

ECOWORLD IS BEST OF THE BEST AGAIN

BY JENNIFER JACOBS



Celebrating together: EcoWorld is united in its diversity

Eco World Group Development Bhd (EcoWorld) won the “Best of the Best” at the Aon Best Employers — Malaysia 2017 awards for the second year running, a feat for a company that is barely four years old.

Its president and CEO Datuk Chang Khim Wah points out that while EcoWorld may seem like a young company, at least 30% of its workforce are very experienced, with between 10 and 20 years in the development industry. “They provide stability to the whole company. They are experts in the fields of finance, marketing, planning, design and implementation and they provide a very solid decision-making and thinking process for the company,” he says.

The other 70% of the team consists of young people of various races, genders, backgrounds and qualifications. “They provide the energy, enthusiasm, disruptiveness of new ideas and the impetus to do things differently,” adds Chang.

When you combine the two, he says, you get a balance between those who can provide new ideas and implement things quickly and those who are more grounded and understand what is feasible and workable in the industry.

Being a young company has its advantages, he notes. “The vision of the company is to create tomorrow and beyond. This vision was thought through and discussed by the team from the beginning,” says Chang. This means that the objectives

of both the individuals and the company are aligned. “And when the objectives are aligned, it makes a very powerful weapon to [conquer the market]. That is the best part of it.”

Chang says many people have asked him whether EcoWorld puts people or profits first. His answer is simple. A company needs the best people to bring in the profits. “You cannot have profits without the best people. Well, not sustainable profits anyway.”

EcoWorld, he adds, is an aspirational developer. “That means we want to have products that enhance the lifestyle and give our buyers a premium. The company, as a whole, creates value, not only for shareholders and our residents and purchasers, but also for the team. The team must also reap benefits in terms of individual skills and knowledge, as well as monetary benefits.”

Although the first four years of the company’s history sound like a fairy tale, Chang admits that the journey has not been easy. “Today’s world is about convincing people to be with you for the ride. It’s about engagement, and this comes in many forms.”

The most senior members of the company, including the chairman, Tan Sri Liew Kee Sin, do the rounds, going to the ground to meet as many of the staff as possible. “We have 1,200 people in our team and Liew will personally do his rounds three or four times a year to meet them. We call

it Chairman 360; he will talk about the company’s vision and listen to feedback. He encourages everyone to participate,” Chang says.

Chang himself has what is known as “good morning sessions”. “As CEO, I have my own rounds. I wake up early and travel around to all the business and supporting units to do good mornings with them. We meet early, say 8 o’clock, have breakfast together, talk about general operational goings-on, things happening in the market and the problems we face on the ground. We also talk about the new ideas staff want to implement and how EcoWorld can continually improve the working environment, procedures and product designs,” he says.

All this boils down to one thing: EcoWorld’s senior management is committed to doing a lot of engagement with the staff. “If my memory serves me correctly, our engagement score was 95%,” says Chang.

PARTICIPATION IS CRUCIAL

It is not a one-way street. “Our people need to participate in this journey. It’s not just the senior management. So, we give the young a lot of leeway,” Chang says.

He gives an example. “We have a training programme called EcoWorld Class, which is about how to provide unmatched product and service quality to all our customers at all times. This

training programme was formulated by the younger members of the team.”

These younger members have taken ownership of the programme and it is up to them to train the other members of the team on this set of ideals and quality levels. “So, the EcoWorld brand, a lot of it, is in the hands of the young people. They own it, they have to spread it and they have to execute it,” Chang says.

Although work takes up a good part of the staff’s time, Chang insists that EcoWorld is not all about work. “It’s also about participation and team building. The team also needs to be humble in its service as well.”

Towards this end, it has formulated something known as the EcoWorld Volunteers Club. “They go out on weekends every now and then, around our project sites, to assist people in need: senior citizens’ homes, orphanages, or flood victims when a flood occurs near any of our projects. They will go out on their own time to assist the people and learn how to deal with the many, many issues in society.”

This creates more well-rounded people, which EcoWorld believes will also help improve the company’s service quality as a whole.

When EcoWorld won the “Best of the Best” employer award last year, it had a definite impact on its hiring. “We actually had a surge of people looking for us, asking whether they could contribute

to our organisation... people with great backgrounds and experience. Many of them noted that we had won the 'Best of the Best' and said they would really like to be part of our organisation," says Chang. In fact, he adds, the company received applications from overseas students who had yet to graduate.

This made the team feel proud of the company. "And when the team takes pride in their work, you can see that the levels of attrition are pretty low as a whole... in fact, in the single digits," Chang says.

He is quick to point out that this is nothing short of remarkable in today's cut-throat job market, where everyone is trying to grab your talent. "A lot of this can be attributed to the fact that we were voted the 'Best of the Best' last year. And when the team knows that we have been voted 'Best of the Best' again, hopefully, the pride factor will bring us through the next few years."

Another effect of winning the 'Best of the Best' award is that people outside the industry have started to sit up and take notice. "A lot of them actually applied to work with us. We always say we want our people to think outside the box and one of the fastest ways to do this is to employ people outside the box."

What kind of people? "The property industry is related to construction, so we usually get people from engineering backgrounds and similar qualifications. But now, we have people with various degrees that are not related to any of these applying. They could be more on the commercial or artistic side, the general science stream or even general marketing, where they have never marketed housing products before. We have a lot of variation in terms of the people who apply now, some of whom are good and some whose qualifications may not be so applicable. But still, this allows us to widen the strength of our team. Ideas are hard to come by. So, it's always good to find new people," Chang says.

For instance, in a soft market, like the one at present, it requires creativity to meet targets without fighting on price. "We believe that in the property industry today, innovation will drive the market, whether it is on an uptrend or a downtrend. People will still buy based on the branding of the developer, the innovation of the products as well as the service and product warranty given by the developer."

To remain at the forefront, Chang points out that Team EcoWorld will always need to be on the edge of innovation as well as product and service quality. "Hence, we always look for people who are creative, who think outside the box and who look at things in different ways."

WHAT IT TAKES

As many people are eager to join the company, it has its fill of applicants. But what is EcoWorld looking for in an employee? "Firstly, it's difficult to hire people based on a piece of paper, so, talking face-to-face is very important. And that's where the team has been trained to look at things like attitude. The candidate must also speak objectively about their aspirations and ambitions and give clear descriptions of their background and experiences," says Chang.

He adds that the company is not looking for yes-men. "We do not require them to be obedient and say all the right things. I think honesty and objectivity is very important. So, we always look out for this. And their energy level is very important as well. We hope to employ positive-minded people so that when the industry is facing soft market conditions, they have what it

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takes to keep grinding, keep going. So, it's not just a matter of qualifications or years of experience. It's how you respond to being part of EcoWorld."

What can a new hire expect? "It depends on their age and the field of work they are in. But basically, when they join us, they are initially assigned a person to look after them for the first few months, like a buddy system. This is somebody who will tell them where everything is, introduce them to everybody and help them with on-the-job training, telling them where all the SOPs are stored, basically helping them get acclimatised to the job."

For the more senior hires, there is a manager development programme and for those who are more motivated and demonstrate higher potential, a leadership development programme.

"When you join EcoWorld, you get a holistic training, both in terms of job competencies and skills as well as leadership and management training."

But that's not all. The training includes training in personal development, outside

the scope of your work, in which staff have to deal with people and organisations that may not be directly related to their workplace or job scope.

As EcoWorld is intent on developing well-rounded staff, it is constantly running programmes to enhance their capabilities. For instance, all staff have to go through Toastmasters to learn to communicate and present themselves properly. "This is in recognition of the fact that in today's world, every individual needs to be able to speak in a confident manner and express themselves, to get ahead. If you cannot express yourself, it is very difficult for a young person, or even a senior person, to move forward in their careers, especially in an industry like ours where we deal with so many different types of people, such as residents, bankers, suppliers and consultants," notes Chang.

He points out that a team cannot execute a project efficiently if the manager is incoherent and keeps giving instructions that no one can understand. "If the seniors cannot give a clear direction as to how the company will grow, the team gets disorientated. And being a listed company, if you go to AGMs and EGMs, you get a lot more questions today. Even the directors need to be able to answer clearly and in a satisfactory manner to manage the shareholders today."

All of which goes to say that public speaking is very important, for everybody.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Another programme EcoWorld runs is called "Bridging the Gap". "This is not a training programme. It is to get the different generations in the workforce together to help them understand each other. They can highlight why they work the way they work, how they receive instructions and how they perceive certain things. This is moderated by people who are neutral and respected in the organisation," says Chang.

Senior management is not allowed to participate to allow for more openness in the feedback. "This is so that the teams can speak honestly about certain aspects of the working environment that they want to improve, or maybe they don't understand why some of the senior managers give instructions [in a certain way]. Or maybe the senior managers don't understand why their juniors don't receive instructions the way they want them to."

When they are allowed to come together and thrash things out, it creates a better understanding between the generations, which allows them to form a closer bond. "So, bridging the gap is the first phase

of this programme in staff engagement. The second phase would be [eliminating] the gap."

These meetings take place in comfortable surroundings where everyone can chat over a cup of coffee. Someone will write everything down so that action can be taken later. "It's normally about communication and understanding how people react — how different generations react — in different ways to different situations. And it's actually quite fun," says Chang.

He adds that while EcoWorld keeps evolving, its values do not change. "Our values of teamwork, looking after our talent and resources, integrity, giving the best service and product quality — those do not change. What we keep evolving is the way we work. We are getting more updated, getting softer in many aspects of our service levels, getting better product quality. As we evolve, we are thinking through what people need in the future in terms of our projects."

Chang points out that EcoWorld tries to find the best solutions to things that other people say is a norm in the industry. "That is the advantage of being a young workforce. We don't have the mindset of doing things as a matter of course, but always think about how we can do it better. We are always asking: Can we do something else? Can we change this? Can we try this?"

This is why, he says, in the coming years, there will be a lot of new things introduced in EcoWorld projects. "This is because the team looks at things very progressively, in a very different and agile manner. Trends can change in a month these days compared with a year before. The workforce needs to be nimble, to adjust, without affecting the values and principles of the team." EcoWorld's advantage, Chang adds, is the teamwork and that most of them were there from the start, helping to formulate the company's mission, vision and objectives. "We're all in this together. And we constantly keep the team engaged."

Basically, when it comes to talent development, the sky is the limit, says Chang. It is up to the individual how much they want to participate. "There are people who are really into it. There are others who have families and need time for their children, so they pace themselves. We leave it to the individual to see how quickly they want to progress."

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> **Chang**



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