

The bridge that connects social services

By K.P. LEE

DOES the term corporate social responsibility (CSR) mean anything to you?

A cynical business reporter used to the realities of the Malaysian corporate world would probably describe it as another one of those nice-sounding buzz words – rather like “corporate governance” still is for some companies. Yes, the “liberally-sprinkle-into-the-CEO’s-speech” variety.

Every once in a while though, there are those who genuinely try to make a difference in the lives of ordinary Malaysians.

The Liaison Combination Sdn Bhd (TLC) believes in making CSR a reality for all Malaysian businesses. It's not every day that one sees a mission statement that reads: “... our main objective is to promote corporate social responsibility in companies operating in Malaysia”.

It's a tall order for Brian Lariche and his three partners in the two-year old company. Where, for instance, does one even begin with something rather easily dismissed by corporates in their quest for profits?

Lariche says there are two aspects. The first is making companies realise that it benefits them to make a difference to society, and the second is to raise the level of professionalism in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through interaction with the corporate world.

He says companies in Malaysia have long been interacting with society, mostly by donating money. TLC is not in favour of the “mock-cheque” approach to social responsibility. Often the company is hardly involved with the community at all and it is usually only the well-known NGOs that are benefiting of this generosity, leaving many less known NGOs struggling on their own to make ends meet.

As for the company itself, the communities or projects chosen frequently have very little to do with their business.

TLC feels that there is a different way. They want companies to realise that there are better and more productive ways in which they can connect with society, work with NGOs and community based organisations, while achieving their objectives at the same time.

Lariche himself has volunteered in many community-based organisations and is still actively involved in the National Cancer Society and the Malaysian AIDS Council, while his other TLC partners have a background in media



Team bonding exercise at Rumah Amal Cheshire

and communication, human resource development and management consultancy.

He says getting involved is the best way to appreciate the real issues faced by society.

What TLC does is bring together businesses and society, while realising that in this association, there must be mutual benefit for the company as well as the NGOs. Lariche says there are many ways in which this can be achieved.

At the moment TLC offers services with respect to project search and screening, project management, human resource (HR) development combined with community development and media services.

With project search and screening TLC is able to source and screen community projects that match company's objectives such as branding, reputation and HR development. For some companies TLC found a community project that was then used to organise their family day doing a “gotong royong” at an orphanage.

Lariche says: “Another international firm offered to send their young professionals during their off-peak periods to spend time teaching language and IT skills to under-privileged children. At first, there was reluctance to join this voluntary Community Outreach Programme, but after a

month, there was a waiting list of staff wanting to do it.”

He says although the benefits to the NGOs are obvious, the “feel good” factor for the employees created by the experience is an equally immense positive force for the company. This factor, which appears like an intangible benefit, is nevertheless very real in the form of increasing employee morale and a belief that they are working for a caring employer. The possibilities, however, extend beyond this feel good factor.

“The employee morale factor is very under-rated,” adds Lariche.

Lariche says he likes to combine human resource development with community development, for that is

community-based organisation.

Lariche sees that ultimately there has to be an exchange of knowledge between companies and NGOs for the relationship to be fruitful. He says this is also an area TLC can help because they are able to source and screen community projects that match a company's corporate objectives so the maximum benefit is derived.

He says although his first clients have been multinationals and firms with international brands, he sees a growing interest among local Malaysian companies who are starting to see the linkage between community work and brand building.

“There are many community projects that can support a brand by



Team building exercise involving erecting a wall for Magic, an NGO working with autistic children

where TLC can best contribute its strengths as a training organisation.

“By combining HR development with community development, we create a fun and interesting horizon-broadening experience while developing skills at the same time. In team building for example, we use real life problems faced by NGOs as a training tool,” he says.

Teambuilding activities have included building a canopy-walk in a nature park, refurbishing homes of orphanages and the elderly, and building a playground. Also indoor training such as in project management and leadership and communication skills can also be equally beneficial by helping to set up a marketing department or re-organise the financial management of a

connecting with the values it stands for” Lariche says.

TLC charges companies for its services, though its services of helping NGOs to link with companies are free. “We have never charged them for this, and we never will. To NGOs we act as an extension of their own marketing capabilities”.

At the moment TLC has an extensive network with NGOs throughout the peninsula and it is also expanding into east Malaysia. All these NGOs are active in areas such as children, women, health, nature, environment, education and the elderly.”

“Though we do work with the better-known NGOs,” Lariche says, “TLC is always on the lookout for small NGOs who are doing good work.”

He cautions, however, that TLC requires transparency and accountability: “We need NGOs to submit their annual plan, an audited statement of accounts and a project proposal based on a TLC template”.

Lariche adds that the proposed projects would have to be sustainable and feasible. All NGOs are screened also on their achievements in the past. “Sometimes we come across an expensive project that has never been truly implemented and thus wasted corporate resources.”

“In the end, we hope to encourage higher levels of professionalism in NGOs which in turn will result in a greater desire by corporations to invest in social projects,” he says. “At TLC, we just provide the bridge to connect them together.”

Lariche says he likes to combine human resource development with community development, for that is where TLC can best contribute its strengths as a training organisation.