



The grill

Ray Lee, founder of port advisory service Portside, speaks to *DCN* about business, “cutting down trees” and the unchanging qualities of leadership

Can you explain the moment you decided to start Portside Group and where the inspiration came from?

I established Portside Solutions in 2007, Portside International (Singapore) and Portside Group in 2017 after recognising that there were few companies in the marketplace able to provide the broad spectrum of services that ports require. Having supplied services for port operators, port owners and port users, including governments, I had the advantage of understanding the needs of each stakeholder, which gave me the idea to establish a platform to combine these services in one place.

Portside offers a wide range of services, is there anything you won't take on?

Great question, some of the contracts Portside has undertaken over the years would be deemed high-risk by many companies. From my perspective, we consider the risk very seriously; that said the more challenging the context, the greater the sense of fulfillment. Portside has worked in crisis situations such as the aftermath of hurricane Mekunu, which devastated the port of Salalah, Oman in 2018, jointly provided anti-piracy support for shipping lines off Somalia, done aerial assessments of ports post-Gulf War and operational support in Djibouti and Pakistan.

What was your first job and how did you get it?

My first job was as a paper boy, followed by a bumper bar repairer in Bankstown. I was paid 2 shillings to deliver the papers and \$8 for a 12-hour day repairing bumpers at the factory. A fellow paper boy helped me get that job, and I think that

someone that didn't like me that much got me the factory job.

What was your first job in the maritime industry, and did you enjoy it?

I started as a casual clerk at STL Chullora in 1974 and later became “multi skilled” as a stevedore in “the bin” in Sydney. The bin was a labour hire company essentially run by the Waterside Workers Federation. From the bin we were dispatched to companies like STL, Union Company, ConAust, Liner Services, Freightbases and of course Patricks and P&O. Most of these do not exist today. It was tough work and often unreliable but looking back it was the perfect start as it gave me an excellent grounding in all types of port operations, including bulk and container terminals.

Have you had a plan for your career, or has it just evolved without much planning?

When I look back, I did not have a specific career plan. I never imagined when I started as a wharfie, I would end up managing some of the same ports that I had worked at as a stevedore/clerk and then progress to being COO (director of operations) for DPWA, Australia's largest port operator at the time. Each time an opportunity was offered to me, I had the inner belief that I could do it, but I rarely saw more than one level ahead.

Was education or formal training a key part of your success in the industry?

This is a question that I often discuss with others within the profession. I did not have any formal training in maritime operations until I was 45, when I completed a Diploma at the AMC. By that time, I was already general

manager of Patrick Port Botany. I believe the knowledge I needed to run a port was gained through working my way up the ladder. Starting at the very bottom is a privilege few educated managers have now. I am certainly not against formal education, but experience often trumps theoretical knowledge. There is a good African saying I picked up in the Republic of Congo: “you learn to cut down trees by cutting down trees”.

How do you think things would be different if you were starting out in the industry today?

Technology is a game-changer in ports today. Much of my career has been about change management to enable labour reliant systems to transform into semi-automated or automated processes. This has involved a great deal of industrial relations negotiations. I have had to learn over time how to effectively integrate smart technology into port operations, but this should be almost intuitive for those starting now. The one key skill in effective port management however will never change – the ability to lead with strength and compassion.

What do you like doing outside of work?

I have a real passion for mountains. In 2013, I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and someday I would like to hike to base camp Everest. I hike or walk every day I can. I travelled a lot before COVID for work and pleasure, but since Australian travel regulations tightened due to the pandemic, I have enjoyed travelling inside my own state in eastern Australia. Lastly, I collect vintage surfboards. I am beginning to run out of wall-space to hang them, but I find them hard to resist. ■