

SUCCESS: THE INSIGHT STORY

Be willing to try anything

BUKIT Kiara Properties Sdn Bhd group managing director Datuk N.K. Tong is the focus in this week's column and he says that starting at the bottom is always a learning experience, which helps you overall.

How has your life experience made you the leader you are today?

Coming from a relatively privileged background, I was somehow fortunate not to take it for granted or be spoilt by it, and was grateful for all and any blessings that came my way. My faith in God has helped me to grow and be guided in my daily journey. I know my time on Earth is borrowed and that He put me here for His purposes.

What have the highlights and challenges been during your tenure at Bukit Kiara Properties (BKP)?

There have been so many highlights working with the team at BKP but the true highlight, for me, has been building this team that we have. I am truly grateful for everyone's efforts over the years. While it is sad to see some move on, it gives me a lot of gratitude to know that we were able to impact their lives when they were with us, and to watch them grow in their careers.

The current team is truly aligned to our core purpose of enriching lives through meaningful engagement, and live out our core values of quality, innovation, care and integrity.

One of the biggest challenges at BKP is when a customer or resident chooses to take advantage of our caring and integrity stance, and abuse it. With over a thousand home owners and many more tenants, there is bound to be a small handful that will tell their version of stories. Because of our stand on integrity, sometimes we are unable to tell all of our side of the story. This puts us in a losing position.

I am however comforted that in the decades to come, the truth will prevail and our customers will come to understand what we truly stand for.

What advice can you offer to entrepreneurs/youths who want to start their career/own business?

Take every opportunity in life, whether at work or outside of it, as a learning opportunity. Even mundane tasks can be an exercise in patience or perfection, with the right attitude and the end goal in mind.

Be willing to start from the bottom and to try anything and everything. I am often surprised for example, by people wanting to open a restaurant who have never worked in one.

After I resigned as executive director of Sunrise Bhd in 1997 (the family having sold the company), I went to work as a cashier and waiter, helping my sister to streamline the



operations at her café. It was a humbling experience and taught me a great deal about dealing with customers, including the most unreasonable ones.

How has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal lives?

I have been blessed with so many mentors throughout my life. Some have been deliberate, some accidental and others weren't even aware that they were mentors, as I am constantly modelling excellent behaviours whenever I see them.

My two biggest mentors were my father and late mother. My father for his disciplined work ethic and caring nature. My late mother for her push for excellence and her discernment of people, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Perhaps my best mentorship experience is still ongoing, in my involvement in the Young Presidents' Organisation (YPO), a global organisation of over 24,000 CEOs. Over the past 14 years as a member, I have had the privilege of meeting many fellow CEOs whom I have been able to learn from. The culmination of this has been over the last three years when I was elected into the 22-person International Board for YPO. This has been one incredible mentorship journey in leadership.

What do you want to accomplish in the next five years?

Five years is a very short time to contemplate what can be achieved. When we talk to the team, we frame it as a 15- to 20-year journey at the very least, and then break down our tasks to the next three and next 12 months.

For the long term, BKP wants to impact the real estate industry in terms of innovative lifestyles and improving quality standards for the benefit of the Malaysian public.

Best piece of advice you ever got on your career?

From Mike Useem, my professor of strategic management, while doing my MBA at the Wharton School of Business. He encouraged us to continue our pursuit of strategic management versus specific disciplines, for example, finance, etc. Although, initially, specialisation was better for salaries, in the long run, 10-15 years later, strategic and general management won the day.

It has given me the courage to explore many different disciplines and remain a generalist, and not a specialist, in my own personal leadership development journey.

Most admired business leader? Why?

I think every business leader has admirable traits that have brought them to where they are today. But perhaps the most admired leaders that I respect are not business leaders.

I truly admire leaders who stand for causes beyond themselves and who were willing to suffer as a result of it, people like Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Jane Goddall, etc. They led a purpose-driven life that went beyond who they were and represented those of us who aspire to do our best for others.

How do you stay abreast of issues affecting your industry?

My involvement in Real Estate and Housing Developers Association Malaysia (Rehda) over the years has kept me up to date with the latest issues locally. But perhaps my travels abroad have given me the most significant impact in terms of learning, understanding and keeping up to date with the changing world of real estate and people's lifestyle aspirations.

What man-made innovation confounds you? Why?

The industrial revolution. While we have progressed a lot as a result, we have also destroyed a lot of natural resources as a result. We have also lost touch with what it is to make things with our own bare hands, to appreciate the simple things in life.

A must-read for every business owner/manager is ...?

Leaders Eat Last, by Simon Sinek. A great follow-up to his other book, *Start With Why*. *Leaders Eat Last* starts with a very interesting historical perspective about leaders from the ancient past, how they behaved and how their followers were willing to be subjected to them, in return for protection, security and safety.