Ideas worth spreading

The prestigious Ernst and Young Family Business Award of Excellence 2014 is given “to outstanding business families who demonstrate the balance between work and family issues, grow their business over generations and engage in philanthropic or social activities,” according to a statement from Ernst and Young Jordan. And its recipient, Vice Chairman of Nuqul Group Ghassan Nuqul has managed to tick all the boxes, Khadija Muhisen reports.
Ghassan Naqil’s tenacious commitment to a sound corporate governance structure, coupled with an unwavering adherence to ethical business values and an ambitious strategic vision has not been an easy feat by any standards. The success of the Naqil Group’s CSR policies, risk management plans, business transparency and equal opportunities has culminated in this honorary accolade to join an exclusive group of nearly 20 noteworthy family business leaders from around the world.

Congratulations on winning this prestigious award. How do you feel about this recognition?

This award is a valuable recognition. Even though the journey has been ripe with challenges, I have always been steadfast and determined to cross that milestone in our lives.

When I started out, I came up with a mission statement for myself: to make a difference in my family, my business and my country. I truly wanted to make a difference.

I have been very keen from the outset to institutionalize our business for the obvious reasons. I think for a family business - or any business - to grow, you need an institutional framework that embodies many elements including investment in human energy and empowerment with all that it entails.

To transform a business that had been in existence for 43 years at the time into an institution with governance was not an easy endeavor, given that my father and I were spearheading major expansion plans outside and inside Jordan. And don’t forget that one cannot work on family business governance without governance for the family itself. It was challenging because we had to address difficult issues and make hard choices.

You are going to the second EV Family Business Summit, scheduled to take place as part of the World Entrepreneur of the Year event this month in Monte Carlo. Many of the world’s most notable family business owners will be attending. What do you hope to take with you to this meeting?

I am looking forward to Monte Carlo for many reasons. I value the opportunity to share with and learn from others because the dynamics are constantly changing. Every phase has its challenges. That is why this networking and exchange is so valuable. I am very much looking forward to sharing my experiences, to represent Jordan with pride, but also to learn from others definitely.

It is not what you do but rather how you do it. This is part of the governance environment: systems and procedures, consistency, sustainability and labour rights.

We were the first members in Jordan of the Global Compact with the United Nations on embracing universal principles and engaging effectively with other enlightened global businesses on labor rights and conditions, among many other principles.

It’s a comprehensive approach towards running your business. And it makes business sense. This is key. Anyone can do it. There is no one size that fits all. You can always adjust according to your conditions. For example, our Group Standard Manual (GSM) is on our portal and governs our operations. There is no room for guessing or experimenting. However, it is also dynamic and adjusted on a weekly basis. We have in fact just
added my favourite chapter: how to break
a system. We encourage our leaders to
be sharing if they feel the system is not
in the best interest of our customer.
There is a committee to evaluate if such
adjustments are in line with our culture
and code of conduct. If they are, they
are incorporated into our systems and
become policy.
So again, governance is a culture,
way of doing business right, both
internally and externally including the
environment, society, CSR, community,
laws, taxes, you name it.
My father taught me that success is like
an electric circuit. You can never have
a current if the circuit is not closed. To
do so, all the elements must be in place
and active.

"Let there be no illusions about this
though: I am very fortunate. My father has
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That’s why I feel I need to make a difference."

Speaking of the environment,
Nuqul Group is known for its
commitment to responsible
behavior towards the environment.
Your motto is “Growing Together.”
Can you tell me more about that?
We are committed to our responsibility to
use natural resources in a safer, sustainable
manner and have implemented
environmentally-friendly technologies at
our plants and mills.
All our pulp suppliers, for instance,
have to abide by the sustainable forestry
principles of the Forest Stewardship
Council that mandates every time a tree is
cut, it be replaced by a minimum number
of three.
Ethical governance is a business
necessity. And to be honest, if you
are environmentally conscious, it
makes business sense in the long run.
We managed to greatly reduce our
mill’s water intake. We recycle our
industrial wastewater back into the
manufacturing process. Our plants’
water is treated and used for irrigation.
We claim back much of our fibre. We
are also reducing our CO2 emissions
and producing cleaner energy.
So again, it not only makes business sense,
it makes environmental sense. And this
takes me back to the circuit of success. It
has to be part and parcel of your overall
methodology. It also goes a long way with
your credibility and goodwill, with your
customers and your employees. When
they see you abiding by a code of conduct
that governs your commitment to the
environment and equal opportunity, they
cannot but respect you and follow in your
footsteps. You also become the employer
de fact. And this was one of our main
business objectives, to attract the best
calibre in the region.

How do you spot talent and how do
you retain it?
We use headhunters. And we attract
talent because of our business ethics.
Empowerment is key. An MIT study on
what enters top-calibre, high level talent
found that the ability to make a difference
ranked highest. And how can employees
make a difference if the employer doesn’t
provide the space? So empowerment
and creating the space are key drivers, as
long as you draw the framework, in terms
of your code of conduct and culture.
We offer profit sharing, bonuses and
international salary scales.
But it hasn’t been easy. We grew from a
small family business dependent on one person (my father) putting in 18 hours a day with five companies in 1980, to 26 companies in 1996 run by a thousand people. We became a leadership. This is when I decided that we could not remain the growth, and do all the restructuring and rationalization we aimed for.

Did you find you had to struggle with the immutability of the older generation to the ability to implement changes and offer new perspectives?

Yes. There is nothing called the habit. My father was very progressive. He believed in me. He believed in my mission even though it was contrary to what he was used to. He certainly took chances because I made bold changes. Thank God, we both stuck to the results. Even though our styles are different, we share the same values and vision. That’s the secret.

Let there be no illusion about this thought. I am very fortunate. My father has given me the platform and the same. That’s why I find I need to make a difference. And I am proud and honored to have continued his journey along the same course of values and culture – but with new blood and a new, dynamic way replacing the last available technology.

Did you ever have moments of self-doubt?

The last day on the job was a very special day for me because I had a closed discussion with my father for three hours. One of the things he told me I carry with me every day: business is part of the world and a stone cutter hammering away at his rock, perhaps a thousand times before there’s even a crack in it.

It has been tough, particularly in the last four years. But you know what, I get a kick out of it. Eighty percent of me that is spent addressing serious problems. But I cannot wait to go to work every morning. I am definitely blessed. It’s all in the mindset. In return, you enjoy the achievement.

The journey is more important than the result. My mission is to make a difference, and learn and network along the way.

And I always rely on the “yellow test,” then I test my head on the yellow at night and my conscience is clear. This is both the award and the drive for me.

This company is no longer for the Nuqul family. It is for all our stakeholders: employees, suppliers, customers, banks, etc.

Tell me more about your involvement in giving back to the community, the group’s CSR activities and the Elia Nuqul Foundation?

Going back to the electric circuit of success: CSR is part and parcel to the heart of good governance. It has to come from a place of true conviction that you use it to your community. Successful CSR is when you employ good business practices into social entrepreneurship. We as the first company in Jordan to sign a partnership agreement with the government in Al Koura district. We committed ourselves to a practical approach to social development and chose Al Koura district, where we also partnered with established NGOs to see results. Today, we use the center to run our free interventions in the area’sLogical clinic, robotics center, micro-finance, chemical-free farming and productive textiles, and packaging and printing center.

What would you tell young talent entering the job market now?

I want to start with a fable by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). “Allah loves that if one does a job, he protects it.” Why is it that we excel at what we do when we work afraid? No for starters, we need to aim to perfect what we do all the time. My father always and consistently has been bound to eventually get a result. He fell often, but he would rise stronger after every fall. I would say work hard, believe in yourself, make mistakes and learn. I make mistakes every day.”