

SEDDIQ HASSANI

They say if you want to be a better CEO, you should run 42km marathons

James Kahongeh

For the last 20 years, the professional and family journeys of Seddiq Hassani, the CEO of Bamburi Cement, have been splendid parallels.

The athletic, good-humoured Moroccan executive has enjoyed a stellar career spanning two decades in the cement industry, working for French multinational Lafarge and its subsidiaries in Africa.

Anything he feels he has yet to attain at 52? "I want to grow my faith as a Muslim and to accomplish the Hajj pilgrimage," he says.

His professional pilgrimage at Lafarge Holcim started in 2001 in Morocco as a control manager and later as country manager in 2003. For 18 years, he served in multiple roles within the company before he was posted to Kenya to steer East Africa's largest cement producer in February 2018.

Hassani is resolutely enthusiastic about the business of cement, but first, I am curious to know about his penchant for marathons.

He ran his first marathon at 45 in 2014, an intercity race between Nice and Cannes in France, where he clocked 4 hours 5 minutes. He has gone on to run 13 more – an average of two per year.

"When I came to Kenya, I'd imagined that I would be able to run a lot more frequently. That hasn't been the case," he says, with a gleeful sigh, but explains that Covid-19 has also checked his passion for the miles.

"I run in April/May and in October/November," he says.

His best run was the Frankfurt marathon in 2016. "I did it in 3 hours and 1 minute. But I was disappointed for failing to break the sub-three-hour barrier."

It is easy to understand his frustration. "I train hard. I run five times every week. Before, I did 40km every week. These days I cover between 80 and 100 km weekly."

His worst? A race in Florence, Italy, in 2017. "It was raining and very windy. I couldn't feel my fingers. I suffered a lot." Still, he managed an impressive finish time of 3 hours 8 minutes.

Hassani is a stickler for dietary discipline. His meals feature "a lot of vegetables and some proteins." His is a teetotal life. He also prefers long nights. "I sleep for seven hours. Sometimes eight."

While admitting that his C-suite success has been a reward of ex-

Cement CEO and His Marathon Wit



"In a marathon, you start to feel the pain after 30km. This is when your endurance is put to test."

SEDDIQ HASSANI the CEO of Bamburi Cement. He took over the Lafarge Group company in 2018.

PHOTO: POOL

perience accumulated over the years, the chief executive notes that running marathons has made him more alert and patient, and allowed him to challenge his limits.

"I'm more resilient now. I deal with most difficulties that come with my job with ease. I'm also never rash when making decisions," he says.

"In a marathon, you start to feel the pain after 30km. This is when your endurance is put to test. You don't finish because you have any energy left but because of your mental power."

Away from the marathon

course, Hassani has had several awakening moments in life, but none quite like the Kenyan assignment. For someone who had worked mostly in the Arab and French worlds, this came with a culture shock.

"Sometimes as CEO, you have to make lone decisions. Doing so after coming from a protected environment can be quite intimidating," he says, but credits himself for his ability to adapt quickly in different contexts by learning the language and culture of the people.

His eldest son, now 20, was born when his career had just taken off. The thought of fatherhood as a young professional unnerved him. "I wondered, would I be able to contribute to raising him? But everything worked out quite well."

His rise professionally has coincided with his two children's growth.

Do they run too? Hassani shrugs, saying attempts to get them to run have fallen through so far. "I started running in my 40s. There's still time for them," he says.

In his household, mood, news of the day and the environment determine conversations.

"My eldest loves politics, which we discuss a lot. His brother is into football. He's a Barcelona fan. Both love travel and want to tour the world. My wife and I talk to them a lot about our culture and values," he says.

We turn to the cement business, his forte. Thanks to ongoing mega infrastructural projects, Kenya's cement industry has been experiencing a boom in recent years, government data shows. Last year, this growth hit 20 percent.

By virtue of its production capacity, Bamburi Cement has taken the largest share of this flourishing business. At 80 percent, the company was the largest supplier of cement during the construction of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) line, Hassani reveals.

"Globally, demand for construction material is picking up. It's a growing business in Kenya, with many projects such as dams, roads and expansion of housing,

currently underway," he says.

"There's, however, a lot of competition and you have to fight every day for your marketshare. I hold critical meetings three times a day to monitor our numbers in the market."

Business and sustainability is the religion of the moment. Cement production, though, is one of the biggest polluters of the environment.

I have to ask him the obvious question: whether he feels that Bamburi Cement, now 70, is doing enough to conserve the environment as it aims for a century in business.

"We have yearly targets which we monitor closely. We're also reducing our water and coal consumption, and rehabilitating quarries wherever we operate," he talks of the company's continuity programme to achieve net zero carbon-dioxide emissions in its operations in the next 15 years.

Under 4 hours

So, what stimulates him in his 50s? Hassani, who has two Master's degrees in engineering mechanics and engineering aeronautics and a PhD in mechanics, says age has come with a keener appetite for knowledge, desire to innovate and to celebrate success.

"We can never learn enough from our teams, colleagues and seniors. We should be humble at all times," he says, adding on innovation: "It's the soul of the modern business. In coming months, we'll roll out 3D printing technology of building. This will make it possible to construct a house in under four hours."

I ask him if he has any personal struggles. "Controlling my emotions. I'm a calm person, but I lose my temper sometimes."

He is also working to improve his listening skills. "Most people don't realise it's never easy to be a good listener," he says.

Ultimately, he wants to undergo a thorough digital detox.

"I'm always using my phone, including during the weekend. I'm trying to reduce this dependence."

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