

GAMUDA'S QUIET SUSTAINABILITY REVOLUTION

Gamuda Bhd has been quietly introducing responsible business practices into its very core, particularly the areas that are often overlooked or invisible to the public eye. The two fronts on which it is making a difference are the integration of differently-abled people into its workforce and setting new standards in foreign worker welfare in this country.

Managing director Datuk Lin Yun Ling is somewhat reluctant to trumpet all the initiatives that the group has implemented. These initiatives, he says, are not there merely for compliance with sustainability disclosures or the publicity of the public-listed construction, infrastructure and property giant.

What's the thinking behind these policies? "No big thinking," he says. These policies are not done out of naivety or sheer kindness.

"If you do it out of kindness, it is like trying to fill a lake with a bucket, it is very difficult. Every group/company will do it in a different way. But the tendency is to do it under the corporate social responsibility box, which is less sustainable," Lin says in a rare media interview.

It is a simple case of what he describes as "enlightened self-interest". What the senior management team has to do is convince staff that diversity and inclusiveness are ultimately good for the company.

"Some years back, when there was a push for diversity and inclusiveness, we told the staff: 'You may not see it immediately but over time, you can see that when different races with different abilities work together, the team will be stronger,'" says Lin.

Gamuda has a clear diversity policy to make sure the composition of its workforce cuts across every

diversity trait, such as race, gender, religion, age, socio-economic status and physical ability. Sure, many companies already have in place policies on workforce diversity, but what is less commonplace in Malaysia are hiring practices that look at integrating differently-abled persons into an office environment.

This is where Gamuda's Project DA, which stands for Project Differently Aabled, is charting new ground. It is a structured programme that offers people with autism sustainable employment in the company, along with career development and a learning platform, with a view to improve their quality of life.

Under the programme, differently-abled staff are paired with their Gamuda colleagues who serve as their buddies and supervisors. There is also a full-time support unit for Project DA.

Periodic reviews are carried out to ensure that the differently-abled are faring well and benefiting from the work experience. But the benefits are not just for the differently-abled staff to reap. Lin admits that even he was surprised to hear regular staff involved in Project DA report how the experience has changed their lives for the better, such as by fostering empathy and kindness.

"They actually say, 'These differently-abled people taught me how to open my heart to others. I think for most of us, the moment we leave the house and come to office, we close our hearts and just use our heads,'" he muses.

Project DA now has 16 differently-abled individuals and some 50 volunteer staff to mentor them. Lin says there are definitely plans to grow the intake, having refined the programme over the last



Gamuda's foreign workers enjoying their time off by playing sports and holding friendly tournaments at the CLQs

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three years. There are also plans for an internship programme for differently-abled students to get a taste of working life.

Gamuda is looking to share the knowledge gleaned from running Project DA with other companies that are keen to see how it can be done. While Lin does not want Gamuda to be seen as “lecturing” to other companies, he is aware that one company cannot employ all the differently-abled people out there.

FOREIGN WORKER WELFARE

In another part of its business, Gamuda has inadvertently set new standards — and rather high ones — with its living quarters for thousands of foreign workers toiling on the Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley

mass rapid transit (MRT) project.

Gamuda is one of the project delivery partners of the MRT project. It has invested more than RM100 million to build four Centralised Labour Quarters (CLQs) in Sungai Buloh, Cheras, Kajang and Jalan Cochrane. These quarters are home to about 18,000 foreign workers, who mainly come from Bangladesh, Indonesia and Myanmar.

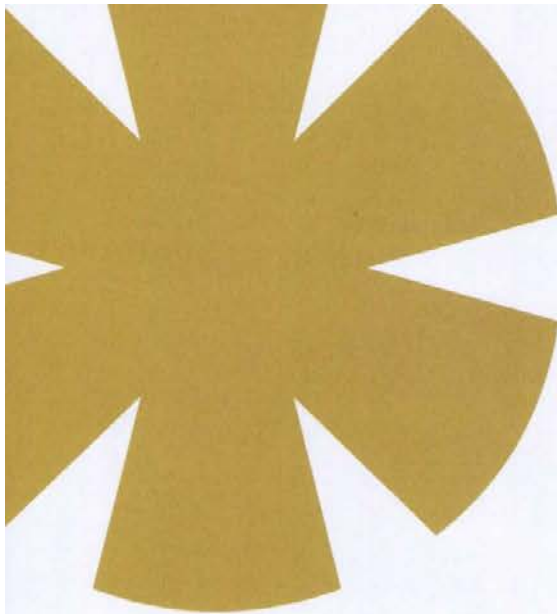
For the most part, living standards for the millions of foreign workers in Malaysia range from ghastly to sub-par. It is not uncommon to see foreign workers living in squatter houses on construction sites.

This is not the first time Gamuda or any other employer has provided foreign workers with decent living quarters. But the company might have outdone itself with its staff quarters for the MRT project.

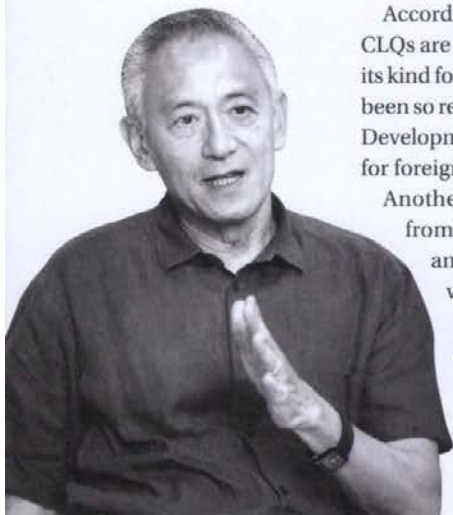
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The CLQs offer clean beds and canteen food, which is tested regularly to ensure it is hygienic and tasty. On-site facilities include self-service laundry equipment, sundry shops, communal kitchens for those who want to whip up a meal and futsal courts for the workers to hold friendly tournaments.

"All these are to make sure that they feel at home ... When workers live in squalid conditions, it does not only hurt them, it also hurts us. When they can't get a good night's rest, how do you expect them to work? When they eat food that is not clean and not well prepared, how will they give their best?" says Lin.

The cost increase is marginal, but the payback is clear, he adds. "The contractors tell me — which is not surprising — that their workers on the MRT project are the most productive because they are well rested," he beams.

According to Gamuda's 2015 annual report, the CLQs are the first accommodation programme of its kind for construction workers in Malaysia. It has been so remarkable that the Construction Industry Development Board is drafting industry guidelines for foreign worker living quarters.

Another area that the company is departing from industry norms is in the area of insurance coverage for its many foreign workers working on the MRT line. According to Lin, when work began on the first MRT alignment four years ago, the insurance payout in the event of death of a foreign worker was only RM30,000. That did not make sense at all to him and his management team.

"We did the maths and found that this



amount was only two years of their savings had they continued to work. So, we pushed for a much higher payout of about RM100,000," says Lin.

The additional insurance premium only came to about RM1 million for the entire project, encompassing thousand of foreign workers. Lin's aim is to have the payout increased to RM150,000.

Besides taking care of the living conditions, there is a strong emphasis on safety training for anyone who is part of Gamuda's construction work. And this is not just for its domestic staff and foreign workforce but also its vendors and sub-contractors involved in the MRT project.

"Unless we do something about it, they will get in harm's way. When you don't have safety training, sooner or later, you are going to have accidents. All

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From left: Nurul and Caryn of Project DA making their choices from the lunch menu

in, there are easily 26,000 to be trained at different levels," says Lin.

"But we are realistic. Even with the training, it will not be enough unless the people — from the CEO down to the contractors, their staff and supervisors — have what we call behavioural changes because this safety culture is not entrenched in the country."

Gamuda takes a "pain and gain" approach to enhance safety on site and reduce accidents. If a lot of pre-emptive measures are implemented, there will be rewards. Conversely, if there are breaches of standards or accidents, there will be heavy fines to pay.

"All these are tackled in a more holistic way. While we cannot be sure that there won't be more accidents, we think this is a vast improvement," says Lin. **By** Chua Sue-Ann

