

Westports: Up Close With The Man At The Helm



OPEN-DOOR ... Westports CEO Ruben Emir Gnanalingam encourages open and healthy dialogue.

PORT KLANG, (Bernama) -- Becoming a chief executive officer does not happen overnight.

Ruben Emir Gnanalingam says he had to work his way through the ranks before taking the reins at Westports Holdings Bhd.

His father, Tan Sri Datuk Gnanalingam or Tan Sri G, as he is fondly known to many, devised a plan on how he could join Westports, one of the busiest ports in the country.

"What my dad did was to make sure that I understand all positions in the company, including those of the rank-and-file", he told Bernama in an interview.

Ruben, who graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Economics from the London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London in 1998, accepted the challenge and sensed his father's wisdom.

His father, who is also a marketing guru, wanted him to learn and understand the ropes of the port business.

PASSING THE BATON

Tan Sri G, who is the Executive Chairman, could have passed the baton to Ruben, his eldest son and heir apparent to the throne he has successfully steered and built, on a silver platter eight years ago.

But the shrewd tycoon, who started Westports in 1994 from a barren swampy island and transformed it into the main container terminal operator in Port Klang, insisted that his son should learn the business the hard way.

"If you don't get to the ground, you won't understand how hard it is for them, and the limits they can take", said Ruben, who joined Westports as a trainee in 1999 and spent the first three months familiarising with the port operations as a worker, including working the night shifts.

"It was a very good experience as it helped me understand how the port operates. I enjoyed my three-month stint", reminisced Ruben, who also holds a diploma in port management from the University of Cambridge in 2001.

After three months, he was ready to move to the next level. Under his stewardship, Ruben formulated a five-year corporate plan for Westports and a second five-year plan upon completion of the first.

LEARNING THROUGH MISTAKES

In 2000, he resigned from Westports during the dotcom era to set up Makmal Jaya Sdn Bhd, a Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) status incubator to invest and nurture Malaysia's high-tech start-ups.

Five years later, Ruben sold off his shares in the information technology (IT) firm that he co-owned with several partners, and returned to Westports.

"I think to a certain extent my dad was probably happy I made mistakes somewhere else and not in his port. Wherever you go, you learn through mistakes. The faster way to learn is through mistakes. Nothing leaves a better impression than making a mistake", said Ruben.

In July 2005, he was appointed to Westports' Board and designated as Executive Director in January 2006. Ruben was promoted to CEO in 2010.

SAME MANAGEMENT STYLES

Ruben and his father believe in the same management principles and ideas. "In essence, our management styles are very similar."

"I think, the key difference, if at all, is that I like to use more data, purely because of rapid technological changes. I get the benefit of more data while my father relies more in his gut feeling. Because of his experience, he has everything in his head and heart".

"We believe that companies must have the right culture, and making mistakes is the best way to learn. No one puts you down for making mistakes, but people will laugh at you if you make the same mistakes twice", said Ruben.

"Now that I am the CEO, a lot of the people who were then my seniors before are now my colleagues and reporting back to me, which is a good thing. As they were my bosses before, they have no problem telling me when I am wrong".

OPEN RELATIONSHIP, HEALTHY DIALOGUE

Ruben added: "People should be able to challenge you. That's why I have a lot of people, who are my peers, who can tell me I am doing right or challenge me if I have made the wrong

decision. They are not yes-men who are afraid to tell you when you are wrong. I am willing to accept their criticisms".

Under his management, Ruben encourages open and healthy dialogue. "We have a very open relationship. I think, they might have been apprehensive to talk freely if they were not my bosses in the past."

Ruben has introduced the 'Suggestion Box' concept as a feedback channel for the employees.

"Basically, it is for them to write to me directly. They can tell me 'thank you' or 'I don't like the food at the canteen' and give suggestions and ideas. I read the letters first - all of them, and I understand every single one of them".

"We have other avenues, but this one is direct. They can come here directly to see me but some are too shy to bring up small things. I reply to all letters, but only to those who identify themselves. Some of them have proposed great ideas, and we have implemented them", said Ruben.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE

Being the man at the helm, Ruben says his biggest challenge so far is formulating strategic business plans.

"Things are changing, people and company must evolve over time. I am evolving fast enough to lead the company in a certain direction. If I don't evolve fast enough for the company, it would be obsolete.

I have to make sure the company is changing at all times. It is important to have a strategy. You can't tell what the future is going to hold. If you know, it is easy to plan".

Ruben stresses that he wants to ensure that improvements are taking place at every level within the company. This he does by meeting his staff very regularly.

"If you don't meet people, you are not a leader. People working with you must be improved in their lives and career - at every level. A leader has to play a role in guiding people. If you stifle the people below you, you're not a leader. You must make them better", highlighted Ruben.

A LEADER MAKES PEOPLE BETTER

"A simple and clear definition of a leader is someone who makes people better. As long as you make their lives easier and better, they will do the same for you as they feel good about you. If your staffs don't really like you, you are probably not a good leader".

Ruben says the culture at Westports is based on three tenets - family, performance and innovation. Family is the main tenet and every staff is considered part of the family. "We want them to feel that they are part of the family".

SECOND IS PERFORMANCE

"We have explained carefully to our staff that performance is the main driving force in the company. We will not tolerate lack of performance. If you perform, you will get more. If you don't perform, everything else stops. There is no preferential treatment for seniority, age or gender; everything is based on merit", stressed Ruben.

Third is innovation. Ruben says the company is continuously innovating to avoid becoming obsolete. "We tell employees to continuously improve. There is no place for legacies. We have inculcated this among our staff from day one".

STAFF TRAINING FROM DAY ONE

Westports provides training for all its staff and the majority of those who join the company come in as fresh graduates. "There is no port degree or real port training outside", he said.

"We provide training from day one, all in-house. This culture has been embedded since day one. As we train in-house, we can propagate our culture throughout. Elements of performance are tied with rewards".

Character is what Ruben looks for in a prospective Westports employee. "Someone who can be easily embedded into our culture. We are constantly hiring people; both executives and non-executives". "Skills are hard to find. If you are open to learning, merit-based, elements will gel well with the company. If you are a good person, we don't mind bringing you in, especially one with a character that suits everybody else", he said.

THOUSANDS HAVE BEEN TRAINED

In terms of job prospect and security, a typical Westports employee can look forward to all kinds of benefits, highlighted Ruben.

Westports provides among the biggest benefits in Malaysia, such as medical programmes for spouses, dependents, he said, noting that its remunerations are competitive in the market.

Ruben stressed that in-house training is one of the biggest benefits for Westports employees, from greenhorns to experienced port people.

"We have trained thousands of people, and many have come here and left to work overseas or with shipping lines or logistics providers. We are continuously training people. It is good for us. We are not shy of it. We now have friends all over the world, in other shipping lines and the logistics industry. In terms of career prospects, they gain extensive knowledge. We prepare them for the industry", said Ruben.