

THE EDGE
MALAYSIAOutstanding Property CEO
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SUHAIMI YUSUF/THE EDGE

Anwar Syahrin Abdul Ajib | CEO and managing director of UEM Sunrise Bhd

Laying strong foundations

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It was not a bed of roses for UEM Sunrise Bhd CEO and managing director Anwar Syahrin Abdul Ajib when he took the helm of the merged entity in 2014, a few months after the sudden demise of his predecessor Datuk Wan Abdullah Wan Ibrahim. In what was called “a merger of opposites”, government-linked company UEM Land Holdings Bhd took over Sunrise Bhd in 2010 and the new entity was named UEM Sunrise in 2013.

Anwar Syahrin — one of the winners of *The Edge Malaysia* Outstanding Property CEO Award 2018 — recalls that UEM Sunrise operated in two offices — one in KL Sentral and the other in Publika Shopping Gallery.

“When I came on board, one of the first decisions I made was for everyone to move into one office — at Publika Shopping Gallery. One of the challenges for me was to merge the cultures of UEM Land and Sunrise. Now, many people can say we are one,” the 45-year-old chartered accountant tells *City & Country*.

Making the transition

Prior to joining UEM Sunrise, Anwar Syahrin was group CFO and group head of ports and logistics division at MMC Corp Bhd for eight years. He reckons that the transition — from a “finance guy” to CEO and managing director — was a tough one. Furthermore, the property industry had been on a downtrend since the previous year. Johor, where most of the company’s land bank is located, was also facing an oversupply of properties.

“MMC is an investment holding company and there is no real operations. At that time [when I left], I really wanted to go into an operational environment because I felt that if I stayed in MMC for too long, I would always be labelled as an accountant. I took up the position at UEM Sunrise, and it was only then that I realised that when it comes to running a company, it is not only about numbers,” he reminisces.

“It is about the people and bringing in the right culture ... it is about setting the direction, instilling passion among the staff and getting them to be excited about their jobs. Previously, I was more of an analyst [CFO in MMC] ... running a company requires a lot of stamina, perseverance and patience.”

Anwar Syahrin sees his mission at UEM Sunrise as increasing its share price by increasing profits with more sales of the right products.

To achieve the goal, he sets a standard for UEM Sunrise — known as E.V.E., it stands for exciting, value and easy. He explains that the company’s products must be exciting, have value and easy to buy.

His greatest achievement, he says, is putting customers first, even during the planning stage. He says focus groups are conducted at the start of each planning process to identify what customers want. The company is also working towards set-

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MOHD IZWAN MOHD NAZAM/THE EDGE



ting defect claims as soon as possible.

“The customer-centric experience is not perfect yet but there is a desire to be so,” he explains. “The second achievement is doing things together ... there are more collaborations between departments and everyone sits down to settle issues together.”

While Johor remains a challenge, Anwar Syahrin still believes in the state’s potential. UEM Sunrise will continue to develop its land bank there, but it will be done selectively, he says. For now, the focus will be on areas like Iskandar Puteri, Puteri Harbour and Gerbang Nusajaya.

Housing and Local Government Deputy Minister Datuk Raja Kamarul Bahrin Shah (third from left), with (from left) The Edge Media Group chairman Datuk Tong Kooi Ong, Anwar Syahrin and The Edge Media Group publisher and CEO Ho Kay Tat

How it all started

Perhaps Anwar Syahrin’s adventurous character — it is not the first time he has made a major life change — can be traced back to his background. Born in Kuala Lumpur, he moved to Johor when he was in primary school together with his late father, Johor chief minister Datuk Ajib Ahmad.

He went to a boarding secondary school in Kuala Kangsar, Perak, before doing his tertiary education in the UK, which trained him to be independent from a young age.

Initially planning to study architecture, he switched to mechanical engineering because “it is difficult to do architecture” and “it is safer to have an engineering degree”.

“It is a typical Malaysian mindset [studying engineering rather than architecture],” he quips. “After my degree, I continued with an MBA (Master of Business Administration) which allowed me to understand more about business. Doing the MBA gave me time to reflect on what I really want to do in my life. I had almost committed to becoming a professional engineer but reading how people did business excited me and the thought of being stuck in an engineering job was worrying ... it gave me time to think how I could expand my skills, knowledge and qualification in engineering into a business.”

He returned to Malaysia to work in oil and gas company Shell as a transport executive for 1½ years, doing vehicle preventive maintenance.

When his wife decided to further her studies in the UK, he went with her, joining an accounting

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(Right) Anwar Syahrin having a chat with a pupil of Sekolah Kebangsaan Cyberjaya last year. This school is located in the Symphony Hills development in Cyberjaya, Selangor;



(Below) Anwar Syahrin and staff at a Hari Malaysia event held on Sept 16;

(Bottom) The topping-out ceremony of Almás Suites @ Puteri Harbour, Iskandar Puteri on December 11 last year



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firm and studying to become a chartered accountant. He did so with advice from friends.

“Many industries have a very high regard for this profession [chartered accountancy]. Taking care of tankers is just too slow for career progression because to move up the corporate ladder, knowledge of finance and business is very important. Thankfully, I managed to pass the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW) exam,” he says.

He describes the first six months in the accounting firm as “a nightmare”. He was scolded a lot as he had gone into the industry with almost zero accounting knowledge.

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of ... being scolded ... because it is part of the learning process. The seniors were supportive, so things got easier along the way. However, passing the exam was no joke ... the passing rate was not high but the joy of passing is indescribable. It was a tough process but it was worth it because I wouldn’t be what I am today without it.”

Instilling passion

Anwar Syahrin also attributes his success to his role model, his late father. “Of course, I have mentors from work but my father instilled good values in me. He was decisive and strong-willed, yet he was humble and carried out his responsibilities honestly and with integrity and sincerity. That is for me ... to get the job done the right way.”

Indeed, he is modest about receiving *The Edge Malaysia* Outstanding Property CEO Award 2018. He notes that the award is also an acknowledgment of the changes that are taking place in the company, which is driven by the staff. He sees the recognition as motivation for the company to do more and not to be complacent. “I can only move so much but if the staff don’t buy into what we aspire for the company to be, the changes will not happen ... so this is something I am proud of achieving not just for me, but for the whole organisation because this wouldn’t be possible without their contribution,” he adds.

“For me, the real success is after I have laid a strong foundation and the passion is instilled, the staff will continue to drive the company to greater heights without me.”

While the property development industry is competitive and he has to do a lot of travelling and work late, he is grateful for the support of his wife and four children, which makes it possible for him to focus on his work.

He makes it a habit to have dinner with his family at least four nights a week, as well as visit his mother and in-laws once a week.

These days, he has even stopped playing his favourite game — golf — to have more time with his family, especially on weekends.

“Now I don’t get to sleep in on weekends because I have to send my son for football practice. After that, my other kids will join us for breakfast. It is not the length but the quality of time spent together,” he says.