

The Changemaker

Tariq Chauhan, Group CEO of facilities management provider EFS, is leading the company through a period of reflection and change—from embracing technology to inspiring people, he is determined that growth will come from transformation.

For Tariq Chauhan, the world is a fascinating place. “Maps have interested me all my life,” he muses, glancing up at the globe he keeps in his office. “Every time I’m in an aircraft, the first thing I have to do is visit the map. It comes from my interest in people and places, I’m just the sort of person who will always try and put together a more precise understanding.”

These days however, Chauhan has his eyes on the map for a different reason. Having ended 2017 with contract revenues of nearly \$1.2 billion in hand and a solid presence in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, in the coming year EFS is exploring acquisitions and learning and development centers in India, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa. Sustainability in profit, growth and excellence is the key strategy for the next three to five years, by which time the CEO believes they will be turning over more than \$1 billion annually.

The forecast growth will put the company in the major leagues next to many of its multinational clients—EFS’s portfolio is made up of billion-dollar businesses, from Schlumberger to Ericsson and HSBC. Most recently the company signed a multi-service contract in November 2017 with Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah Economic City.

It’s an impressive record, even more so when you remember that just eight years ago the company was struggling through the financial crisis when Chauhan took the helm.

A master of many trades, Chauhan had decades of experience in banking, engineering and entrepreneurship before he decided to turn his hand to facilities. What has remained constant is his belief in holding onto strong core values and taking them wherever you go and into whatever you do. “I’m of the opinion that to be good in life you’ve got to be consistently good and to do that you need to continue to learn from both your successes and mistakes,” he



explains. “You don’t change your values, they are permanent, although you continue to keep evolving them.”

Being able to cope so well with intense periods of change and learning will stand him in good stead for 2018. In his own words “this is a year for a quantum leap in transformation”.

At the start of his career 30 years ago, Chauhan hadn’t planned for quite so much change. Born one of seven children, his parents encouraged him to go into finance for a solid and stable career for life. Following their direction, Chauhan completed Bachelors and Master’s degrees in economics before joining the Bank of Oman as a trainee officer in 1987.

Chauhan credits this time as being full of lessons, the results of which he still carries with him. “I was told banking is nothing but common sense and logic. And that really greatly influenced my life. In every industry I went into, I make sure to use common sense and logic,” he says. Over the next seven years he cut his teeth with the Bank of Oman, the Banque Indo Suez Indi and the Bughshan Group, working his way up to a senior treasurer position in risk management.

In 1995 came a new direction. Chauhan moved to Dubai to work with Elfina Banking & Financial Investments Co, managing a high-network investment portfolio, running roadshows and getting stuck into financial modelling and merger acquisitions. His first move as an entrepreneur came shortly after when he decided to buy the company—a move he admits now was “a disaster”.

“I was very ambitious and I did not comprehend the risk of capital,” Chauhan remembers. “I was the founder, but I had seed capital from the original promoters, and I bought those promoters out for a very large premium. I was able to sell the company without any liabilities on me, but I could not earn anything out of it.”

Emerging from the experience wiser and unscathed, Chauhan joined the Wall Street Group in 1998 as Managing Director. Over four years with the group he got his taste for making a global mark, taking the business into 11 countries, including the U.S., the U.K. and China. It didn’t take long for Chauhan’s ambition to kick in. Being a passionate leader and unwilling to give up on the dream of running his own business, Chauhan again made an offer to buy out the promoters with a leverage buy-out. However, the budding entrepreneur decided to back off from the deal after heeding the advice of his friends and lawyers.

His next venture led him to technology—a sector he continues to embrace today. He set up KOL Corporation in 2003 to provide e-business integration, working with clients to build apps for online applications, civil aviation and electronics. He enjoyed six years of success, exiting the company in 2009 to head EFS.

Looking back on his journey Chauhan is sure of two things: he never compromised on his values, and

he never dealt with small players. “Lightweights were never part of my life,” he asserts confidently. “Not as a kid, not as a client, not as a business, not as anything.”

Having built a solid reputation for taking on and handling risk, Chauhan arrived at EFS an experienced and ambitious leader. Unsurprisingly, he wasn’t alone. Some of the key managers at EFS today have worked with Chauhan for years, following him into each new venture.

An understanding of people is fundamental to the CEO’s role. One of the first things Chauhan did upon joining EFS was to address the culture. Identifying passion, precision and excellence as core values, Chauhan and his team created an approach designed to motivate and add value to people’s lives, increasing headcount from 1,500 to 15,000 in eight years.

To energize the army of blue-collar workers under EFS’s umbrella, the team set about building case studies on progression and learning and development to highlight how people can succeed and grow within the organization. Using strong communication to connect with the workforce, EFS offers counselling services, training and social events to its staff, leading to high retention and loyalty. “We have been able to take around 15% of employees through progression into higher salary brackets and higher roles,” Chauhan explains proudly. “We created a people’s organization.”

The journey has not been without challenges. The global geopolitical and economic situation in 2009 was turbulent. And as these cyclical movements come around again, Chauhan is prepared.

“My challenge is with change management,” he admits. “Clients have expectations, but they don’t see the intrinsic cost of service. They don’t want to pay but they still want to see the results. They have their own a la carte menu of wishes and what is needed out here is a buffet menu with reasonable pricing. How do you manage that? Through strong client engagement. That comes to trust.”

It’s a setback affecting the whole sector globally. Even in the pioneering markets of the U.K. and U.S. economic conditions are impacting facilities services. The Middle East market is faring better than most, with 15% compound annual growth compared to 8% in the global



segment. “The industry is under continuous transformation and change,” says Chauhan. “Our biggest concern is to protect our name and brand, our company position.”

Maintaining their reputation is something they excel at—EFS has retained an incredible 97% of its business in the last eight years, parting company with just a handful of clients over the period due to timing or a change in direction.

Looking ahead and one of the key issues at stake is the integration of technology. For a company dedicated to its people, replacing a significant part of the workforce with machines is not something taken lightly. It is, however, inevitable. An average cleaner, for example, can cover 8,000 square feet of space in an eight-hour day. In just one hour, a machine can cover 14,000.

This doesn’t necessarily mean that jobs are lost. Chauhan is determined that they will instead transform into new areas and new opportunities, with EFS investing roughly 20%

of its net profits into developing technology every year. “Technology has created new avenues for people in better economic segments,” he explains. “It is an enabler, an influencer—it changes lives. An app-savvy person is much more dynamic, more energetic, more able to take on things.”

The CEO is committed to embracing and managing change. In his personal life as well as his career, Chauhan confronts challenge with strength. In 2013, he was told he had a malignant tumor on his windpipe and travelled to New York for treatment. Having recently been given the all-clear, it will take more than some market fluctuations to ruffle his feathers. “It inspired me to be stronger,” he says. “Risk in my life is not something that is fearful. I’m not scared by anything.”

As he continues to build his homegrown multinational into a global force, fearlessness is putting both Chauhan and EFS firmly on the map.