

Tru-Marine

Training

a ship-shape team

By LYNN SEAH

LEARNING is an important part of the culture at ship repair firm Tru-Marine, where 4 per cent of its payroll is invested in training every year.

Mr David Loke, its 57-year-old group managing director, practises what he preaches. He obtained his Master of Business Administration from Australia's Macquarie University at the ripe old age of 49, through a two-year programme at the Singapore National Employers

Federation Training Institute.

He would like to have taken even more courses except that work takes him out of the country at least two weeks every month. So he reads voraciously instead.

"I spend so much time travelling that I've seen all the SIA in-flight movies," he jokes. "So I always pick up a book from the bookstand when I fly. If I come across a good idea, I will come back and share it with my people."

Tru-Marine is a company that Mr Loke started with two partners

back in 1977. It now specialises in servicing the turbocharger, a piece of precision equipment in the engine that rotates at tremendous speeds, boosting the power of the engine by driving more air into it for combustion.

Repairing it requires a lot of technical know-how, which explains, in part, the company's emphasis on training.

Each time the company sets up an overseas service station, it has to quickly get the local team up to speed with the expertise the compa-

ny has built up over 30 years. Currently, it has four overseas service stations — in Shanghai, Tianjin and Guangzhou in China, and in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates

Mr Loke says: "When the customer uses Tru-Marine, they don't care if it is Tru-Marine Shanghai or Tru-Marine Sharjah. They expect the same delivery and quality as in Singapore."

The other reason the company trains, is to nurture leaders to helm new subsidiaries and to fill the shoes of managers who retire.

Young people from among its local staff of 75 are being groomed to take on management positions. They get to shadow senior managers in the company and go for management courses.

"As we expand, we need more qualified people to fill positions here and overseas. If we don't start succession planning now, in the end, we may not be able to expand any more," he says.

Tru-Marine has been on an overseas expansion path since 1995, when it opened its first subsidiary in Shanghai.

The company has been doing well, clocking annual growth rates of between 25 to 30 per cent the past three years.

Last year, its turnover in Singapore hit \$23.8 million. This is the third time it is on the Enterprise 50 list. It also made the list last year and in 2002.

It has been a long, tough climb to these heights. In the early days, there were struggles with limited

finances and know-how. The partners had to be thrifty and channel savings into the business. The lack of know-how was overcome by looking and learning, such as by visiting ship repair yards in places like Rotterdam and adapting what they saw.

But this is not the way to go now, as Tru-Marine levels up to be a global player. "When you copy, you are one step behind already," he says.

To avoid having to play catch-up constantly with more technologically advanced countries in the West, the company has taken steps to develop its own technology.

For this, it is grateful to government agencies such as the Singapore Institute of Manufacturing Technology and Spring Singapore.

By the end of the year, Tru-Marine will have two more service stations — in Mumbai, India and Haiphong, Vietnam.

And at least three more subsidiaries are being planned for the next three to five years in Europe and America.

This expanding network increases the urgency of its training efforts.

Says Mr Loke: "Of course, there are people who question this. They say: 'If you train them, they will run away.'"

"My answer is: 'If this company is no good, they will run away, anyway.' If you train, hopefully the company will do better. If the company is performing better, and you share the benefits with the employee, there is really no reason for the employee to resign."



PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

The rapid expansion of Tru-Marine's network increases the urgency of its training efforts, says Mr Loke.