



Cruising right on course

Tru-Marine sails ahead of its competitors by regularly upgrading its repair technologies

by philip lee

MR DAVID Loke, the boss of Tru-Marine, one of the world's leading repairers of turbochargers in marine diesel engines, has two interesting work philosophies.

One is "creative destruction" – a seemingly contradictory concept which has seen the company expand here and overseas since it started business in 1977 as a general ship repairer.

The other is to create "pseudo-crisis situations" within the organisation, a strategy that has kept the firm on an even keel and his workforce on the payroll through global economic upheavals.

In the first, he makes it imperative that the company's repair technologies be made obsolete regularly by replacing them with upgraded methods.

"We must do this before our competitors outmode us," he says of his company which today serves ship owners and ship management companies in more than 30 countries including Germany, Malaysia, Norway and Britain.

The second involves creating problems when there is none. "This is to galvanise all employees in preparation for adverse eventualities," he says.

"Our continuous improvement efforts have progressively nurtured the corporate culture into an entrepreneurial one that is poised for necessary change to innovate and seize market opportunities," he explains.

Reducing wastage and cost-control are two key components.

Says Mr Loke, 59, who started working life as a regular in the Singapore navy: "A significant programme of ensuring flexibility in our cost structure is the incorporation of variable bonus in our remuneration plan that is closely linked to the company's and employee's performance."

“We have been continuously upgrading our enterprise capabilities that bring value to the customer.”

– Mr David Loke, group managing director, Tru-Marine

He says such adjustments have enabled Tru-Marine to adjust to changing business situations without having to lay off any of its 200 engineers and technicians worldwide. They enjoy the company's no-retirement policy, with job rotations and redesignations depending on the worker's age and physical ability.

The company ensures that there are sufficient reserves to see the company through bad times, says Mr Loke, who earned his master's degree in business administration from Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, at age 49.

Mr Loke's vision today is to build Tru-Marine into a global enterprise with service stations worldwide. There are plans for market penetration in Europe.

Tru-Marine has a network of seven subsidiaries. They are in Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangzhou, Sharjah (United Arab Emirates), Mumbai, Haiphong, Rotterdam and Singapore, its headquarters.

It has also launched its own brand of turbocharger Hybrid Bearings, which can be used for turbochargers in power plants, trains as well as offshore and marine applications.

The beginning of Tru-Marine was less stellar. After 15 years in the competitive ship repair business with two partners, Mr Loke took over as group managing director in 1992 when he saw that there was a promising niche in ship turbocharger

repairs. His partners have since retired.

Quality repairs to, or replacement of, worn parts in turbochargers are far cheaper than replacing entire units and he realised that such services would be in great demand.

He soon picked up the skills from Tru-Marine's turbocharger partners in more advanced countries, particularly in Europe.

The company's formal research and development (R&D) efforts began in 1991 when it collaborated with the Singapore Polytechnic on the welding of turbine blades.

"Over the years, we have maintained our R&D investment through collaboration with various research agencies, in particular Singapore Institute of Manufacturing Technology, Spring Singapore and industry partners," says Mr Loke.

He adds that Tru-Marine's improvements include a strong learning culture among its workers.

It is now understudying Singapore Technologies Aerospace Engines to revamp its process capabilities as it foresees that the turbocharger technology will converge with aerospace technology in component design.

The many awards Tru-Marine has won attest to its efforts to excel in R&D, company management, brand development and staff welfare.

It got its ISO certification in 1993, National Training Award in 1999, People Developer Award in 2000, Class NK Certification in 2002, Singapore Quality Class Award in 2002 and 2005, and Enterprise 50 (E50) award in 2002, 2005 and 2006.

Says Mr Loke of this year's E50 win: "This award would not have been possible without the support of a dedicated team that has consistently delivered the Tru-Marine brand promise."



Mr Loke's two work philosophies – "creative destruction" and "pseudo-crisis" – are the reasons for the success of Tru-Marine. PHOTO: TRU-MARINE