

ECOWORLD INSPIRES ITS PEOPLE TO BE BOLD AND TAKE CHANCES

BY OLIVER CHRISTOPHER GOMEZ

Times are hard, especially for property developers, but Eco World Development Group Bhd continues to enjoy a high level of engagement with its staff. This is evident from the fact that it not only bagged a Best Employer award but CEO Datuk Chang Khim Wah also received special recognition for Engaging Leadership at this year's Kincentric Best Employers — Malaysia 2019 (formerly known as Aon Best Employers) awards.

He attributes the company's achievement to its culture of teamwork and camaraderie that was instilled when the company was formed six years ago. "Every success we have enjoyed is down to Team EcoWorld. The entire team embraces the same values and works toward the same goals," he says.

The culture of engagement is built into the company's DNA and is practised from the top down. Chang believes his biggest priority as CEO is to continuously engage with EcoWorld staff.

"I trust my project managers and general managers to run the company and ensure that business is always in order. I feel strongly about going down to the ground with my people. I regularly play football and futsal with people from all of our departments, including our auxiliary police force," he says.

But Chang reaches out to his people through more than just sports. He personally hands out red packets or angpows to each of his staff — a challenging feat as there are more than 1,400 of them. And during town hall meetings, he takes the time to meet the staff from every department, sometimes even in small groups.

Interestingly, millennials now make up about 70% of the company's workforce. This has helped it to be more agile and receptive to industry trends in a way that was not possible before. Historically, property development and construction — literally being a bricks-and-mortar business — tended to carry a conventional, almost unglamorous image, says Chang.

"But I think we have managed to break away from this stereotype to become more appealing to the millennial workforce by constantly reinventing ourselves and emphasising innovation. Millennials have been in the wider workforce for roughly 10 years now, whereas we are a young, six-year-old company. During that period, our millennial workforce has matured greatly and grown by leaps and bounds," he adds.

"When they first joined us, our millennials were characterised by their boundless energy and enthusiasm. They have such curious minds and ask plenty of great questions."

Over the last few years, high-performing millennials have taken on leadership and management roles at the company. "They are starting to manage the younger millennials and are more actively participating in the wider company decision-making process," says Chang.

This has resulted in more junior millennial managers working alongside and complementing the skillsets of their more experienced counterparts. According to Chang, it has had the added effect of keeping the company's senior managers on their toes.

"Our top-level managers have deep knowledge in their respective fields. Our financial controllers, for example, understand all the technicalities of their duties and are very familiar with the prevailing regulatory framework," he says.

Meanwhile, the company's senior project



managers have an excellent grasp of their roles and responsibilities. "They can see and solve technical problems well before we even break ground on a particular development," says Chang.

EcoWorld's millennial managers work slightly differently. "Obviously, at this level, they too have fantastic technical capabilities. But they also have a healthy tendency to ask questions. They are always keen to try new things, to add technology and innovation to our product line-up wherever possible," he says.

This was not how things were done years ago. In the old days, senior managers in the property development sector were deeply steadfast people, managing highly structured and rigid systems, says Chang. "These people could be depended on to solve any number of problems. However, this sometimes came at the expense of the agility needed to be innovative. We were innovative in the old days of course, but perhaps not quite as much as we should have been."

The company has been able to capture the best of both worlds — financial and technical superiority — by finding a good balance between enthusiasm and experience. This is another hallmark of EcoWorld's human capital, says Chang.

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Taking a broader view, he believes that the major human capital question is no longer whether the generational gap can be bridged but rather, the challenge that companies face in ensuring that their organisations have sufficient variety in the workforce.

"Employers need to accept that millennials are a uniquely mobile demographic. They want to learn new things and we as employers need to actively groom them while they are with the company and also give them opportunities to gain new experiences. For our part, key initiatives such as our EcoWorld Sports Club and the Young Adults Network ensure that our millennial workforce is regularly engaged with," says Chang.

He adds that the company currently has a turnover rate of 10%. "Of course, we want our turnover to be as low as possible. But even so, the current rate tells us a lot about our employee satisfaction levels."

All this boils down to a company-wide commitment to putting people first. Engagement is tremendously important for the company, says Chang.

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Due to the sheer diversity of our team, we have gone about setting up different platforms to engage with the different demographics in our workforce," he adds.

For instance, its Professional Women's Network caters specifically to women in the workforce and brings together women leaders to inspire others at its annual Women's Summit. The company also has an EcoWorld Parents' Network, which runs programmes such as parenting workshops and after-school activities for children during the school holidays.

"In addition, our Young Adult Network organises activities for the millennial demographic. We want to be able to support as many people in the roles they play, both at and outside of work," says Chang.

More broadly, he and his leadership team are able to keep their finger on the EcoWorld pulse by running the company's annual People's Heartbeat Survey, among others. The survey covers four key dimensions: leadership, infrastructure, people management and performance management. "I am proud to say we have consistently achieved scores of 90% and above each year since we implemented the survey," he says.

The company also conducts an annual survey on engagement levels. Dubbed the People's Heartbeat Survey on the Go, it can be completed by employees via a mobile device, anywhere, anytime. "This particular survey focuses specifically on engagement. It enables employees to seek guidance if they find themselves less engaged, or if they want to improve their engagement scores," says Chang.

Another crucial means of engagement is the EcoWorld Leadership Programme, where participants are personally mentored and undertake execution of ideas with the support of a project sponsor. This provides many touchpoints between the team and the leaders from the different divisions as well as expertise and hands-on learning, which is integral for high-potential talent development. The mentors and project sponsors are also able to gain better insight into what is happening on the ground.

EcoWorld may have been in the market for only six years, but it boasts a wealth of knowledge and experience from its senior leadership, coupled with the energy and agility of its young workforce and managers. "There are plenty of opportunities to realise your full potential. At EcoWorld, if you have an idea, it does not matter who you are or if your idea is big or small, you will be heard," says Chang.

"If we can develop the idea and turn it into reality, then it is full steam ahead. We are empowering Team EcoWorld to lead, experiment and be bold in all that they do." **E**