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Ramlan sees chief executive as firm's most accountable person

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WHEN Ramlan Rashid, the chief executive of Malaysian Assurance Alliance (MAA), was young, he was wrong on two counts. Wrong in his perception of the job of a top boss of a corporation, and wrong about hard work and retirement.

He had thought that being the Number One in a corporation, that is being the chief executive officer (CEO), would be a cushy job.

"When I became the executive director/chief executive officer of MAA, I remembered what I had thought about the top job," he said in an interview recently.

"In today's environment the chief executive is the most accountable person in the company.

"You had better be hands on, and you better know how soft or hard the ground you are standing on is. This is how we operate in MAA."

Fifteen years ago he thought that he if he worked hard he would retire from active work at the prime age of 45.

"Now I am 45," he said, with a hearty laugh. "Yet, today I am still working, and retirement is far from my mind."

He added that he was continuing because of a "mindset change" as well as "exposure in life".

"Look at our Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. He should be a good model to follow. He is now in his 70s and he is still working as productively and as hard as ever.

"Look at me, I am just about more than half his age, and to retire?" Ramlan said his "exposure" to life in the United States had also changed his mind about retiring early.

"In the United States, I see people working when they are 65 or even 70 and this is considered to be normal.

"Look at our group chairman, Tunku Abdullah Tuanku Abdul Rahman. He is also about the same age as the Prime Minister, yet he still enjoys what he is doing today.

"It depends on your mindset. I don't think I will be retiring anytime soon."

And so for now, Ramlan will continue to work hard and long hours. But he said, "I work long hours only when necessary. I do not force myself that, say today, I must work more than eight hours. I don't believe in that.

"I believe in doing long hours only when you are really required to do so.

"Like when MAA was going through tough times to become one of the largest insurance companies in Malaysia, I clocked in long hours.

"It is not a 100-metre dash. Think long term. I always believe you have to be fit and have lots of energy. If you work too long hours, you tire yourself easily."

Ramlan has been known to think out of the box, to do things differently. For he believes in being an initiator, an innovator, to be more creative than others, rather than be a follower.

His wanting to do things differently started when he was deciding on what studies to pursue after he finished his Form Five.

"I did not have much guidance. When I came upon actuarial science, I knew that I would like the subject very much.

"What attracted me was that the course talked about research, analysis and forecasting with numbers.

"When I checked with Institut Teknologi Mara, the only institution of higher learning then that had a course in actuarial science, I found that the success rate was very low, so I decided against it.

"I almost forgot about doing actuarial science until I went to Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) to do my first degree in mathematics.

"I had the opportunity of doing my Master's degree in the United States.

"Despite a lot of people telling me how tough the course was and why I would want to 'kill' myself studying for such a difficult degree, I decided to go for it, do the Master's in actuarial science."

Though tough Ramlan finished his studies with flying colours, and naturally, he ended up working in the insurance industry.

"No, I don't think I have any regrets getting into this profession. I think I really enjoy the nature of work and the responsibilities."

"But I enjoy dealing with people, making decisions, solving problems and leading a team.

"The insurance business itself is beautiful, very noble. So while you are working hard, you are actually giving financial protection and security to Malaysian society.

"I get to meet different people, from corporate men to the agents and the customers. I love the job."

Ramlan was appointed chief executive of MAA in August last year.

"I took the job as a challenge. MAA is not just about life insurance.

"It also covers general and financial services products. And that is good for me as I love to learn new things.

"I always believe in continuous learning. MAA has given me the opportunity to be exposed to the general insurance industry as well as human resources and the various systems.

"To me, those are challenges that will drive me to move forward."

To some, Ramlan's career seems to have been guided by fate. "I do believe in fate, but sometimes you do need initiative.

"When I was 17, fate was already telling me, 'This is your line, actuarial science, go into insurance'.

"So, do I believe in fate? Yes, but you must also keep looking for opportunities.

"You must also have lots of initiative and put in hard work into it. Don't always depend on fate, but certainly you need good luck on your side.

"I always believe in the cause-and-effect theory. Whatever you do, the effect may not be today but perhaps tomorrow or later."

"For me, the cause was what I did when I was 17. Nobody really told me to take up actuarial science.

Having come this far as the chief executive of an insurance company, Ramlan still feels that he has yet to achieve his ambition, and that he still has some way to go.

"Ambition is all about moving. I always believe in dynamic goals. At this point of time, I won't say that I have achieved my ambition.

"Definitely, I have ambitions.

"But at this point of time, I will be more focused to excel in what I have in hand now."