C-Suite Awards: A Q&A with Nish Vartanian, MSA Safety

By: Paul J. Gough – Reporter, Pittsburgh Business Times

When Nish Vartanian was named MSA Safety Inc.'s CEO in 2018 and chairman in 2020, he joined a small and select group of top executives at the 108-year-old Pittsburgh-region mainstay. And you could say he has been preparing for that moment for his entire career, ever since he joined the company as a sales intern in college. He has been there ever since and is now in his 37th year at MSA (NYSE: MSA). Under Vartanian's tenure, MSA has played a critical role in keeping first responders and industrial workers safe and added a new line of safety gear for health care professionals after it worked with Highmark Health and Allegheny Health Network during the Covid-19 pandemic.

What made you want to work in a company's C-suite?

I never made it a goal to work in MSA's C-suite or become the CEO. My favorite job was region sales leader, but MSA kept providing me with new and different opportunities, which ultimately created pathways to executive management.

What accomplishment are you most proud of?

I am most proud of leading the successful integration of General Monitors. In 2010, Bill Lambert, my predecessor, drove the decision to make a $270 million acquisition of General Monitors. At that time, MSA's market capitalization was only $1 billion. General Monitors was a global leader in fixed gas and flame detection technology, and I was selected as the integration leader for the acquisition. That opportunity gave me P&L ownership, as well as operations and global business experience. Our success with this acquisition changed the course for MSA. If we were not successful, my career may have been very different.

Where would you like your company to be in five years?

I would like to see MSA Safety recognized as the global leader in sophisticated safety technology that helps protect people at work and the environment. A key to achieving that vision lies in our ability to deploy cloud, Bluetooth and other technologies that connect customers to safety data — from any place and at any time — through our Connected Worker platform.

What is the biggest change you have witnessed in corporate America during your career?

The greatest change would be the pace of innovation driven by technology. I began my career pre-cellphone and pre-internet. The innovation and productivity gains made possible by technology have been stunning.

Of all the current local, national and international challenges, which worries you the most as it affects your business?

I have two major concerns right now, the first being the global geopolitical instability due to the war in Ukraine and the economic implications beyond those two countries. The second is the declining rate of employment participation in our own country. The implications of both will continue to create headwinds for economic growth and advancement.

MSA is not only one of the oldest companies in Pittsburgh, but it's also got one of the strongest mission statements. How do MSA employees carry out that mission every day?

It's pretty inspiring to know that the mission of our company has never changed in 108 years. Our people carry out that mission, to protect the lives of workers and our environment, by listening to our customers' needs, leveraging technology to find solutions and tapping the tremendous talent that exists across all of MSA to achieve our goals.

ABOUT NISH VARTANIAN:
Title: Chairman, president and CEO, MSA Safety Inc.
Family: Wife Pam, son Jake, daughter Tess, stepson Andrew
Education: B.S., management, University of Massachusetts Amherst
First job: Mine Safety Appliances Co. (today MSA Safety) sales intern
Hobbies: Golf and ski
Community Involvement/Professional Commitments: Pittsburgh Branch of Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland; International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), board of trustees; Manufacturers Alliance for Productivity and Innovation (MAPI), board of trustees; Allegheny Conference on Community Development, executive committee; Senator John Heinz History Center, board of trustees; Duquesne Club, board of directors; Best of the Batch Foundation, wife Pam is chairman of the board

FAVORITES:
Ways to relax: Physical activity – exercise/yoga
Book: "The Changing World Order" by Ray Dalio
Restaurant: Napa Prime Chophouse
Inspirational quote or life lesson: "Never mistake activity for achievement."

Vacation destination: Kiawah Island, South Carolina

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