

Moto's Warrior

By Julie Johnsson
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Padmasree Warrior made her name at Motorola Inc. by killing a business she headed.

Ms. Warrior was put in charge of a semiconductor offshoot believed to have billion-dollar potential in 2001. But she quickly realized the technology would never be ready for prime time. She had to break the news to Chris Galvin, then Motorola's CEO. "It was very hard . . . to tell people at the top of the organization things aren't going to work," she recalls.

But rather than derailing her career, her candor scored points with Mr. Galvin, who named her chief technology officer months later.

Today, Ms. Warrior leads a 20,000-plus-engineer force that's challenging archrival Nokia Corp. for dominance of the emerging markets where most of the industry's growth will happen in the next ten years.

It's up to Ms. Warrior to scan the hundreds of ideas being developed in Motorola's global labs and pick the ones that can be turned into marketable products. No technology goes to market without her say-so. And the bets she makes will largely determine Motorola's success in the race with Nokia.

Countries such as Nigeria, Russia, Brazil and India are the final battleground in the cell phone business. The potential payoff: a billion new customers. But Nokia is already in the lead.

To close the gap, Ms. Warrior has set up teams in six countries to find innovations, and she's mulling a seventh incubator in Africa. The idea is to develop gadgets that will take off in those markets, even if they might never be a hit here.

It's already happened in Motorola's China lab, where engineers created a cell phone that recognizes handwriting traced with a finger — a boon in China, where the complex alphabet doesn't lend itself to text messaging.

"She grew up in India. She gets it," says James O'Connor Jr., a Motorola vice-president who heads its incubators and reports to Ms. Warrior.

Motorola CEO Edward Zander credits Ms. Warrior, 45, with plotting "a lot of the rebirth of Motorola around our vision and our strategy." Their personality types — opposites — are a good balance, he adds, although the two argue at times. "I'm a little bit off the wall at times and she's more on the wall," Mr. Zander adds. "She's steady."

Mr. Zander tried unsuccessfully to recruit Ms. Warrior to Sun Microsystems Inc., where he was COO until 2002. She was one of two Motorolans he consulted before joining the company in 2004. "She's probably responsible for me coming here," he says.

The overseas R&D strategy she's crafted is crucial for Motorola, since most of the sales growth for its \$21.46-billion handset division is likely to come from places like Russia and Brazil through 2010. Phone sales in North America and Western Europe are rising only 8% to 10% annually, much lower than the 20% to 30% growth seen in emerging economies, according to American Technology Research Inc., a San Francisco market research firm.

Establishing a foothold in these countries "is essential, or else you're going to face a future of shrinking global marketshare," says Albert Lin, telecom analyst at American Technology Research.

The challenge is that Nokia also has proven adept at catering to local tastes. The Finnish phonemaker controls 55% of Indian handset sales, compared with Moto's 11%, in part because it was the first to market a phone that packed a built-in flashlight — an appealing feature in a country prone to power outages.

Motorola is pouring resources into places like India and gearing up in Bangladesh and the Philippines with new, cheap handsets.

Raised near Chennai, in Southern India, Ms. Warrior earned a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from the country's famed Indian Institute of Technology, and later received a master's in the same field from Cornell University. With her husband, Mohan, whom she's known since she was 16, she started work at Motorola's semiconductor business in 1984.

She was one of only five or six women out of thousands of workers at the Phoenix facility, something she viewed as an advantage, since it meant she "got noticed." She worked her way up the semiconductor division, finally serving as its chief technology officer before joining Thoughtbeam Inc., the failed chip spinoff, in 2001.

Her ability to quickly grasp technical issues and explain their relevance in plain terms to others has propelled her career. "She likes to lead the discussion, not by sitting around the conference table," says former Moto exec Ed Zylka, CEO of Chicago upstart TVcompass Ltd. "She's the person with the pen in hand at the whiteboard, capturing and driving the issues forward."

She's also known for facing prickly problems head on, "without being overbearing or pushy," he adds.

Case in point: Motorola two years ago was lagging in efforts to develop "mesh," a new wireless network that never goes down. In typical Moto fashion, two teams were creating competing versions, unaware of the other's efforts. Then Ms. Warrior stepped in. "I told (them), 'You have two weeks to come up with something.'"

When neither had a viable solution, Ms. Warrior decided to chuck the in-house efforts and turn elsewhere. As a result, Motorola purchased MeshNetworks Inc. of Florida, the leading developer of the technology, for \$169 million in late 2004.

Today, Ms. Warrior is the highest-ranking woman in Motorola history. She's brought a distinctive touch to the executive suite. At her insistence, management retreats now feature spa days, as well as golf outings. Known for her eye for cool stuff, she's followed by a flock of Motorolans on the shopping excursions that she squeezes in during overseas business trips.

Most days, Ms. Warrior rises around 4 a.m., catches up on e-mail, exercises, then drops her son off at school before heading to work.

Her life isn't likely to get any simpler. Headhunters say she's one of a handful of executives on Mr. Zander's team with CEO potential.

"Someone's going to give her a chance, whether at Motorola or someplace else," says headhunter Peter Crist of Crist Associates in Hinsdale. "She's on screens."