CLIMBING THE CORPORATE LATTICE

Women like Fifth Third’s Mary Tuuk are proving that a strong career trajectory doesn’t always have to go straight up. By Jean E. Herskowitz

This time last year, Mary Tuuk was at the top of her game as chief risk officer of Fifth Third Bancorp. She already had helped to steer the Cincinnati-based regional through the worst of the financial crisis, when it was an early mover in raising capital and recognizing problem loans. More recently she had guided the company in its repayment of Troubled Asset Relief Program money.

She had maintained the trust of Wall Street, and of Fifth Third CEO Kevin Kabat.

Yet for all of her accomplishments, Tuuk was facing a roadblock in her career path.

Had she been content with the idea of staying in risk management, she might never have noticed a problem. But it was clear to her that if she ever intended to take on a broader leadership role with the $114 billion-asset company, she was going to need some P&L experience.

A common knock on women in financial services is that they are prone to concentrating themselves in functional roles, landing in cost centers like marketing and human resources instead of taking on revenue-producing roles—the kind that come with oversight of profit and loss statements, or P&L; the kind that can accelerate people into the highest leadership posts at a bank.

Risk management arguably is different from other functional roles. It is intertwined, or at least it should be, with every line of business, and demand for people with experience in the field certainly has risen in recent years. All the same, when was the last time you heard about a sizeable financial institution plucking its next CEO from the...
ranks of risk management?

"In my experience, individuals who are great at the risk and control side of our business—that’s usually where their careers begin and end," says LeeAnne Linderman, executive vice president for retail banking at Zions First National Bank, explaining, "It’s such a specialty."

That’s how she knew Fifth Third must have had something bigger in store for Tuuk when she read last December that Tuuk had been reassigned to run the Western Michigan market.

"Being president of an affiliate takes more generalist skills," Linderman says. "You’ve got to understand how to grow deposits and loans and how to manage a very large and diverse group of employees—vice president, secretary and legal counsel. It was Kabat, then an executive with Grand Rapids-based Old Kent, who hired her for the role. Old Kent was sold to Fifth Third in 2001 and became the backbone of the company’s Western Michigan affiliate, which today has more than $6 billion in asset and $8 billion in deposits.

Tuuk relocated to Cincinnati in 2003 for a corporate job in risk management, and was promoted to chief risk officer in June 2007—an inauspicious time for banks but a good opportunity for a risk executive who was comfortable raising her profile.

A year into her tenure as chief risk officer, Fifth Third joined one of the first waves of regional banks to slash its dividend and raise fresh capital."

verse in terms of all the specialties they represent. You’ve got to be fantastic as a community leader and fantastic at economic development.”

For Tuuk to have been put in a role like that, she says, Fifth Third “had to believe she had enormous leadership capability.”

Kabat, who has helped guide Tuuk’s career ever since she entered the banking industry 16 years ago, confirms this interpretation of events.

“The industry today is more complex and broad than a stack-ranked, single path to the top,” says Fifth Third CEO Kevin Kabat, who hired Tuuk into banking and championed her move from chief risk officer to affiliate president.

"It wasn’t something all the other companies were doing then, but we decided to use a measured raise in capital as a means to mitigate what we knew were going to be future credit challenges," Tuuk says.

Kabat is more direct in trumpeting the role Tuuk played during an especially difficult period. "Mary carried yeoman’s weight in terms of helping us get through it, both strategically and policy-wise."

He says she was the “key architect” in further developing the company’s risk framework, building new capabilities and recruiting the staff needed to support the broadened infrastructure.

When Fifth Third decided to reassign half a dozen senior leaders last year for the purpose of rounding out their executive experience, Tuuk was among those selected for a rotation.

Kabat says Tuuk was clear about her interest in gaining exposure to P&L responsibility and running a large piece of the business. Tuuk, for her part, describes the opportunity as “a time of optimal alignment.”

“I had an interest in an additional skill set," she says, while the company was “looking at what makes sense in terms...of our business needs and overall goals of executive development.”

As president of Fifth Third's Western Michigan affiliate, Tuuk is in charge of the bank’s third-largest franchise. She oversees lines of business including commercial and branch banking, consumer lending and investment advisory services—experience she couldn’t have garnered in her former role.

In the traditional corporate ladder, the only trajectory is up. But in banking and in other sectors, there seems to be a growing appreciation for the idea of occasion-
vice president for organization development and planning, believes the lattice approach is becoming more commonplace. "People are realizing that in order to be relevant and have long-term sustainability, they have to be very intentional with their development. What are their strengths? What are the company's needs and how do employees go about getting the skills that would make them more effective going forward?"

This is the type of thinking that Linderman, a mentor to many at Zions, has been a proponent of for years. She talks about career lattices when she addresses industry groups on the topic of leadership development, and she works on them with employees who come directly to her for guidance.

May. (Tuuk majored in both business and music as an undergraduate and sings solos at her church.)

Recently she formed a program at her alma mater, Calvin College, also in Grand Rapids, to introduce young women to business—a project inspired by two of her nieces, who had recently finished school and were bombarding her with questions about potential careers in business.

The first part of the program concluded in July. It brought high school juniors onto campus, gave them access to local business leaders and helped them with skill assessments. The second part of the program will bring high-profile speakers to the campus, "especially those who can speak with more of a Fortune 500 focus," Tuuk says.

The goal of a program Tuuk has created at her alma mater is to give young women exposure to their opportunities in the business world and help them leverage their potential. "It's like what we do for our bank employees," she says.

"I look at their education level, their training and at the successful work experiences they already have, and I point out where the holes exist," Linderman says. She explains to them that they might have to learn new duties, or take on new jobs. Often, she says, "employees aren't willing to do those things because it takes them out of their comfort zone and because most often the moves would be lateral, and in some cases even viewed as a step down."

But at Fifth Third, Tuuk—who retained her executive vice president's title—embraced her new role wholeheartedly. She quickly reacquainted herself with the local scene in Western Michigan, where she now sits on the boards of about a half dozen community organizations and is substantively involved in several more.

She even performed the national anthem at Fifth Third's annual River Bank Run in Grand Rapids, which hosted nearly 20,000 runners and 40,000 spectators last

The final element will be the establishment of a women's business network for the college. The overarching goal, she says, is to expose young women to the business world and to help them leverage their potential.

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At Fifth Third, Tuuk went through a leadership development program designed for the bank with the help of Case Western Reserve University. The first component of the program is intended to teach bank executives about themselves. Two days of "emotional intelligence" training are followed by six hours of executive coaching and a "360-degree assessment" providing feedback from superiors, underlings and peers. "They spend time working on their ideal self and their personal vision for themselves," Woolford says.

The second part of the training, on how to coach others, occurs a year later.

Tuuk says that all of the prep work taught her how to keep members of her new team emotionally charged.

"That's a passion of mine," she says. "I believe very strongly in possibility thinking." What that means, she explains, is posing questions with the "What if..." construction and thinking in terms of what could be.

"Too often it's easy to see the constraint or the obstacle in front of us, and to allow that obstacle to become a self-fulfilling prophecy," Tuuk says. "I believe very strongly in empowering teams to do what's possible and to leverage the full opportunity of a specific expectation."

Since returning to Grand Rapids, Tuuk is delivering on the expectations that company had laid out for her. Says Kabat, "She's growing net income for the company, she's growing the top line and she's growing the bottom line. She's managing the business really well.

"She's doing a good job and I think she's having a lot of fun; I think that shows in the results."

Recognizing that "what might work for one person doesn't necessarily work for another," Tuuk says she still would "encourage everyone" to take a broad-minded approach to their own career development.

As for her own career path, Tuuk is relishing the total bank experience that her new role provides. "There's something very exciting about seeing the bottom line impact of earnings—to see how it contributes value for all of our constituencies," she says. "It's especially rewarding to see how the bank directly impacts the lives of our customers and the communities in which we're doing business."

Jean E. Herskowitz is a freelancer in Pittsburgh.