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By T. Aviles

## BOARDROOM Watch

'Biking with the Vikings' – a The Manila Times feature on Rodolfo "Ozone" Azanza, Jr.



RODOLFO TEJERO AZANZA JR., President and Chairman of the Board, Norconsult Management Services (Philippines) Inc.

Witty answer to the job interview question leads to opportunity to become the first Filipino to lead a Norwegian company.

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Leaders are born and not made.

This is precisely the best description for Rodolfo "Ozone" Tejero Azanza Jr., who was destined to become the first Filipino president and chairman of the board of Norconsult Management Services (Philippines) Inc.

He was class valedictorian in Gogon Elementary School in Virac, Catanduanes, and finished top 3 in Catanduanes State Colleges Laboratory High School.

His academic and work background are also impressive.

He took up his Bachelor of Science in Economics at the University of the Philippines, Los Baños, Laguna, and a graduate diploma in Urban and Regional Planning, and a Master of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of South Australia.

He has received a string of awards from his alma mater as an outstanding alumnus in the fields of economics and management, and energy sector.

He is also proud of his Masonic credentials, whose values he is putting into good use in his daily life.

Having served at the National Economic Development Authority and later at the Office of the Executive Secretary and Office of the President-Build Operate Transfer Center for 15 years, Azanza decided to join the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Manila in 2003.

A witty response “I wanna go biking with the Vikings” got him the post of a commercial officer, where he worked for two years assisting Norwegian companies to do business in the Philippines.

Azanza adjusted to his new work environment which he described as flatter as decisions can be taken more swiftly.

“There are also no clerks nor secretaries or other support staff, you usually have to do things yourself, including photocopying, jotting down your own notes in meetings, etc.,” he said.

However, he said that his previous government work honed his ability to write correspondences in a cordial and diplomatic manner.

“My bosses would let me do a final review of their letters to the government to check if it is ‘cordial’ enough. It is also very helpful to know how to work in the bureaucracy, and to find and to know the right people to contact,” he said.

This exposure in the embassy later on paved the way for a state-owned Norwegian firm called SN Power to offer him the post of country representative, where he worked for almost a decade until he was “pirated” to become the president of Norconsult Philippines in mid-2014. He has, since this period, been leading the company as the first Filipino executive to ever manage the firm as historically Norwegians have been overseeing the company’s operations.

Norconsult Philippines is the local subsidiary of Norconsult AS, a Norwegian engineering consulting company and one of the largest in Scandinavia. It came to the Philippines in the 1970s. Norconsult prides itself to have designed the original North Luzon Expressway, originally called Manila North Tollways, or MNT, and the Janopol hydropower project in Bohol.

He narrated that when he joined Norconsult in 2014, he walked into a team of 15 people working on one major project.

“After about 2 years, we were about 60 people with five to ten major projects at any given time, and the company has been one of the few international subsidiaries of Norconsult which has delivered profits even during the Covid-19 pandemic,” he said.

Coming out fresh from completing his basic management program from the Asian Institute of Management, he said that he learned how to be more strategic in his approach and the changes he wanted to implement.

“There were old timers in the company who did not want a newbie like me messing up what they already got used to. So I had to start with building partnerships with some key people who are more open-minded. We agreed and implemented a few small changes that can be done fast, and the results were seen immediately,” he said.

These quick wins, or low-hanging fruits, led them to accept that with this new guy in the block, good things can be done.

He beamed, “We can do good things. That is how I converted most of the skeptical colleagues to my side. The rest was almost textbook strategic management. Taking from the whole concept of ‘building a house on the hill,’ it was the typical ‘what do we need’ vs ‘what do we have now’ and ‘how do we close the gap’ thinking process.”

Azanza said that his style as the team leader in the organization is that of a people-centric leadership.

“A key principle for me is that machines, equipment, vehicles and other inputs to production are managed, but people are not managed; they are led.”

For Azanza, building good relationships is the key toward achieving best results.

“I think that people who can develop good relationships and work well in a team are the best to have. Smart is easy to come by, because if you are smart, you can teach your people to be smart. But honesty and loyalty are hard to find. And these characteristics are the ones that matter to me.”

A believer of the reciprocity principle which espouses that employees care for companies who care about them, Azanza developed the “Meaningful Stay Program” in Norconsult.

This refers to all the activities and policies that cater to only one clear purpose: to see that when people finally retire from Norconsult, they should be able to tell their grandchildren that they did not just work at the firm but that they actually had a meaningful stay.

Because of all these advocacies, Norconsult Philippines under Azanza’s helm was able to undertake two big projects. The Cebu-Cordova Link Expressway Project which was completed in 2022 and where Norconsult was the independent consultant, which reviewed the design and monitored the contractor during the construction period. The ongoing 60-megawatt Kapangan Hydropower project in Benguet is another milestone initiative as the firm is the owner’s engineer which aims to harness the water from the Amburayan River for power generation.

When asked what Scandinavian trait that Norconsult Philippines has adopted, Azanza said that his company always starts meetings on the dot, there is no time for tardiness even for a minute or two. There are also no long-winded introductions, agenda items are discussed at points which are typical of the Scandinavians.

To balance off the scale, he also said that the Filipino tenacity is a trait admired by Azanza’s counterparts.

Colleagues look up to Filipinos for their resiliency. Norwegians, according to him, are very surprised that we have to navigate through traffic for two to three hours every morning or evening, and we just manage to keep going.

“We bring this staying power into the performance of our jobs.”

In the field of consultancy and engineering, Azanza shared that the biggest challenge is to stay honest.

“In a world where honesty and integrity seem to have been shoved aside, I have made a vow never to feed my children with food bought with dirty money. Because if they ever choke on such food, I will never forgive myself. I am happy that I landed a job with the Norwegians, who as employers, had always been big about honesty and integrity.”

He is grateful that he and his team have adopted good governance. He said that the “Norwegian government and these huge, towering people from the Roof of the World, hate corruption.”

“We make sure that people do not cross the line. We are proud to say that we make decent profits. We pay the right taxes on time, we only have one book of accounts that is good for the owners, good for the Board and good for the Bureau of Internal Revenue, and the Securities and Exchange Commission.

“I shoot from the hip, and my managers are straight as arrows,” words which are very well said by a natural leader who has opted to take the straight path.

## **QUICK QUESTIONS**

### **MY GREATEST FEAR**

I am afraid to fly in small planes. When I was working in OP (Office of the President), two of my colleagues died in a small plane crash in Bagabag, Nueva Vizcaya. It took me several years to fly again and only in bigger planes. Anything smaller than a 737, I will opt to drive or skip the whole trip.

### **WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WON THE LOTTO?**

I will not. In my book, it is a form of gambling.

### **WHAT REALLY MAKES YOU ANGRY?**

These days, POGO (Philippine Offshore Gaming Operator) and their enablers.

### **WHAT MAKES YOU WORK HARD?**

I do not. My parents used to think I was a slacker, but I was not. I just learned early about the migrating buffalos in North America and their penchant for finding the paths of least resistance.

### **WHAT/WHO MAKES YOU LAUGH THE MOST?**

Jerry Seinfeld

### **WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU WERE SMALL?**

An engineer.

### **IF YOU COULD SHARE A MEAL WITH ANY INDIVIDUAL, ALIVE OR DEAD, WHO WOULD THEY BE?**

Atty. Leni Robredo

**WHAT'S THE MOST DARING THING YOU'VE EVER DONE?**

Whitewater rafting in Trysil, Norway.

**WHAT'S THE LAST BOOK YOU READ?**

“Rizal Without the Overcoat” by Ambeth Ocampo.

**WHICH CELEBRITY WOULD YOU LIKE TO MEET FOR A CUP OF COFFEE?**

My fellow Christian, Manny Pacquiao.

**WHAT IS ONE THING YOU WILL NEVER DO AGAIN?**

Ride a small plane.

**WHERE WOULD YOU BE IN 10 YEARS?**

Likely, still enjoying the company of my brother Masons as we sit in an open lodge.



**NO OTHER WAY** Rodolfo Azanza served in the National Economic Development Authority and the Office of the Executive Secretary, and Office of the President – Build Operate Transfer Center for 15 years before joining the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Manila in 2003 as a commercial officer, which would become his ticket to join Norconsult Philippines

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