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*PUSHING
PAST HIS
COMFORT
ZONE*

President and Chairman of ExxonMobil in Malaysia, See Kok Yew, shares his thoughts on the growth of the local oil and gas industry, the company's priorities for the next few years, and why it's important to view new challenges as opportunities. *By Sreerema Banoo*

See Kok Yew – or SKY, as he's better known to friends and colleagues – subscribes to the belief that the only way to grow and develop both professionally and personally is to take on new challenges and roles that force you out of your comfort zone. It's a philosophy that's taken him to where he is today – the helm of ExxonMobil's operations in Malaysia.

"When we are put in new and challenging situations, my belief is if you don't step out of your comfort zone and test yourself, you'll never know how good you can be ... if you remain within the confines of your comfort zone you're not growing, you're not developing, you're just doing the same thing," he says.

Judging by the roles he's taken on throughout his more-than-two-decade career at ExxonMobil, one cannot accuse SKY of not pushing the boundaries.

In February this year, he was appointed the President of ExxonMobil Exploration and Production Malaysia Inc. (EMEPMI) and Chairman of the ExxonMobil Subsidiaries in Malaysia – returning to Malaysia after over a decade in the US where he served in a variety of senior management roles.

A civil and structural engineering graduate from the University of Malaya, SKY began his career with EMEPMI in 1990 and held various technical, supervisory and management positions in Kerteh, Terengganu and KL.

In 2003, he was assigned to ExxonMobil Production Company in Houston, Texas, as Regional Advisor to the Vice President for Asia Pacific/Middle East. Two years later, he was appointed the Operations Manager for the Gulf of Mexico assets in ExxonMobil US Production. In 2007, SKY moved to the Exxon Mobil Corporation head office in Irving, Texas to become the Senior Upstream Advisor to the Corporate Senior Vice President.

After another two years, he returned to Houston to assume the post of the US Production Manager where he was responsible for ExxonMobil Production Company assets in the Gulf of Mexico, Mobile Bay, Alabama, offshore California, the Rockies in Wyoming and Colorado, and onshore assets in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas.

Although SKY credits his career rise to good fortune and opportunities that have helped him grow and prepare for what is certainly a career-defining role, his strong work ethic and philosophy of embracing challenges have also been pivotal.

The youngest of five siblings, SKY – who was born and bred in Penang – comes from a modest, if not humble background, and learnt from a young age the importance of hard work. His parents, who left school at a young age, had a small laundry business, which he describes as backbreaking work. "By watching them, I recognised that there is no short cut to success, it takes hard work."



Presentation of safety awards to employees – Safety Award POT – Grand Winner Tapis B team

Although those boyhood observations shaped his work ethic, it wasn't until he started working at ExxonMobil and began taking on new roles and challenges that SKY really came into his own.

"This is a great company to work for – I've enjoyed every single assignment that I've had ... they have always come with their fair share of challenges but it's through these experiences that I've been able to grow. I believe that taking on new roles and challenges gets you out of your comfort zone, and tests your ability, and over the years I have been fortunate to have these opportunities," he says.

On the home front, his wife Susie and his children – daughter Zhi-Syuen and son Zhi-Hahn – have been tremendously supportive. "My wife manages all the things that I don't when I am work and that's been a great support," he says.

Giving his best

The 48-year-old describes the news of his current appointment as "an incredible feeling" for this was a role he had not expected when he began his career at the oil and gas company.

"When you first start working, what's on your mind is to work hard, do your best ... the usual expectations. As I reflect on my career, I realise that I have grown and developed tremendously ... over the years as I gained more experience with the company, it has given me more confidence to lead the organisation and make more difficult decisions," he says.

Although he recognises its significance, he dismisses the idea that there is an added burden attached to being the first Malaysian to helm ExxonMobil's operations in Malaysia.

"I am excited and proud to be the first Malaysian to play this role. I'm sure I'm not going to be the last ... it gives good encouragement for our local workforce to see that a Malaysian can occupy this position. As to whether it's an added burden or not, you know, I have always approached my responsibilities in the same way regardless of the position and that's to always give my best.

"If I am able to fulfil that, then everything else will take care of itself ... what's important is that I do my job to the best of my abilities."

Giving one's best hinges on harnessing the lessons learnt over the years, and this is true for SKY. Of particular importance, he says, is having a strong grasp of the fundamentals. "We cut our teeth on the engineering and operations aspects of the business, and that includes the basics of managing safety of our people, managing facility integrity and risk of operations, maximising production from the fields as well as keeping cost under control," he says.

"These are the fundamentals that one had to have to progress ... it is key, and even today I rely on those experiences to help guide me in discussions and decision making," he says.

The experience of managing and leading teams – from small teams to large organisations with thousands under him – has also been invaluable. “These are the building blocks gained over the years that have prepared me for this role,” he says.

Priorities of the job

SKY is cognisant of the responsibilities and priorities of the job. “There is no doubt in my mind that the priority of leading the organisation is ensuring the safety of the people who are working with us every single day,” he says, adding that the importance of safety is a key lesson learnt over the years. “There is risk in our business, you have to be aware of what they are and manage them accordingly. I have seen and experienced enough safety incidences to suggest that we should never be complacent when it comes to safety. We’re only as good as today ... tomorrow is a new day altogether and we have to always be on the alert.”

Another priority area is maximising the value of its existing assets. “We have put in a lot of investments over the years and we want to ensure we are maximising the reliability and the production of oil and gas for the benefit of the country by working with PETRONAS as well as our business partners,” he says, adding that ExxonMobil plays a critical role in Malaysia’s energy sector, supplying half of Peninsular Malaysia’s natural gas needs. “We need to ensure high reliability so that natural gas can be supplied uninterrupted to the power plants and the industries,” he adds.

Related to this, he adds, is the issue of cost efficiency. “Cost efficiency in any business is crucial, more so now with oil price at the level that it is, but we don’t talk about cost efficiency just because oil prices are low. It is a core focus on any given day. Cost efficiency entails making sure that we look at how we can do things more cost effectively by asking ‘Why? Why now? Why this way?’” These, he says, are some of the questions he discusses with his team.

For one who has benefitted from the company’s focus on training and development, it’s unsurprising that talent development is a high priority area. “We have tremendous talent within the organisation so we have to ensure that we offer them the opportunities to develop and put them in the right assignments so that they have the ability to improve and be able to fulfil their potential,” he says.

SKY is proud of the fact that the majority of the 2,000-strong team in Malaysia comprises local talent. “When we started our upstream operations here back in the 1970s, we had about 300 people, of which 50 percent were expats. Today 95 percent of our workforce are locals and that’s the result of our focus and attention in developing local capability, providing the training and opportunities to help them reach their full potential,” he says, adding that there are some 80 Malaysians who are employed at various ExxonMobil locations around the world.

The US Ambassador to Malaysia, His Excellency Joseph Yun, visits ExxonMobil’s new Tapis R platform



Exciting time to be in Malaysia

In his new role now for 10 months, SKY is pleased and excited to be back in Malaysia, not the least because of the changes and developments in the local oil and gas scene.

“There are a lot more capable local companies now in the industry, whether they are PSC contractors or service providers, and it’s good to see that. For example, when I worked in Kerteh some 20-plus years ago, it was a small town and really there weren’t a whole lot of things to do other than office and home. Today there are a lot of developments, new gas and chemical plants, power plants and a thriving town...so it’s good to see that and we’re pleased to have contributed and being part of that development,” he says.

It is, he concedes, an exciting time to be back in the industry in Malaysia. “The industry is very active, there have been new developments in East Malaysia, and we’ve just completed major investments and projects of our own offshore Terengganu,” he adds.

In February this year, ExxonMobil announced the start of natural gas production at the Damar field off the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The Damar start-up follows the Telok gas development, which began production in March 2013. More recently ExxonMobil also announced the successful installation and start up of the Tapis R offshore platform, a key component of the Tapis Enhanced Oil Recovery (EOR) project.

Stressing the importance of its partnership with PETRONAS, SKY says ExxonMobil is proud of the relationship that’s been fostered through the years, and is excited to be part of the evolving oil and gas landscape. “The industry is thriving, and on top of that PETRONAS is driving initiatives to make Malaysia the oil and gas services hub for the region. And Malaysia certainly has the potential ... so these are some pretty exciting times for the industry,” he says.

As for the man himself, SKY says he still has “some ways to go before I reach retirement age”. And until then, he hopes that he will be able to continue to contribute to the company. “I enjoy my work and will continue to do the best I can every single day, and that’s what I have been doing ever since I joined the company.”



SKY at the presentation of ExxonMobil's support for two math and science programmes (International Math Olympiad and the National Science Challenge) with the Minister of Education



Interacting with students at the ExxonMobil sponsored English theme Park in Kuala Terengganu



On holiday in Ho Chi Minh City with his family