

Engineer makes it on good ethics

By Susanna Khoo



Market leader ... Lee's successful company is built on a solid foundation of ethical principles.

Dr Nehemiah Lee Chee Hai firmly believes in the importance of upholding integrity and compassion, and he leads the way through his life.

As the managing director and founder of Nehemiah Reinforced Soil Sdn Bhd, Lee strictly enforces honesty as the best policy in all the company's operations.

His company's business cards flash this bold statement: "We pledge to conduct business with integrity. We shall not get involved in any corrupt practice."

Explaining why he decided to start his own company, Lee said he often encountered ethically-compromising situations on the job during his first 15 years as a civil engineer.

According to him, the construction industry is rife with corrupt practices because most projects involve large sums of money and many are tempted to compromise in exchange for personal gains.

Describing bribery as a perversion of justice, Lee says that he gets "very angry with it because it is a very unfair practice. It favours the corrupt person and disadvantages straight and honest people".

Due to the tremendous pressures to conform to the unethical practices, Lee opted to set up his own company instead so that he could keep his business dealings corruption free.

"I started with little experience and little money," recalls Lee, who says he is just a civil engineer, and not really a business man.

Nevertheless, he was driven by the desire to do something of greater significance rather than just climbing the corporate ladder as he had turned 40 at that time.

Being at the helm of the company allows Lee to control how construction projects are chosen and he can also easily draw the line whenever negative influences, such as bribery, arise.

"It may be a small company, but at least I'm the decision maker," he says.

Lee started his company in 1993, offering reinforced soil retaining wall and slopes services.

Its most renowned product, the Nehemiah Wall, is now a common sight at major highways, embankments and development projects around the Klang Valley and beyond.

In fact, the company is now recognised as the market leader for retaining walls in Malaysia.

His business has grown significantly over the last 17 years, with offices now at Kuala Lumpur, Penang, India and Australia.

The company also has a presence in other countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Brunei and Singapore.

Lee says his company's success testifies to the fact that one doesn't need to resort to unethical means to excel and gain acceptance in the industry.

"God in his wonderful way has been very gracious to the company in spite of the challenges and difficulties of doing business without bribing," he says, acknowledging it is divine provision that has seen him through the difficulties he faced due to his anti-corruption stance.

Lee admits that his company also owes much of its success to the good support he received from people whom he had worked with previously.

"There's a certain trust which has been built up from past work experiences," he says.

Presently, Lee manages a team of over 60 staff whom he is "happy to teach them all that I know".

Ultimately, he believes that leadership by example is the best way to pass on wisdom and good practices to his staff.

"Staff learn principles from you when they see you make decisions," he shares.

Lee also strongly advises others who want to make integrity a mainstay of their work life to lay down a clear set of principles as guidelines to live by.

"Make up your mind at the very start to stay true so that you are able to withstand the pressure when it comes," he advises.

Aside from his business, Lee is also busy with community work. He provides free maths tuition to underprivileged children at a community centre in Sg Kampung Kayu Ara.

The centre he volunteers at – Pusat Perkhidmatan Sungai Kayu Ara (PUSKA) – started in 2008 and opens twice a week on Tuesdays and Saturdays. He tutors around 20 to 30 children each time, most of whom are in primary school.

"We need to encourage them to desire to study, to help overcome some of their not-so-good habits, to instill in them the interest and desire to learn," Lee says.

One of the main reasons for volunteering to teach the children is his childhood experience.

"I suffered the pain of poverty and it's not easy to get out of the poverty cycle," he says.

Sharing about his life back then, he says, "I was offered places in top universities in the world, but I didn't have the money to go. I was quite upset with that."

This is why he now feels compelled to help others who are poor and in need.

Another reason for his voluntary community service is that he believes the poor have a special place in God's heart.

"As his follower, I should have a similar compassion for the poor," says Lee.

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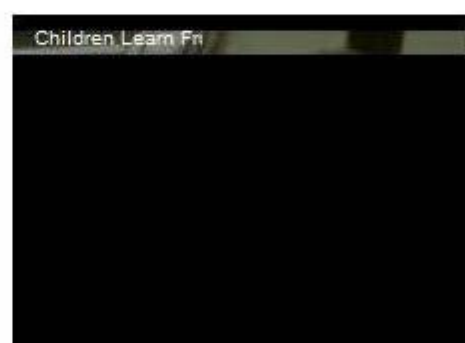


Not all work ... despite his busy work schedule, Lee schedules time to tutor poor children at a community centre.

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