

Raise Yourself to Help Mankind

An Interview with Vijay Eswaran, Executive Chairman, QI Group of Companies

EDITORS' NOTE A true 21st century Renaissance man, Vijay Eswaran is the founder and executive chairman of the QI Group of Companies. The economist-turned-entrepreneur is also a best-selling author, noted speaker, and philanthropist. Educated in the UK and the USA, Eswaran had a successful corporate career in North America, working with top technology and consulting companies before the call of entrepreneurship brought him home to



Vijay Eswaran

Asia in the early 1990s. Since growing the QI Group of Companies into a successful conglomerate of businesses, he is now focused on his legacy project, the QI University in Malaysia, which he aims to turn into an Ivy League institution of the East. A seasoned orator, he is a regular speaker at prominent international events, including the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in Davos, the Horasis Visionary Circle, and various ASEAN Leadership Forums. A proponent of value-based leadership, Eswaran has ensured the QI Group adheres to sustainable practices in business, making a positive impact in the communities it operates in. A 2011 honoree of the Forbes Asia annual list of Heroes of Philanthropy, he has also received a Lifetime Achievement Award for Regional Philanthropy in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the ASEAN community. Eswaran has written several books on various aspects of life management which have been translated into numerous languages.

COMPANY BRIEF QI Group of Companies (qigroup.com), headquartered in Hong Kong, is a diversified multinational entity with a wide range of subsidiary companies in nearly 30 countries. The company keeps pace with exponentially growing technology and expands through tactical investments leading to the creation of interrelated ventures, services, and products that take the QI Group across the globe. QI Group understands the value of holistic human development – not just through financial aid, but through empowering, developing, and finding solutions for the relevant areas of focus such as lifestyle, education, travel, tech, and entrepreneurship.

What was your vision for creating QI Group and how do you define its mission?

In some ways, the QI Group was born due to a necessity and not based on a well thought out plan. I'd say I was an accidental entrepreneur. A group of us were involved in the direct selling business in Asia in the mid-'90s promoting products for an American company, essentially acting as their independent sales force. My partners and I had built a robust team of nearly 2,000 people and had generated significant revenue for the company. However, after a series of incidents, we realized that the company's management team wasn't being honest with us and were actually in the process of winding up operations. That left my partners and I with liabilities owed to more than 1,000 people on our team. More concerning than the money, however, was the idea of letting down all these people who had placed their faith in us when we promised them a better life.

My partners and I decided we could not live with our conscience if we didn't do something to make things right. Setting up our own direct selling company to take care of our people was the natural next step. Because of our past experiences, we were united in our belief that there should be more to a business than just profits. We wanted our business to have a purpose that went beyond financial gain. We envisioned a business that had the power to change people's lives for the better. That's how our mission was born. We call it RYTHM, an acronym for Raise Yourself To Help Mankind.

RYTHM in its simplest form means empowering yourself before you can help someone else, and this philosophy has held us in good stead for over two decades. It is the driving force of everything we do and how we grew from a single-product, single business Asian start-up born at the height of the economic crisis in the region, to a multinational entity that today runs more than 10 businesses and employs over 2,000 people around the world.

Will you provide an overview of QI Group's business and how the company has evolved?

In 2023, the QI Group is celebrating its 25th year. Back in 1998, when we were starting out, I could not have imagined we would get this far. Today, QI Group is a diversified multinational

entity with a presence around the world through business interests in e-commerce based direct selling, education, travel and leisure, lifestyle and luxury, education, and retail. Our businesses directly employ around 2,000 people across Asia, Europe, the U.S., and the Middle East.

- We started with an e-commerce based direct selling company that today has a global footprint with a loyal customer base in at least 100 countries.

- Through our travel and leisure business, we operate boutique hotels and resorts in Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Turkey, with a focus on eco-tourism.

- We are also very proud of our University in Malaysia, which despite being very young is already making waves in the education sector with its innovative teaching methods and strong focus on research-based learning.

- In North America, we operate a niche, all vegetarian, organic supermarket chain which works with local farmers and is deeply involved in advocating for a healthy plant-based lifestyle in the local community.

- We were fortunate to acquire a nearly 100-year-old legacy Swiss watch brand in 2006 and revive it for a new generation of watch connoisseurs, giving them access to affordable luxury.

While at first glance these may seem rather varied and diverse, the common thread that runs through all our businesses is that each entity is driven by the desire to make a positive social impact. All of them are, one way or another, involved in local communities and working towards making a difference.

What do you see as QI Group's responsibility to be engaged in the communities it serves and to be a force for good in society?

I've always taken the view that any company that purely exists for profit does not have a lateral view of their business. Profit alone cannot justify the existence of a company. Any business that wants to succeed must start by engaging with the communities in which it operates. The QI Board decided fairly early in our journey that we will put aside 10 percent of our revenues towards causes that support our communities. We eventually formalized this by establishing the RYTHM Foundation as our social impact initiative in 2005. Over the last decade, the Foundation, which is spearheaded by my wife, Umayal, has implemented

an estimated 75 sustainable community development projects in approximately 30 countries that have benefited more than 80,000 people.

Additionally, we strive to instill a culture of “service above self” in our employees through our volunteering program. In just the last five years, our employees have donated more than 100,000 volunteer hours towards approximately 550 different initiatives in some 10 countries. They’ve helped out with community cleanups, soup kitchens, elderly care, repairs, and renovations in low-income communities, and so much more.

Where did your interest and passion for philanthropy develop?

I’ve always held a strong belief in the principle of “Service before Self,” a value instilled in me from a young age. Observing my father’s unwavering dedication to selflessly assisting others during my childhood greatly influenced me. Through his example, I grasped the essence of genuine servant leadership – prioritizing the needs of others above one’s own, all in the pursuit of a grander purpose.

In my view, philanthropy transcends being a mere public relations endeavor. We’ve taken deliberate steps to integrate it into the very fabric of our organization. With a singular planet at our disposal, the responsibility to preserve and enhance it for the coming generations rests squarely upon us. Our duty is to ensure that we leave behind a world that surpasses the one we inherited.

What do you feel are the keys to being effective and making an impact in philanthropic work?

In our pursuit of effective philanthropic impact, we’ve come to recognize several pivotal principles that guide our approach. One key revelation was the realization that our influence could be magnified significantly by aligning our efforts with a broader mission. Initially, our contributions were limited to isolated financial assistance, but this paradigm shifted when we understood the potential of harnessing our capabilities on a larger canvas – empowering individuals through our strengths.

Central to our strategy is the strategic alignment of our initiatives with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment not only gives direction to our actions, but also positions us at the intersection of impactful change.

We’ve transitioned from sporadic, short-term undertakings to committed, long-term engagements that span a minimum of three years. Throughout this duration, we remain deeply involved – receiving progress reports from our partners, conducting on-site evaluations, and disbursing funds in line with predefined milestones. This comprehensive approach allows us to measure, adapt, and optimize our initiatives for maximum effectiveness.

A prime example that underscores the importance of such an approach is the involvement of our Foundation with an Indian NGO where we were initially looking to address infant mortality through maternal education and nutrition programs. However, when our



Vijay and Umayal Eswaran

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project manager conducted an on-site assessment, it led to the identification of an underlying issue: the lack of basic sanitation facilities within the targeted community. Consequently, we forged a partnership with another organization to construct functional toilets – a testament to our commitment to addressing core challenges while aiming for holistic impact.

Our steadfast commitment to collaborating with organizations for three to five years stems from a profound understanding that sustainable change necessitates time, dedication, and a multifaceted approach. This extended partnership duration empowers our collaborators to grow, evolve, and eventually achieve self-sufficiency, ensuring a lasting and meaningful impact on the communities we serve.

How do you decide where to focus your philanthropic efforts?

My wife, Umayal, who has been leading the efforts of the RYTHM Foundation, has been instrumental in its evolution over the years. The Foundation was at one point involved in everything from giving education scholarships to disaster relief efforts. It was all very ad hoc and informal. As QI Group continued to grow and expand, especially into many emerging markets, we saw that there was a real need for support in many local communities. We didn't want to be the organization that just writes a one-time check and poses for a photograph but doesn't know what happens after that. We wanted to identify problems faced by the underserved communities in countries where we do business and work with grassroots organizations that were committed to solving those problems in a sustainable way.

That's when we started to align with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals to guide the type of projects we support. We identified three focus areas based on the SDGs related to gender rights, education, economic empowerment, youth development, and clean water and energy, and developed a strategic roadmap for the type of impact we hope to make over the next few years.

Today, as we mark the 25th anniversary of the business, the Foundation has positioned the focus areas into the 3Es – Education, Empowerment, and the Environment. Together, these three focus areas align with the Group's overall mission to make a sustainable social impact in the world.

While much of philanthropy is focused on writing checks, you give your time, energy, and ideas to the causes you support. How important is it for your philanthropic activities be more than just about donating money?

The significance of our philanthropic activities extending beyond mere financial contributions cannot be overstated. Our journey has unequivocally demonstrated that impactful philanthropy is a multifaceted endeavor, necessitating a comprehensive approach that transcends the act of merely writing checks. While financial support undoubtedly holds value, our unwavering dedication to effecting enduring change calls for a more profound level of engagement and collaboration. This approach emphasizes our commitment to actively participate in the transformations we seek to instigate.

Central to our philanthropic philosophy is the notion of empowerment and the pursuit of sustainable change. It is through this lens that we view our initiatives, striving not just to address immediate needs, but also to create lasting impact that reverberates through generations.

As we connect with parents of children with disabilities in Malaysia and Ghana, listening to their stories of how our educational projects have empowered their children to gain confidence and embrace independence, or as we bear witness to the emotional culmination of a first-generation learner from an Indian family of daily wage workers achieving high school graduation, we recognize the resonance of our path. Our conviction is reinforced by the multitude of real-life stories around the globe, illustrating the transformative power of our projects.

These stories are a testament to the profound change our initiatives trigger. By improving the life trajectory of one individual, we set off a ripple effect that helps break the chains of multi-generational poverty, illuminating the path to a brighter future for entire families.

What does success mean to you?

Despite its textbook definition being the accomplishment of an aim or purpose, I have always viewed success as an enriching journey, and not an end goal or destination. And it does not necessarily equate to transient things like fame, wealth, and power.

Success is not a trophy to be won, nor a set of lofty aspirations that always seem to be just out of reach. Each day that we are present to face any adversity is a success. So is recognizing our ability to practice our curiosity, to master new endeavors, and dive into pursuits that are equally challenging as they are joyful.

Finding fulfillment and meaning in the minutiae of life is to know success, and experiencing failure is part of it. After all, if you learned something from falling down, that's a success, too.

Did you always know you had an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to build your own business?

Not really. I came from a family of civil servants. No one I knew personally had ventured into starting a business. I had no guide or role model, but a series of events culminated in a desire to have more control over my life's path.

I had returned to Asia after spending 13 years in the U.K. and North America in the early '90s, and was almost immediately hired to lead an ailing publishing house in Malaysia that was on the brink of bankruptcy. It took me two years of hard work, working long hours and weekends, but I was able to turn things around. At that point, I was sent to the U.S. to explore business expansion opportunities, only to discover when I returned that the company had been sold and the new owners had decided to bring in their own management. All the work I had put in had helped increase the value of the company and had made someone else a lot of money, while I was suddenly unemployed.

This was the catalyst that set me on a path to take charge of my life. I realized that the only way I could do that was if I started a business of my own. That's how I got started in the direct selling business back in the day, because it was the most democratic form of entrepreneurship that existed as far as I was concerned.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

Adapt. Adjust. Accommodate. If there is one thing the pandemic has taught everyone, change occurs rapidly and unexpectedly. Business is about flexibility and versatility, so be prepared to throw out your best-laid plans, assess the situation, adapt to the new reality, and make the necessary adjustments to fit into the new world. In the words of Bruce Lee – “Be water, my friend.” ●