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Quah in command

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MILD-MANNERED yet authoritative, soft-spoken and enthusiastic - these are adjectives that fit Dr Sam Quah to a T.

He is the 42-year-old chief executive officer (CEO) of Unico Technology Bhd, the total solution provider in the Information Technology (IT) and telecommunications fields. He is also the man responsible for turning Unico around but would prefer to attribute this to "collective efforts". Quah said, "When I arrived as assistant general manager of one of the business units in 1995, Unico was facing some `quality issues'.

"I helped to stabilise the company by providing technical management expertise and in due recognition of that was promoted to CEO."

He added proudly, "Today, Unico is recognised as a quality firm and is one of the best not only in the region but also internationally. We have awards from our customers pertaining to quality, delivery, customer service, etc.

"It was a huge about-turn," he says enthusiastically.

Business Times was curious to know more about Quah and when prodded, he revealed that he had been working for firms elsewhere.

Although being slightly reticent about his overseas experience, he admitted to being involved in research activities in the US and added that he had worked for Cypress Semiconductor in California and Honeywell as well as other firms.

"My biggest strength is in technical competencies," he says.

This is easy to understand considering Quah's many educational qualifications.

Quah received his PhD in Engineering and Technology Management, with a major in research and development (R and D) from Kennedy Western University in Idaho.

He has also a post-graduate degree in Electrical/Electronic Engineering, majoring in microelectronic control and a MBA in Industrial Management and Marketing from Durham University in the UK.

Earlier on he got his first degree, his Bachelors in Electrical Engineering from Cornell University in the US.

But surely Quah must have also been working locally prior to taking up a position at Unico?

"Yes," he answers and went on to say that he had been working as general manager for manufacturing at Team Concept in Sungei Petani, Kedah which was 100 per cent owned by Team Concept Hong Kong, a Hang Seng listed firm. He went on to say that he became interested in Unico after speaking to its general manager at the time.

What interested him, he said, was the fact that Unico is owned in entirety by Malaysians. This aspect of the company being "totally Malaysian" appealed greatly to Quah who is fiercely patriotic.

"Although I had the opportunity of becoming a Singaporean citizen and a US citizen too, I find Malaysia is still the better country.

"Malaysians possess a Malaysian spirit and believe in fighting for their fellow citizens... I hold this personal belief," he stated.

And that perhaps is the reason why Unico within three years has eight Territorial Army platoons.

This is also one subject that Quah will speak about with great fervour.

"The Territorial Army," he said, "is basically a volunteer corps and my rank (he is a major) was given in recognition of services rendered by the

Malaysian Government.

"I have been involved in it for about three years and within this period of time the number of people in my firm who have signed up has increased to 180 or eight platoons."

The first battalion, he said, was formed in February 1997, prior to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Unico in April of the same year.

"We (the Territorial Army) are the secondary defence corps," Quah said emphatically.

"Should the regular army be engaged in warfare, then we will be sent in to guard dams, factories and other critical areas."

"One of the key benefits of involvement in this corps is discipline and the company thus gains from its association with the Territorial Army," he added.

According to a recent survey by Unico's Human Resources and Development Department, he said, those who have had training in the corps perform well in their jobs and possess both discipline and confidence.

"Territorial Army volunteers are basically more open in dealing with peers and also with management," he added.

Quah is a firm proponent of the corps.

"We are performing a national task," he states firmly.

"Our workers have been 'strengthened' by participating in the corps," Quah stressed, adding that "participation has given us the opportunity to perform our social and national obligations".

Because of the size of the group (eight platoons), training is carried out on the factory's premises and Quah said that later this month there will be comprehensive training at an annual camp.

The annual camp this year is being held at Baling, Kedah and here Unico's platoons will have the opportunity to meet up with other volunteers from various companies.

He also had more to say of Unico's involvement with the Territorial Army.

"We have a uniform day which is every Tuesday and we march," he said smilingly. (No wonder there was a uniform hanging in his office at Unico's plant in Prai!)

"We also have extracurricular activities such as hill hikes where the whole team will go up Penang Hill to exercise. Our platoons are also involved in such community projects as gotong royong programmes." And with all of these activities are Unico's platoons possibly the most active in the Territorial Army?

Quah affirmed, "There are pockets of activities within other companies but we are the most active and have the most number of people."

"Our battalion has been involved consistently in programmes which we have either carried out on our own initiatives or in collaboration with the 509 Unit (of the Territorial Army which is in charge of the Penang region).

"This year we have already participated in about eight programmes."

When workers undergo training as part of the Territorial Army they get time off and incidentally, the Unico battalion has participated in two national parades.

Unico's boss then chose to speak about how his firm's defence corps volunteers and Unit 509 worked with students who had severe disciplinary problems at Sungei Aceh.

At the end of the training stint, the "problem" students had turned into motivated students who became role models for others in their school.

"It was a real transformation," he says.

The same can be said for Unico under Quah.

From an "unknown" company it has become one which has gained recognition, garnering a string of awards from customers in the process. It has migrated from being "just a contract manufacturer in 1995" to possessing R and D capabilities which enable it to undertake R and D work for firms that are far away (for example those in the US and Australia), carrying out jobs which "initially no one thought Unico was capable of doing".

"Unico stands very much for the success of Malaysians," he says. An appropriate statement, indeed, from a patriotic CEO who admits cheerfully, "It gives me a very good feeling to be able to contribute to the industrial growth in Malaysia."

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