

Focus Malaysia
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Leadership during COVID-19 – Steering through turbulent times

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By Raymond Lew

SINCE COVID-19 first swept over Malaysia at the start of 2020, it has resulted in major socio-economic implications for the country and left many Malaysians bereft of job security and finances.

This caused many to face the daunting task of staying afloat and weathering through the pandemic to keep their families safe and protected.

In such perilous circumstances, leaders were required to stand up and shoulder the responsibility of developing and implementing life-saving policies – be it financially or physically.

Business leaders had to steer companies and employees through challenging times, adapting to the new normal while also charting new business strategies to ensure the business and employees were financially secured.

With COVID-19 cases rising daily, and the implementation of second movement control order (MCO) this year, we need to take our learnings from 2020 and adapt them to the current times to safeguard businesses and employees.

Strengthen Business Resilience

Movement restrictions at the start of the pandemic's first wave brought along immense challenges for businesses, regardless of industry. With movement grinding to a halt, businesses had to adapt to the new normal at lightning speed.

At the time, staying home was a priority and challenge for many. While some businesses had little trouble implementing work-from-home policies, it was a challenge for more people-facing businesses – such as the insurance industry.

At Sun Life Malaysia, we were able to guide our company of over 600 employees into working from home effectively within four days. However, our sales advisors faced the problem of not being able to meet with clients in person which we later resolved fairly quickly with our non face-to-face sales process.

This problem also impacted the insurance industry as a whole where for the most part sales relied on face-to-face interactions, causing a huge and pressing need for rapid digitalisation across the industry. As such in the early days of the pandemic, there were struggles across the board but now we see that there is a fairly stable migration to digital industry wide.

Rapid Innovation The Way Forward

Digital tools and e-trainings to upskill the sales team has been critical to prepare the force for non-face-to-face sales processes. This is something we at Sun Life Malaysia stressed initially, and now we can see the industry as a whole following suit.

It isn't just on the sales front, but also when it comes to client engagement and outreach as well. The industry in general has gotten much better at interacting virtually and rolling out successful virtual events.

Today, there is still the need to keep movement to a minimum while we continue to adapt and sustain business as usual. The path here has not been without challenges, but its clear we need to innovate and digitalise in order to safeguard businesses and employees.

Communication is Key

Communication, done well and often, was essential in those uncertain times. Stakeholders – Clients, employees, business partners – were updated consistently as new initiatives were rolled out.

Employees are the backbone of any company. They remain the essential portion of a company that keep the business going through turbulent times.

Businesses must extend a compassionate outlook towards employees to ensure the company can run as a well-oiled machine. Consistent engagement activities can help raise morale and create employees that are more focused and dedicated in working towards achieving the company's business purpose.

Compassion in Leadership

The COVID-19 landscape in Malaysia today is more alarming than that of 2020. The high number of COVID-19 cases pose a threat to businesses that are already in a precarious position.

In times like this, leaders must show compassion and strength to fortify the company's position. As any leader can attest, presenting a continuous and calm presence to all stakeholders can be challenging in the face of an ever-spreading virus, yet necessary.

My advice is to ensure the value of compassion is retained in your actions. Something as little as setting a specific day off for employees to rest and recharge can really help them bounce back stronger, as evidenced by our initiative in the past year.

A steady hand at the helm is what helped steer Sun Life Malaysia to a successful 2020, where I am proud to say our strategies helped turn what initially seemed like a dire situation into our highest ever quarterly sales in 3Q2020.

While we can't predict what might happen next, we will definitely take lessons learned from 2020 to chart the way for a safer, brighter and healthier 2021 for all. – Feb 27, 2021

Raymond Lew is the CEO and President/Country Head of Sun Life Malaysia.