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**Soon Lay Ean**

Managing Director  
Sebarang (M) Sdn Bhd  
Member since 1997  
VCE-57

# WOMAN POWER

**Soon Lay Ean no longer has to prove herself in the male-dominated world of construction and building materials. Learning from her Vistage Chair and group peers has also given her self-confidence to venture into other businesses.**

When Soon Lay Ean graduated in business and finance, joining her family business in Penang was not her career choice. But fate proved otherwise. Mounting bad debts and weak management plagued her family businesses in several companies operating in manufacturing and trading of building materials. After her father's demise, she eventually stepped in to take over as Managing Director of Sebarang (M) Sdn Bhd, a trading company which distributes premium building materials.

As a novice in business, Lay Ean was initially lost. "I was hungry for somebody to coach and guide me. I needed fast track learning and advice," Lay Ean recalls. She was introduced to TEC and Richard Wong by one of Sebarang's shareholders. Her first Chair was Lim Kah Hooi, who had just started a group in Penang. In the early years, she noted that she benefited from TEC, absorbing "like a sponge" many aspects of business systems and management.

She credits Kah Hooi for helping her to build self-confidence and resilience to overcome chauvinism in the male-dominated construction industry. Back then, there were few women in that line of business and they had to deal with mainly male architects, contractors and engineers. "I really toughened up, and now I am accepted in the community," she reveals.

In the early years, Lay Ean was hard on herself and felt very stressed trying to juggle business and family. Besides business growth, Vistage also emphasised work-life balance for its members. This gradually worked into her psyche, helping her to calm down and manage her time to achieve a more balanced life. Vistage featured her work-life balance story in Vistage Malaysia's 15th Anniversary book in 2009. This later attracted the attention of business radio station BFM who interviewed her on this topic.

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As a boss, Lay Ean started as one who was authoritative and rigid. She admits that she was prone to scolding her staff. “I used to be very firm in my thoughts. Now I am more open to other people’s ideas and I listen more,” she discloses. Lay Ean has also sharpened her leadership skills and developed a positive work culture, especially avoiding office politics. “My style is don’t play politics. If you have complaints, bring them out in the open,” she asserts. She resolves grievances behind closed doors and does not take things personally after she walks out the door.

After many tribulations, the turnaround of Sebarang was a feather in the cap for Lay Ean. The enterprising CEO then took up the challenge to turn around another business. This was a struggling company called Foil Laminate Industries Sdn Bhd in Penang that makes premium foil which provides insulation against heat and vapour. In this venture, she reveals that she learnt a lot from Vistage about this brand new area for her – manufacturing and how to run a manufacturing company. What benchmark for quality control, what departments to set up, how to do product development and how to measure efficiency and productivity – these were some of the lessons she picked up from her Chair and peers in her Vistage group.

“I am very blessed to have peers who genuinely want to help. They give valuable advice,” she notes. Her peers are now based in Kuala Lumpur as Lay Ean has moved her membership to a Vistage group in the capital city. She flies in from Penang every month for Vistage meetings.

The eventual turnaround of Foil Laminate Industries was another accomplishment for Lay Ean. Since then, she has also entered a new business segment – taking up a Cartridge World franchise in Malaysia. The franchise, from Australia, has 680 stores globally offering businesses low-cost solutions for printing and easy maintenance for printers and copiers. Presently, the three different companies under Lay Ean’s ambit chalk up an annual turnover of over RM40 million.

After the successful turnarounds, Lay Ean is taking things a bit easier. Her Heads of Department can run the show if she is away for two weeks at a go. She reveals that retirement is at the back of her mind and she is on the lookout for a good General Manager. But she is in no hurry.

In the meantime, Lay Ean intends to stay with Vistage because she wants to continue learning, emphasizing that “Learning is a life-long process.” She is still looking ahead for good business opportunities and believes that Vistage gives her an extra advantage. “We need to carve a path to grow the company every year. We need external stimulation from peers and wider thinking ability. When you hear what other people say, it can trigger different thoughts and ideas,” she explains.

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Soon Lay Ean launching “The Magical Christmas Market”, a fund raising initiative by Soroptimist International Club of Penang to better Educate, Empower and Enable the less privilege women and children in Penang

Sebarang (M) Sdn Bhd was founded in 1974 and deals in the distribution of a wide range of high quality building and construction materials. Product ranges relate to roofing systems, insulation, structural, external finishes, wall, ceiling and flooring as well as drainage and sewerage. The company also provides services such as project design and full contract and build.