

# **A Recipe for Effective Leadership**

*An interview with a man whose decisions  
may affect your life*

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This article is about a man whose decisions may already have had an impact on your life. Or the life of one of your friends or relatives. And, as time goes on, his impact on Malaysian society will multiply. Mr Lee Weng Keng has a lot of responsibility resting on his shoulders. He is the Chief Executive Officer of Sunway Group's Education and Healthcare Division. In this capacity, he has direct responsibility over three dynamic and growing institutions in Malaysia - Sunway University College, Monash University Malaysia and Sunway Medical Centre.

**Key ingredients... self awareness, core values and a Leadership Compass**

I have had the pleasure and privilege of working with Mr Lee. My impressions are that he is a humble and unassuming man. He prefers to be low key rather than high profile, even in his own organisations. He comes across as a very calm person who listens intently before he speaks. I wanted to learn how he maintains his calm demeanour despite his many responsibilities. I found that the answer lay in a combination of a high level of self awareness, a strong set of core values and a “Leadership Compass” – the key principles that guide Mr Lee’s leadership behaviours.

Let’s do a quick tour of Mr Lee’s career. He started out as a teacher. After 4 years, he moved to a local Malaysian company. By the age of 30, Mr Lee had 50 people working under him. His next career move was to have a big impact on his life. Mr Lee joined a multinational company. He was with this company for 18 years before joining the Sunway Group. In his early days with the Sunway Group, Mr Lee made a name for himself by turning around a manufacturing company from the brink of failure to being one of the profit stars in the Sunway Group. He was rewarded by being appointed as Director of Sunway College in 1996. Another key milestone in Mr Lee’s career was to start up Malaysia’s first foreign university branch campus - Monash University Malaysia in 1998. Mr Lee has held his current position for the last 8 years.

**Self awareness – a key to effective leadership**

So, let’s start with why Mr Lee does not seem to be a stressed, burnt-out senior executive. The short answer lies in two words - self awareness. Mr Lee knows his strengths and works off them. “You need to know yourself - your strengths and your weaknesses. I focus on where I can add most value. I may be responsible for lots of things, but stay out of the way where I can’t add value,” he said.

Mr Lee continued, “You have to ask yourself, which are the areas where you can make a difference. People think that if they are in charge of a department, everything has to come through them. I have had someone who took over a department who was stressed to death. I told him that he felt stressed because he is responsible and he felt he must know and be involved in everything. That is not true. It’s wrong.”

**Focus on where you can add the most value**

**Get out of the way and trust your people to get on with the job**

### **Trust and empower your people**

Empowerment plays a major role in Mr Lee's management style. "I have three big areas and 2000 people; I can't run from this. But it's impossible for me to cover all the ground. I have to know which are the areas I should focus on. I make sure that the people under me understand that they are free to make decisions. Even if they make a mistake, it's not a problem."

A key to effective leadership is the ability to get out of the way and to trust your people to get on with the job. Mr Lee has a simple formula. "I make sure people understand they are free to make a decision. If they feel comfortable, then they can go and make decisions. If the issue is really important, then they will let me know. If they feel they want to consult with me, then my door is always open," he said.

### **Leverage off your strengths**

So what are Mr Lee's strengths? "I am strong in conceptual skills. I am strategic in my thinking. So many things are happening with lots of variables. I have the ability to scan the variables and come to a conclusion on what works and what does not work. PepsiCo's CEO spoke about "strategic acuity". This is my strength."

Daniel Pink's book, "A Whole New Mind" speaks of the rising importance of the right brain in business. He introduced 6 key senses that leaders should possess. One of these is what he calls "Symphony." This is the ability to integrate information, to construct the whole from the parts. My discussions with senior managers who work with Mr Lee indicate that he certainly has this right brain ability.

There is another key skill that Mr Lee brings to the table – the ability to size up ideas and proposals and to manage risks. "It's about thinking how to take the business forward. I am quick with numbers. I studied economics and business, specialising in statistics. Risk management is always at the top of my mind. I think of the probability of success and the probability of failure. If it's a big risk, it better give you a very big return. If it's a small risk, then the decision is easy to make. If people give me a proposal, I think of what is the probability of it being true, of it working. I will intuitively think whether it is likely to succeed or not," he said.

**Work hard  
and  
reciprocate  
kindness to  
those who  
help you**

### **Factors that have had an impact on Mr Lee as a person and as a leader**

Mr Lee's upbringing shaped his values. And then, his time in a multinational company shaped his thoughts on leadership.

Mr Lee came from a humble background. As a child, it was a case of, "Be seen, but not heard." As a result, he developed and honed the skills of being a keen observer of people and events, and a very good listener. Mr Lee's father had a major impact on his value system. His father taught him the values of hard work, reciprocation of kindness to those who help you, keeping of promises and being loyal to those who help you. "Loyalty to the company is old fashioned. It's automatic to me," he said.

Mr Lee's 18 years with an American multinational had a major impact on his leadership style. "There was a lot of emphasis on being open when dealing with issues. The culture was that we have to face up to the issues, be open with your people and articulate the issues clearly," he said. "Presentation is a part and parcel of building a career in a multinational - presentations about your strategy, the future, your analysis. This honed his thinking skills and ability to articulate issues clearly," he continued.

In his time with this company, Mr Lee observed how leaders managed the business. He formed opinions on what worked and what was not that successful.

"I saw what they did and learned some good things and thought that other things didn't make sense. I didn't follow blindly," he said.

For example, directness, even aggressiveness, was a part of the multinational company's culture. "The company valued people who were dynamic and could 'kick ass'. There was an attitude of, 'I don't give a damn what you do, just give me the results.' I saw a lot of people acting like this," he said. "Some executives were doing very well even though they were very rude and used four letter words. They got the job done. One time, engineers in the quality department were meeting with the manufacturing department. After a heated disagreement, the Head said, 'Get out of my department!' Mr Lee did not think that this made sense. "How can quality problems be resolved when the quality people are not welcome?" he asked himself.

**70% of  
people meet  
job  
requirements  
. 20% go  
above that  
and 5% are  
stars.**

Another example relates to performance reviews. “In the 1970s, they would say that your performance review must follow the bell curve. Some of your people will be above average and half below average. Then there would be 10% who are outstanding, 40% above average, 45% below average and 5% weak. They would give a bonus and increment based on this. I had a lot of problems with this. Straight away you have to divide people into two halves. Why would people want to be below average? If they are below average, you will have a hard time dealing with them. Rating 50% of your people as below average is not good,” he said.

Mr Lee’s view is that 70% of people are in the centre. These people are meeting job requirements and are doing a solid job. And then there is the 10-20% who are above the 70%. And then, above that, you have 5% who are true stars. “The good people are solid and happy to be there. The talent - you have to nurture and develop. The stars - you have to recognise them. People are happy with that,” he said. “At the other end, there is the 5% or less who are not pulling their weight. You have to confront this group. It may be 1% of your people. You must make an effort to identify these,” he said.

### **Mr Lee’s Management Style**

I asked Mr Lee to describe his management style. “It’s not about having an autocratic style or democratic style. When I am in a position, I say, ‘What is the role that I need to play?’ I am a situational leader. I don’t believe in treating everyone equally. How can you treat people equally? You have people who work hard and loyal. When they make a mistake do you scold them? Compare this to someone who makes mistakes often. If two people make the same mistake, you will be harder on the one who makes more mistakes,” he said.

“I play a role. When I am at home with my family I am different. I take a different role when I talk to my children. I can be a different person at work. When I am in the company, I am serious typically. The right and wrong is important. I am strict. For example, when handling company money, the line is clear. But when it comes to my personal money, I am generous. If a family member needs some help, I will give help. If they cannot pay me, it’s okay.”

Listen,  
listen,  
listen...

### **Leaders as listeners**

Mr Lee's senior managers confirm that he is a very good listener. One manager said that she could be speaking to Mr Lee for an hour and then he would summarise the key points and then draw it all together. "I listen to people before I make decisions. But when the decisions need to be made, I make them fast. I don't consult too many people. If I am sure, then I will be quite dominant and say, 'Let's go.' If I face resistance, I listen and ask why. I ask, 'Why do people resist?' and 'Who resists?' If people who I respect resist, then I have no difficulty in changing my mind," he said.

### **Never say "it can't be done"**

"When I first joined Sunway, we had a company that was bleeding to death. Everyone was losing money. I analysed the company and said that there was no hope. Two weeks later, they appointed me as GM to lead it! It was now my baby."

"We turned it around after 2 years. It became one of the most profitable companies in the Group. We achieved this through operations management, quality management, and common sense marketing. We were able to bring the cost down from RM1000 a piece to 700 and finally down to 550. When we started to move it down to 700, we made money. When we brought it down to 550, we made very good money. One lesson from this is never say die, never say it's impossible," he said.

### **Mr Lee's Leadership Compass**

I asked Mr Lee to talk about the principles that guide his leadership behaviour. After listening to him, it was clear that he operates by a well defined Leadership Compass. The points on his Leadership Compass can be summarized by quotes from Mr Lee as follows:

1. **Leadership by example.** "If policies are good enough for the people, then they are good enough for me. There should be one standard for all." (I personally witnessed this when I visited Sunway University College. It was during the time of the H1N1 scare. Mr Lee had just returned from the US and wore a face-mask for a week after his return. The rule was that you had to wear a face mask for a week if you had just returned to Malaysia from certain countries. There were no exceptions to the face-mask rule – even for the CEO!)

2. **Win-win.** “I will not do business that does not have a win-win outcome. When I come to a situation, I want both parties to win.
3. **Fair play.** “I must feel that it is fair. It’s difficult for me to do something if it is not fair to stakeholders. Sometimes, it’s a bit difficult. I have been lucky that I have been able to live by that principle.
4. **Leverage off people’s strengths.** “Develop them, give them the opportunities. I ask, ‘What is the person’s strength? How can I put them in a job to optimize their strength?’ We need to have the right job for the right people.
5. **Feedback –** “I am a one minute manager. I have no difficulty in telling people that they have done a good job. A quick pat on the back.”
6. **Visibility:** “I don’t like to sit in the office too much. I talk to people and observe what is going on and assess the situation.”
7. **Profile:** “I prefer to be not too high profile. Where I need to be seen, I do it. There are CEO communications twice a year. Some of my leaders like to be seen. For me, it doesn’t matter. I have management meetings 3-4 times a year, plus EXCO (Senior Management) meetings weekly.”
8. **Integrator.** “Sometimes, people have conflicting priorities and become emotional. For example, in Pre–University, we have units representing Australia, Canada and A levels – and they all go to the same market. They are fighting for the same set of students. My way of looking at it is that I don’t over-emphasise individual program numbers. I don’t beat them to death. I want to see evidence of strategy and plan to leverage and plan to sell on each unit’s own uniqueness. But I say “Don’t back-stab on your colleague’s program.” This is a no-no. When we all win, we all get a bonus. We all win in total. We all get recognized. This is the environment that we get when we all win. Look at people who look after themselves, then look at their lives. They are miserable. I emphasise that we are all winning together.”

## Challenges of leadership

I asked Mr Lee about the challenges of leadership in Malaysia. He indicated that leading diversity is a challenge. “Diversity is our strength, but diversity is a big issue for leadership and management. How do you get them to see the benefits of their diversity? It’s compounded by racial interests. How do you leverage that to your advantage? You have to exploit that as strength and manage the conflict from the differences,” he said.

## So what lies ahead?

I concluded the interview by asking Mr Lee about the opportunities that lie ahead. Mr Lee gave a focused response. “The opportunities are clear-cut – to build a top class institution. To make this place prosper. It will be good for Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah and good for the stakeholders. The opportunity is to make this a success. There is a lot to do to make this happen...” No doubt, with his self awareness and values as his foundation, and operating by his Leadership Compass, Mr Lee will continue to lead his team to growth and success. Until next month.

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