

# Cruising calmly through rough seas

BLPL is a firm that has emerged successfully despite the odds facing the shipping industry. **BY VIVIEN ANG**

**T**HE tide is in BLPL Singapore's favour. The shipping line arm under Transworld Group Singapore seems to be having none of the choppy ride some firms are facing, against a backdrop of lacklustre economic growth and volatile shipping freight rates.

Today, a five-year plan up till 2020 has been mapped out for BLPL and the company will be one step closer to its goal of being an Asia regional operator when it makes its voyage into Japan by Q1 this year.

Mahesh Sivaswamy, managing director of BLPL, and chairman & CEO of Transworld Group Singapore, which BLPL is a subsidiary of, says: "We have a good agency which is keen to do our business there. We are just about tied up."

"In the South-east Asia region, we are completely covered. We have also covered Busan in South Korea, North Asia like Taiwan, the Indian subcontinent and expanded into parts of the Middle East. I can say, more or less, we have laid all the right foundation to achieve our dream."

The company is currently working with International Enterprise Singapore over an acquisition the firm is undertaking in India, through foreign direct investment. In recognition of the firm's contribution to the economic development, BLPL has been admitted to the Enterprise 50 (E50) Awards again.

"For the 5th year, I have challenged our team to come within the top 5 and we will definitely strive for it."

BLPL was created in 2007 to complement the services of Orient Express Lines (Singapore) – also one of the four subsidiaries under Transworld Group Singapore – set up in 2000, but the journey was not always so smooth.

"We were running Orient Express Lines, the feeder company, but during that year, mid 2007, we lost a very big contract that made up about 80 per cent of our revenue. We had the ships, and we needed containers and the backing to fill them up. That's when we bought our first 300 containers, and that's how BLPL started."

In 2008, Mr Mahesh spotted a business opportunity amid the debacle of Lehman Brothers. While many companies had to bid adios to the good times they enjoyed before the collapse, and were more circumspect, BLPL started building its business.



**Mr Mahesh says the firm's aim for 2015 was to beat US\$100 million turnover and to cross 100,000 laden TEUs, both of which they have achieved, and exceeded. PHOTO: LAURA NG**

The firm approached the factories in China which had idle ships and containers and added about 3,000 to 4,000 containers to its growing fleet through operational leases.

"By 2008, we were back on track in the business, and when Lehman Brothers collapsed, we had got back on our feet from 2007 and were building the business up. We were adding a lot more containers to BLPL and it was a 100 per cent growth year-on-year."

Since then, the company has been growing from strength to strength. Revenue has been steadily increasing, from US\$13.2 million in FY08 to US\$81 million in FY14, says Mr Mahesh.

BLPL initially populated the slots on OEL's feeder ships in Bangladesh, but today, BLPL clientele is spread across 25 countries which includes big trading houses and manufacturing companies.

The expansion route was the way for BLPL, but first, a proper system had to be set up.

Hence, the software for the company was developed in-house, in India, to track the containers' movement. Now, it has become one of the pillars of strength to the company and its managers.

Mr Mahesh says: "That is one of the reasons why we are more successful than the others, you may say. We have a team who is constantly creating and upgrading the software that we have. Our system is really real time, and we continue to invest into it."

"There was really no question of looking back. When we started off, we kept our aggression, we kept going strong."

The firm's aim for 2015 was to beat US\$100 million turnover and to cross 100,000 laden TEUs, both of

which they have achieved, and exceeded.

"I am glad to see that we have crossed 103,000 TEUs as at Dec 31," says Mr Mahesh. Unaudited turnover would also be in excess of US\$100 million, he adds.

It is no wonder the managing director is bullish about the industry outlook.

"I know what is happening in the world but that is not going to be the driving factor for our business. We have already drawn up a five-year plan, from 2016 until 2020 and we will go as per the plan."

The towering managing director has come a long way since he and his family moved to Singapore from Mumbai in India in 1999.

"I started off in my father's company in India in 1989 and I relocated to Singapore with my family when I was 32. I initially meant to set up an extension of our India businesses in Singa-

pore and build on it, but it just (became) our own."

The family of four got accustomed to the Singapore lifestyle almost immediately.

"In fact it was easy to adjust. My daughter was eight and my son was four. We gave ourselves one year to succeed be it in school or business. I think we had fit in extremely well. Business wise it was very challenging, no doubt. That was quite tough – not only for me, but my children as well. Expectations were high in schools here and they had to catch up. But moving to Singapore was the best thing that we could have done."

In running the businesses, Mr Mahesh sticks to his father's philosophy – trust and openness.

"Openness to our customers and staff is maintained at the highest levels. When I talk to our staff, I always talk of mutual respect, be it towards the CEO of the company or front-desk personnel."

"Integrity is much valued as well. If there is an integrity issue (with someone), I will say there is no chance for that person to continue in the company. That is a clear unwritten rule and these things are said to them when they join the company. Most of the values have been there from my father's time, and I lost my father nearly 30 years ago, so it is a long time. But the values are equally important today."

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**Mr Mahesh Sivaswamy,**  
managing director of BLPL

Employees are the core of the company and Mr Mahesh says his other achievement is in identifying the right people for the job.

"Because, ultimately, it is the people who make the business."

There are 18 staff members working for BLPL Singapore. However, there are about 500 employees altogether who are working for Transworld Group Singapore and its four other subsidiaries worldwide.

To create bonding, training sessions are organised every Thursday for staff based in Singapore where they get to change into their sporting gear and work out. However, office trips to interesting overseas location is an important feature of the group's yearly calendar and the latest trip was to Lombok in October.

Despite wearing many different hats, Mr Mahesh ensures he has time for his family.

The office is just about an eight-minute drive to his waterfront property at Sentosa Cove.

"It is extremely convenient, so I get to go home by about 5.30 and it is my family time," Mr Mahesh says with a smile.