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New head of Employers' Federation looks to the future

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Director General, Employers' Federation of Ceylon, Kanishka Weerasinghe

by Randima Attygalle

The Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC) is the country's premier employer organization with a history of 86 years and the mandate to decide on employment and labour law related policies on behalf of employers. Presently the EFC serves 600 direct members and 29 affiliated business chambers and associations through a team of experienced professionals who have specialized in Labour Law, Human Resources as well as a gamut of disciplines related to employment. Apart from representing and serving organizations from different industries and sectors employing over a million people here, the EFC also prides itself for its regional outreach and nation-wide representative capacity. We spoke to its newly appointed Director General, Kanishka Weerasinghe who elaborates on the EFC's vision in representing employers' interest and tapping new talent in the dynamic world of work.

An experienced specialist in the fields of industrial relations and employment in the country, Mr. Weerasinghe is the 11th Director General of the EFC and is credited with having handled a broad spectrum of industrial issues for different sectors, including the plantations, over the years. An Attorney-at-Law, he came on the EFC's board in 1997 as an Industrial Relations Advisor after a successful stint at the Attorney General's Department. He was promoted to the positions of EFC's Assistant Director General in 2004 and thereafter as its Deputy Director General in 2007. An experienced specialist in the fields of industrial relations and employment in the country, he holds a Masters degree in International Relations from the University of Colombo. He also has associated qualifications and has received executive education at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and holds numerous positions related to his expertise at the national level, which includes being a member of the National Labour Advisory Council.

He also has the distinction of having represented Nalanda College in first eleven cricket from 1985 to 87 being awarded colours in 1987, following in the footsteps of his cricketing father Chandrasiri Weerasinghe (former Director of Aitken Spence Insurance and the Insurance Broking wing of NTB) and older brother Kushan, who both captained and excelled in the sport. He considers the four ladies in his life, his mother Mrs. Rohini Weerasinghe who taught with distinction at several leading schools, his wife Yuvani, a doctor by profession and daughters Harini and Lochini as the 'wind beneath his wings'. His sister Chinthika is now a Senior VP at Virtusa. He also attributes his success in life to his grandparents and aunts, Sakuntala and the late Chandrika, along with Uncles Satchi and Eraj.

Q: Can you tell us about your academic and professional background?

A: I received my primary education at Royal College, Colombo. Thereafter I went on to complete my studies at Nalanda College, Colombo. I was selected for admission to the Sri Lanka Law College and the University of Colombo simultaneously in 1988. Having completed my legal studies at Law College, I apprenticed in the chambers of the Attorney General and was admitted to the Bar in November 1992. Thereafter I joined the Attorney General's Department, first as a counsel attached to the Corporation Division and thereafter as a State Counsel. I had the opportunity of working in both civil and the criminal law sectors. My work in the AGs Department gave me a lot of exposure because of the autonomy we had and the nature of the work we had to do not only as prosecutors in the High Courts but also in handling appeals and administrative matters of the various provinces we were stationed in as the representatives of the Attorney General. I am much obliged to the Attorneys-General and seniors of yesteryear who constantly instilled in us a sense of integrity and professionalism.

My second stint as a State Counsel was in the North Central Province and provided me some unique experience. At that time the Provincial Government was dismissed and the Governor was ruling directly owing to issues concerning state land. As such, apart from the normal prosecutions in the High Court, we also had to handle a lot of litigation in terms of Constitutional issues, particularly in relation to State Land and the Agrarian Services Act and related matters. In addition to that I also had to look after the legal issues of the Northern Province because it was the time of conflict and a considerable proportion of legal matters were referred to the Anuradhapura High Court. Some of these matters included Indian fishermen being taken into custody off the Northern seas as well as legal issues relating to service personnel etc. The experience further enriched me.

Q: Can you share your experience at the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC) over the past 18 years?

A: I joined the EFC in June 1997 as an Industrial Relations Advisor and it was my good fortune that I was recruited by a very pragmatic senior employment specialist, Mr. Franklyn Amerasinghe who was the Director General of the EFC at that time. Mr. Amerasinghe was well known for his ability to facilitate industrial harmony through work place relations. An experienced policy-maker, he exposed us to diverse aspects of labour relations. When I first joined the EFC he got me to think of subjects other than law such as productivity. In fact my first training course was in Japan in 1997 on the subject of Total Quality Management. The training I got and the exposure I received was so important because when you talk of today's business you immediately think of competitiveness. Although our mandate is in relation to employment and labour law, its link with productivity and competitiveness is almost inseparable. I have since received specialized training through the International Labour Organization and the Asian Productivity Organization, to name a few. My initial exposure to diverse subjects was a valued experience when I think of what I am today.

In 2004 I was promoted as the Assistant Director General of EFC and thereafter as the Deputy Director General in 2007. I'm extremely grateful to Mr. Franklyn Amerasinghe and subsequent Directors General whom I served under, including Mr. Gotabhaya Dasanayaka and Mr. Ravi Peiris, senior employment specialists in the South Asian Region in their own right, who also exposed me to diverse situations related to employment, moving beyond labour law and industrial relations. I'm also inspired by the achievements of Mr. Sriyan de Silva, EFC's CEO prior to Mr. Amerasinghe who is a legal luminary and one of the senior most employment specialists in Asia if not the world, well known for his vast knowledge and experience in labour law and industrial relations. I was moulded to lead the EFC by Mr. Dasanayaka in his inimitable style.

Q: In what way do you think this diverse exposure could further solidify your future plans for the EFC?

A: The ability to think laterally and bring people together through a 'meeting of minds' are my greatest strengths. This is relevant at every level because one has to think not only of interventions in one's own areas like policy, but other aspects as well and in our case we need to think of value-added services to our members. If you are working to safeguard or propagate the interests of the employers, you cannot be confined to one area because there is a whole gamut of other issues that the employers are concerned with these days such as skills development, engaging the community etc. It's a case of 'yes we are there to make profits but we are also there to look at the ways of improving the welfare of employees'. In terms of solidifying the future mandate of the EFC, while keeping the legacy of my predecessors alive, I hope to see the EFC intervening in some of the hitherto uncharted areas as well.

I have inherited an organization with a solid base, and it's a matter of evolving to meet tomorrow's challenges. I don't believe in reinventing the wheel, but my team and I will strive to stay relevant to employers' requirements and vision at all times.

Q: In what ways does the EFC aspire to create a better dialogue among employers and other stakeholders concerned?

A: I believe that a better dialogue is enabled only by engaging the larger community. In this regard some of the interventions of the EFC are extremely decisive. We have remained a non-partisan organization that has earned the respect of successive governments as well as stakeholders both locally and overseas. We have ensured that industrial harmony prevails in the private sector over years by proactively facilitating dialogue at the enterprise level and beyond. Sadly, many now take these outcomes for granted.

As a responsible national employers' organization, we have also promoted inclusiveness and diversity in society and have initiated projects, which have even been cited as models for employers to follow internationally. I can cite the Disability Employment Network, Gender based initiatives, HIV/AIDS, Green Jobs as some examples of what we've done. Networking in this way is crucial because then we are exposed to an assortment of measures important in the dynamic world of work.

Q: Does the EFC have a special mandate to enhance the skills of the country's young work force?

A: Indeed we do. In fact, the EFC has been strongly involved in this area of expertise since it's very much within our mandate. The EFC played a major role in developing the National Human Resource and Employment Policy (NHREP) and the Master Plan. It will similarly extend its cooperation to the government in its implementation. We are to have a National Internship Programme of Employers through which we hope to engage with the universities and centres of learning around the country. This programme will enable graduates to have an internship link with our network of employers- both direct members and affiliated members. The programme has many objectives, but most importantly, it will give the newly graduated students an opportunity to experience the world of work. At the same time it will benefit the employers as well, as they will be able to harness new talent.

Through this process the policy makers will be able to identify the skills gaps which exist on the 'supply' side as well as the 'demand' side. If our universities are not actually catering to the requirements of the business world, we'll be able to assess gaps and communicate them to universities as well as vocational training institutes for rectification. Similarly employers will be able to assess the spirit and aspirations of the newcomers or the 'millennials' as we call them. The latter will enable them to fine tune policies that relate to recruitment, remuneration and human resource development.

This is a very challenging concern and in addition to coordinating all this, the EFC also hopes to conduct an orientation for interns of this programme to enhance their 'soft skills'. We hope to get them all under one roof and give them an opportunity of understanding employment related issues as well as career guidance. We also hope to provide opportunities for upgrading their presentation skills and English language competence. Today there is a lot talent which is left out because of the language barrier. So we believe that if we could bridge this gap, the country can benefit a lot.

We are also supporting the government's initiative of one million jobs. It makes business sense on one hand for the employees, as there will be opportunities and progression where jobs are concerned and on the other hand when the employment levels are high, it will reflect positively on the economy.

Pix by Sujatha Jayaratne