

# THERE'S NO SUBSTITUTE FOR HARD WORK

23 February 2015 / 12:02



In the first working day of the Year of the Goat, SunBiz catches up with Tan Sri Lim Chee Wai, founder and chairman of Top Glove Corp Bhd, the world's largest glove maker, for his thoughts and views.

## **1) How has your life experience made you the leader you are to day?**

I was born and raised in Titi, Negri Sembilan, where my family owned a small rubber plantation and was involved in the rubber trading business. I had ordinary beginnings but big dreams. However, the path to achieving these dreams was a challenging one.

Funding was not easy to come by and my wife and I worked very hard to raise the initial capital of RM180,000 to found Top Glove.

When we started our rubber glove business in 1991, we had relatively little industry experience. I had to learn a lot and learn very fast. In addition, lack of technical knowledge of the manufacturing process and a shortage of skilled workers were also issues we had to confront.

As a new player, I also had to work extremely hard to get in customers, gain their confidence and build a good reputation by delivering good

quality products and services.

Today, even as the largest rubber glove manufacturer in the world, we face a different set of business challenges: talent shortage, intensifying competition, rising costs and increasingly higher expectations from our customers.

However, going through all this has taught me the value of hard work, discipline, prudence as well as the importance of persevering and remaining focused through difficult times. It has made me stronger and more determined, and with these experiences under my belt, I am able to lead with greater wisdom and confidence.

## **2) How has your previous employment experience aided your current position?**

Early in my career, as a sales manager in the air-con business, I was already exposed to various work challenges and a very tough business environment. I also had a very demanding boss, whom I learned a lot from.

This invariably trained me to be, resilient, hardworking and quality-driven, qualities which I bring to my position to day as chairman of Top Glove and also endeavour to instil in my staff.

## **3) What advice can you offer to budding entrepreneurs/women/youths who want to start their career/own business?**

First, I would tell them that in a business or career, there is no substitute for hard work. In addition to working hard, they must also be prepared to work smart and fast. There is no short cut to success either.

Hard work is what built Top Glove into world's largest rubber glove manufacturer and is what will keep us in the number one position.

In business and in life, it is important to set a vision/goals and the correct direction, and be fully committed to pursuing it even in the face of

challenges.

I also believe firmly in continuous learning and improvement. No matter how successful, we should stay hungry for knowledge and strive to do better.

Finally, stay fit and healthy so you can be a positive contributor to your organisation and your family.

#### **4) How do you maintain work/life balance?**

Through sheer discipline and good planning.

As I always tell people, I take my work as my hobby and exercise as my duty. To ensure I do not neglect any areas in my life, I schedule time every day for things that are important to me: work, exercise, family and friends - and I keep to it.

#### **5) How has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal lives?**

Mentorship, in the form of guidance, feedback and even criticism, has been vital to my personal and professional development. It has come from formal mentors, for example, my former boss at OYL Industries, from whom I learnt so much about business and leadership.

Nowadays, that input comes less formally, from fellow directors, my management team and even my staff, on ways we can improve how we do things at Top Glove.

On the home front, my wife and children remain my most valued advisers.

#### **6) What do you want to accomplish in the next five years?**

We are now the world's number one rubber glove manufacturer and intend to maintain our position. In fact, we have set our sights on capturing 30% of the global market by 2020.

In addition, we also aim to become the world's largest nitrile glove manufacturer.

On a personal level, I aim to stay healthy and spend quality time with my family. I also hope to keep spreading the message on the importance of keeping healthy to my staff, friends and business associates.

### **7) Best piece of advice you ever got on your career?**

The best piece of advice I ever received on my career was demonstrated, rather than spoken, to me. During my days at OYL Industries, I had the opportunity to observe my boss closely and his work ethic spoke volumes to me on how I ought to manage my career and eventually, my business.

It was to do things with passion. Everything else will follow suit.

### **8) Most admired business leader? Why?**

Warren Buffett, regarded as the most successful businessman of the 20th century. His perspective is fresh, his wisdom is timeless and his methods are proven in the resounding success of the conglomerate he runs, Berkshire Hathaway.

### **9) How do you stay abreast of issues affecting your industry?**

I maintain a large network of business contacts which I am constantly expanding.

I find it particularly worthwhile to be part of trade associations like the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers where I have had the honour of serving as vice president since 2013, the East Asia Business Council to which I was appointed council member by the minister of international trade and industry in 2011, the Malaysian Association of Rubber Glove

Manufacturers where I was president from 1997 to 1999 and the Malaysian Rubber Export Promotion Council where I was also a board of member.

I also read widely but do so selectively, especially in view of the glut of information available today.

Perhaps most importantly, I believe in going down to the grassroots so I see/hear things first hand.

**10) If you could have an hour with any thought leader in the world, who would it be and why?**

It would be Warren Buffett, one of the world's most successful businessmen, investment guru and self-made billionaire. I aspire to attain his level of success one day and would value the opportunity to get his perspective on how we can take our business to the next level.

**12) What was your biggest failure and how did you learn from it?**

I have made a conscious effort not to dwell on failures as this serves no purpose.

Instead, where an error in judgment or a mistake has been made, I simply quickly learn from it, resolve not to make it again and keep moving forward.

I also try to learn from the mis- takes of others as much as possible.

**12) What was the most outlandish business proposal you have ever heard of?**

There are no outlandish business proposals; just those that are suitable for your business and those that are not! Having said that, in our industry the deals I have come across aren't that unusual.

### **13) The biggest challenge that you've faced?**

There has been more than one big challenge, many of which were experienced building the business. However, if we push through the hard times, remain focused and not give up, success will eventually be ours.

### **14) Malaysia's greatest brand.**

It's hard to pick just one when there are several home-grown brands have done so well for themselves and done our country proud.

Let's just say that I have the greatest admiration for the leaders behind these brands, many of which have gone global, and draw my inspiration from them.

### **15) Blue or red ocean strategy? Or neither? Why?**

I would say a combination of both. Top Glove relentlessly pursues high quality at low cost, which is classic Blue Ocean strategy. However, we also compete in existing market spaces and leverage existing demand, which is more characteristic of the Red Ocean strategy.

Ultimately, I believe that it is not necessary to confine ourselves to a single strategy, but just do what we know works for our unique market based on our years of collective experience.

### **16) A must-read for every business owner/manager is ...**

I highly recommend books authored by Warren Buffet; they are well-written and full of sound advice on business, investment and life. I also enjoy reading books on successfully managed companies such as Samsung and Toyota.

*The Sun Daily*