Voice of Experience: Amanda Tepper, CEO of Chestnut Advisory Group

By Cathie Ericson

Fresh out of college, Amanda Tepper, currently a financial industry leader as founder and CEO of Chestnut Advisory Group, set her sights on a career in the radio industry. "And then one night, as I stood on stage introducing Ozzy Osbourne, I realized it was not for me. Time to get off the 'Crazy Train'," she says.

That wakeup call sent Tepper to the career networking office at her alma mater, Brown University, where she found a job on Wall Street at Mabon, Nugent & Co — and she has never looked back.

Moving Up, Up, Up…

With her position on the syndicated loan pricing desk, she sold corporate bonds to regional broker dealers, and at 23 was traveling extensively with her own expense account. That's when she decided to move into investment banking, so she earned her MBA from The Wharton School.

"I graduated in 1991, which until the recent recession was the worst time to graduate. Less than half my graduating class had jobs," she recalls, nevertheless earning a position at Manufacturers Hanover. From the training program to the derivatives desk to investment banking to sell-side equity research, she learned the business inside and out – all while also having two kids.

Eventually she moved to management at Bank of America, where she was brought in as Associate Director of Equity Research, with half of the department reporting directly to her. From there she moved to AllianceBernstein where she became Global Director of the Senior Portfolio Management team, leading the firm's product specialists as they marketed all of AB's investment products to institutional investors.

"The changes have been enormous along the way, moving from investment banking to research to management," she says. "Every single position prepared me for my next role."

…And Away!
With her 360-degree overview of the global asset management industry, Tepper embarked on her next venture — launching Chestnut Advisory Group. "We saw a void in the market," Tepper says, explaining that Chestnut provides investor relations programs for asset managers.

Her research has shown that fund performance is only about 15 percent of the equation in keeping investors content, and everything else is investor relations and education. She compares the asset management business today to the attitudes that publicly traded companies used to hold 40 years ago, when "investor relations" consisted of a dry 10K, rather than the vibrant practice it is today.

She sees today's asset management industry turning to this new model, led by early adopters, which are typically the largest asset managers. That has allowed Chestnut to fill that niche for smaller firms. "If your investors don't understand what you're doing, they're not going to give you their money."

In that way, she sees that she is improving the industry, and relishes the challenge of building an impactful company from the ground up, after her years at large global corporations.

"I couldn't be doing what I'm doing now, without my experiences there," she says.

The Only Constant is Change
Tepper believes she has thrived in the financial services industry because of her ability to embrace change. "Women wanting to pursue the financial services industry must be comfortable with volatility," she says, citing her first firm, which underwent seven mergers in 15 years, the first of which occurred only her second week on the job out of business school. "Change can be exhilarating or difficult; if you find it the former, you will be successful."

Hand-in-hand with embracing change as a path to success is asking for what you want. She believes that women need to be more proactive about promoting themselves. "You have to ASK for the promotion and find out what's required to get there – then acquire those skills."

Building a Culture that Supports Advancement
Amanda currently serves as Chair of 100 Women in Hedge Funds' Connecticut/Westchester Committee and sits on Phillips Academy's Andover Development Board, as well as previously serving on the Board of Girls Inc. of New York.

Amanda is also focused on creating a culture at Chestnut that supports the advancement of women. "Our mantra is that every employee must bring their authentic self to work every day." The firm currently has five employees – four of them women – and is building to scale rapidly.

She hopes this can serve as a model for what she describes as a huge amount of senior female financial services talent "sitting on the sidelines."

"I'd love to see those women get back in and build their own businesses. We need as many successful women role models in this industry as possible to keep younger women motivated."

On a Final "Note"

And, even though it didn't become her career, Tepper highlights that she still loves music. With a husband and two daughters, a challenging career and a full slate of volunteer activities, you might say that Tepper is in tune with how to create a rich and fulfilling life.