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From troubleshooter to top gun

V Prathaban

CHEW CHENG Kiat is one cool chief. With over 28 years of experience in the air-conditioning and building services industries, he makes a good fit for the top position at Emerson Network Power (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd.

As the managing director of Emerson, Chew's responsibility includes ensuring its profitability and managing 65 staff.

Prior to joining Emerson, Chew was in the United Kingdom for 21 years. His last job before joining Emerson was with Carrier Corporation, which specialises in building air-conditioners. In 1993, he joined Liebert Malaysia as general manager of its Information Technology-Telecommunications-Critical Systems Division. Last year, Liebert Malaysia changed its name to Emerson Network (Malaysia). His involvement in the marketing, sales and project management has given Chew a valuable edge in leading Emerson.

In an e-mail interview with mb-e, Chew talks about the industry, economy and his management style.

What made you venture into the ICT industry?

Prior to joining Emerson, I was working for another large US corporation for 16 years and held many management positions that saw me taking up challenges in the sales, marketing, application, project, R&D and service divisions. I gained a reputation in the company for being a 'troubleshooter'. I was always called upon to sort out difficult assignments and fix problems. But after a while, I started to feel tired of playing second fiddle. In 1993, I was offered to join Liebert Malaysia, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Emerson Group, as its general manager. Liebert Malaysia then was a leading player in computer air-conditioning, uninterruptible power supply and computer room site preparation business.

What is Emerson Network's unique selling proposition?

Emerson Network Power (ENP) is powering the networked economy. This is a very demanding business environment where critical applications are pushing the levels of reliability to new heights, better known today as 'high nines'. In order to achieve the high availability infrastructure, we at ENP recognise that the end user has to address the following areas, which we fondly call the Five keys: Power Availability, Power Protection, Power Distribution, Heat Removal, and Remote Monitoring & Service Support.

Compromising any one of these areas would mean compromising the availability.

Can you outline your goals for the year and the key areas in which your company needs to focus on in order to achieve those goals?

Emerson Network Power (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd (ENPM) has a vision to be recognised in Malaysia as the No 1 supplier of network power solutions and the business partner of choice. The team in Malaysia also has a mission to contribute to the success of her customers by providing world-class network power solutions.

In line with this, the first major goal of the year was to update our quality standards by adopting the MS ISO 9001:2000. We are pleased to be able to say that in October 2002 ENPM became the first company in Malaysia in this line of business to be MS ISO 9001:2000 certified.

Tell us about your management philosophy.

Our management philosophy is enshrined in our quality policy that demands world-class quality and commitment to customers' expectations.

The backbone of our management philosophy is in our shared values which we emphasise throughout the company: respect, commitment, perseverance and professionalism.

ENP prefers, where possible in the country where they operate, the country head to be a local. This practice shows that the company views people as the most important asset and strives to better understand not only the market place but also the culture. As the managing director, I feel that we are not only operating in Malaysia because we want to make money for the company. ENPM contributes to the society by offering industrial training opportunities for engineering students from the local colleges and universities. Each year, we offer about a dozen or so undergraduates exposure to sales, design, project and service activities for a period of up to four months with an allowance of RM1,000 per month.

What are the areas in which the Malaysian government can help to ensure that the country retains its competitive advantage?

I am glad that the Malaysian Government already recognises the need to change the people's paradigm and steer the country towards a knowledge-based society in order to remain competitive. The re-introduction of English as a medium of instruction for Science and Maths is definitely a right step. I attended the recent East Asia Economic Summit (EAES) in KL where they highlighted the immense challenge Malaysia (and other East Asian countries) will have to face as China continues to gobble up the lion's share of the world's Foreign Direct Investment.

It was also recognised during the EAES that Malaysia (and other East Asian countries) will not be able to compete with China head on. Instead, they will have to quickly find ways in which they can complement China. The Malaysian government should emphasise a programme of conveying this awareness to the people.

Is the nation's intellectual wealth being managed properly?

Unfortunately, this area warrants a lot of improvement.

Why are local Knowledge Workers (KWs) leaving Malaysia and how can this be stopped?

The nation's intellectual wealth can only be managed properly if we create an environment where the people who have gained the intellect want to contribute in Malaysia. Currently, we still have many young people who have gone overseas to study but do not find it lucrative enough to return and contribute. The 'lucrative-ness' is not only financial but must also have merit-based equal opportunity fundamentals.

Which corporate figure do you most admire locally and internationally? Why?

The local accolade goes to Tan Sri Mohd Hassan Marican, CEO of Petronas. He has led the national oil conglomerate to international repute and got it listed in the Fortune 500 as one of the top performing national oil companies. It is easy to do a 'bad' job of running a national oil company as can be seen from our neighbouring countries' fiasco. Petronas today has such a heavy responsibility not only in managing the country's natural resources but also has been exemplary in operating as a professional and profitable concern when benchmarked not only against other national oil companies but also the other world-class companies. Petronas' contribution to the country as a caring corporate citizen should also not be taken for granted.

It is also difficult not to admire Charles F. Knight, chairman of Emerson Electric Co. In 2000, he retired as the CEO after leading the company to maintain a track record of 43 years of continuous increased earnings per share, of which he was directly responsible for 18 years. His management style focuses on setting clear and quantifiable goals, keeping it simple and regularly reviewing the performance. His management

technique is now legendary and frequently quoted as a case study in Harvard Business School.

Which historic figure has had the greatest impact upon your life and philosophy and why?

Although I read a fair bit about historic figures, somehow historic personalities do not impress me as much as those who are living or have touched my life personally.

Our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad definitely is one person whom I admire a lot. The thing that impresses me most about our PM is that he has a 'never-say-die' attitude and also has the courage to express what he feels is right. To me, a true leader must not be afraid to take the bull by the horns. I share the pain when he has to lead the country, true to his beliefs, during the 1998 Asian financial crisis by going against the world and international opinion. Today, it is easy for the world to say that the IMF is not always right, but, believe me, in 1997 it was deemed suicidal!

Can you share with us the worst moment in your professional life?

The worst moment of my professional life occurred in 1985 when Malaysia was going through a recession. I was working for a leading US-based company where I ran the R&D and Sales & Marketing Division. We were very successful in steering the company to export our products to compensate for the downturn in the local business. Unfortunately, we received a directive from the US HQ to retrench 15 per cent of our workforce. The most difficult task of a manager is to lay off people.

How did you overcome the above hurdles?

To avoid lay-offs, I made a personal commitment to adopt a philosophy that a manager must plan ahead to ensure that there is sustainable and profitable business growth year-on-year irrespective of the economic situation. I am pleased to say that I was able to lead my team through the 1997/1998 Asian crisis and the dotcom bubble burst in 2000/2001 by delivering the company's expectation of sustainable and profitable business growth by putting strategies together during the good years of 1993 to 1996, thus avoiding a retrenchment exercise.

How do you ensure your life stays balanced?

To stay balanced, I believe that the 'home' must firstly be in order. So, my wife and I put a lot of emphasis on inculcating the values (which we observe are good from the Western as well as Asian cultures) in our children.

My wife and I lived in the UK for 10 years and have adopted many good values from the West, but I would say that our values are tilted more towards Asian.

We share the same philosophy that we will take the 'middle path' in life.

As such, I also conduct myself in the same manner in doing business. In life, we do not win all the time. It is better to strive for a win-win situation, wherever possible.