

## ROCK STEADY

*Lim Fung Chee is an entrepreneur with staying power.*

*We first make our habits, and then our habits make us. – Dryden*

FOR LIM FUNG CHEE, 53, chief executive officer and group managing director of Kumpulan Emas Berhad (KEB), reading is a life-long passion. Says Lim, 'I can't go to sleep without a book, no matter how late it is.' But while he reads a great deal, he hesitates to consider himself as a widely read person.

'My reading is usually confined to self-improvement books and articles relating to current affairs, economics, politics, management practices and philosophies,' says Lim. 'I've not touched a novel for a very long time. So you see, I'm not much of a romantic.'

It doesn't seem to hurt.

Lim grew up in Kuala Lumpur with no special advantages. He was, well, just another boy. His father was a hotel cashier and he left school at 17. But the drive to succeed was unmistakable. 'I was always looking for a break that would enable me to own my own business,' Lim recalls.

It took awhile.

His climb to the top of the corporate ladder began with a trainee executive position at the Malaysian Estate Agencies Group Limited (MEAGL). He stayed there for nine years, rising steadily through the rank and file. By the time he left MEAGL to join plantation firm Kuala Lumpur-Kepong (KLK), Lim was deputy group general manager.

At KLK, young Lim was groomed by rubber tycoon Tan Sri Lee Loy Seng himself. Hard work, smart work and sheer determination finally paid off for Lim when he clinched the position of general manager at KLK. Then came his big break.

Together with a couple of close friends (one of whom is Lim Chan Lok, the current managing director for Salcon Engineering Sdn Bhd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of KEB) and approximately 60,000 rgt, they took command of a small firm, Kumpulan Emas, which was engaged in engineering consultancy, plantations and financial services.

That was then. KEB's capital base has since multiplied more than a hundred fold! And KEB proved its staying power by enduring the 1985/86 recession without going insolvent.

The CEO and his company. One is a reflection of the other. In corporate circles, Lim has been known to be a conservative and shrewd businessman. Says an associate, 'He's very straight but sharp. He also has a strong mind and is both an entrepreneur and a corporate man.'

Described as 'a good man to work with' by his associates, Lim is said to be free of 'shady stuff'. Says the associate, 'He really believes in doing business in its true sense; not just juggling numbers on paper.' Lim was once quoted as saying, "We believe in nurturing private companies to realise their full potential instead of making big corporate manoeuvres.'

The CEO says he still holds that view: 'I believe in building and expanding through lateral growth, which is quite distinct from corporate manoeuvring.' Nevertheless, he agrees that good corporate moves are an essential part of business expansion.

Lim believes that the two most important ingredients for the success of a good corporation are good leadership, and sound and enlightened management. Says Lim, 'No matter how effective a corporate strategic plan is, without these two elements, it will be extremely difficult to realise the plan. And even if it's realised, it will wither away in time.'

In a competitive business environment, a CEO's ability to sustain the business is critical to the survival of a corporation. Associates close to Lim say he is able to do both – to create and sustain. Says one, 'The training he had at KLK provided him with the nose for business and the staying power to carry it through.'

His skills have not gone unnoticed. Having been a member of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) for some 13 years, Lim had rubbed shoulders with many personalities in the Chinese community. As a result, Lim was asked by MCA president Datuk Seri Lim Liong Sik 'to help out' at Kojadi and Matang Holdings Bhd, a company inspired by the MCA with interest in plantations and finance.

Kojadi, a deposit-taking co-operative was in the rut of a nation-wide co-operative brouhaha a few years back, but Lim says it is 'doing fine' now. There is nothing wrong with Kojadi or Matang today. Lim is basically 'seconded' to provide the 'sharper eye' for business. However, he declines to be regarded as a 'corporate doctor'. And he maintains that he is not cut out for politics. The furthest he went was to be the head of the MCA branch in Taman Tun Dr Ismail.

He has travelled extensively and met a lot of people both for business and pleasure. And he has this to say, 'I have always been inspired by great leaders who are gutsy entrepreneurs and visionaries; people who are able to influence and inspire the confidence of others. Personally, I have great admiration for personalities like Tun Ismail Ali, Tan Sri Azman Hashim, Tan Sri Robert Kuok and Datuk Malek Merican.'

Lim leads a quiet life outside the corporate world. His wife was formerly with the Inland Revenue Department, and he has two daughters. The elder is a lawyer while the younger one is still in Britain reading law.

Hard-nosed corporate man that he is, Lim has managed to find the delicate balance between the pressures of family and corporation. He stopped playing golf to spend weekends with his family.