

## FINDING THE RIGHT FIT

JYOTSNA HEGDE, PRESIDENT OF SOBHA REALTY, SHARES HER VISION FOR BRINGING OUT EMPLOYEE POTENTIAL

BY GAVIN GIBBON

**T**here's a horse and a donkey and both have their values; but if you try to make a horse do what a donkey does and a donkey do what a horse does, it's never going to work."

It seems relatively straightforward, but Jyotsna Hegde, president of UAE-based real estate developer Sobha Realty, tells *CEO Middle East* that finding the right type of people to work with is one of the biggest challenges she faces.

A quick look on the company website lauds Hegde for her "expertise in change management" and "people management" skills. She reveals, when we meet, that she'd taught her receptionist only that morning how to make the perfect cup of ginger and lemon tea – and, do you know what, it was pretty good.

According to Hegde, it's all about finding the right person for the right job. In order to do this, there needs to be a mixture of key ingredients: an innovative and entrepreneurial attitude, coupled with talent, and a collaborative approach towards work.

Hegde explains: "For example, an interior designer working with us needs to not just have the skills and qualifications, but also a visionary approach to be able to incorporate into our design ethos, futuristic trends that enable us to build homes for generations to come.

"But if you expect them to handle the commercial aspect of the business,



they may not possess the ability to do so. That is when you need to recognise their strengths and create a system which does not fail and provides the right kind of support to enhance skills and grow."

That being said, she admits she's not one to flog a dead horse and if a person isn't performing then she'll happily see them ride off into the sunset.

"If you are able to get the right person, there is capability and there is attitude. Both are equally important because you cannot train or create either – the training can only be to enhance what is intrinsically within a person. A lot of professionals tell me if someone has the right attitude then you can teach them everything else. I found that is not true, because if you don't have the talent or you're not meant for a certain position, no matter how much I coach you, it's not going to happen," she says.

That's not to say training isn't part of the ethos at Sobha Realty. Quite the opposite. The company incorporates a strategy that sees leaders constantly working to improve skills – both their own and their teams' while underscoring the company vision to employees from the very top down.

A key part of this is the Sobha Academy in India, which was set up in 2007 and is managed by the Sri Kurumba Educational and Charitable Trust, the CSR wing of Sobha Ltd.

The aim of the academy is to train a generation of highly qualified and ethically driven professionals.

Hegde says: "I think our biggest strength has been our value systems. Our chairman gives away 50 percent of his wealth to charity. I think a company that believes in giving back cannot afford to cheat or hurt anybody. We have to be extremely fair to our employees, we have to be extremely fair to



our customers, we have to be extremely fair to all of our partners. Integrity and fairness are our core values and this is what we need to train every single person on. We are in the real estate industry, we have a huge sales force and it has been my biggest challenge to hire people and instil this because there is a misconception that anything might be forgiven if they bring a sale. That's a misconception that we are working really hard to change!"

She reveals that many of her sales team meetings will begin with a plea. "Please don't tell a lie to ensure I make another dirham, I am not interested in that money. The product, the offering, the value proposition that we have is exciting enough for somebody to buy as long as you present it to them factually. You don't have to con somebody into buying my product, you just have to take pride in it and go out and find the right kind of person."

It is five years since Sobha Realty launched its maiden project in Dubai – the \$4bn Sobha Hartland development in Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum City (MBR City). Since then the workforce in Dubai has grown exponentially and they now boast a staff of over 5,000.

## **"OUR SENIOR MANAGEMENT IS ACTIVELY INVESTING IN CREATING A CULTURE OF 'CONSTANTLY LEARNING'"**

They have come a long way since that launch. As Hegde looks out over the project from her 13th floor office window on the edge of Business Bay, she recalls how all their expert planning almost ended in disaster.

"2012 and 2013 were really good years so we did exceptionally well. We launched Hartland in the middle of 2014 hoping that the momentum would continue, but unfortunately the downturn started, so the last four or five years have been challenging to say the least," she says.

An optimist, Hegde prefers to look back on the positives from the experience. "I think the fact that the sales happened slower than what we initially expected or projected, this helped us to build a very strong foundation for the company."

Sobha Realty announced AED500m (\$136m) sales bookings in the first quarter of 2019 – 33 percent above target. It has given Hegde optimism for

the future, with talk of another Dubai development in the offing and expansion plans for the UK or USA.

"We have a top line target which I think we should achieve in the next two years, we're on track this year. I think we could be a billion-dollar company in two years' time," she says.

The developer has bases in India and Dubai as well as diversified interests and investments in the UAE, India, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Brunei and Tanzania.

It's a far cry from 2004 when Hegde joined Sobha India as secretary to company founder and chairman PNC Menon. By her own admission, "I had no experience as a secretary, but someone thought it would be the right fit". But the chairman's belief in her and a thirst for knowledge and learning quickly saw her move from secretary to manager, and 15 years later she proudly sits as president.

She says: "I have never seen a better teacher in my life. He (Menon) taught me everything I know and he gave me opportunity after opportunity. I was quite greedy in the sense that I was always ready for the next thing.

"Primarily it was his belief in me. I didn't know any better because I was young and foolish, but he used to tell people, 'she's director material', and this was just when I joined. I used to wonder what on earth he was talking about, but he had very strong belief. I had the energy and I worked really hard and things just evolved."

It is this level of belief that Hegde tries to foster on her own staff.

She says: "It's very important to recognise people's strengths and provide opportunities for people.

"Our senior management too is actively investing in creating a culture of 'constantly learning' and it is our constant endeavour to extend mentorship and skills refresher training programmes to high performing employees." **CEO**