

By **MATT NAYLOR**  
matt.naylor@leaderonomics.com

**W**ITH a constant stream of work demands coming through digitally and yet only so many available hours in a day, top executives in today's business environment may well feel they are under a perpetual time crunch.

Rather than being a reason for not spending time with one's employees, however, this scenario renders internal communications even more critical than ever. At least, that's the opinion of Datuk C M Vignaesvaran Jeyandran, chief executive of the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF).

As head of the chief human capital development authority in Malaysia, Vignaesvaran, known affectionately to his associates and staff as "Datuk Vicks", has liaised with and trained talent at some of the biggest and brightest organisations in the country. He understands the key challenges facing today's industry leaders better than most.

In a chat with Leaderonomics CEO Roshan Thiran on the latest episode of *The Leaderonomics Show*, the affable Vignaesvaran spoke at length about his journey to HRDF and shared a few insights he's gained on today's corporate environment.

"As a CEO, our time is very limited. Most of the time, you'll be out and about. But although you may be one resource on your own, as leader of an organisation you represent a team comprising hundreds of resources..

"I always make sure to spend some of my working time talking to my staff. It could be a simple chit-chat or it could be a serious discussion. It could even be a simple talk about what kind of hobbies they keep outside the office, because these conversations all help to tell me what kinds of ideas each employee can offer. Apart from just making decisions and handling business matters, spend some time each day talking to your employees and learning what they can do."

### FROM SELLING NASI LEMAK TO TRANSFORMING THE NATION

Vignaesvaran's humble upbringing instilled in him a stern work ethic from an early age. His father ran a small *nasi lemak* and *roti canai* stall catering to the early morning breakfast crowd.

Having to wake up daily at four in the morning to help his father run the stall before going to school, then returning from a day of studies to help close the eatery in the evening, there was very little downtime for young Vignaesvaran.

"Any time I wasn't in school, I was helping my father run his stall," he recalls.

Rather than looking forward to holidays such as Chinese New Year and Hari Raya, he dreaded these "busiest times" of the year.

"During the school holidays, while all of my friends and classmates were out playing, I would be at work," he says. "It was a lonely existence at times, but it taught me the fundamentals of business from an early age."

The sacrifices he made also paid off for the family business. Vignaesvaran's father would later expand the stall into a restaurant and, ultimately, a chain of outlets.

It was at his next two jobs, however, that Vignaesvaran would learn the life lessons that undergird his leadership approach to this day.

### TURNING CHALLENGES AROUND

While working for his millionaire uncle's construction company, Vignaesvaran looked to his uncle as a

# WORK HARD AND LISTEN TO YOUR PEOPLE

## THE LEADERONOMICS SHOW CATCHES UP WITH HRDF CHIEF EXECUTIVE DATUK VIGNAESVARAN JEYANDRAN



Vignaesvaran (left) with Leaderonomics CEO Roshan Thiran on *The Leaderonomics Show*. Pic by Fariha Harith/LEADERONOMICS

role model of a successful businessman and enjoyed the time sat under his learning tree. When his uncle and his company went dramatically and suddenly bankrupt, Vignaesvaran saw that nothing in business is assured and that failure can come about when we least expect it.

Moving on to a new line of work, Vignaesvaran decided to join the sales line and began selling photocopiers for Inchcape. For the first three months, he sold zero copiers, an experience he describes as "extremely embarrassing".

At this point, he was thrown a bone by a colleague, who passed one of his sales leads to the increasingly demoralised man. Two weeks later, he had sold 40 copiers.

That one simple gesture extended to Vignaesvaran by a co-worker provided so much more than just building his confidence in selling copying machines. It vividly demonstrated for him the immense value of collaboration, which he continues to promote in his work to this day.

From there, Vignaesvaran moved to the then-fledgling JobStreet, where he was given a budget of zero ringgit to get the company's marketing initiatives off the ground. Thinking on his feet and outside the box, he orchestrated bartering arrangements with various companies and eventually ran more than 40 events within a single calendar year, all without a sen of backing from his side.

### SWALLOW YOUR PRIDE, MILLENNIALS

Vignaesvaran's counsel for fresh graduates entering the corporate world is evidently shaped by his own formative experiences.

While his take on the challenges faced by millennials and Generation Z entering the workplace may seem hard-nosed, he maintains that it was only by stepping beyond his predefined job scope that he learnt his most valuable lessons in work and life.

Vignaesvaran's advice, in a nutshell? *Swallow your pride.*

"When your boss gives you something to do, just do it," he says.

"Don't complain about being over-worked and stuff like that because every single job that you get is actually a learning curve for you to ascend. That's how I learnt a lot of the things that I apply in my work today. If I looked at the task and only did what was in my job description I would never have learnt a lot of new skills.

"I know that you have a university education and that's fantastic, but swallow your pride. When you come out and enter the workplace, it is a different reality."

### LIFE AS A BOSS

Upon moving into HRDF seven years ago, Vignaesvaran steadily worked his way up the ranks to his current position a chief executive, developing his own distinctive style of leadership as he interacted with a diverse range of business leaders along the way.

On his first day in the biggest seat at HRDF, he focused on establishing one key value: democracy. Calling a "town-hall" meeting with the entire staff of HRDF, he encouraged everyone there to share ideas about the kind of changes that they wanted to see under his leadership.

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Out of this came two new policies, introduced internally to improve morale among the workforce: Dress-down Fridays and the adoption of a healthier lifestyle at work through initiatives such

### WHAT DOES THE REVISED PSMB ACT MEAN FOR COMPANIES IN MALAYSIA?

Effective today, the PSMB Act 2001 is being expanded to cover even more subsectors of the manufacturing, service, mining and quarrying sectors. About 17 new subsectors are now eligible for HRDF-reclaimable training schemes, bringing the total to 63 industries covered.

The increased scope of the act is in line with HRDF's goal to bring the number of employees eligible for training schemes up from the current 1.77 million to 2.8 million by 2020, a target which Vignaesvaran believes it is on course to achieve.

All current eligible subsectors will be unaffected. To check on your company's eligibility under the revised act, visit [hrdf.com.my](http://hrdf.com.my)

as fruit platters around the office and subsidised gym memberships.

Externally, HRDF has since launched a host of new workforce development initiatives with a stronger focus on team-building exercises in addition to just competency-based training.

As he leads HRDF in shaping the future of Malaysia's human potential by working with almost 18,000 companies across the nation, Vignaesvaran continues to draw inspiration from those who mentored him along the way.

"Something I really picked up from Mark Chang (of JobStreet) is how to be humble no matter how successful you become," he says.

"He was a different kind of boss, one who interacts very well with his staff. I think, in his mind, we are all his friends who work for him. Now, I do the same with my employees and always encourage them to speak up."

At the end of the day, Vignaesvaran is as comfortable holding his own among the nation's lawmakers during a parliamentary session as he is joking about returning to his roots with a pit stop at the nearest *roti canai* stall.

When you know how far your own grit and determination has brought you, there is no fear of starting anew, even from ground zero, and raising others up along with you.



Scan the QR Code above to watch *The Leaderonomics Show* with HRDF CEO Datuk CM Vignaesvaran

■ **Matt Naylor** is GM of media strategy and execution at Leaderonomics. He believes that, in this digital age and its competitive marketplace, it is more important than ever for companies to develop an effective employer branding platform.