

Let your work do the talking

◆ This week SunBiz gets the thoughts and views of AIA General Bhd CEO Eric Chang

SUCCESS: THE INSIGHT STORY

How has your life experience made you the leader you are today?

I come from a background of modest means, so from a young age I've had to work hard for what I want. No short cuts. No easy pass. I still remember when I was 11 years old, I represented my school in a badminton tournament. I needed a quality racket that would help me excel in the game as my very basic, worn out one was no longer adequate. The only way I could afford one was to set aside a small amount of my lunch money every day as well as helped others with their daily chores to earn extra.

Months later when I finally got hold of my new racket, I felt such a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment (further enhanced by the subsequent success I enjoyed on the court). It taught me that I could attain my goals in life if I work towards them with tenacity and relentlessness - giving my all and never giving up.

My spiritual faith also plays a big part in how I see the world, above all it gives meaning and a sense of purpose to my life. This naturally extends to the arena of the workplace - what I do, and how I do what I do. I believe that spearheading a company is not all about how successful you are in generating profits - it is also measured by how well the company contributes to the betterment of society. Every day, I strive to positively impact the people around me as I lead my team and the organisation forward - that's true success to me.

What traits do you look for in your talent or how do you decide who is right for a job?

A desire to win, to excel. I'd choose someone with lesser qualifications but has a great attitude towards learning and improving himself over a person that is highly qualified and acts like he knows it all.

From past experiences, it is indeed proven to be the winning formula. It's the reason why, time and time again, we see little known underdogs beat superstar opponents.

How do you think the industry you are in will evolve in the future?

The digital age has completely transformed our lifestyles. Our needs today, including our protection needs, are markedly different from our parents'. We have unfettered access to data and knowledge - unprecedented in the history of mankind - thanks to the internet.

Digital technologies have created new ways for us to interact with one another (voice calls are so last millennium) and we expect to have everything instantly and at our fingertips.

As with every industry, the implication is that businesses need to respond accordingly to

customers' evolving needs and new expectations. Businesses that fail to transform will slowly but inevitably lose their edge and fade away. To stay relevant, businesses need to start offering products and services that didn't exist previously or perhaps weren't feasible but have become possible today through advances in technology. Importantly, technology has levelled the playing field by allowing companies regardless of size and strength to innovate quickly and carve out their own distinctive positions.

But make no mistake, innovation and transformation require investment and commitment. History provides cautionary tales of companies that declined into obsolescence either because they didn't put in the required effort or they acted too slow, or a combination of both. All said and done, if I was forced to choose, I'd pick investing in building capabilities that will enable the business to treat the customer as an individual (segment of one) as my top priority.

What advice can you offer those looking to start their career/own business?

We all come from different backgrounds with different career paths to choose in life. Our success journeys differ from one another. If anything, I'd like to encourage them to follow their dreams, and to keep going even when it seems like they've taken the wrong turn. Sometimes a detour is necessary to get them to their destination. I like what Steve Jobs said, that we can only connect the dots looking backward. So, have the courage and keep moving forward.

Best piece of advice you ever received on your career.

I've been very blessed to have crossed paths with so many kind souls and great leaders who have given me great advice and guidance that made all the difference for my career. It's impossible to pick one out as the best. If there's one that immediately comes to mind is to "let my work do the talking."

I've held on to this piece of advice as a constant reminder for me to be laser-focused on delivering excellence in what I do because at the end of the day, no one can dispute the outcome of a well-executed work, which is what truly matters. So, don't get distracted by the bright lights or noise; focus instead on knocking the ball out of the park every time you're asked to step up to the plate.

Most-admired business leader? Why?

Sir Richard Branson. He has such a zest for life, he is inventive, and he has a big heart. His autobiography, *Losing My Virginity*, detailed the journey he took to build his business empire. Like when he launched Virgin Atlantic and had to take on British Airways, a true David and Goliath tussle - it took real passion, resilience and courage for him to succeed

against great odds.

Above all, he has a well-documented reputation for looking after his team. His philosophy is - "Employees come first. Look after your employees well, and they will look after your customers." I stand by this philosophy and try my best to emulate and put this into practice with my team.

A must-read for every business owner/manager is...

Good to Great by Jim Collins

Malaysia's greatest brand.

Where does one begin? There's so many to choose from. If I must name one, a local household brand that I grew up with comes to mind - Ramly Burger.

Tell us a joke.

He who dies with the most toys wins.

