

# S P SETIA'S SECRET SAUCE IS 'CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT'

BY MAXINE YONG

When S P Setia Bhd president and CEO Datuk Khor Chap Jen steps into a lift at the company's corporate headquarters in Setia Alam, there are already some staff in it. They cheerfully greet him "Hi Datuk CJ" — which is he fondly known as — and he replies in kind with a smile.

Some C-suite executives rarely see their own employees but Khor is clearly not one of them. In fact, he believes engaging with employees would motivate them, in turn contributing to the company's bottom line.

He has impressive evidence to back his case. S P Setia was one of the best employers at Aon Best Employers — Malaysia 2017 — again.

Khor says: "All of us at S P Setia are delighted to receive the award for the eighth time. If there is any single attribute that stands out from our win, I would say it is teamwork. Teamwork is the hallmark of S P Setia's culture.

"Moreover, our vision has always been to be the best in what we do; it is simple yet powerful. For us, it means that all of us must strive for excellence. We have to constantly improve ourselves to excel in what we do."

So, what is the company's secret sauce for keeping its people happy? Continuous engagement, says Khor.

He points out that S P Setia's "open door" policy means the doors to the rooms of the managers, heads of department and even C-suite executives are always open to employees. General managers conduct town hall meetings once every two months, and Khor himself meets with staff once every six months.

"We make sure we have regular engagement with staff. We have a gym where they can spend time to stay in shape. We also have a hotspot centre, where they can relax. At the centre, they can play pool, darts and table tennis or even enjoy karaoke," he notes.

The company is also doing its bit for diversity. It has a special programme for women called "Women of Inspiration". Khor says, "A few years back, it was difficult to employ domestic help. So, some of our staff were finding it difficult to juggle between work and family. The company set up a nursing room in the hotspot centre to help them."

Has all this paid off? It seems like it. Last year, Khor says, the company recorded a turnover rate of 8.5%, against an industry-wide average attrition rate of between 12% and 15%. He is quick to point out, however, that the company is not chasing a figure but focusing instead on keeping employees happy.

"We are fine with 8.5% as it is lower than the industry average. It is getting more challenging to retain employees because 62% of our employees are Gen-Y. We have to continuously create good challenges

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> Khor

for them to keep them engaged," he says.

"The idea is not to keep the turnover rate low but to focus and engage our staff, create a conducive work environment so they will stay with us. There will still be people leaving no matter how good we are, as they want to move on. We will have to accept this and let them go."

Khor notices subtle differences between Gen-Y and baby boomers. The latter obey their superior's instructions and rarely ask questions about the work. But Gen-Ys are a different breed.

"Gen-Y love challenges and excitement. They want their opinion to be heard and they want to be credited for outperformance and excellence. As an employer, it is important for the company to engage with employees and give credit where credit is due."

Khor says the company uses the same approach with all employees. "When new employees join S P Setia, we impress upon them that we have a career plan for them. We have challenges for them, such as taking on new roles and tasks, and learning new skills. We also offer proper guidance such as training programmes and mentoring sessions so they will not feel lost."

As the company is on an expansion drive to double its size in five years, it offers employees plenty of opportunities — and challenges. Khor notes that when there is a job vacancy, the company will consider staff from within the organisation first before turning to external candidates.

"We provide different types of training for our staff. For example, employees who are promoted to managers or senior managers will learn managerial skills. Those taking a more technical role will attend training to acquire the specific technical skills.

"We also have a 'High Potential Programme' designed for staff with immense potential. We think these candidates can go a long way. General training will be given to groom and prepare them for new opportunities. When job vacancies arise, they will be the first to be considered for the positions," he says.

The company also organises overseas study tours for staff. During the tours, they will learn new concepts in the industry and be inspired. When they return, the teams may bounce ideas off each other based on those generated during the tour.

What does it take to be a part of S P Setia's award-winning team? "Having the right attitude is the most important criteria for us," says Khor. "Knowledge can be taught. Academic training does not align very well with industry needs, so we will need to train our staff accordingly. But staff with the right attitude are not easy to come by."

Therefore, S P Setia values candidates who possess integrity and always deliver on their promises. It is also important to have passion for the job. Furthermore, candidates should embrace and be proud of the diversity within the company and the nation at large.

The company has been through tough transitions and still managed to come out on top. In 2014, founder, Tan Sri Liew Kee Sin, who was also group president and CEO, left. A few important figures, including chief financial officer Datuk Teow Leong Seng, followed suit a while later.

A few S P Setia lieutenants, including Khor, who was then group executive

vice-president, stayed back to ensure a smooth transition. And the rest is history.

Khor admits that year was indeed difficult and challenging for the company. The bright side was that many long-serving staff — who had served for more than a decade — chose to stay with the company and drive it forward.

He recalls: "Staff morale was down in 2014. The turbulent period lasted for six months before we could really start to move on. But you would be surprised at how many of the long-serving staff stepped up to shoulder more responsibility and work to fill the gaps in the company. That was a tremendous help.

"We started with reorganisation and capacity-building. We had a lot of dialogue and town hall sessions to fill the staff in on what was happening and what plans we had. We had a series of team-building activities to reinforce the bonding between the staff. These helped them focus on their work and drive the company forward."

The result of the reorganisation was significant — the company continued to bag the Aon Best Employer award as it put the unsettled period behind it and focused on striving for excellence.

Khor believes being an eight-time winner of the award helps the business. "When a property developer is called a best employer, our customers would expect that we adopt the best approach in serving them. They will have more confidence in us and our product and services.

In terms of recruitment, the awards definitely add value: "We stand out from the crowd. The candidate will be convinced that we have something good for them, and this would be a major attraction when it comes to recruiting top talent. As for sales and marketing, I always believe happy staff will go above and beyond to generate the sales and revenue that would drive the company's bottom line." ■

