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# What a catch

**Frabelle Fishing Corporation has grown from a humble fishing operation in the Philippines to a global group of businesses covering a diverse range of industries.**

IMAGES JAMES ONA

**F**rancisco Tiu Laurel, Jr. was just twenty-eight years old when he took over the family business, Frabelle Fishing Corporation, as president. However, despite his age, he certainly wasn't lacking in the skills and knowledge to take the company forward. Francisco had been involved since he was a teenager and became full time when he was aged twenty. He started out in the engineering division before moving into sales, and then progressed up the leadership chain.

"I worked hard under my father's guidance and under the guidance of his key people," Francisco recalls. "I was able to learn a lot that way."

"Then, each year for five years straight, I would also spend an average of forty-five days at sea on a couple of our fishing vessels. I was at the frontline, connecting with our people, our captains, and our crew. While you are onboard a ship, there is so much machinery and engineering to use and operate, which I gladly helped out with. I learned so much from those experiences. >>



**Name** Francisco Tiu Laurel, Jr.  
**Company** Frabelle Fishing Corporation  
**Position** President  
**HQ** Manila, Philippines  
**Employees** 4,500 in seafood group; 7,000 in group of companies



**“When I took over, I saw this opportunity to commercialise our business further and cater to a wider range of customers.”**

- Francisco Tiu Laurel, Jr

biggest tuna-fishing companies in Asia,” Francisco continues. “Then when we were able to move on from our core competence, fishing, we developed ourselves as a group of companies. During my father’s time, before I was president, we were just in fishing and that was the only thing we would do; we would just catch fish and sell them. We had the shipyard where we repaired our own ships, but when I took over I saw this as an opportunity to commercialise our business further and cater to a wider range of customers. Things just grew from there.”

“Another notable thing that my father did for me for a period of about two years was to send me to Japan regularly. I was there for two weeks at a time, and I was able to undertake training with some of the country’s key fishing and boat businesses. I trained in refrigeration, net manufacturing, engine overhauling, electronics, hydraulics, food manufacturing, shipbuilding, and ship repair. I became competent in so many real-life situations out in the field. I travelled all over Japan and all over Asia to visit factories, see how they were run, and understand what they produced.”

These experiences meant that Francisco was thoroughly familiar with Frabelle’s operations when he succeeded his father as president, and he had developed grand plans for its future. Back then, the business had two divisions in its fishing operation — sardine catching and tuna catching — and it had a small shipyard just for its own boats.

Today, under Francisco’s directorship, the business has grown exponentially to operate twelve business units in industries such as power generation, real estate, meat and seafood processing, cold-chain network, aquaculture, and shipbuilding and repair. It still has its original tuna- and sardine-catching operations but now boasts a fleet of around 117 vessels.

Frabelle has also expanded geographically outside of its home base in the Philippines, servicing Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, the Atlantic, and many other major regions across the globe. This expansion has given it the opportunity to explore new markets and open satellite offices in South Africa, Vietnam, Singapore, China, Papua New Guinea, and Indonesia. According to Francisco, Frabelle now sits among the top three tuna fishing companies in the world — a huge feat.

“Another great achievement was when we became one of the leading and

Francisco’s leadership style is all about keeping things as simple as possible. He notes that the business itself isn’t at all complicated; it is people who make it that way. His other philosophies are to “not spend more than you sell” and “keep your people happy, or at least content as a worst case scenario”. This approach is clearly serving Frabelle well as it continues to evolve and succeed.

However the most important thing, he shares, is having a focus on sustainability. “We have been a fishing company for the last fifty-three years and we have seen our own fishing decline in the Philippines because of overfishing and the lack of implementation of policies. We were actually forced to go out of the Philippines almost twenty-five years ago to catch fish in other countries that were better managed. That’s why we are so committed to sustainability, because we know what can happen if it’s not a priority. We want the fishing business to

last for the next couple of generations, if not more — forever, if possible — but without sustainability, that will not be possible. So for the survival of our first business and for it to remain one of the biggest businesses we have, we need to be sustainable.”

Francisco currently sits as the chairman of the World Tuna Purse Seine Organization, a role he is using to help promote the cause and call for sustainable practices to be implemented worldwide. And his company Frabelle is without a doubt leading by example.

“We work with scientists, non-government organisations, technology

*“Working with Frabelle Fishing Corporation is like tying a knot for greater strength and durability in the fishing industry without retreat but always moving forward together.” – Fortune Net & Twine Manufacturing*

service providers, and regional fisheries management organisations. We help them do studies and we formulate policies with them. The idea is to fish below maximum sustainable levels. One way to police this and make sure it is being properly monitored, and ensure nobody is cheating, is to track vessels twenty-four hours a day by satellite; so we have 100-per-cent third-party observer coverage. Then there are electronic logs in all our fishing activities, and we recently put a digital camera system on all our vessels to ensure everything is recorded.

“Our current focus is to continually improve our efficiencies by acquiring the latest technology, newest vessels, and developing our staff’s capabilities and skills. By achieving these goals, it will allow us to fish more sustainably so that we can play our role in looking after the world’s seas.” ■



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