





THE IDEALIST

Maqbool Ali Salman, founder and managing director of the Al Hassan Group, says there are no short cuts to success. By Ramya Dilipkumar

While entering the offices of Al Hassan Group, one cannot help but notice a direct correlation between the wisdom quotes that flashes on the television screen in the lobby and its founder and managing director Maqbool Ali Salman who is an avid reader of philosophy. "I want to keep my employees constantly motivated and encourage them to think out of the box first thing in the morning on how to make things easier and simpler," says Salman. But this is not a lesson for his employees alone. Self-motivation is also a key element for success, according to this veteran, who starts his day by reading two to three inspirational quotes. "They always motivate me and trigger some kind of passion in me. It also helps me envision something creative and set high goals. I don't simply pick up a pen first thing in the morning and prepare a today's list," says Salman. In fact the high goals that Salman set for

himself, which at one point envisioned his father's small shop becoming a Fortune 500 company, coupled with his constant thirst for knowledge resulted in the evolution of the prominent business conglomerate known as Al Hassan Group in Oman with a mammoth presence in contracting, trading and manufacturing. Today, the multi-million rial group comprises 11 companies and has also moved into Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Qatar. Al Hassan also has a joint venture with India based Asian Paints Group for manufacturing paints under the name Berger Paints Oman.

"In life, there are no short cuts to realising your ambition and success. You need not be highly educated to run a business. But you have to be very street smart and constantly educate yourself when it comes to business practices. One should also look at being a student to a wise man," says Salman. True to this

statement, Salman reveals that besides the numerous courses and seminars that he constantly participated in, during his interactions with prominent businessmen over the years, he sat down with each of them to learn about the road to their success.

Having started his empire from humble beginnings, Salman says it was easy to maintain humility and a democratic style of leadership, instead of losing himself to the success in the corporate world. He admits that managers at his firm have objected to his gentle demeanor when it comes to tough decisions regarding employees, so Salman decided to leave these decisions to his managers, advising them to ensure fairness.

But this soft-spoken man's instincts in business are not to be underestimated. "There are tense situations when you run a business – it can be the market movement or a transaction that might have gone wrong. Or a difficult decision needs to be made where you have to fight it out with somebody. But one thing that has always helped is that I am a very positive person."

Crafting success

Salman's lessons in the business world began as a child when his father established a small shop in Muttrah. His ambition was to always become a businessman. "When I saw executives sitting in a cabin, I promised myself that one day I would have a cabin too – a small one with a desk and a simple enclosure – as this was the quintessential businessman in my eyes," reveals Salman.

In 1975, after graduating from the Karachi University majoring in economics, Salman began working at PDO. During this time he had learnt some electrical work and came across a trader with a crate of ceiling fans, who was unable to make a sale at the Muttrah souq. Salman remembers buying the fans from the trader at cost price and hunting for wires and switches thereafter. "I did not know much about the electrical business at that time," admits Salman. But for a man who believed in self-education, learning about the sector and its related companies through magazines and exhibitions was not an impossible feat.

Within three years, the business saw a marked increase in profits and the shop was well known in Muttrah. But when the trader who had sold him the fans returned and wanted to take the business back, Salman



surrendered the shop to him. "I did not want to keep something that wasn't mine." He says the trader was amazed that he returned the thriving shop without any protest. Salman's shop was soon relocated to Hamriya as a much smaller establishment. During this time he realised that his job at the PDO made it difficult for him to devote much time for his own business. In 1978, Salman decided to resign and focus on the family business. While he does not regret this decision today, he admits that he was hesitant at that time.

"But I reminded myself that I was young, with not many commitments and was a graduate. Those days, not many had a degree, so I was convinced that if my firm did not take off in a successful manner, I could get a new job." Salman recalls that his first day at his company after quitting PDO was one of the most memorable ones in the years to follow. "I went for an auction of electrical goods. There I was able to get a deal worth my entire year's salary. After that there was no looking back." Al Hassan Group saw a



Mohammed Ali Juma
CEO, Vision Securities

Mohammed Ali Juma has known Salman in the professional sphere and as a personal acquaintance since 1998. He fondly recalls how the veteran was one of his first clients when Vision began operating in the sultanate. “He is one of the most ethical people I know when it comes to business and is always very supportive of helping young entrepreneurs in the society.” According to him, there are five attributes that can best describe Salman’s overall personality – ethics, integrity, team work, persistence and self motivation. “He is extremely transparent when it comes to business dealings. He also believes in living a simple life and is capable of handling any challenge in the most relaxed and calm manner. He does his homework on time and challenges people to come up with new ideas. But once he takes a decision, he sticks by it and takes action upon it. He does not indulge in over-analysis.” Juma considers Salman a perfect gentleman and his only advise to his long time friend is to never underestimate himself.

Today this is called customer care,” he points out smiling. These traits helped Salman and his conglomerate through some rough patches. From challenging business environments during the fiscal crisis, to lonely stints outside of Oman during Ramadan, Salman has weathered difficulties in both the professional space and his personal life. But during this loneliness, he recalls how he tried to gauge the purpose of fighting these constant battles. “One day I decided to write down the benefits that the business was giving me. As I listed them I realised that only three of those benefits were for me and my family. I found out that I was able to pass on five of these benefits to my community and five to my country – this included job creation and value addition to society. I immediately realised that this was worth the pain.”

Salman’s spontaneous nature is well mirrored in his professional life. “There is no

themselves to reflect. You will be surprised by the results. I also advise people to do two crazy things in a month. It is fun and it helps you unwind and think out of the box. It can change your direction. But it is tough to think crazy and easy to think logically.”

While the empire that is Al Hassan needs constant attention, Salman says he has tried as much to not compromise on any time devoted for his family as a father and a husband. “When I get back home, I turn my mobile phone on silent so that I can spend quality time with my family. In the mornings I also set aside some time for myself to listen to some soothing music and meditate.”

Salman has started writing his memoirs. “I have told my kids that after my time, if they ever face any difficulty in their life, they can read these journals and see if they find something helpful.”

For today’s young entrepreneurs, Salman

Salman advises youngsters to do things that are measurable as it helps one gauge one’s work at the end of the day

typical day for me,” he says laughing. “I like to try something new everyday and concentrate on a different area or segment of the business. I constantly strive to come up with innovative ideas to take my business to new heights.” Salman reveals that he constantly indulges in self analysis and figures out ways to improve his productivity. He also encourages his employees to look at the world outside of the business arena to instill creativity. “I advise my managers to set aside one hour a day for

has an advice. “Do things that are measurable. What is measurable is achievable. It helps you gauge work at the end of the day. Always quantify and then measure as you can surprise yourself.” He also points out that youngsters must respect those with experience and should be open to learning, accepting help and admitting mistakes. “They can blend these with their technology driven minds. They should be good with planning and time management.” ■

slow and steady rise in profits as the business also expanded.

Lessons learnt

Some very basic golden rules are essential to establishing and maintaining a successful empire and such lessons for Salman began at a very early age. His tutor was none other than his own father. “He told me some business stories and emphasised on simple things like if you take care of your customers, you will be automatically taken care of.