

16/02/1997

A model manager

Risen Jayaseelan

DR SHAFIQ SIT Abdullah, voted Young Manager of The Year 1996, struggled with the large trophy, amidst chuckles from some members of the audience. Clearly, Herculean strength was not a criteria for winning the award. Shafiq has other qualities - qualities which were sufficient to convince the panel of judges to choose him for the award.

A Rhodes scholar at Oxford, Shafiq has been doing the right things as Sime Darby Bhd's group general manager of corporate planning. Certainly, the man at the helm of the company seems to think so. 'Sime Darby's chief executive, Datuk Nik Mohamed Yaacob, has given us an excellent report on Shafiq, detailing his contributions to Sime Darby and how he has helped make the company more competitive,' says Dr Tarcisius Chin, the chief executive of the Malaysian Institute of Management (MIM), which has been conducting this contest for the past three years. He adds, 'Based on our own analysis and investigation, we would give him a perfect score for criteria such as leadership, management and social and community related activities. To us, he is the kind of all-rounded manager who would make a good role model for others.'

Chin says Shafiq was the driving force behind Sime Darby's recent acquisition of United Malayan Banking Corporation, renamed Sime Bank, and is also playing a pivotal role in the proposed acquisition of Oriental Bank. However, Shafiq himself plays down such accolades. 'It was a team effort,' he says, adding that perhaps it is his role as a team leader which impressed the judges the most.

His team members seem to be a highly motivated lot. This writer received no less than four phone calls from a Shafiq aide, as early as two weeks before the interview, for a list of questions to be asked during the session. 'He has an extremely busy schedule and travels extensively. He's also very meticulous about everything,' she explained. Does he think his staff enjoy working under him? 'To an extent,' he answers. 'My guess is that it can be challenging for them and at times tiring. More importantly, I enjoy working with them.'

Shafiq is also a regular member of the entourages which usually accompany the VIPs and ministers on investment missions. 'Since 1989, I've been going to places like Vietnam, Cambodia, South Africa and Bosnia,' he says. More recently, Shafiq was a part of the delegation that accompanied Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the United States to promote the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC).

Shafiq has a keen interest in the MSC, which stems from the importance he places on keeping up with new technology. He says, 'Change arising from technological innovations is affecting most businesses in ways which only a few years ago, were relatively manageable.'

In keeping with this, Sime Darby has established a RM100 million revolving fund called the Sime Darby Technology Fund, which Shafiq heads. He explains, 'We hope to use this fund, which was established five months ago, to acquire stakes in new technology-based companies in countries like the US and Australia, where the latest technologies are emerging from. It's slightly different from a purely venture capital fund in the sense that we want to have management control in those companies. One reason is that we would then be able to bring such companies into the MSC.'

Shafiq is also a staffer of the APEC Business Advisory Council. 'The Council will ensure that we are prepared to host APEC in Malaysia in 1998.'

It has allowed me the opportunity to work with other APEC representatives and staffers to promote Malaysia's views on the development of the Asia-Pacific region.'

Shafiq's excellent educational achievements were a definite help in the contest as well as in his work. As Chin says, 'Shafiq is academically sound.' An economics degree from Cambridge University followed by a Rhodes scholarship to pursue a Masters and Doctorate in International Economics at Oxford University are no easy feats.

On his experience at Oxford, Shafiq says, 'It compelled me to compare my achievements and aspirations relative to other Rhodes scholars at an international level. There were also many opportunities to exchange ideas and learn about the different priorities of rather different and highly opinionated individuals from far and wide. It also provided me with a highly useful and extremely strong network of friends.'

In the past, Shafiq has said that Malaysian companies do not do enough for their staff and this has hindered efforts at realising the full potential of employees. He explains this, 'The biggest failing of companies today is their lack of emphasis on human resource. Malaysia has a very large pool of untapped management talents which can be exploited through more vigorous training programmes. Once executives have been trained, it is important that they are put on the right career path to maximise the benefits of their training, for themselves and for the company. Once they know exactly where they are headed to, they can clearly chart their short and long-term objectives. This will cultivate strong commitment, greater loyalty and a sense of responsibility towards achieving real gains.'

He adds, 'Companies should also take more time to seriously consider the physical and mental working environment they create for their employees. Loyalty is partly derived from the fact that people are comfortable with their working environment and can work in unison, happily, to meet the organisation's objectives. In this regard, a conducive and ceria working environment is essential.' (Ceria is a Bahasa word connoting all that is lively, homely and peaceful.)

But how do companies go about determining the right career path for their respective employees? 'It would have to start with a rigorous selection process where dedicated good workers with potential are identified. They should then be put through intensive training programmes to familiarise themselves with the corporate culture and the company's way of doing things.

'Some degree of monitoring at the early stages of their career path will also ensure that the employees are given half the chance to understand the objectives of the respective division or subsidiary. Companies should ensure that there is free-flowing two-way discussions between employees and management. Only through such interaction can there be a true basis for understanding between two parties upon which the resulting team spirit will lead to a sharing of the corporate vision.'

And in the case of Shafiq, Sime Darby must surely have given him all this. Having served the company for 10 years, he says he has no intentions of leaving despite being much sought after.

(END)