

THE VISIONARIES

# From one hotel to eight

*In this fortnightly series, our writers talk to people who stand out in their areas of expertise, especially those from the corporate world*



BY REICO WONG

IMAGINE having a multi-skilled specialist team which can be cross-deployed to take on the role of waiters and waitresses, housekeeping staff and front-line service personnel whenever additional resources are required.

Sounds like a perfect solution to the labour-crunch problem, especially if you're in an industry as manpower-intensive as the **hospitality sector**?

Well, that is what the chief executive of Park Hotel Group, Mr Allen Law, 32, envisioned when the Government started to tighten its restrictions on foreign workers here a year or so ago.

Realising that the **staff-shortage** problem was a permanent one and that there was also a limit to raising productivity, he started to think out of the box.

Mr Law eventually formed his own Hotel Operational Specialist Team (Host) – the first and only such team in Singapore's hospitality industry, similar to the special tactics and rescue team which law-enforcement agencies often have.

Under the scheme, staff who are able to converse well, have the ability to pick up things quickly, and have a customer-centric mindset are specially recruited and trained in different hotel operations in order to serve as additional resources during peak hours across various hospitality divisions.

For their hard work and extra skills, they are paid about 50 per cent more than those who take on just one job at the hotel.

There are now about 17 people in the Host team, and this is expected to grow to 24 by the end of this year.

"It was a case of going back to look at the root cause of our operational problems, when the various peak hours are, in what areas staff are most needed, and also thinking back on a cross-deployment work scheme we had tried to implement a few years back," said Mr Law.

"I told my management team to forget about the nitty-gritty of dol-



BIODATA OF ALLEN LAW

**WHO:** Mr Allen Law was born in Hong Kong on Jan 8, 1980. His family started out in the garment-manufacturing business and later branched out into the property and retail industries. He has lived in Singapore since 2005.

His elder sister, Wendy, 33, handles the retail arm of the company, Park Retail, which includes Knightsbridge Mall, while his younger sister, Eva, 27, currently resides in Britain.

Mr Law met his Singaporean wife, Madam Tan Shin Hui, 28, during Park Hotel Group's acquisition of Grand Park City Hall at 10 Coleman Street. Her family was the previous owner of the hotel, and managed the hospitality business under the label of the Pan-Pacific Hotel Group.

The couple have an eight-month-old son, Ian.

**EDUCATION:** Mr Law graduated with a first-class honours Bachelor of Science degree from the University of London. He majored in both mathematics and management.

He also has a certificate in directorship, given out by the Singapore Management University in partnership with the Singapore Institute of Directors.

**CAREER:** Mr Law joined Park Hotel Hong Kong in 2004 after graduation, learning the ins and outs of the hospitality business from the ground up.

He was responsible for setting up the hotel chain's headquarters in Singapore a year or so later, and quickly spearheaded the group's aggressive expansion in the Asia-Pacific region, acquiring properties in Singapore, China and Japan.

lars and cents, and that this was above their typical manpower budget. I figured it was time to stop playing it safe, especially since we're businessmen."

This willingness to take **calculated risks**, combined with his sharp business acumen, is what has allowed forward-looking Mr Law to make a name for himself, despite his young age.

Starting with just one hotel in Hong Kong when he first took over the reins of the business from his father as a 24-year-old fresh graduate, he has managed to grow the company to span eight hotels in the Asia-Pacific, worth some S\$2 billion in assets.

But managing a hotel was not something naturally in his blood, Mr Law claimed, and a lot of sweat and tears were shed when he first started out in 2004.

He likened Park Hotel Group's business to that of a start-up then.

"It was very hard to find experienced people for our management team as we weren't really established then, plus I had to work very hard to convince people of my vision and capabilities since I was relatively young and had no experience," he said.

But the feisty lad quickly gained the respect of his colleagues after he put himself through a fast-track training programme, taking the trouble to dirty his hands learning everything from the ground up.

Over a course of six months, he washed plates, waited on tables, made beds and served as a member of the front-line service staff at Park Hotel Hong Kong.

"I still have my uniforms somewhere in my office," said Mr Law, with a laugh.

"Looking back, I think it's been quite an achievement for such a short period, but I always caution my team that we've reached only our first milestone.

"We've still got a long way to go, even though we've built a platform that will enable us to grow more rapidly in the next few years."

Among his many plans for growing the business is to take on management contracts as the operator of hotels in the Asia-Pacific, as well as to continue expanding the group's portfolio through a series of acquisitions.

These would still mainly be four- and five-star hotels in **prime locations**, although Mr Law said he also sees a strong business opportunity in the budget-hotel segment in Singapore.

"We're still focusing on the higher-class hotel space, but are also exploring the budget model. So even though the site may not be in a prime location, it may be suitable for the budget model and we're ready to do it," he said. "We're playing around with a lot of ideas."

Still, Mr Law isn't all about all work and no play. His biggest joy in life at the moment is his eight-month-old son, Ian.

The proud dad is taking delight in nurturing his own great love for travelling in Ian, and has already taken him to visit places like Hong Kong, China, South Korea and Japan.

Asked whether there was a limit to what he would do for his family, Mr Law said, with absolutely no hesitation: "Nothing!"

reicow@sph.com.sg

HELPDESK 我的字典

**Hospitality sector:** 酒店业 jiǔ diàn yè

**Staff shortage:** 人手短缺 rén shǒu duǎn quē

**Calculated risks:** 预期风险 yù qī fēng xiǎn

**Prime locations:** 地理位置优越 dì lǐ wèi zhì yōu yuè