

CHANNEL

# THE FINESSE OF HEAD HUNTING

Chief executive officer of GMP **Annie Yap** says the role of the HR arm of an organisation has become more strategic, reports **Suhana Ab**

**M**ost women in power have been reputed to be dragon ladies but Annie Yap, chief executive officer of headhunting firm GMP Group, paints a different picture. Far from being the domineering and unreasonable stereotype types associated with such women, Annie comes across as a leader who inspires, advocates the growth of her staff and understands their needs – not surprising considering that she was named Leading CEO by the Singapore Human Resources Institute last year for her outstanding HR practices.

Annie took over the helm from the company's late founder, Dr Giam Cheng Lan, in 1998. "She was my mentor and taught me everything that I know about the recruitment industry," she says reverentially. It was Dr Giam who interviewed Annie during a job hunt in 1994. She was so impressed with her that she extended her an offer to join her company instead. The 37-year-old who was then looking to be a banker decided to take a chance and accepted. "It was about keeping an open mind. One will never know till they try. If I never accepted her invitation, I would not be where I am today," the CEO acknowledges.

During her early years as a head

of the world with her clients to explore the possibilities of bringing in foreign talent into Singapore. "Once when I was in China, the Chinese manager refused to look me in the eye to speak to me. He chose to communicate with my male colleague who was more junior than I was!" Annie recalls.

Things have now changed. Annie has gained the respect of both men and women. It was also due to these virtues that she was handpicked and trained by the late founder herself to succeed her. Within a short span of four years Annie was promoted to general manager, followed by her promotion to managing director in 2000 and CEO in 2006.

"When Dr Giam passed away in 2000, we not only lost a mentor but also a friend. That same year the country was hit by recession and two years later was largely affected by the Sars epidemic. It was a difficult time but the only way to overcome a challenge is to face it," recalled Annie. "Instead of specialising in recruitment for the manufacturing industry, we switched to healthcare," she revealed. This move proved to be highly successful. In 2006, Annie became the first woman to be ever awarded the Entrepreneur of the Year Award by the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises.

With her at the reign the GMP Group



a turnover growth of 216 percent between the years 2000 and 2006.

With talk of the US recession, GMP is concentrating on providing recruitment solutions to the hospitality and service industry. When asked how this recession will affect Singapore, she says: "The US is the biggest economy and will inevitably affect a lot of countries that have trade relations with them. However, Singapore is now more diversified when compared to 2001. We also depend on China, Middle East and Japan. There will be an impact but it will not be like before."

Over the years, Annie has observed that the role of the human resource department has changed. Once a predominantly transactional role — recruitment drives, managing leave, pay rolls the department has transformed into a more strategic arm of an organisation. "HR is integrating into the boardroom and assisting the CEO in issues such as attracting talent, developing and retaining it in line with the business goals," she says.

Despite her hectic schedule, this CEO is not one to neglect the needs of her staff. An advocate of a work-life harmony, she stresses: "Life is not only about work, it is only a small fraction of our life. You must be happy and have different interests and hobbies." To encourage this, the GMP Group sponsors staff to participate in the Singapore marathon, leisure trips and team bonding activities. Annie is particularly supportive of working mothers and understands the heavy responsibilities that come with children.

At this organisation, women do not have to worry about being judged should they need to take time off to attend to their family. Annie points out that many employers are embracing these changes. "The government is promoting this. Flexible work arrangements can be worked out for moms who are returning to the workforce. Some are allowed to work from home."

Annie leads by example. The mother of two boys values her family time and makes time for her children. She cycles, plays in the park and even integrates her own interest into her bonding sessions. "I love to cook and will conduct lessons for my kids and my god daughter. They enjoy it; this way you fulfill your interests as well