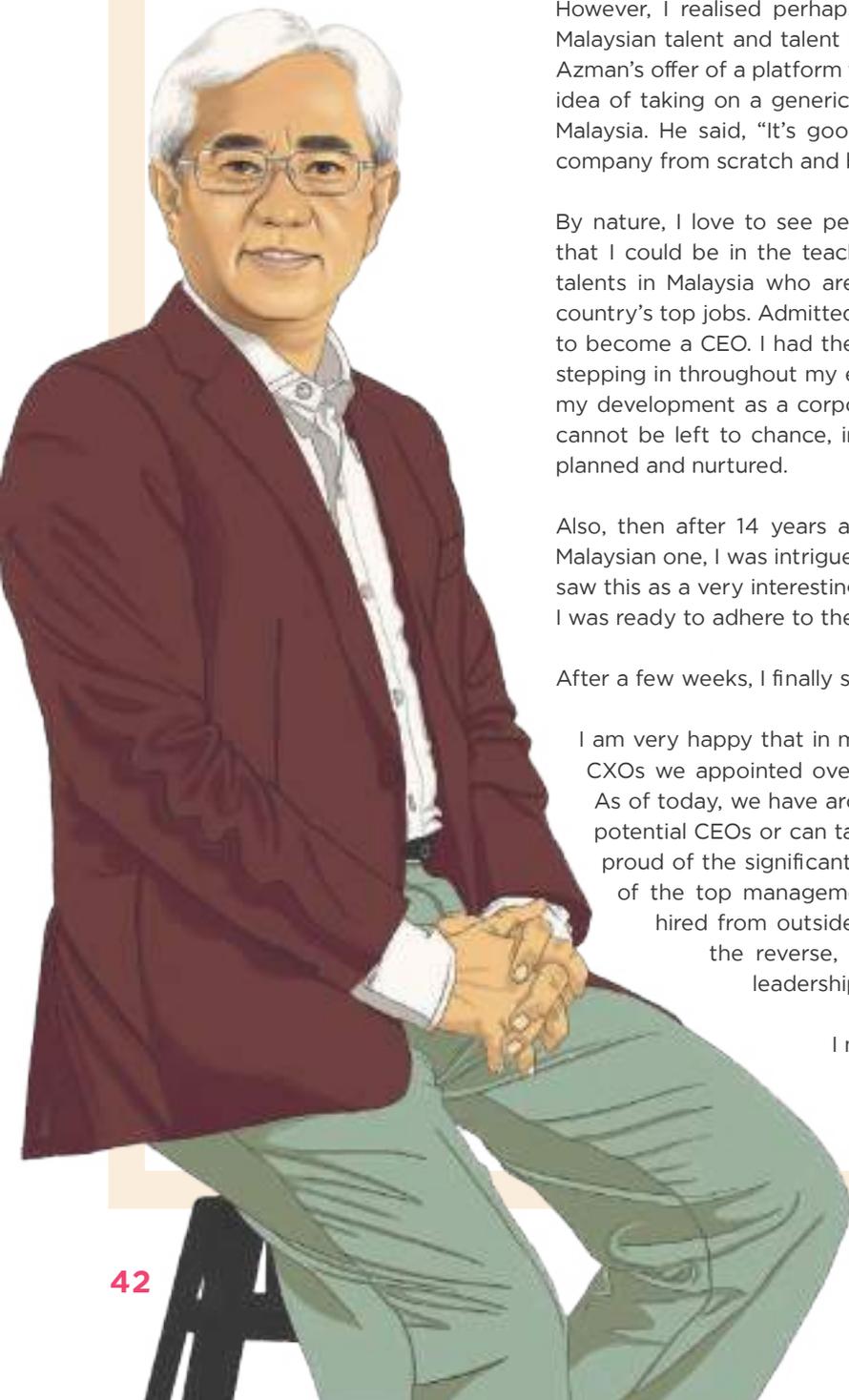


“To be effective in my work, I am always conscious of the importance of vision and strategy. At the same time, I am very aware I should only spend 10%, not even 20%, of my time on that. The rest is all about execution.”

Tan Sri Jamaludin Ibrahim

MD/President & Group CEO
Axiata, 2008 - Present



When I was first approached by Tan Sri (then Dato’) Azman Mokhtar back in 2007 to take on the leadership role in Axiata (or TMI and Celcom as it was known then), I was not very keen. At that time, I wanted to do something very different and not another corporate job and especially not in the telecoms industry.

However, I realised perhaps I did have some “unfinished business” in building Malaysian talent and talent in general, I have always felt I could do more. Tan Sri Azman’s offer of a platform for my vision appeared more attractive than my initial idea of taking on a generic, overarching role in Khazanah to build talent across Malaysia. He said, “It’s good timing. After the demerger, you can develop this company from scratch and build a platform to develop talent.”

By nature, I love to see people grow. I did spend a year as a lecturer and felt that I could be in the teaching field. It’s a pity we have not produced enough talents in Malaysia who are able to confidently take on the challenges of our country’s top jobs. Admittedly, I have been very lucky in my path as I did not plan to become a CEO. I had the great fortune of great bosses, and fantastic people stepping in throughout my early career to guide me and create opportunities for my development as a corporate leader. But it was clear to me that “leadership” cannot be left to chance, instead, this nation’s future CEOs should be properly planned and nurtured.

Also, then after 14 years as a CEO in a multinational organisation and later a Malaysian one, I was intrigued by the possibility of turning a GLC into an MNC and saw this as a very interesting challenge. Last but not least, as a grateful Malaysian I was ready to adhere to the mantra that ‘thou must do national service’.

After a few weeks, I finally said yes to Tan Sri Azman.

I am very happy that in my 11 years here in Axiata, the seven CEOs and many CXOs we appointed over the last four years were all promoted from within. As of today, we have around 800 top and middle management staff who are potential CEOs or can take on the senior leadership roles. I’m also immensely proud of the significant leap we made in this aspect. When we first started, of the top management posts across the Group, almost 80% had been hired from outside the company. In the last four years the results are the reverse, with more than 80% of those promoted to senior leadership positions or CEOs came from within.

I must admit that I did not expect us to grow as big as we have today. To put it into perspective, we are now in eleven countries with revenue almost 2.5 times

larger than when we started. As for our name, Axiata, I'm very proud that today, it is well-known across the global telecoms industry. Whenever I go for international conferences with telecoms CEOs anywhere in the world, when I mention Axiata and almost everyone would have heard of this 10-year old organisation.

From the very start, our vision was to become a Regional Champion, so we adopted diversity as one of our key strategies. Diversity in Axiata is really gratifying to me. We have 38 nationalities working for us. When we see people from various nationalities and races working towards a common goal, it helps us realise the world is a lot bigger. It is filled with people who think very differently from us, with lots of new ideas and new innovative ways of doing things. By opening ourselves up in this way, harnessing different skills and ideas, we are continually challenged. This is the strength of diversity.

Therefore, we made sure that we hired the right people, those with appropriate skills and who believed in diversity and teamwork. We encouraged them to help build Axiata to become one of the largest and most successful companies in the region, inspiring them to rally behind that vision. Our performance and compensation system help steer people towards what we wanted to achieve. By 2015, we believe we achieved our goal of becoming a regional champion, flying the Malaysian flag high in Asia. By then, the financial achievements speak for themselves and we were known regionally and beyond, in the telecommunications industry.

But even before that, in 2014 itself we were already contemplating the question of What's Next? The question is: how do we transform a legacy telecommunications company into a digital one? We knew we had to do something but had no idea exactly how to do it. Fortunately, nobody else knew either!

But rather than waiting and watching on the side at what was happening elsewhere in the world, we decided to infuse digital-company concept, thinking and technology into our traditional businesses. With strong support from

our forward-looking board, we decided to be more daring and take the industry leadership role. By the end of 2015, we had our new vision.

We got everybody to rally behind the roadmap of becoming a New Generation Digital Company. We embarked on a group-wide digitisation programme across all functions. We did have a slow start, and in fact failed to take the lead in the markets except for two OpCos. But fast-forward, by 2019, we are either at par or ahead of many of our competitors. Although still a work-in-progress, our digitalisation programme encompasses our products/services, processes (external and internal), technology and most of all, our 'organisation and people'. It embodies the culture we want to build, as well as the people we want to hire, to enable us to achieve that objective.

In our digital journey over the last five years, we've built a culture to experiment without fear of failure. We do not penalise or punish people for making mistakes. In fact, we encourage them to try again, try something new without criticism. The reason I emphasise this is that too often companies, people and the public look at mistakes and losses, but not at the bigger picture. We dare to challenge the norms and how people look at us. I think we should allow companies to nurture this attitude in Malaysia.

We made many mistakes and to be frank, some of the initiatives did not do as well as they should. But we persevered. By experimenting we will keep learning and adapting to new ways, and in the process, challenge ourselves. But that's not the only way. We also encourage our people to challenge each other, to learn from other industries.

Apart from "digitising" our so-called traditional business, we also embarked on building new Digital/Internet businesses, mostly organically. In 2015, we then embarked on the new journey.

Two years ago, after investing USD250 million in more than 23 digital companies, our companies valued at USD640 million by early 2019.

On another initiative, we have Axiata Analytics Centre (AAC) that employs almost 200 staff. They are at the forefront of using analytics and also Artificial Intelligence to solve complex business problems to develop a new explorer culture here. It's the atmosphere and the environment we nurture to allow people to generate new ideas. At AAC we sanction 20% of their working hours to pursue their own interests, allowing them to experiment or derive analytics unrelated to Axiata. We want to build on this new kind of skill. Perhaps this is one of the most important capabilities of any company to cultivate in the age of disruption.

Disruption can be detrimental, but it makes life very interesting. Some businesses we created have become the disruptor to the disruptors. For example, in our integrated digital advertising business, ADA, we not only disrupt traditional advertising companies, but use tech data and business model innovation to disrupt other digital advertising companies.

To survive disruptions, we developed a culture we call M.A.D. (Modern. Agile. Digital). Being M.A.D is all about a modern and progressive approach with the agility to encompass being simultaneously proactive and reactive and using the digitalisation concept and mindset to adapt. We are building a new culture.

I must say, my time here has been like a mini-roller-coaster ride. Just imagine, we are talking about 40-plus quarters after almost 12 years! Quarter by quarter, looking at the results and knowing we will not have a perfect picture. To top that, we also have to grapple with unpredictable regulatory environments and all kinds of circumstances beyond our control.

Case in point, back in 2016. Just as I landed in a country for an appointment with a telecoms minister over lunch, I was told that he had been replaced. Yet I still met him, albeit over a farewell lunch. Not too long after, I was scheduled to meet with the prime minister of another country. But when I arrived very late that night, I was told there was an announcement that the prime minister would be replaced. Same thing with another minister in a different country.

Lots of ups and downs. Just when I hear good news from one country, I will get bad news from the next. But I have since learned the art of receiving bad news! To be proactive, to react and respond very quickly, thoughtfully and calmly. I have since then in my role in Axiata, taught myself to prepare for any possibility.

I wish I could say that I know the future of telecommunications. I don't, and truth be told, no one does. What we can do is to position ourselves well, develop the building blocks and be agile to adapt. Being a chess player when I was in school, I remember while we can't predict the opponent's next move, we must position ourselves well by taking control of the 'centre boxes'. By doing so, we can react better or in today's word, be agile. Along the way we can experiment, improvise, learn and adjust, even as we move a few steps back or forward, all the while building blocks learning and progress. While we don't have all the answers, doing nothing is worse. So, what we have done is to believe we must transform ourselves into the next-generation company.

To be effective in my work, I'm always conscious of the importance of vision and strategy. But, at the same time, I'm very aware that I should only spend 10%, not even 20%, of my time on that. The rest is mostly about execution. As a CEO, you obviously cannot execute everything, instead you must enable execution. You get the right people, the right

organisation, the right processes and strategy to empower people to execute. That is my main role, an active enabler.

My job is also to build an 'institution' so that the company can prosper and sustain without huge dependency on existing management and people. It sounds easy, but to me, that's a huge part of the CEO role. It's not just about getting short term results.

Looking back, business-wise I'm quite proud that this GLC is largely managed like an MNC, with a Malaysian flavour at heart. It means we must be very performance oriented. We must produce results - financial and non-financial. We must attract, hire and retain top performers and team players. We must strictly manage non-performers, but with a heart and being compassionate, respectful and humane. That makes us different from some MNCs.

In fact, all our companies have done very well. Smart in Cambodia has successfully grown five times bigger. So has Robi in Bangladesh. XL in Indonesia and Dialog in Sri Lanka have all tripled in size respectively since we started. It gives me a lot of satisfaction to see how successful they are. Plus, all of them have been some of the best performers, if not the best in their respective markets.

As I said, the reason I joined this company is not just about the business, it is about developing talent. When I look back on what we have done, the many recent CEOs whom we have been nurtured from within and our mix of potential leaders from a combination of nationalities.

Within that context, I'm also very proud of our Axiata Young Talent Programme, where we have spent RM70 million of the pledged RM100 million, successfully developing 2,200 primary and secondary students and young professionals into future CEOs. Hopefully, 20 to 30 years from now, many of them can take on CEO positions that this country can take pride in.

We have also launched a programme to build Malaysian digital entrepreneurs, investing RM50 million, working with Malaysian Venture Capital Management Bhd (MAVCAP) and Johor Corporation. With the RM90 million under the Axiata Digital Innovation Fund (ADIF), we sought to identify, nurture and invest in Malaysian digital companies. So far, we have invested in more than 20 companies and, hopefully, in a few years some of them will become unicorns. We can take pride in being part of their journey.

I take personal pride and happiness specifically in these sets of achievements working together with my management teams and staff across the group. To me, that makes my journey in Axiata very worthwhile. When I look back, I see an MNC company; I see highly motivated staff; I see our contributions to all the countries we operate in and communities we serve, especially in Malaysia.

When I look back too, I have to thank Tan Sri Azman for giving me this opportunity to lead this company, and of course a long list of people who have guided, supported and helped me in the whole journey.

I now realise that my job is still and will always be an "unfinished business"; but I hope we have built an "institution" that will continue or carry our vision into the future.