

Young Executive of the Year

Mike Sang



AIRWAYS HIGH FLYER

When the Airways Corporation of New Zealand sent its young group manager finance, Mike Sang, off on a one-and-a-half day senior executive assessment programme with Sheffield Consulting they were not surprised when the results came back and the consultants remarked that he was one of the most “talented young executives they had seen in a long while”. As Airways Corporation chief executive Ashley Smout puts it: Mike Sang is “future CEO material”.

Sang has few doubts about his own ability and sees himself as a good leader with the skills necessary to become a CEO. And that is his goal. He understands that he has to get some more management ‘notches’ on his belt but, there isn’t any question in his mind that he is headed for the top. The judges of this year’s NZIM Young Executive of the Year Awards felt similarly about his potential (see judges’ comments).

Thinking strategically, selling a vision, making decisions and an ‘executive disposition’ are among the competencies his employers attribute to him. He has, they say, the ability to communicate complex technical subjects in an “easy-to-understand manner that is not condescending” and does “not turn people off”.

From his perspective, Sang says he has been leading and managing people “in virtually every role since I left university”. And this includes experience working overseas as well as in different New Zealand companies.

While he finds it difficult to explain his leadership style in a single phrase, he concedes it is geared toward “clear organisation”. “I like everyone to know and understand their roles and responsibilities,” he says. He likes to empower people. “I like people to take responsibility and take charge of their own areas [of responsibility].”

Part of his approach to communication is to keep an open door and encourage plenty of “two-way communication”. He walks the floor, spends time with his colleagues and tries to “read their body language” as much as he can. He likes to keep regular contact with everyone he works with and to monitor the progress and performance of those who report to him on a regular basis and to provide plenty of feedback.

“I am pretty relaxed,” he says. “I don’t believe in an overly formal approach and I think that it is important to ensure things are working well. I like to show confidence and enthusiasm and not create barriers.” He likes to lead by example so keeps “visible” and behaves as he wants others to behave.

Sang has handled some fairly complex and sensitive projects in his five years at Airways Corporation of New Zealand. Projects like setting out to solve the company’s future capital funding requirements, a problem he solved by introducing his executives and board to the complexities of leveraged cross-border leasing as a cost-effective way for Airways to meet its long-term financing requirements.

“I have been involved in developing both the strategy and the business plans of Airways. And the company is now regarded as being among the best [in the world] in its industry,” he says. “We have excellent customer relations and are well respected by our shareholders as a well-performing state-owned enterprise.”

Sang feels he has had a major part to play in helping the organisation reach and retain its current strong industry position. Now NZIM’s Young Executive of the Year for 2003 is looking forward to his next big challenge. **M**



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JUDGES' COMMENTS

WINNER

MIKE SANG

GROUP MANAGER FINANCE

AIRWAYS CORPORATION OF NEW ZEALAND

Mike Sang is an outstanding and effective young executive working in a complex field with an increasing and sophisticated international dimension at Airways Corporation of New Zealand. He has the ability both to lead and to be a team player as the business demands. He has demonstrated a high level of competence in strategic thinking and planning as well as the ability to break down quite complex technology issues into simple concepts to facilitate problem solving. He is highly innovative in his thinking.

Sang is held in high regard by his peers, by staff and by management, which reposes a good deal of faith and trust in his competence. He has been able to drive quite complex projects to a successful conclusion in areas that are critical to the development of business relationships and external business growth. He has been an integral part of the company's success – recognised by its awards from Trade NZ, for services exporter of the year and the American Chamber of Commerce, for exports to the USA.

He impressed as being very self aware with a clear evaluation of his present strengths and weaknesses and of his potential future capacity. He has an engaging personality and demonstrated excellent communication skills both personally and in bringing politically sensitive negotiations to a successful conclusion.



FINALISTS

MARTIN ELLIS

GROUP GENERAL MANAGER SLEEPYHEAD MANUFACTURING

Taking a lead management position in Sleepyhead Manufacturing Company – a long-established family firm with

two active executive directors – is quite a big ask. Add to that the recognition by directors that upgrading and modernising many aspects of their manufacturing and business systems was a necessary precursor to further development of the business both here and overseas, and that executive finds himself with a management challenge of considerable proportions.

It is a tribute to Martin Ellis' capacity and drive that he has been able to initiate the transformation from private company to a style more closely aligned to a corporatised organisation, while increasing capacity and efficiency, adding considerable value to the bottom line, and upskilling the workforce. The ability to lead and motivate a team and at the same time act as a team player with the owners, requires a degree of balance and diplomacy and an understanding of just how far things can be pushed today. Ellis demonstrated tact, flair and imagination in responding to this complex environment and, while leading with a strong results-oriented focus, was also able to show respect for the traditions of the organisation.

He demonstrates strong leadership ability and organisational skills, is a quiet achiever and has the capacity to thrive and develop further as a CEO.

DAVID BARRON

GENERAL MANAGER COMMARC CONSULTING

In an industry noted for its high staff turnover and for the challenges of managing a highly intelligent, itinerant and often opinionated workforce, David Barron stands out as a manager who leads by example. He has created an environment where everyone is committed to a culture of achievement and high levels of customer service.

His powers of persuasion led to his taking over management of the company with its owner's blessing, enabling them both to realise CommArc Consulting's vision of what the company could become. His management ability and leadership skills have established the company as a "learning organisation" within the IT community – a company committed to continuous improvement in every aspect of its activities. Its growth has been marked by innovative thinking and the provision of creative solutions for customer needs. Barron has led these developments with flair and a high level of commitment.

Alongside this he has demonstrated a high level of pastoral care for his co-workers. That staff turnover is very low by industry norms is a tribute to this and his strong leadership skills.

He has an engaging personal style, is an excellent communicator and is highly thought of by his peers and by his customers. He delivers.



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