

“It was like a family, despite the fights we fought to stay together.”

Dr Farid Mohamed Sani

Founding Board Member
Axiata, 2008 – 2011



As a founding Board Member, when I look back now I am proud of what we managed to achieve after the demerger. The creation of Axiata. Everything else after that was the outcome of that execution. Of course there were a few things that didn't happen as we planned originally. But they turned out better in the end and, knowing what I now know, I would have still recommended the same.

What I remember most of my three years there is how challenging it was for Axiata to be in possession of a united front, as it came with so many holding entities. We managed to bring them all together, housing them under one roof. It was like a family, despite the fights we fought to stay together. At the end of the day when push came to shove, with the mounting challenges, we argued and fought to overcome the obstacles. Not necessarily in the most systematic way, but that was par for the course.

Part of my personal learning was our ability to accept people from different cultures and understand them. That did not come from formal meetings in the boardroom - by that time a decision would have already been made. It was keen personal engagement beforehand to get to know and understand one another that sealed the deals.

It takes a lot to build company culture. Right from the beginning, we had a very people-centric organisation. Back then we were trying to make Axiata a leadership engine, and everyone contributed to its creation. We value talent, wherever they are from and whatever their backgrounds may be. Even today, Axiata has many staff from countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh based in Kuala Lumpur.

It's hard for me to comment on Axiata after 2011. However, I do think some of the occasional country challenges after that could have been handled better. I think perhaps they tried too hard in the headquarters to expand while, in certain countries, the mobile markets were facing a downturn. Having said that, we were also very aware of the challenges that were coming. Voice usage erosion and data's prominence were predicted long before their reality, and they have become real issues now.

Looking ahead, to stay the course Axiata could learn from its past to let go of egos. If you ask me, the best days of Axiata were when we set aside our egos. On our worst days, egos got in the way.

The way I see it, the future for a mobile and telecommunications company is whether it will go forward alone, or need partner companies that have a larger footprint. There are always newer ways of doing things.