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Leading by Example

Basim AlSaie of Installux Gulf explains what he thinks needs to be done to encourage innovation



Basim AlSaie, Managing Director of Installux Gulf, is a good interviewee. Decisive, direct and dynamic, he speaks clearly and at length on a variety of subjects, notably about how to promote energy-efficiency and the changes that are necessary in Bahrain to foster excellence.

His ambitions for this country are far-reaching and go beyond the sector in which he works. He set up Installux Gulf, a supplier of architectural aluminium products such as facades, doors and windows, 20 years ago, and today the former small operation is a regional player that has worked on many landmark projects across the Gulf. AlSaie's vision for this country is similarly expansive, and includes becoming a leader in the field.

"We need to look beyond borders and consider this region and beyond," he says. "In our industry, we are pushed by the tougher standards in Europe, which force us to be more innovative. I have worked in this industry for 27 years and we are always telling people to invest in more energy-efficient windows, doors and facades. In the past, developers didn't care because a dinar saved on better-quality but more expensive products went into their pockets, because electricity was subsidised. That is not the case anymore. We need to update building codes and standards and then put ambitious goals in place to make buildings more energy-efficient. If you set the goal of consuming zero energy for example - which is challenging but not impossible - then you have a clear objective and innovation will follow, as companies will invest in technology. In Bahrain, we are always trying to catch up rather than put goals in place that would make us leaders in the future."

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He believes that success and invention will come from understanding your strengths and unique qualities and allowing these things to inform your "grand vision". He believes there needs to be clearer vision for where Bahrain wants to be. "The country needs clear goals - that by 2030, we want to be 75 per cent powered by cleaner, renewable energy, for example. Combine this with incentives to create opportunities for local industry. We need a framework for people to put their investment where it matters and make it feasible to build locally. From elsewhere in the world, we know that renewable energy is never picked up without incentives. The challenge is how to find such an incentive without draining the government, because often, in the past, these ideas have looked good but didn't deliver or work efficiently."

Many people talk about renewable energy - solar and wind power - and conserving energy, but AlSaie feels they are often just using buzz words, because this is what the rest of the world is talking about, without deep conviction or substance. "I would like to reverse the habit of just talking about something because it is on trend. Instead, we should start trying to challenge the business community, giving them the opportunity to come up with solutions to reach the goals."

Bahrain already has companies that make air conditioners. AlSaie believes that if the government set a target of reducing energy consumption in AC units, those same companies have the potential to respond innovatively. "The most efficient solar panels installed on the roof of a house in Bahrain don't have the capacity to produce enough energy to power the AC units. We need to inspire the companies to make better AC units, and to encourage the financial sector to be creative and make those units affordable to Bahraini families, allowing them to pay by instalment, for instance. Eventually this technology will save the households money but they can't afford it outright now. There are no practical mechanics to make all of this happen."

The first step he would take towards promoting energy-efficiency would be to introduce a higher duty on old-fashioned, non-efficient products. "We need to make changes even if they are small in the beginning, but soon they will grow and in the end the savings and benefits will be large. There will always be pain and hardship when you embark on new technologies but as long as there is a clear vision and focus, things will become successful. This has always been the case everywhere in the world" says AlSaie. "Are we ready to take bold moves towards leadership, or are we happy just to follow?" asks AlSaie. **BIG**