

TEH LIP KIM

Leading Lady

Surely you've been through a lot with SDB, but what was the biggest challenge for you earlier on in your career?

When I took over as Managing Director in July 1998, the tin market had collapsed and it was no longer viable to continue mining. On top of that, it was the height of the Asian Financial Crisis. To make matters worse the company, having turned its back on tin mining, began to invest in a whole lot of businesses but did not have management control over any of them. Many of these were losing money. It was like pouring water into a pail with holes in it. The more money we invested, the more we lost.

I could have thrown up my hands in despair and let the company crumble. But I opted to do something else – consolidate the businesses and, hopefully, put the company back on the path to profitability.

Some relatives and friends who had an interest in several businesses within the group were persuaded to agree to wind up or sell off those businesses that were losing money. Many of them also agreed to step aside to enable the management to consolidate the company's position.

Eventually, we had most of the businesses sold off or wound down and were left with the core businesses of property leasing, property management and the hotel. We also appointed a much smaller board of directors – reducing membership from 11 to five. That enabled us to look for other areas in which to invest, that led us to property development. All in all, that was the most challenging time I've had in the company.

Most memorable achievement?

Coincidentally, my best moment also came in the midst of another crisis. This was in the midst of the 2008-2009 sub-prime financial melt-down. It hit us really hard. For a period of nine months, we failed to sell a single apartment or house.

At that point in time, I could have done what most developers did and hold back all new projects to conserve resources. Instead, I decided to launch a new project – Five Stones. It was also a costly project. We had to spend an additional RM20 million to RM30 million just for the sub-structure.

Interview by Lawrence Julius

She is a leader. At the helm of a public listed company, she has shown her prowess in the corporate world. Through all that, she is also a caring mother, wife and a woman full of passion. It is no easy task to climb the corporate ladder while balancing everything else in one hand, but Teh Lip Kim, Managing Director of Selangor Dredging Bhd (SDB), prevails. She shares her story and thoughts.



Happily for us, the Five Stones project was a major success. We sold all 377 units within months, thus providing us the impetus to ride out the financial crisis and to launch other projects. The success was made that much sweeter by the fact that it was a project that was entirely ours – from concept to design to execution.

Looks like you've got a lot on your hands. Between work, family and personal interests, how do you keep yourself motivated?

I love my work. I'm very passionate about it. In fact, I look forward to coming to work every morning. This is when I let my creative juices flow. I like creating new things like coming up with new concepts and designs. But I do not create for the sake of doing it. To me, it is also important that what I created is appealing to others. For instance, home concepts and designs I create for our homes must appeal to the buyer. I look at what they like, what appeals to them, and use that information for my concepts and designs.

In a way, my family also becomes an inspiration for me. Similarly, my personal interests also revolve around my work. When I travel, I spend a lot of time looking for designs and ideas that I find captivating, and I try to adapt those ideas for our projects. In a way, doing this is not work anymore. It has become a personal pursuit, something that I really enjoy.

When it comes to hobbies, I like to read. And I practice yoga and pilates as well. These are the moments where I can be by myself, to think, to enjoy the quiet, to just be myself.

What are your thoughts on women in the corporate sector today? Is it harder for women to climb up the ladder?

The traditional role of the woman is to stay at home and look after the children. It was always the role of the man to be the breadwinner.

But if these traditional roles were reversed, I believe it would give rise to a similar situation, but only this time, it would be the women who climbed the corporate ladder.

Perhaps if we didn't have this cultural bias against women, the situation could be a lot more balanced. The cultural perception is for women to stay at home and take care of the children. If culture dictated men to stay home, women would be up the corporate ladder in no time.

Here in Asia, it has always been accepted that the men should go out to work and bring home the bacon while women stayed at home. But with changing times, and the availability of domestic help, women are increasingly being given equal opportunities to chart a career.

In the West where domestic help is more costly, husband and wife do tend to share the household chores. This also means that the woman has a greater opportunity to go out and work, and climb the corporate ladder.

Who were / are the women you look up to as role models? And why?

My mother was my biggest role model. She was a cancer patient. She was stricken by the disease not once but twice in her life. Despite the fact that she was not well, she continued to take her responsibilities as wife and mother bravely and she remained very brave until the day she died. It was her outlook in life that I most admired.

Despite her illness, she continued to play her role as wife and mother very well. She did not wallow in self-pity. She looked at the role she had to play and took it in her stride. And she dealt with her own issues by herself, putting up a brave front till the end.

Over and above that, she even helped others whom she felt were less fortunate than her.

What is your single most valuable life lesson you keep dear?

Well, I learned this the day my son was diagnosed with autism. I think it is very important to accept things. The day we accept the reality of things, our world gets bigger.

When my son was diagnosed with autism, he was four years old. As a mother I initially refused to accept it. I always lived with this gift called "hope". Today however, I am more realistic with my hope. Initially, I always imagined that one day I would wake up to find that my son was alright. Just like that. Of course I know that it will never happen.

The first thing I needed to do was to accept that my son had autism. Then I asked myself, what I, as his mother, could do about it.

Acceptance is really the most important. Once there is acceptance, we can and

must act on it. We have to be action-oriented. We have to do something about it. What this means is that I should do what a mother should do to help her child, and not passing the burden on to someone else.

It was like in 1998 when I took over the reins and the company was in such a bad shape. I could have started blaming everyone else for what happened to the company. And I could have just sat back and did nothing. But I accepted that we were not getting anywhere with the businesses and decided to do something about it.

Finally, how would you define success?

To me success is the ability to sell a concept. It is about the emotion attached to the product you are selling and, at the end of the day, the buyer feels good about buying it. For instance, if it is a home you are selling, the buyer must feel good about living in it eventually.

Success is also about the ability to offer a new concept that becomes the standard for quality. For instance, in SDB homes, we have a concept that we refer to as "spatial planning". When someone moves into a new home, more often than not, he may find that one part of the house has too much space that he is not going to utilize while another part may be too small for his liking. He may find that his bedroom is too big and the extra space could have been better utilized for a larger living area. Spatial planning is a concept that ensures that the ratio of the many parts in a house – bedrooms, kitchen, living area, etc – is at an optimum. Spatial planning is an SDB concept, it is our intellectual property.

Another factor that reads success is like when we hand over a newly completed property to the buyer and he goes 'Wow. This is so nice. This is what I want.' That is what I mean by success. It is when the buyer tells himself, 'What I walked into now is even better than what I bought into before it was built.'

For instance, in our Five Stones development in SS2, Petaling Jaya, despite the fact that there are altogether 377 units, you do not feel like you're in a crowded place. It is proof that we have delivered more than what we have promised. Capital gain is a bonus for buyers.

Collectively, these are the factors that define success.