

Do what you have to do and if you do it well, others will follow – Iftikar Ahamed

Having begun his professional career at the age of 19, the Managing Director of Softlogic Life Insurance PLC, Iftikar Ahamed illustrates a fascinating career journey.

“Starting at Deutsche Bank, one of the world’s largest banks at the time, which provided fantastic international exposure through the most exciting sectors of banking and financial markets, I then went on to join Sri Lanka’s largest conglomerate - John Keells, to start up Nations Trust Bank covering the areas of; Treasury, Global Markets, Corporate Credit, International Trade, Branch Distribution, Relationship Management and Correspondent Relationships. The latest move was joining the country’s visionary entrepreneurial group - the Softlogic Group, tasked with building the group’s Financial Services business. My career has taken me to the financial capitals of the world, transcending powerful and diverse institutions, and provided one of the most diverse exposures imaginable.”

Describing the events, which brought him into the Insurance industry, Iftikar explained, “My advent into Insurance was after the Softlogic Group acquired what was, at that time, Asian Alliance Insurance, now Softlogic Life. Being the largest investment in the sector, I was determined to make sure that the venture was a great success. We have worked hard to build Softlogic Life and grow business exponentially over the past years, increasing market share and rising steadily in market standings. At the time I started, I didn't even know that Insurance had two parts - Life Insurance and General Insurance - as for the man on the street, Insurance is Insurance. But I learn fast.”

Coming from a financial background, Iftikar described how the Insurance industry differed from other financial services. “Insurance essentially transfers risk, and when simplified, it’s about collecting premiums and paying claims, and doing it well so that you grow your business and make it profitable. Unlike banking, here you have to book your revenues on a daily and monthly basis, whilst when a bank books a loan, they enjoy interest income for the period of the loan. So, Insurance is a much tougher business as customers tend to consider premiums an expense outgo.”

“The greatest challenge that Life Insurance has faced is ‘under-penetration’ where relatively few Sri Lankans possess a life insurance policy. Whilst the low per capita of the country is one reason, many other things can be done to improve the business and grow the market where the upside potential is huge”, Iftikar opined further.

As an industry expert, Iftikar described how Softlogic Life represents the primary principles of the sector. “Softlogic Life has always led by example. The moment of truth in Insurance is whether your Insurer is at hand when you need them most, and is usually about being able to receive your claim when you need it. We have established a claim settlement process where over 80% of claims are settled in one single day. As an area that is open to frequent

disagreement, the key principle is to be fair and reasonable at all times, no matter what the circumstances and customers will always appreciate this in the long run.”

Predicting the impact of COVID-19 on the future of the Insurance industry, Iftikar stated, “COVID-19 has taught us to be safe and not be exposed to risk. Therefore, we believe that the Life and Health Insurance businesses will be the key beneficiaries. Some markets have already witnessed a surge in Health Insurance premiums post-COVID.”

Of the steps taken by Softlogic Life to aid those of its clients who have been severely impacted by the pandemic, Ifitikar said, “The main effects of the pandemic are largely due to job loss and income cuts as a result of the economic fallout. As such, we have deferred premium payments and have offered several alternative plans to help policyholders get over this unimaginable situation.”

“The Life Insurance industry has traditionally been driven by Insurance Agents and Advisors who visit customers and convince them of the merits of Insurance. Social distancing has however brought about a big hurdle. We see that the door to digitization is now slowly opening, and perhaps this will be the new and more effective paradigm for the future. We have to always see how we can improve distribution beyond tradition”, noted Ifitikar, while speaking of the changes brought on by COVID-19 that will help mould the future of the Insurance industry.

The Insurance industry is no stranger when it comes to adopting digital trends as Ifitikar disclosed, “Digitization should be a top priority in the progress of Insurance. We need to make it easier and convenient for customers to purchase our products, and to do so, digitization is required for the process to be as smooth as possible. Therefore, digitization means simplifying access; including the salesperson, distribution partner or the customer as the case might be. So, digitization does not only mean an online transaction.”

As per Ifitikar, the three steps to countering the negative impression many people have of the Insurance industry are as follows -

1. Be fair, do not hide behind long contractual documents and fine print
2. Simplify products and make them relevant and transparent
3. Pay claims promptly without any delay.

When asked about the driving force behind his success, Iftikar replied, “At the end of the day, it’s all about hard work, and being excited and passionate about what you do. It also entails how things can be looked at, created and delivered differently, and not treading down that same old worn-out path that many do for the best part of their lives.”

On the topic of the makings of a good leader, the Managing Director opined, “Leadership is about walking the talk, leading the way and ensuring that your band of people follow you and accomplish the organization’s set goals. You have to make the journey exciting so that the team builds momentum. Along the way, it’s always important to treat your staff the same way that you would want to be treated.”

“Fitness is important not only for one’s health, but also to ensure proper productivity, mental agility and effectiveness at work. My weekly routine covers a 3km jog on three days of the week and 28 holes of golf, which is a lot of fun. Additionally, the gym is important too”, responded Iftikar, when questioned about the role of health and fitness play in his life.

In his closing thoughts Iftikar reminisces of a poem ‘If’ by Rudyard Kipling that his Dad gave him as a teenager, parts of which have stuck with him through the years.

“If you can dream- and not make dreams your master
If you can think- and not make thoughts your
aim If you can meet with triumph and disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same...

.... Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it
And – which is more -you’ll be a Man, my Son”