

ON MENTORING, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY

By

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An Interview with Tan Sri Dato' Engr. Dr. Francis Yeoh Sock Ping

When it comes to home grown successful people who have made their mark internationally, the one name that most often comes to mind is none other than Y. Bhg. Tan Sri Dato' Engr. Dr. Francis Yeoh Sock Ping. Managing Director of YTL Group of Companies. The latter took over the running of YTL in 1988 and nurtured it into a global conglomerate with a combined market capitalisation of over RM 30.9 billion and assets of over RM 45 billion as of 31 August 2011.

In a recent interview with JURUTERA, the civil engineer attributed the group's tremendous growth and success to his firm belief in God's stewardship. He said, "My passion for engineering is God-given. I believe whole-heartedly that engineering is a noble and necessary profession. As such, I feel very strongly that every engineer in the country should commit their skills to make a difference to their community, as well as build something beautiful and everlasting".

He then proceeded to give his views on the engineering profession and provided some tips for young engineers. Y. Bhg. Tan Sri Dr. Yeoh stressed that it is very important for the young to be business savvy and to have a mentor when they first start out on their careers. There are many mentors in the engineering field that one can learn from. Good mentors can provide guidance on technical and professional issues as well as help one in learning to deal with business challenges and avoid the common pitfalls.

He said, "Engineering is a precise science that requires facts and figures, which is very similar to running a business. My engineering training has often helped me make a value judgement based on the available facts and avoid unnecessary speculation and the emotional complexities that come with decision-making".

Many have wondered if he has ever relied on his 'gut-feeling' or intuition to deal with a difficult situation. He responded by saying, "Gut feeling is probably very much over rated. Everyday, I have to make numerous strategic decisions that will affect my company's business direction. Thus, I would rather rely on what I see with my own eyes than something that is intangible".

BUILDING A SOLID FOUNDATION

Not surprisingly, many have gone to him for advice on how they can replicate his success both locally and overseas. However, Y. Bhg. Tan Sri Dr. Yeoh believes that before establishing themselves overseas, local engineers should use their engineering skills and contribute towards the development of the country. He said, "Everyone wants to be recognized internationally. However, local engineers should ensure that they have established a strong foundation in their own country first. That is a very important first step".

He also pointed out that local engineers should also be proud of what they can achieve in Malaysia. For instance, he stated that local engineers were responsible for the major pouring of Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre and KL Tower. In fact, the concrete shaft of the KL Tower, which stands at 360 m, was erected with phenomenal speed using slip form and took only four months to build. In addition, a subsidiary of YTL Cement holds the Malaysian record for the continuous production, delivery and placement of concrete for raft foundations of the Petronas Twin Towers.

Y. Bhg. Tan Sri Dr. Yeoh said, "The KL Tower is a great testament on how skilful local engineers can be in building a great structure that is globally recognized. However, we need

more local engineers to step up to the mark. They must strive hard to find solutions that are cost competitive and be ready to face challenges that affects the engineering fraternity”.

He encourages Malaysian engineers to take pride in what they do. He said, “Whether you are an employee or running your own firm, as an engineer, you should excel in your profession and skill sets. Do not compromise on your principles and ethics no matter how tempting it is. More importantly, strive to contribute to engineering achievements in your own country”. He firmly believed that the best engineering feats and inventions help transform human lives for the better.

He said, “Entrepreneurship is vital to all great engineering innovations and inventions, a subject that many young engineers do not take seriously enough and at their loss. Indeed, what good are ground breaking engineering technologies and innovations if they hardly make it to the market and few benefit from them?”

The esteemed businessman and engineer also pointed out the complex correlation between engineering and entrepreneurship, arguing that they are intertwined but are by no means easy bedfellows. Contending that engineering carries its true worth only if it could be capitalised upon to help transform and better societies and individuals, the acid test he applies for all engineering is practical application, commercial viability and long-term sustainability.

He said, “The world will never know just how many ground breaking technologies and innovations in history failed to see the light of the day, because the engineers who invented them were not entrepreneurial or business savvy. Each one of these unfulfilled potentials is a missed opportunity to make a difference”.

Y. Bhg. Tan Sri Dr. Yeoh stated that he has always insisted on championing YTL as a force for good, i.e. for advocating environmental conservation and clean renewable energy. He stated that local engineers should become more aware of how urgent it has become for them to deal with pollution and environmental issues, not just for themselves, but also for future generations. Thus, instead of creating technologies that will pollute, he hopes to see more engineers, both young and old, use their engineering skills to change the world and save the environment.

According to him, the challenge of developing sustainable energy is perhaps one of the most important goals for engineers today. Thus he would like to see Malaysian engineers lead by example. He said, “Engineering carries its true worth only if it could be capitalised upon to help transform and better societies and individuals. There is no point in creating a destructive technology that eventually destroys the very sanctity of life itself. We need technology that will respect the environment and treasure human life”.

TAKING THE LEAP OF FAITH

Local companies which are ready to make the leap into the global business arena should prepare themselves for the challenges that follow. Y. Bhg. Tan Sri Dr. Yeoh pointed out that there are currently many Malaysian engineering firms that are doing well in India and the Middle East, especially Abu Dhabi. The advice he gave was that they must be prepared to continuously improve their engineering skill sets and stand firm by not compromising in terms of their integrity.

The fastest way for local companies to create an international presence is with the help of the Internet. He said, “The digital economy powered by the Internet is no longer an option to ignore. In fact, the Internet itself is a sign of the next evolution in business communication. It has cut down a tremendous amount of unnecessary paperwork and expedited the speed of business transactions”.

According to him, businesses must establish their online presence and capitalise on what the digital economy has to offer. He believes, not only is it the smartest engineering technology to date, that all engineers must capitalise on the Internet and mobile internet technology to advance their engineering businesses.

Going into the future, Y. Bhg. Tan Sri Dr. Yeoh said, “From a global perspective, while Malaysia has been affected by the financial crisis in Europe, the economic situation here remains resilient. Despite many naysayers claiming otherwise, I believe that there are still many developments in the country that we can look forward to including infrastructure projects such as roads, housing and public transportation”.

He added, “I believe there is a very bright future for engineers in Malaysia who are both capable and excel in their line of work. In Europe as well as South Africa, the demand for engineering skill sets is very high. This is a good opportunity for Malaysian engineers to prove that they are just as good as their foreign counterparts. In fact, those who specialise in certain fields of knowledge such as oil and gas are in great demand overseas”.

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