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First Solar was named the Grand winner for Employer of Choice (Private Sector) at yesterday's Malaysia-International HR Awards 2018.

THE ART OF SUSTAINING PEOPLE

By **JOANNA LEE**
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"When people are financially invested, they want a return. When people are emotionally invested, they want to contribute." – Simon Sinek

HAVING a caring employer that looks into in every aspect makes all the difference. And caring for a family of 3,200 members in one company is no small feat.

First Solar Malaysia Sdn Bhd in Kulim, Kedah, a leading provider of comprehensive photovoltaic (PV) solar energy solutions has set a shining example, garnering it the Malaysian Institute of Human Resource Management (MIHRM) Employer of Choice Award, both in 2015 and 2016.

First Solar is among the seven Gold award winners and subsequently emerged as the Grand Winner for Employer of Choice 2018 (Private Sector category) in the 18th Malaysia-International HR Awards 2018.

Its string of human resources (HR) industry accolades locally and internationally are testaments to its approach in managing its people effectively, emphasising openness and balance.

It experienced phenomenal growth in its first four years of operation, expanding from a single plant in 2008 to six plants by mid-2011, growing from just 100 to 3,200 in that span of time also meant much changes and challenges. How do you sustain growth this size in a rapidly shifting environment of high turnovers? How does a sustainable energy company sustain its people?

First Solar Malaysia human resources director Masliza Mansor shared some of their secret components that has led to their current success to date.

A COMPANY GROWS ONLY AS BIG AS ITS PEOPLE

"Riding from the thought that 'everyone has a chance to learn if one is willing to learn', learning and development opportunities are made available extensively and equally to all associates, regardless of levels and positions," Masliza tells us.

Over the past seven years, First Solar has spent a total of RM35mil in training and development initiatives be in the form of formal education, short courses and customised programmes.

"In 2017, we spent 6.5% of our annual base salary on associates' development. Continuous learning and upskilling enable the increase in workforce competency and capability, creating opportunities for career progression. Over the past 10 years, about 70% of our associates has experienced career progression at First Solar," she says.

In fact, First Solar Malaysia has successfully transitioned the ratio of job composition profile of white collar associates (professionals to senior leadership) to increase from 38% (2008) to 78% (2018) and blue collar associates (operator) has reduced from 62% (2008) to 22% (2018).

Out of its training to improve functional and technical development, they're able to consolidate and redesign job design compositions to be more effective to reduce redundancy and improve productivity.

"These development strategies are complemented with a right structure of performance and talent management and reward structure that we have in place. This has proven to be an excellent formula for us as our consistent average annualised retention rate is at 91% since 2013," Masliza adds.



First Solar's HR team

STOKING THE HEARTH OF THE COMPANY

First Solar invests in its leaders and strives to create a culture where 'interaction is seamless vertically, horizontally and diagonally', coming together as 1 Team 1 Goal 1 First Solar.

There seems to be a drive to push leaders to stretch their capabilities beyond their comfort zones. Going wide, First Solar's HR has a cross-functional training committee while going deep, they've created a subject matter experts development programme as well.

In addition, First Solar also grooms its leaders to be involved as internal trainers and facilitators with an emphasis on fostering team bonding, building trust and respect.

HELPING EMPLOYEES STRIKE A BALANCE

Another factor that drives First Solar as a 'Great Place to Work' is that they enable their associates to flourish in all their roles, not just work.

"We have given back to the community through active involvement in various corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes and humanitarian initiatives through 82,200 volunteer hours, 115KW of PV Module Donation and commendable value of donation-in-kind to needy organisations, communities, non-governmental organisations, hospitals, homes and schools," she added.

This is besides practising an equal benefits strategy where all their associates receive the same benefits coverage. Inculcating diversity and inclusion is also on their agenda with programmes like Women@First Solar, Modified Work Programme and their internship programme.

THE REWARDS OF CARING FOR EMPLOYEES' HEALTH

One of the challenges faced in every organisation is a high rate of medical and health issues. Poor health equals reduced productivity with the burden of medical costs. Prior to 2013, its Kulim facility faced an upward trend in medical insurance claims, a ratio which went over 100%. They also saw more high-risk medical cases and an increase in insurance premiums due to poor health self-care.

First Solar's HR went all out to tackle this. They designed and introduced the 'Wellness for Life' campaign which aimed to change the culture and mindsets at that time. Associates get to choose to join fun activities such as weekly zumba and gym sessions and collect points from these activities.

They then exchange these points for quarterly prizes. Other activities include healthy eating campaign which is aimed at increasing people's intake of fruits and vegetables, fun runs and fun rides, as well as futsal, netball and badminton.

The result was a decrease in its medical



Datuk P'ng Soo Hong, vice president and managing director of manufacturing operations

insurance claims; hence, successfully sustained at 'market healthy range' for 5 consecutive years already. This initiative won them the Tigers Golden Globe Award in 2017 for organisation with innovative HR practices, International SOS Foundation 2018 Duty of Care Awards – 'Sustainability Category' and Malaysia HR Award 2017 HR Best Practices Award (Gold).

CHALLENGING ITS PEOPLE TO DEVELOP AGILITY

Being in a highly volatile solar market environment, to move up to the next level one must continue to have a thirst for knowledge, be inquisitive by keeping oneself current and abreast of the new technologies in this ever-changing and challenging environment and to never stop being hungry for success.

The human propensity to be resistant to change is one of the challenges First Solar also encounters, especially when it comes to implementing changes with each initiative.

Datuk P'ng Soo Hong, First Solar Malaysia's vice president and managing director of manufacturing operations offered his insights on agility: "We have recorded significant successes and experienced 10 years of excellence in our operations, however it is imperative to never be complacent as the past glory does not determine our future success."

"We constantly drive home the message of the need to learn, unlearn and relearn. Learning agility is the key to unlocking our 'change proficiency' and succeeding in an uncertain and constantly evolving environment," Masliza reiterates.

USING DATA ANALYTICS FOR SMARTER DECISIONS

First Solar is heeding its own advice in constantly learning as much as it can about its people. Here's where they leverage on technology to harness its magic in managing a large, growing workforce.

"We've been growing at a rapid pace and our success has always been due to

FIRST SOLAR MALAYSIA: 10 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE IN THE MAKING

Industry Recognitions

1. Prime Minister's Hibiscus Awards 2014/2015 for Exceptional Achievement in Environmental Performance
2. Global Leadership Award 2015 - Excellence in Renewable Energy Manufacturing Sector
3. Malaysia HR Awards 2015 & 2016 - Employer of Choice
4. Aon Best Employers Malaysia 2016 for Generation Y
5. National Occupational Safety & Health Awards 2016 for Electrical and Electronics Category
6. Industry Excellence Award 2017 - Kedah Chief Minister Special Excellence Award
7. HR Excellence Award 2017 - Excellence in Workplace Wellbeing
8. Malaysia HR Award 2017 - HR Best Practices Award
9. International SOS Foundation 2018 Duty of Care Awards - Sustainability Honorable Mention
10. HR Excellence Award 2018 - Excellence in HR Change Management

our people," Masliza says. "So, data analytics is applied in many areas of our business and we have started having people analytics strategy to make First Solar a better place to work.

"Through data analytics, we find meaningful patterns that could help us make smart business decisions that lead to a significant impact on performance that has helped shape our manpower planning, training and development strategy, engagement and retention strategy, sustainability initiatives and communications strategy," she continued.

ENGAGING THE HEART AND MIND

Ultimately, an organisation is where people spend a whole lot of time building their careers and lives. So, how would First Solar like to be seen as an employer?

"We would like to be perceived as an employer with a harmonised balance between the work and its people. That we continuously strived to enable our workforce to have balance between work and personal responsibilities, which strengthens their loyalty and productivity," Masliza tells us.

P'ng spoke of the vital role that the HR team plays in First Solar's people and growth: "As the organisation continues to progress and move towards the Industry 4.0 era, I support and am confident that the HR team is able to match the organisation's momentum and continue to operate as an independent body, free from the 'control' of the management. This will enable HR to be an active catalyst to both the organisation and the people," he said.

"Ultimately, HR needs to 'be relevant and (be) the enabling partner' (their internal HR slogan) rather than being a roadblock of bureaucracy, and continue to be a catalyst of change," Masliza said.

Part of the challenge is to continuously garner the commitment, integrity and passion of the people in the ever evolving environment where change is the only constant.

As Masliza concludes: "We engage the heart through emotional commitment and engage the mind through intellectual commitment".

■ First Solar Malaysia Sdn Bhd has developed, financed, engineered, constructed, and currently operates many of the world's largest grid-connected PV power plants. Visit firstsolar.com to find out more.