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Datuk Azzat Kamaludin

Chairman of edotco Group, 2016 – 2020
Chairman of Dialog, 2008 – 2020
Board Member, Axiata, 2008 – 2018



I'd like to think that Axiata is the prototype of a Malaysian company of the future, as well as a company of the present. From how it constituted its Board and working with different cultural groups to developing talent on merit and not pandering or having to look over its shoulder. Other companies can learn from it.

The first thing I was impressed with and fascinated by when I came on board was the Board's composition. Although we didn't have gender diversity in the beginning, we certainly had some racial diversity and foreign participation. I believe that variety has been embedded in our Board compositions, thus contributing to Axiata's success.

We always enjoyed a good collegial camaraderie in the boardroom, which helps discussions. As everyone is well versed in their areas of expertise, no one hesitates to express their views. And it is our duty to voice our views and not be afraid of repercussions, because that is what we are there for. It's never personal when an issue requires thorough discourse. It helps when the diversity is overarching and people aren't afraid to speak up.

From my first Board appointment my guiding light, complemented by my more than 45-year company law career, has always been the interests of the company. When this guide is challenged you speak up, or when, as the last resort when a client disagrees with you, you discharge yourself. To me it's quite simple. You can take my view, accept it or modify it. That's fine, but I think it's important that honesty and integrity remain your guiding light.

The leaders and employees of Axiata are all very confident of themselves, secure in the knowledge that they know who they are and their areas of expertise. When you are in that kind of position, you do not have to push your ego, you give and take. We have very good people here as we recruit among some of the best in the business.

I believe a company is a company of people. And you have to make the people who work with the company feel that they belong there, and want to work there as long as they can. And do things for the company as much as they can. That's key. Yet people are the first to get dispensed with. There should be more money spent on human resources rather than machines. Maybe I'm generous or too compassionate, but I always feel that we should reward people as much as we can.



One of our greatest challenges in the early days was ensuring that we could work with all the operating companies, made up of different nationalities and cultures. We did that through working out the terms of engagement, in understanding each other and in ways of interacting that we constantly reviewed and revised. We needed to have a clear *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* with them that did not breed antagonism. I thought this was key to enabling the kind of co-operation, collaboration and close-knit working relationship that eventually emerged in Axiata. Here, we've built a relationship where we respect one another, yet each company maintains its independence as a separate entity, forged by mutual benefit.

Another positive development was our good talent management. Staff from the OpCos were trained and moulded in our Corporate Centre, giving them a boost in their careers. It helped the Group to better itself to take advantage of the OpCos and meet our other goal, to ensure that - as much as possible - senior positions in these holding companies were all homegrown. I think we have succeeded in that to a very great extent.

One of my most memorable times in Axiata was when I was appointed as a director and Dialog Chairman and was sent out there for the first time. Although I knew Sri Lankans when I was a student as very intellectual and good people, I had not really interacted with them.

I was flabbergasted to find out that, although Dialog was number one in the industry, it was losing money. We did turn it around eventually, and I found the people working there were the *creme de la creme*, and in our case some of the best that Axiata has. I have been there 10 years, and find staff arriving at the office early in the morning almost bursting with energy and enthusiasm. With such vim and vigour, the Sri Lankans I found to be both a delight and a revelation. It's a great company with really great people, if you get the right people, give them the right conditions and environment - they can do wonders. I would certainly like to be known as a *bona fide* Sri Lankan.

On the other hand, a key challenge in the last decade was the time and interest taken up by our investment and shareholding in India. It caused me a lot of anxiety because some of us felt that we should be there, while others maintained that India was a very difficult country to operate in. While we were excited by it, in the end we did not make any decisions until developments outside our control overtook us.

As a company operating in emerging markets there is always the fear that we may have to resort to corrupt influences to make things work. This fear was allayed as we were very clear that we would not allow that to happen, of course sometimes at the cost of what we wanted. Some might say that we could have been more successful, but I think we did the right thing.

Just like when we came up with the name Axiata. As Malays we were concerned that the name might carry a bad connotation, or it might not be right. I understood later that the Chairman had actually checked with Samad Said, Malaysia's renowned novelist and poet, and we received an *imprimatur*, a seal of approval.

It did not matter that it had no meaning but, even back then, in everyone's mind we knew we were going to add meaning to it. And that's what we did.