AN INVESTOR TURNS CEO: HOW A LEADER FINDS HIS RIGHT PATH

The team is the first thing that comes to my mind when talking about managing since we have to think about what we have to manage, who has to be managed and how to manage,” says Att Thongtang, the chief executive of Prasit Patana Plc and the Paolo Hospital Group.

Mr Att started working professionally with Global Environmental Technology Co (Getco), a wastewater treatment company under contract to the Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand, after earning a degree in finance from San Francisco State University in California. Building a team of 60 people from scratch, Mr Att received his first taste of management at the early age of 23. From 1999, he ran the show there for almost two years and also began to get some experience in the hospital business as a member of the audit committee of Sikarin Hospital.

“After my family took over the [hospital] business, I became chief executive of Prasit Patana Plc and the Phyathai Hospitals Group in 2004, although our group’s main interest was investment and not management of the businesses we took over,” he said.

“Having learned about running a hospital through hands-on experience, I admit that I and my father [investor Wichai Thongtang] love to run hospitals even though it is difficult and very tiring. However, it’s encouraging to see the results of patients recovering from illness.”

Size advantage: Paolo and Phyathai hospitals are two key strategic parts of Bangkok Dusit Medical Services Plc (listed on the SET under the symbol BGH), the largest medical services business in Thailand. The company also controls the flagship Bangkok Hospital Group with 15 locations nationwide as well as BNH and Samitivej hospitals.
“BGH has vast resources, especially medical personnel,” says Mr Att. “In the past, each hospital tended to reach out to customers from all angles and in some cases overlapped each other. But today, our strategic direction is crystal-clear.

“Under my responsibility, we focus on the domestic market. Phyathai is moving towards the general segment including the upper-range market, while Paolo is focusing on the mass market with Social Security cardholders still our major revenue contributor.”

The scale that BGH has achieved has given it many very valuable assets, especially its people. “There are big pools of senior doctors who have broad and extensive experience from abroad within our group. This is an invaluable resource that we could not have afforded by ourselves [as individual hospitals].”

“Working under the big BGH umbrella allows us to create synergy and use not only medical doctors but also other experienced professionals, especially in our quality system. The checks-and-balances system that builds on the unique know-how of each hospital helps us to implement our business plan and grow continuously.”

**Thinking as a leader:** While waiting for Mr Att in the reception area, I noticed a number of books on the shelf, ranging from a serious work on the Balanced Scorecard to the popular Chicken Soup self-help series.

“Previously, I preferred to read management theory, but lately I’ve changed more to biographies such as those of Warren Buffett and Jack Welch,” he explains. “Reading books provides me with moments to think. A number of new ideas come up while I’m reading that can be used later. “When I started reading about Buddhism, I used to think that the explanations were not easy to understand. There was a moment when someone told me: ‘Don’t complain, just start to study.’ I consider it the moment that led me to further study and actively practise Buddhism nowadays.”

Mr Att, who also took on the role of chief executive of the Paolo Hospital Group in 2010, takes a practical approach to strategic business planning.

“An organisation should have a clear vision that is supported by the right set of strategies,” he says. “Hence, I usually set the direction first, and then my management team will put their heads together to line up an action plan with a lot of supporting data and information.

“We normally run an AOP (annual operating plan) workshop after the first half of the year, which includes a mid-year review as well. By year-end, there will be more brainstorming workshops with various divisions that also cover the capital expenditure plans for the next year. This is a good example of how a corporation aligns its units and ensures proper uses of its resources.”

**Man of principle:** Although Mr Att is not a medical doctor, he says he has not encountered any problems when managing teams of doctors including senior physicians who have years of practical experience.

“In principle, doctors are strongly grounded in rationality and logic together with high ethical commitment. Their work is always in line with their professional code of conduct. If we understand and respect these facts, we need to remind ourselves all the time that any decision must be made in line with these principles in order to share the very same spiritual belief in medical services,” he says.

“At times, we may have different view on certain issues such as investment in new equipment [to provide more comprehensive service]. I then have to make it clear and share with them what we have to prioritise to be effective and create a balance between incoming revenue and expenses. With mutual understanding and respect for each other's roles, our groups keep growing while strengthening our professional teams day after day.

“I believe in the principle of work. If the work starts to drift away from the principle, the organisation usually is not sustainable in the long term. Therefore, typically speaking, I will communicate through constructive thinking such as painting the big picture first.

“It is important to use this approach since the ones who execute the plan will not be me but my team members. Hence, I have to ensure we have the very same framework. Listening is my favourite thing to do when we have a meeting. This way, I can learn new things and share them with my team.”

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