fastest-growing economies."

The two cars launched while she's been in the driver's seat, the Cruze and Cobalt, are both Chevys. "The Cobalt is a vehicle designed and engineered by the team in Brazil," she says. "We haven't announced the new products for next year yet."

There's also a lot to like about living in Brazil. "The food is excellent in Sao Paulo," she says. The company is located in the Sao Paulo suburb of Sao Caetano do Sul, which is "well above the country average for all standards," she says,

citing the city's high marks for literacy, life expectancy and income.

"The ability to travel in Brazil and South America is great," she says, although traffic and the airports "are challenges here."

### **An 'Undersung Song'**

A recent University of California, Davis, study found that if the proportion of women leading California's largest companies continues at its current pace, it will take more than a century for women to achieve parity with men.

The study also found that a third of California's largest companies have no women among their highest-paid executives or board members -- and that's in a state with a reputation, deserved or not, for micromanaging the playing field.

That doesn't reflect her experience at GM.

To backtrack a bit, "Diversity is a different thing when you go to other countries," she says. GM has women's affinity groups in Mexico and Brazil, "but 'diversity' is used a little bit differently, because in Mexico, you know, there are no Hispanics because everyone's Hispanic."

She says that gender, not race, is the prime differentiator in Latin America.

"Race is not an issue here. People don't say, 'Well, I'm black' or 'I'm white.'" They think of themselves as Brazilians first.

In the U.S., by contrast, "It's very, 'I'm Hispanic' or 'I'm African-American' or 'I'm Asian-American.' You don't see that, or at least I have not seen that, in Mexico or Brazil."

That said, Ms. Lieblein was involved with the GM women's and Hispanic affinity groups back in the States and "was also part of the diversity leadership team at a senior leader level." GM "has done a very good job of having diversity efforts not only at the recruiting level but also at the employee, grass-roots level," she says.

Her advice for women, and especially Latinas, is straightforward: "Understand the culture that you are working (in), and try to fit in while still keeping your uniqueness. Believe in yourself. Be clear about your priorities and what success really means to you."

She points out that on the team that developed the Chevy Traverse crossover SUV, the vehicle line executive, the vehicle line director and the chief engineer -- Ms. Lieblein herself -- were all women.

"GM has a track record of putting women and diverse people in key leadership jobs," she says. "I happen to be Hispanic as well, but I think that that is an

undersung song for General Motors. As you look at the other automakers, that tells a story right there. Clearly, having diversity is not just a slogan or a program (at GM), but an integral part of our business."

**Source:** HispanicBusiness.com (c) 2012. All rights reserved.