

# PERSONAL SAFETY LEADERSHIP

CASE STUDY

TEAMBUILD ENGINEERING &  
CONSTRUCTION PTE LTD

## SUMMARY

In 2012, Johnny Lim Chee Hwa joined Teambuild Construction Group as its Executive Director. During Johnny's first few months with the company, he quickly realised that one of his biggest challenges was in the area of workplace safety. Although Teambuild's safety performance was better compared to the industry's average, safety standards and practices varied across worksites and there were still incidents of injuries that could have been prevented. As more building projects were secured, Johnny and his management team were faced with the challenge of raising and maintaining high safety standards across all Teambuild's construction sites.

# PERSONAL SAFETY LEADERSHIP

## OBJECTIVE

- ❖ To demonstrate the safety leadership of Johnny Lim, the Executive Director of Teambuild Engineering & Construction Pte Ltd, through his vision and commitment to overcome the challenges in managing workplace safety.

## ABOUT TEAMBUILD ENGINEERING & CONSTRUCTION PTE LTD

Teambuild Engineering & Construction Pte Ltd is an A1<sup>1</sup> registered civil engineering and construction company based in Singapore. Its business focuses on public housing, private residential, institutional and commercial projects. Teambuild began as a small construction outfit in 1992. Today, the company employs some 300 permanent employees, with multiple construction projects employing some 700 sub-contractor workers across its worksites.

## ABOUT JOHNNY LIM CHEE HWA

### Executive Director | Teambuild Engineering & Construction Pte Ltd

Johnny Lim is a registered architect with more than 20 years of experience in the Construction industry. He joined Teambuild Construction Group as an Executive Director in 2012, reporting directly to the Construction Group CEO.

His key areas of responsibilities are:

- To assist the CEO in the formulation and execution of strategies and budget plans;
- To assist the CEO in overseeing the operations of the company;
- To oversee the overall business development;
- To strengthen the design and build capability of the company;

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<sup>1</sup> Under the Building and Construction Authority (BCA) Contractors Registration System which serves the construction procurement needs of the public sector in Singapore, an A1 grade requires the contractor to have a minimum financial capital of \$15 million, a past 3-year track record of completing construction projects with a minimal value of \$150 million, and the ISO9001:2008(SAC), ISO14000, OHSAS18000, and GGBS accreditations.

- To look at new technologies and new businesses;
- To oversee, formulate and implement systems and processes for the Construction Group; and
- To set up, implement and propose improvements to departmental policies, procedures, processes and activities.

Prior to joining Teambuild Construction Group, Johnny was with the Far East Organization as the Deputy Director for the Property Services Division where he reported directly to the Executive Director. In this role, he helped oversee four departments; the Development and Projects, Property Enhancement Department, Customers' Service and Estates.

Earlier, Johnny held the position of Senior Vice-President of the Architecture Division in CPG Consultants Pte Ltd. Besides being responsible for the Division's profit and loss, and key performance indicators, he was also the Project Director, Lead Designer, Architectural Qualified Person and Superintending Officer for many of the major projects in CPG.

With strengths in both design and management, Johnny has a wealth of knowledge and experience in managing large-scale projects both locally and overseas. He is known to be effective in leading, organizing and managing different business segments effectively and profitably.

## BACKGROUND

Mr Johnny Lim was approached to join the Teambuild Construction Group as its Executive Director in 2012 during the time when Teambuild's construction business was steadily growing. The company was bringing in an annual turnover of more than \$200 million. What began as a small construction outfit in 1992 had grown into a company with 130 permanent employees, with multiple construction projects employing some 700 sub-contractor workers across its worksites. Teambuild's management wanted someone to bring a fresh perspective in moving the business forward, and Johnny was hired to fulfill this role.

During Johnny's first few months with the company, he quickly realised that one of his biggest challenges was in the area of workplace safety. Although Teambuild's safety performance was better compared to the industry's average, safety standards and practices varied across worksites and there were still incidents of injuries that could have been prevented. As more building projects were secured, Johnny and his management team were faced with the challenge of raising and maintaining high safety standards across all Teambuild's construction sites.

Johnny was no stranger to the Construction industry. His prior experiences as an architect and subsequently with a developer had made him aware of the inherent dangers and potential risks present in construction works. Nonetheless, he strongly believed that safety was a basic right of every worker. He was well aware that every worker's well-being contributed to the overall business productivity and that a single fatal or serious accident could result in major down-time and financial loss to the company.

**“Instead of just being preoccupied with your own work, we tell the workers that they should watch out for each other because at the end of the day, we want them to go back home safely to their families and loved ones.”**

**Mr Johnny Lim | Executive Director**

## INHERITED CHALLENGES

Hiring external consultants as Safety Advisors in its earlier years had unintentionally resulted in a lack of ownership and personal accountability for safety by Teambuild's own employees. Safety had become more of a paperwork compliance than an actual priority. In 2009, faced with an increasing number of accidents on sites, the management team made the decision to groom a selected group of construction supervisors as Workplace Safety & Health (WSH) Officers, thus seeing the establishment of an in-house safety team.

This move led to an improvement in Teambuild's safety performance as the in-house WSH Officers became more familiar with the risks and dangers on sites, and took on responsibility for ensuring that they were managed and mitigated. Yet, safety performance stagnated in 2010 and 2011, with accidents continuing to occur on sites. Teambuild's WSH Officers faced the challenge of a lack of cooperation from the project teams and inadequate control over the subcontractors, especially with time pressures to complete the building projects.

To have a significant shift in safety performance, Johnny recognised the need to instill a strong safety culture in Teambuild. He envisioned a culture where safety was a key priority of every individual – from management, supervisors, workers and the subcontractors. **Johnny also firmly debunked the notion that achieving zero accidents was an impossible task, even with Teambuild's expanding construction business.** With this vision as a driving force, he started to consider how safety had been implemented in the company at the macro perspective and what executive changes he could make to advance Teambuild's safety outcomes and performance in a sustainable manner.

## MAKING SAFETY A PRIORITY

### 1. Taking direct responsibility

Johnny understood that having a direct overview of safety issues in his personal capacity as Executive Director would send a strong signal on the importance of workers' safety, and allow him to personally address any roadblocks. **He established a direct reporting line for the Environment, Health, and Safety (EHS) function to the Executive Director,** where it was

previously a staff function under the Construction Director (refer to Figure 1). A weekly update on safety matters was initiated to understand the issues on-the-ground that required his personal attention. Johnny also promoted Mr Allan Low, a WSH Officer with 5 years of experience, to a WSH Manager, recognising that prioritising safety also meant creating a career pathway and development opportunities for staff within the Safety Unit.

## New Construction Department Organisation

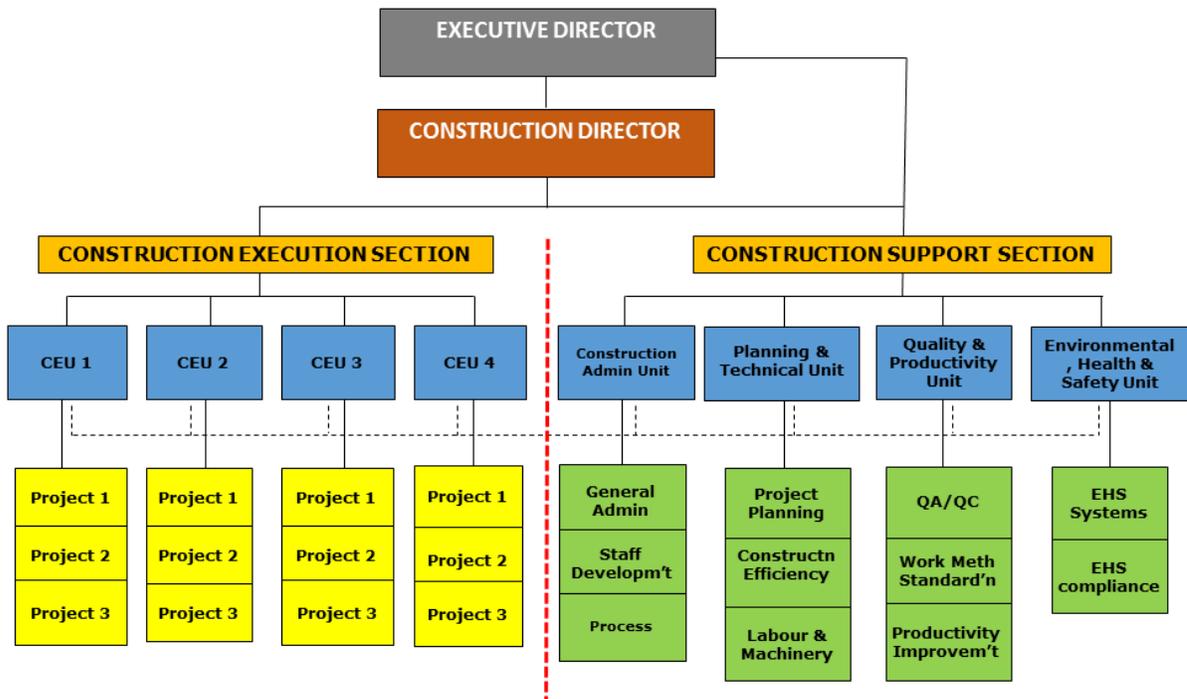


Figure 1: Teambuild’s organisation chart.

## 2. Going to the ground

Johnny also wanted to personally observe the site situation, knowing that management visibility at the site would send a strong signal of their commitment to workers’ safety. Together with the senior management team, he regularly arranged for impromptu visits to the various project sites. **These visits were intentionally unplanned and unannounced so that the real issues on site could be observed.** During these visits, the management team would take the opportunity to stress the importance of good housekeeping as they believed that the discipline taken to keep a

site neat and free of debris was the fundamental step to doing safe and productive work. This emphasis led to a 15 to 30 minutes practice of daily housekeeping by each worker for their respective work areas at the end of each work day.

**“Good housekeeping not only results in a lower probability of accidents but allows greater accessibility for people and machines to maneuver on the construction site. Having seen it for myself, this definitely enhances safety and productivity on site.”**

**Mr Johnny Lim | Executive Director**



*Figure 2: Good housekeeping by Teambuild workers demonstrated that a neat and tidy site was not an impossible task in construction.*

### **3. What gets measured gets managed**

To drive home the message that safety was an integral part of Teambuild’s business, **Johnny and the management team incorporated safety as a key performance indicator for**

**all employees and sub-contractors (20% of individual KPI) to create a sense of ‘shared accountability’ for safety by all.** This decision was faced with initial resistance from the project managers who felt it imposed an additional layer of safety monitoring which would slow down site progress and incur unnecessary costs. However, Johnny and the management team stood firm by their decision, believing that this would contribute to a culture that would embrace and value workers’ safety in the long term.

#### **4. Raising subcontractors’ safety standards**

As a main contractor, Teambuild was responsible for managing subcontractors across its building projects. This included safety but one challenge faced was that the subcontractors were different in their levels of safety culture and competency. Moreover under time pressure, it was not uncommon for them to ignore the WSH Officers and violate safety measures. **Johnny was determined to raise the standard of safety management consistently across all Teambuild’s subcontractors.**

First, Johnny and the management team imposed a requirement for all subcontractors to be minimally certified with bizSAFE level 3<sup>2</sup> in order to be considered for Teambuild’s projects. An internal safety assessment checklist was also developed to assess the subcontractors’ safety performance before awarding sub-contracting works to them. This ensured an acceptable level of safety management across all Teambuild’s subcontractors.

Johnny also initiated the development of an in-house safety performance management system to monitor subcontractors across its project sites. Under this system, safety violations would be photographed by the WSH Officers and highlighted to the subcontractors involved. Those with poor safety performance would be highlighted during the weekly review chaired by Johnny. If safety performance was consistently poor, the subcontractor’s management would then be called in for a meeting with Teambuild’s management team. Johnny would adopt a collaborative, non-punitive approach, focused on resolving the issues that could be causing the persistent poor safety performance.

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<sup>2</sup> bizSAFE is a five-step programme by the Workplace Safety and Health Council, Singapore, that assists companies to build up their WSH capabilities. At bizSAFE Level 3, companies would have implemented an audited WSH risk management system for their work activities and processes.

This helped to create open communication lines and fostered a good rapport between Teambuild and its subcontractors. Johnny's personal involvement in these meetings raised Teambuild's reputation as a company that placed a high priority on safety and created a strong influence on the subcontractors to elevate their safety management standards. **Over time, this attracted like-minded subcontractors who cared about their safety performance to work alongside Teambuild.**

## 5. Looking ahead

**Recognising that innovation could improve productivity and safety, Johnny started exploring new construction technologies for Teambuild.** One area of exploration was in the area of PPVC - Prefabricated, Prefinished Volumetric Construction, where pre-fabricated modules were cast in an off-site factory before being delivered to sites for installation. This reduced the number of construction activities on site required for the installation and joining of the modules, translating to less debris and hence a cleaner, more organized and safer work site for the workers.



*Figure 3: Johnny championed the use of PPVC - Prefabricated, Prefinished Volumetric Construction, a new technology that improved site productivity and safety.*

## ACHIEVING A LEAP

Johnny's personal safety leadership and the company's commitment to safety proved fruitful. In 2013, Teambuild achieved a leap in reducing their accident frequency and severity rates (refer to Figures 4 & 5). Teambuild also received the bizSAFE STAR and bizSAFE Partner Awards by the Workplace Safety and Health Council, Singapore, in recognition for their improved safety outcomes and performance. This was a significant milestone for Teambuild in their journey towards achieving zero harm. **Johnny understood that this journey was not solely about achieving a performance target of zero fatalities and injuries, but instead a relentless striving to prevent all work accidents and injuries without compromise.**

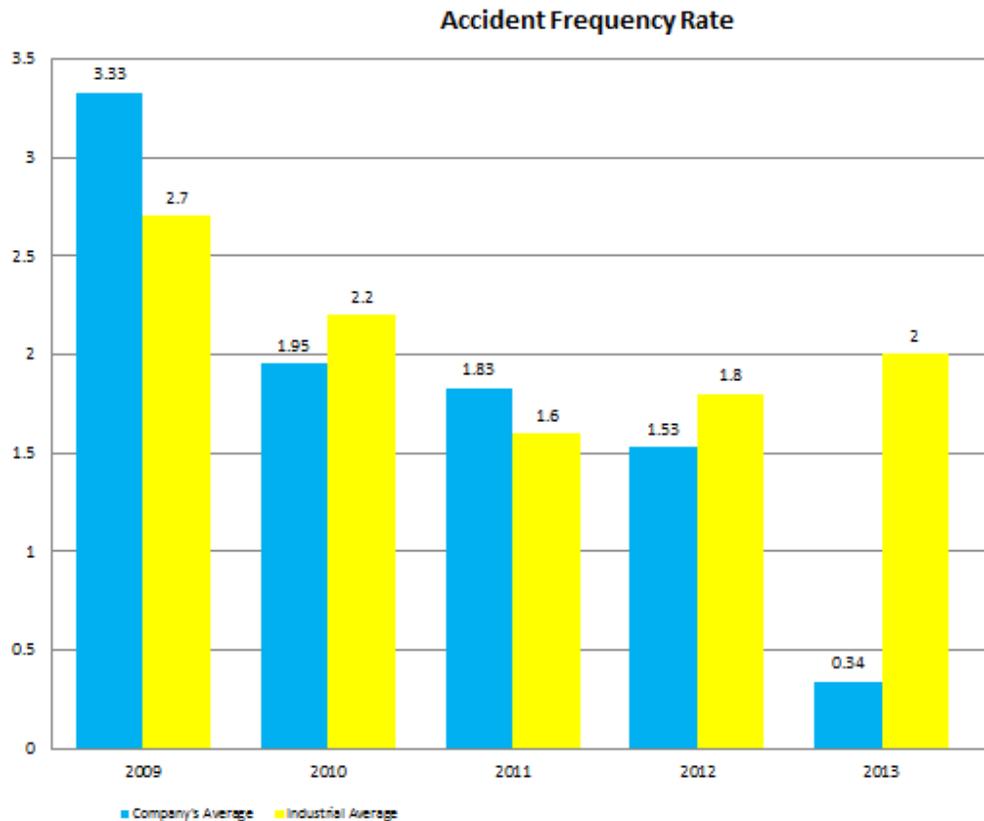
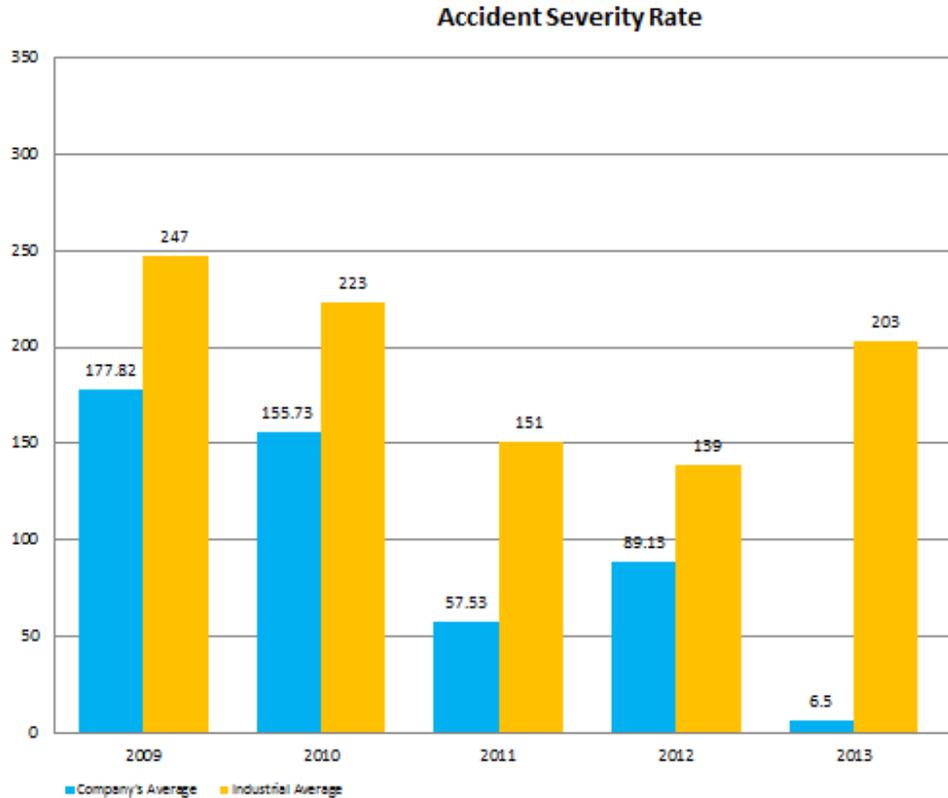


Figure 4: Teambuild's accident frequency rate across construction sites.



*Figure 5: Teambuild's accident severity rate across construction sites.*

With improved safety outcomes and performance, Teambuild also achieved the following business benefits:

- Improved company reputation and higher competitive advantage with developers as a result of Teambuild's accomplishment of zero reportable accident rates;
- Higher levels of trust and loyalty from employees and workers with the personal involvement of top management in safety;
- Higher safety standards of Teambuild's subcontractors, which has also attracted like-minded subcontractors who value their workers' safety;
- Reductions in business costs from workmen compensation payouts caused by accidents.

## CLOSING REMARKS

Johnny's personal safety leadership has shown that the key success of a company's safety journey lies within the commitment of top management. Instead of the common perception that safety requirements were a hindrance to work progress, Johnny believed that it was a business leader's moral responsibility to ensure every worker returns home safely. For businesses to be successful, he shared that safety was a required long-term investment, and would ultimately lead to higher employees' morale, loyalty and productivity.

**To begin a company's safety journey, Johnny emphasized that an awareness, knowledge and commitment from the top management is required.** Top management must visibly create a strong position on the importance of safety in the company, and take the lead in motivating their employees towards achieving a leap in safety standards. In this regard, Johnny shared his thoughts on what makes a good leader:

**“A good leader is not only one who knows how to achieve excellent results, but one who inspires every individual in the organization to achieve the results with him.”**

**Mr Johnny Lim | Executive Director**

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## RECOMMENDED CASE DISCUSSION

1. What do you think are the significant decisions/actions that Johnny took to achieve a leap in Teambuild's safety performance? If you were in Johnny's position, would you have done anything differently?
2. Johnny had a vision that achieving zero accidents was not an impossible task and this became his driving force. What do you think about his vision? What is your safety vision for your company?
3. What were the safety challenges that Johnny faced and how did he resolve them? Can you identify with any of the challenges / what are some of the safety challenges you face in your company? Can you apply any lessons from the case?
4. What are the business benefits that Teambuild achieved from improving their safety outcomes and performance? Do you think the benefits can be replicated in your company? Why or why not?
5. What do you think is the role of top management in workplace safety?