

# BUSINESS

## *as usual*

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It was business as usual for the Managing Director and CEO of Wearnes International (1994) Limited (“WIL”), Soh Yew Hock, after it was privatised and brought back into the fold of parent company Wearnes.

Privatisation will represent the second milestone for Soh, who joined Wearnes in 1986 as Group Company Secretary. He became Group General Manager of Wearnes before assuming his position as CEO of WIL, after it was listed. He is also a Director of Wearnes subsidiary, MFS Technology and Asia Dekor Holdings.

The first milestone was when Polytek Wearnes Holdings changed its name to WIL. Six trading companies (Wearnes International, Jaguar Cars Taiwan, Wearne Brothers (1983), O’Connor’s Singapore, Welmate and Wearnes Gas) belonging to parent company Wearnes were injected into WIL. WIL then became the listed trading arm of the Group.

WIL has grown and diversified rapidly. From its listing in 1994, revenues have increased twenty-fold from S\$30 million to S\$590 million. The automotive business expanded regionally and is now poised to grow internationally. O’Connor’s, which was in consumer goods, has evolved into

one of the leading systems integration companies in the region. Pacific Silica’s sand quarry has turned out to be a good investment and the land itself is real estate which could be developed in the future. WIL has also made a foray into the water treatment business by acquiring EPD USA and now operates in the USA, China, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia, and is also exploring possibilities in India, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Soh is a hands-on person, travels with his staff and does not believe in armchair management. “Unless you understand the practical problems your staff face and feel the ground, you will not be able to effectively lead, direct and support their initiatives. I need to touch and feel.”

He credits WIL’s success to teamwork and a “buy-in of ideas” by staff. He says it helps when there is real camaraderie in the company and no politicking – something he has almost zero tolerance for. His own management style is to focus on strengths and not nitpick on weaknesses. “It’s perhaps the only place I know where this is the case. There’s the occasional bickering down the line, but not the sinister backstabbing or jostling for positions. My senior colleagues and I don’t

engage in politicking ourselves and this has filtered down.”

As for the future, he thinks that the Group must venture abroad more. His own charter is to grow the water business and oversee the profitable sand mining business. “It’s a necessity, not an alternative. The market here is too small and the competition intense. We must see the world as our market, starting with the region. We have the expertise, experience and the reputation.”

He believes competition will always be there and he does not worry too much about it. “We have to stay alert, lean, hungry and productive. We must be aware of what’s happening in the market and be always one step ahead.”

But he points out the importance when venturing abroad, of understanding the business culture, building trust and maintaining a good reputation. “It is important that abroad, we fly our flag honourably. In WIL, we’ve done that.”

“In fact, because of WIL’s expertise and reputation, we have become a magnet for many manufacturers who have asked us to represent their products. It’s not just about us going after customers, they too come to us. And that speaks volumes!”

