



# THINK

like a sage.

# WORK

like a fool.

# ACT

like a criminal.

success secrets of a designpreneur  
**BY MARK PHOOI AND JEANNIE CHIA**



**THINK LIKE A SAGE.  
WORK LIKE A FOOL.  
ACT LIKE A CRIMINAL.**

**Mark Phooi**



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## Foreword

# THE SWEETNESS OF MY STRUGGLES

To begin with, I am basically a dreamer. Unlike many who dream with their eyes closed, mine have always been wide open. I have lofty aspirations and I will passionately chase these dreams till my last ounce of energy is gone.

On another note, I don't claim to be a writer and the English language remains one of my major challenges, of which I have continuously sought to improve.

For readers, this book is not written in the usual self-help format, but it consists of a diverse collection of my thoughts, self-concocted design thinking methods, design management approaches and design business strategies.

Putting together this book was nothing less than a painstaking task, but I truly enjoyed every bit of it. This project saw me working past midnight and waking up in the wee hours of the morning, drawing inspiration from the first light of day, and working from a typical Singapore coffee shop at Binjai Park. Amidst my tight daily routine and with the kind assistance of Jeannie, I managed to gather thousands of loose pieces of notes, including a few personal diary records that were written as far back as 1985.

Hence, you will be reading a couple of varied writing styles, including some original reproductions (pardon the grammatical errors), all of which have been incorporated into this book through different types of editorial layout designs.

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## **A Bad Start Was Indeed a Good Start**

Being poor and underprivileged was a good starting point in my life. The hardship I was put through during my teenage to young adult years has taught me many difficult and bitter lessons. It did not defeat me, but instead it has helped me develop fortitude and conditioned my mind to seek success. It has also sharpened my survival instincts, allowing me to excel in my professional career as a designer, a design manager, a designpreneur, and currently as a design educator.

## **My Secret to Success**

I attribute the key to my success to chancing on a Christian theology book called *The 7 Laws of Success* when I was in my twenties. It provided direction to my thoughts and purpose in my pursuits, which led to me crafting my very own vision and aspirations. You will find records of these in one of my personal diary entries, dated 10 December 1986 on pages 272 – 274. Each and every struggle thereafter gave me new meaning and purpose. Reading *The 7 Laws of Success* helped me to attain a strong sense of purpose, and more importantly, a higher sense of self-worth. From that moment onwards, quitting was never an option for me. Feelings of stress, tiredness, procrastination, self-doubt, fear and every other negative emotion that may have led to me sitting back and resting, were all completely erased from my mental dictionary. I was on a journey of no return.

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## **Accidental Discovery of Self-mastery**

Since young, I have always been told that I was a rebel, a rascal, and a non-conformist. Being a contrarian by nature, it intrigued me to find out and understand why so many typical Singaporeans work and think in a manner that conforms to the norms of society. Therefore, I began to uncover more about myself through the process of self-reflection. In total, I have kept three diaries and thousands of loose scribbled notes that record my personal thoughts and events.

It was through these countless sessions of self-reflection that I discovered my true self. Like any human being, I possessed good and bad traits as well as a strong personality. My more important positive traits include having self-discipline, empathy, diligence, commitment, generosity, and curiosity. And my negative ones include being impulsive, mischievous, impatient, intolerant, dominating and sometimes, abrasive.

This led to a profound understanding of myself, which ultimately led to the acceptance that there were parts of my DNA that were near impossible to change. However, somehow I did manage to utilise this mixed bag of good and bad traits selectively, and to my advantage. In other words, I was able to get things done, and achieve the results I expected. This allowed me, at times, to get away with certain things as well as out of trouble on many occasions. To put it negatively, this was the criminal mind in me at work. This accidental discovery of the value of self-mastery enabled me to effectively press the right button at the right time to get the right result.

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## **Socialism**

Karl Marx, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Mao Tse-Tung are my inspirations. Why? Because they survived and succeeded in their struggles purely based on a simple ideology – socialism. They were the underdogs, but it was their strong ideological belief in a better economic society for the masses that strengthened their willpower to the point where they were willing to stake their lives for it.

Like my heroes, I too, am an underdog, fighting to forge my own identity, and sharpening my survival skills with the aim of attaining personal financial success.

## **Accidental Love – Design**

At 24, I enrolled into a local arts institution not because of my interest or talent, but because art was the only non-academic subject I excelled in. That particular institution was also the only one willing to accept me. I was at my wits' end because the education system in the eighties was not designed to accommodate matured students and late developers like me. I originally enrolled to learn fine arts and not design. It was through an accidental discovery in my first year as an arts student that I realised design was more my cup of tea.

Besides, it was also more commercially viable as a career, so I switched to studying design.

## **Coming to Terms with Money**

I'd like to believe that I now belong to the upper middle class, but not to the ultra rich. Ever since I entered the education field, old memories of my coaching days have come back

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to me. Back then, my swimming boys were aware that if they could not afford my monthly teaching fee of SGD20, they were welcome to join in for free as long as they were genuinely interested in learning and willing to put up with the hardship of my training sessions. As a school owner now, I still feel the same way and have implemented a 'study now pay later' financial scheme to help financially weak students, who likewise have a genuine interest to study design, but lack the means to pay.

While I do recognise the importance and necessity of money, my attitude towards it has somehow changed, and I see it as having a lesser priority in my life. I have come to terms with one basic fact: however much we have, it will never be enough. The value of material things now mean less to me, as compared to my early struggling years.

I have embraced this quote with zest and purpose in my life, and I hope you will too.

*For the rich who think they have not enough, they will always remain poor. For the poor who think they have enough, they are already rich.*

## **My Appreciation and Sincere Thanks**

To all my partners, colleagues, FMDS students, alumni members, competitors, friends and foes – my sincere thanks to you as you have contributed to a mixed bag of varied encounters and experiences in my journey. And I will find it a waste if these encounters and thoughts were not recorded.

To my competitors and foes, you have been one of my best teachers. From you, I have derived the necessary

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motivation and drive to push myself to think out of the box, in order to be one step ahead of you.

This was partly fuelled by your intimidating market presence and my fear of losing. You have also indirectly contributed to my wisdom bank, without which I would never have had. I thank you.

To my editorial team, namely Jeannie Chia. Thank you for being so patient and ever ready to stretch, despite the numerous mean text messages and hurting words I have directed towards you. You have managed to rise to the challenge and I salute you. You are now part of my success story.

To the team at Lancer Design, namely Genz Lim, Dimitrije Curcic, Tian Peiqin, and especially Audrey Chong. Thank you for all your wonderful help in putting this beautifully designed book together.

To Elisa, Marcus, Kenneth and Nicholas. You have been my chief motivators, and the driving force of my life and its string of successes. Nothing means more to me than having your understanding and acceptance of my eccentricity at home. Papa loves you all.

To all partners, friends and readers, I do hope this book will bring a smile to your face as you read it. Hopefully you might find some useful tips in here for your life and business.

If any of you wish to share your thoughts, you are most welcome to email me at [markphooi@firstmedia.edu.sg](mailto:markphooi@firstmedia.edu.sg). Your contribution and feedback might spur me on to do my next edition.

Thank you all and my best regards,

Mark Phooi

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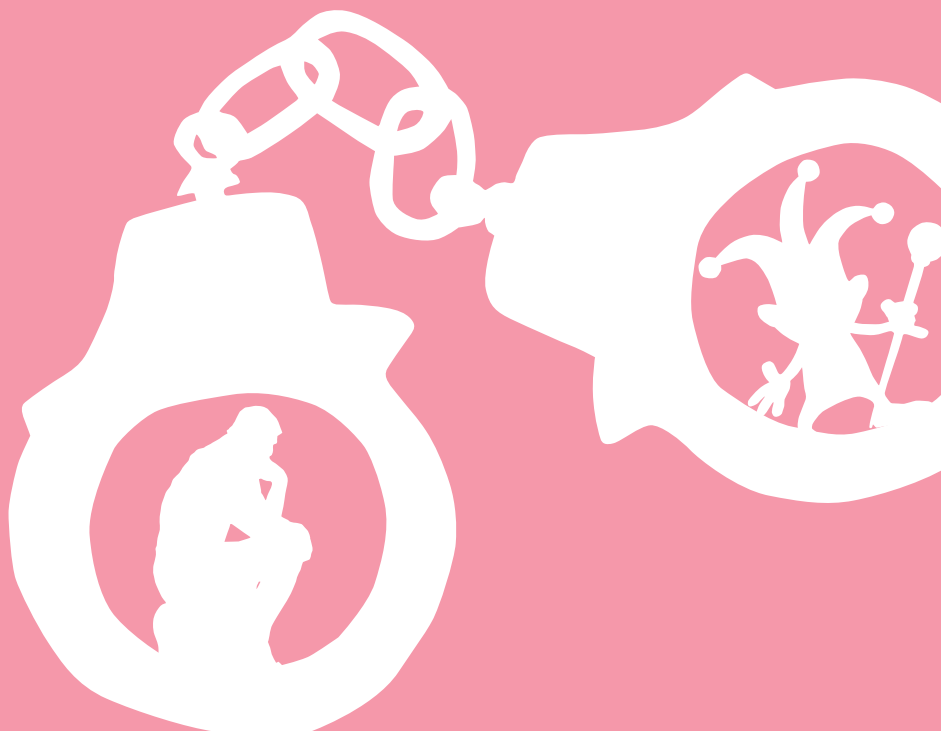
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# PART I

*Mark Phooi:  
A Life by Design*



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## Introduction

# A SAGE. A FOOL. A CRIMINAL.

*“Think like a Sage. Work like a Fool. Act like a Criminal.”*

He wrote these 12 words on the whiteboard in his office and said each phrase with as much conviction as a man who's been there and done it all. To be honest, as soon as I finished jotting down the word “criminal”, all I could think about was why a principal of a school would actually advise anyone to act like a criminal. That just wasn't what you would expect to hear from a man who, at this point in his life, defines himself largely as an educator. He looked around at the mostly confused faces that filled the room and with half a grin, said, “Do you know what this means?” As one of a handful of employees he was mentoring that day, it was obvious why he wanted us to think like a sage. However, I was more than a little curious as to his intention behind wanting his employees to become fools and act like criminals. I thought to myself, “Where's the lesson in that?”

Many things can be said about Mark Phooi, both good and bad, but above all, it is undeniable that he is a self-made man. Now at the age of 50, Mark has achieved heaps more than the average person from his humble family background, even though he only started his career in design at the considerably late age of 27. However, his working life actually started very much earlier than most. His very first job was opening car doors for wealthy customers at the tender age of seven. This progressed to him taking on a variety of odd jobs including being a houseman at a hotel, a labourer, an



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office boy, a production operator, an encyclopedia salesman, a lifeguard, a timber yard supervisor, and an in-house sales quotation executive. From starting his own design practice after attaining his diploma from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), to finally becoming the founder and CEO of First Media Pte Ltd, the only communications agency ever to receive the prestigious Enterprise 50 Start Up Award (an annual business award recognising 50 of Singapore's most promising privately-held companies), to setting up and assuming the role of principal at First Media Design School (FMDS), a progressive private educational institution, even though he knew very little about the education business, it is undeniable that Mark has been triumphant in every key venture he has started. What then, is the secret to his success? How did he manage to rise above poverty and mediocrity, against all odds, to become one of Singapore's most established designpreneurs? What is it that sets Mark apart from his peers? Perhaps it all boils down to the way he views the world and how he has always aspired to lead his life – by *thinking like a sage, working like a fool and acting like a criminal*.

## THINK LIKE A SAGE

*Thinking like a sage* requires a certain level of wisdom and courage – that which can largely be attained through a lifelong quest for self-development and self-improvement. In order to think like a sage, we must first work towards inhabiting the qualities of one. The wise and successful often have a few key characteristics in common. Firstly, they come across as confident and self-aware individuals who know what their strengths and weaknesses are, and who are fully focused on their goals. Secondly, they believe in the benefits

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of constantly improving themselves by always pushing their limits of knowledge and experience. And lastly, they are more inclined to see beyond what may be deemed typically as negative and positive perspectives, while having the ability to reflect on and learn from life's many lessons. All in all, sages are often perceived as those who possess a deeper understanding, as compared to the average man, of their surroundings and themselves.

When I met Mark for the very first time, right off the bat, I could sense that this was a man who was hardly lacking in self-confidence. He spoke with a level of assertion that bordered on arrogance, but there was something untypically charming and persuasive about his manner that I could not really put a finger on. At moments, I was surprised as to how candid he was with his remarks, and it was as though he spoke without an ounce of inhibition. During our conversation, he was open about his expectations and the more he shared, the more I became convinced of his ideals and what he represented. To be honest, even though he did not strike me as highly intellectual, he did come across as someone wise; someone who had acquired a great deal of knowledge through his years of experience. And within the hour or so spent talking to him, largely because of his open nature, I left thinking that he was someone I could actually learn a great deal from.

"I'm here to seek a breakthrough," said Mark to his classmates. That was how he introduced himself during the first day of the Berkeley-Nanyang Advanced Management Programme that he is currently enrolled in. Even at the age of 50, Mark has not stopped pursuing his studies, and continues to find ways to improve himself. As an educator, it is of no surprise that Mark is a firm believer in the importance of personal growth and development. Looking back on his two-week programme at the Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University, he shares that at this point in his life, he has

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reached a crossroad. “I’ve come to a point where I feel like I’m cruising in my life. Should I continue and end well, or should I adopt a gung-ho spirit and *qiong* (translated as ‘a rapid work pace’ in Chinese dialect) again?” He then explained that through studying, he hopes to gain a deeper understanding of new business strategies and concepts applied in other established enterprises, with the aim of learning how to improve his business. Even with all the success that he has attained, he admits that while he has ideas, he isn’t sure if they are good enough, and that he is still trying to find his footing in terms of the growth strategies he plans to implement for his education business.

The process of reflection is undoubtedly a crucial part of growth. And although it would be easy to peg Mark as a man of action, a big part of his transformation from a lifeguard who was paid a mere SGD20 a day to the owner of an award-winning communications group, can be attributed to his ability to contemplate and take stock of his actions. Mark is a man who strongly believes in making plans. During one of his Design Management classes, I remember him asking his students the following question: “If you were going on a trip tomorrow, what would you pack in your suitcase?” He then went on to expand that in life, we are all given suitcases of the same size, and it is ultimately up to us to decide if we want to pack light or pack heavy. “To me, sleeping is a waste of time. If I can do something more valuable and more interesting. I’ll say let’s do it,” said Mark. “I’ll always try to maximise my time. As long as you plan, you’ll be able to execute things very fast because part of the analytical thinking process has already been completed in advance.” With this in mind, Mark often encourages his students to chart out their goals from the age they currently are until the time they retire. This way, they will then be able to reverse plan their life journey, and clearly determine the approaches they have to take to reach every milestone.

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This is also something that Mark frequently practises. “When I chart my goals, I’ll start from the day that I think I’ll be buried. Who will come to my wake and what am I expecting others to say about me? I’ll start with an end in mind,” explained Mark. “If you want to leave behind a good memory and legacy, you should start from the day you die and work your way backwards. With your character, values, behaviour and principles, act accordingly to what you want your end to be like.” As a reminder that he has a finite amount of time on this earth, he makes it a point to continually assess if he has reached his targeted goals, while also setting new goals for the future. “I am down to 1,300 living weeks given the average life expectancy of 75,” quipped Mark. Although this way of thinking about one’s life may seem morbid, he does not see it as such, and in fact, it is what gives him the imperative to live life to the fullest. This process of introspection will usually be done periodically, and it is this continual cycle of reflective thinking, while assessing and dissecting his victories and failures that is undoubtedly one of the secrets to his success. This ritual keeps him on his toes and provides welcomed challenges that spur him to consistently strive towards greater heights in both his personal and professional endeavours. To Mark, even though everyone’s suitcase is the same size, knowing what to pack and having a plan in place has always served well to get him a higher return on the contents of his.

The German poet and novelist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once said, “Thinking is easy, acting is difficult, and to put one’s thoughts into action is the most difficult thing in the world.” To those who have worked closely with Mark, it would seem as though, contrary to Goethe’s observation, he hardly faces any difficulty in putting his thoughts into action. In fact, one of Mark’s key strengths is his ability to not only see things from a wider perspective, but also having the resourcefulness

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to accomplish what he sets out to do, which in itself is a very rare trait. Unlike most, he is able to pull together all sorts of personalities with different competencies and draw out their individual strengths towards achieving a common goal. This observation of his unique strength was also shared by Audrey Chong, who started working with Mark 10 years ago and has since become one of his most trusted business partners. “There’s something about him that I wish I could emulate, which I don’t think I can but he does very well – it’s the fact that he’s able to pull the right strings and these can be totally unrelated strings, and then let them work their course out so that all these can come together to form something bigger,” said Audrey. “This is not easy to do, because you must be able to see the matrix. Not only does he have to connect the dots, he has to harness the energy. I think this is tough for a normal leader to do.”

Even though sage-like qualities can only be attained with the continual exposure to experiences that will aid us in our journey of personal growth and development, perhaps what Mark really means with his advice to *think like a sage* is that it all consists of having the right attitude towards how we wish to lead our lives. *Thinking like a sage* cannot be achieved overnight, but choosing to think like one will undeniably help to bring us one step closer to attaining wisdom.

## **WORK LIKE A FOOL**

A fool may be ridiculed by others for his lack of sense but because of this very nature of not having any sense, the fool often does not care what others think of him. Anyone who has had the opportunity to work with Mark will attest to the fact that he is an extremely hardworking individual. Since he

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started primary school, while any kid would prefer to spend their holidays playing with their friends, Mark always took the initiative to find a part-time job to earn his own allowance instead of asking his parents for money. Throughout his childhood, he was willing to take on a variety of jobs, from working at a melon seed factory at the age of nine, to becoming a houseman at Hotel New Hong Kong (currently known as Allson Hotel) when he was 13, a production assistant at Bridgestone Tyres at the age of 16, and a labourer at age 17. With each new venture, Mark has always *worked like a fool* and given his very best, irregardless of the nature of the job. While working as a houseman, his supervisor was so pleased with his performance that she even offered him a full-time position even though he was only 13 years old! It is often rare for someone to be so committed at that age, but even then, Mark believed that every task should be completed to the best of one's ability and till this day, he still adopts this mindset.

When Mark first started Lancer Design in 1989 with only a working capital of SGD2,000, he was running the company as a one-man show, which meant that he had to adopt all the required roles to sustain his company. Essentially, he had to be the salesman, project coordinator, creative head, planner and administrator of Lancer Design. On top of this, he also had to cope with the arrival of his first child during that very same year. Therefore, his daily routine was packed from morning to night and consisted of him starting the day by dropping off his son at his in-law's home to be looked after, dropping off his wife at work, and returning to his home office to cold call potential customers and work on design projects. In the evening, he would then pick up his wife and son, and continue to work until the wee hours of the night. Mark was a swimming coach for seven years before he ventured into the design industry and even after starting Lancer Design, Mark

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continued to give swimming lessons during his weekends to supplement his income. “During the early days, he used to work very hard. He was always the last to leave the office and the first to arrive,” recalled May Lee, the Administration Manager at Lancer. “And even when he goes for family vacations, when he comes back during the weekend, he will go back to the office to work.” A self-professed workaholic, Mark has also made it a habit to spend his weekends working on ways to improve and expand his business. Since he was seven, Mark has never stopped working and even his wife thinks that there is a strong possibility that he may never will.

It takes a unique kind of individual to choose to start each and every single day with the mentality of working hard and following through. Most men would buckle at the pressure of having to sustain the amount of energy and willpower required to do so. However, anyone who knows Mark Phooi would hardly label him as ‘most men’. He has proved that to a certain extent, *working like a fool*, even at times to the point of senselessness, can be attributed as one of the key factors to his continual success.

## **ACT LIKE A CRIMINAL**

According to a study by Bill McCarthy, an associate professor of Sociology at the University of California, Davis, and co-author professor John Hagan of Northwestern University, some of the attributes that create successful, legitimate, thoroughly respectable entrepreneurs can also be found in ‘successful’ criminals. These two authors report that people who were the most successful at crime have a strong desire to succeed and specialise, are risk takers, and are willing to work with others. And most importantly, they are also very

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competent. All the above traits are, by and large, qualities associated with entrepreneurship, and perhaps under different circumstances, some criminals could have been successful entrepreneurs.

At an early age, Mark already discovered that he had the makings of an entrepreneur. He was a mischievous child by nature and was often not afraid to take risks in order to work around living on meagre finances throughout his childhood. Because of this, he often found himself flirting the line between what was right and wrong on more than one occasion. When he was a kid, he would visit the corridors of four- or five-room HDB flats to swap his tattered shoes with brand new ones that were placed outside the doors of these residences. *Acting like a criminal*, Mark was smart enough to figure out that at that time, only wealthy people could afford to stay in such large flats, which meant that they could afford to buy their children new shoes. He was also competent enough to plan his heist at a time where most families were not at home.

When Mark was a Scout, a regular activity during his school holidays would be for Scouts to go door-to-door to offer their services during 'Job Week'. During 'Job Week', Scouts would knock on doors to provide any household and menial services in exchange for monetary donations. Each donation would have to be recorded in a log card and submitted to the Scoutmaster at the end of the day. "I wised up after a year, that was when I was 12 years old. The following year, instead of working in a group, I worked alone. I wanted to avoid doing work, and also factoring in the keen competition from other Scout groups, I often started days before the official start date," recalled Mark. "I simply asked for donations. If they chose to sign my log card, they would also have to declare



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the amount on it, so as much as I could, I would try not to let them sign it, and I would pocket the money. Over the course of the week, I could make over SGD100. Every time after 'Job Week', I would come in with new shirts and shoes. I never got caught." Even at such a young age, Mark knew that there was a loophole in this system, and more importantly, he knew how to exploit it to his benefit.

Granted, Mark could have been caught swapping shoes or pocketing those donations, but acting like a criminal at an early stage in his life has undoubtedly helped to hone his entrepreneurial spirit for the future. Entrepreneurs are widely known to engage in some degree of rule breaking, and perhaps this is a necessary part of attaining success in the business world. Throughout his career as an entrepreneur, Mark has certainly broken his fair share of rules and taken risk after risk. Some may have been detrimental to his business, but it is the ones that pay off because of his willingness to *act like a criminal*, that have made all the difference.

## **WHERE'S THE LESSON IN THAT?**

As I think back to that fateful day where I was first introduced to Mark's ideology of incorporating certain characteristics of a sage, a fool and a criminal into our thought process and behaviour, I began to realise that, although unconventional in nature, there may indeed be merits to leading one's life in this manner. Even though many of us may not be equipped with the wisdom to think like a sage due to our lack of experience, the willpower and perseverance to work like a fool, and the guts to act like a criminal, it has always been Mark's belief that all these traits can be learnt and adopted by anyone. All it takes is the *Passion, Hunger and Discipline*

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(i.e. P.H.D. qualities) to work towards achieving one's goals. And perhaps the most important lesson that can be learnt from Mark Phooi's unique life story is best exemplified by the recent speech his 19-year-old son gave at his design school's convocation ceremony held at the Mandarin Orchard Hotel:

***First Media Design School's 6<sup>th</sup> Convocation GALA***

***27<sup>th</sup> October 2012***

***Speaker: Kenneth Phooi***

*"When I was nine years old and in Primary 3 or so, my father once told me about some of his mischievous acts when he was young, and there was one story that I will always remember. He told me that when he was about my age, he would steal chocolates from a provision store and he would run all the way to the multi-storied carpark to eat them there, but by the time he got there, they would all have been melted. For me, my takeaway of the story is this: For a guy coming from a family that was not financially stable, to even manage to put himself through school by working as a lifeguard, and to become a principal who operates his school in multiple foreign countries, and of course, in Singapore, it is no mean feat that he has come to accomplish all this. He is the one person I need to tell me, look, we live in a world of endless possibilities, if you want something, don't sit on your ass and expect things to fall onto your lap, go out there and get it yourself."*

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## Chapter 1



# THE EARLY YEARS

**J**ohn C. Maxwell, a renowned leadership expert, author and speaker, once said: “Your potential is really up to you. It doesn’t matter what others might think. It doesn’t matter where you came from. It doesn’t even matter what you might have believed about yourself at a previous time in your life. It’s about what lies within you and whether you can bring it out.”

Mark Phooi was born on the 22 August 1962, the fourth of five children belonging to the Phooi family. His father was a PSA (Port of Singapore Authority) contractor and his mother was employed as a contract labourer for UIC (Universal Integrated Corporation), a company that manufactures and distributes detergents. Both his parents worked long hours to try to make ends meet and ensure that their five children had enough to eat. As a result, they could hardly spend time with Mark and his siblings. Being one of the younger children in the family, Mark spent a large portion of his early childhood with his elder brother, Ben. It was also Ben who introduced him to sign up for the Sea Scouts when he was nine years old. This would turn out to be one of the major turning points in his life, where he would discover what his potential truly was and whether he had it in him to fully maximise it.

## THE EYE OF A TIGER AND THE HEART OF A LION

According to the Chinese horoscope, those born in the year of the tiger often have the following characteristics in

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common – they are competitive in nature, they often cannot pass up a challenge and they are natural leaders. And from the perspective of Western astrology, individuals born under the Zodiac sign of the Leo are usually ambitious, courageous, dominant, strong willed, self-confident born leaders. Born in the year of the tiger as well as under the Zodiac sign of the Leo, it is therefore not surprising that those who know Mark would agree that all these characteristics do in fact accurately describe his personality. Like a tiger, he has always had that hunger in his eyes; that ambition and motivation from within that propel him to constantly want to be number one. And like a lion, it seems second nature for him to claim his spot as the leader of his pride; a bold and confident presence who will fight tooth and nail for the survival of his pack.

“Mark likes challenges. Even when we golf together, he is always very focused,” described Edmund Fong, one of Mark’s closest friends who has known him since he was 17. “On the course, we will always try to outdrive each other. He enjoys competing and always wants to win the hole. But even when he doesn’t, he is not a sore loser.” Similarly, this recognition of Mark’s competitive drive is also reflected in the way he runs his business. When I asked May Lee, who has worked with Mark since 1995, how he responds to his former employees who have left his company to start up their own agencies, she replied: “He welcomes it. He’ll say ‘Bring it on’. Because the market is so big, he knows that he can’t possibly eat the whole cake. He enjoys the competition.”

Till this day, even after 20 over years in the industry, Mark still exhibits the same appetite and desire to be on top of his game. Most of us would wonder how is it even possible to sustain the same level of ambition and drive over such a long period of time. But perhaps these character traits have

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already been hardwired in him since the day he was born, taking into consideration the unique combination of Eastern and Western astrological significance that comes with the particular year and month of his birth. However, even though it seems that Mark was, in a sense, destined for success, it was still challenging for him to discover what it was that he would truly excel in.

## **SWIMMING UPSTREAM**

At the tender age of nine, Mark was a scrawny kid who had not quite decided on what he enjoyed doing. Being one of the younger children in his family, he was roped into joining the 2418 Sea Scouts, a group that his elder brother Ben was attached to. Not knowing what he was really getting into, Mark agreed to give it a shot. "When I first joined, after my first meeting, they wanted me to go for a five-day camp. I was only nine and I had to be totally detached from civilisation. My brother was in another branch and he didn't really bother or care about me," recounted Mark. "For one week I didn't even know what the hell was happening. And I had to do PT (Physical Training) exercises at 5am! Then I had to come back and clean the tent and the surrounding trees and branches, and scrub the pots and pans. It was slavery. There were also swimming, canoeing and various other sports activities during the course of the entire day, and it was very strenuous. The Scoutmaster would check that we were all in bed by 8pm. During the first year I cried every night. I couldn't get used to the gruelling activities and the regimented schedules."

All members of the Sea Scouts also had to attend an exhausting swimming training session every Tuesday evening at the Queenstown Swimming Complex. This was

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particularly tough for Mark, as he was the youngest of the group and at that point, had no prior training in swimming. As a result, he had to constantly play catch up with the seasoned swimmers in the group. On top of the demanding training sessions as well as not particularly enjoying swimming as an activity in itself, Mark was also pressured by Ben to join the Life Saving Club at Yan Kit Swimming Pool. The prerequisites of being in this club meant that he had to endure an even more regimented form of swimming training that included towing a 'victim' to safety. This was by far no easy feat for a nine-year-old boy. And even though he was the youngest and had the smallest build out of everyone in the group, he still had to follow the full training that all the older boys were going through. Being the weakest member of the group, Mark was constantly frowned upon by his instructor and peers.

In situations where we are faced with challenges that may seem insurmountable at that point in time, the easiest thing to do would be to give up. Even as adults, most of us would choose to do so. The chances that we'll simply not show up for training the next day due to not wanting to face the intimidation from our peers as well as sheer exhaustion, would be even higher for a child. After all, what difference would it make if we quit? It would only be natural for a nine-year-old kid to also have these doubts in his mind. "I could have chosen to quit but I don't know why I didn't. Perhaps it was because there were no other leisure options, or it could also be because subconsciously I didn't want to be a loser," retorted Mark. "There were many rounds of tests to go through and despite being the weakest, I managed to pass all the tests and I became a qualified lifeguard at the tender age of 12."

This was to be the first of many instances of Mark facing challenges with both the lion-like quality of courage and the tiger-like quality of conviction, and it laid the path for a

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life of never quitting. Another clear example of his positive characteristic of never giving up lies in a story Mark told me about his participation in his secondary school's annual 4.8km cross country run at MacRitchie Reservoir. He first took part in the event when he was 13 years old, but did not win any medals. However, he did not give up on himself. Instead, Mark trained hard for the following year's event, and eventually came in second. "I remember bringing along a plastic bag to the race," recalled Mark. "My classmates were curious and naturally asked why. To which I replied: 'To keep my trophies in.' They all laughed after hearing me say that." That was how confident he was about winning. Even as a young boy, Mark understood that it didn't matter what others thought about him, for he discovered that he had the potential within him to succeed in anything he put his mind to.

## THE LOVE OF BEING IN CONTROL

*"Winners always want the ball."*

*Gene Hackman (1930 — )  
Actor, The Replacements*

What does it take to be a truly effective leader? One of the key attributes of a respected and capable leader lies in the individual having the courage to demand for the ball when there are only seconds remaining in the championship-deciding game of the season. Failure is always a possibility in life, but leaders are those who are not afraid to face the potential of failure, simply because they understand that failure is a by-product of success. A true leader will always relish the opportunity to be in control of the game. Instead of succumbing to the pressure, they will rise to the occasion and flourish when the responsibility to succeed rests squarely on

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their shoulders. True leaders are the ones who have the guts to demand the ball when there are only five seconds left on the clock. They love being in control and want to be the key agent for bringing the glory home.

At the age of 13, Mark was given the opportunity to flex his leadership muscles for the first time when he was made a patrol leader who oversaw around eight to 10 other Sea Scouts from the Kingfisher Patrol. This meant that he had to control all aspects of an annual five-day camp competition, which was based on a point system where each patrol's standard of camp cleanliness, team spirit, physical training, swimming skills and rowing skills were assessed. There was a certain glamour and recognition that came with winning this competition, and Mark was determined to come out tops. "The first year of secondary school was the turning point for me. Prior to the actual camping days, we made so many preparations, and even though I was a leader for the first time, we won the competition. We came in first," beamed Mark. "It was tough, but it brought out the true leader within me." As patrol leader, Mark had to be in charge of planning and budgeting for his team. He also had to figure out how to come up with the money to build their props and gadgets because they were not given any funds to begin with. One particular year, his team made craftworks out of bamboo, and they had to scout for bamboo to make tables, a stand, and even cooking ladles. Mark led his team to many victories and thoroughly appreciated the satisfaction of taking charge and ensuring that every single member of his team worked together towards achieving a common goal. "The joy of being recognised as a leader and of being first – the honour of it all was a really good feeling. Winning really motivated me," Mark remarked.

The following year, Mark was recognised for his leadership skills with the Scouts and was selected to represent his



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secondary school, Tanglin Technical, at the inter-school camp at St. John's Island. When he was in the third year of his secondary education, he was also chosen to represent the Singapore Scout Association for the Asia-Pacific Jamboree held at Sibolangit, North Sumatra. At that time, he was very tanned and fit because of all the activities he participated, and soon he started to attract the attention of Girl Guides who were drawn to his physique and outgoing personality. That same year, Mark also recorded an album, sponsored by the Singapore Scout Association, with 10 other senior Scouts and as a result was featured in the press and on television. "Those were the days that allowed me to be in the limelight, and I enjoyed the attention. Being in the Scouts also improved my planning skills," Mark observed.

Apart from his Scout's achievements, Mark also excelled in various sports during his primary and secondary school education. He was selected to represent his school and won medals for a broad spectrum of track and field events, such as the 100m and 200m sprint, the 1,500m race as well as javelin and short put competitions at inter-school level. He was also involved in his school's table tennis and volleyball teams, and was the goalkeeper for his neighbourhood football team, who called themselves the *Night Wanderers*. Hence, although Mark was weak in his academic studies, his inclination towards the pursuit of excellence and his spirit of winning remained strong in the area of sports.

As someone who enjoys being in control, it would only be natural for Mark to feel out of his element in situations of powerlessness. It would then be no surprise that he dreaded serving his mandatory National Service with the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) at the age of 18, where every aspect of his life would be strictly regimented for the following 24 months. "Being in the army was the worst time of my life,"

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reflected Mark. “My platoon officer, Sergeant and Corporal were very harsh and I didn’t like being controlled.” In spite of this, he managed to rise above the circumstances he was forced into, and shone in the physical training requirements that had to be met; he was the overall second best Physical Training Trainee amongst his entire Basic Military Training (BMT) cohort in the Infantry Training Depot (ITD) in Sembawang. During his three-month BMT, he was heavily involved in representing his *Echo* platoon in swimming events, winning six gold medals and one silver medal in inter-company swimming competitions. Soon, he became known to all as “The Admiral” – a nickname borne out of multiple medal wins. Mark later also went on to represent the *Signal Formation* in annual inter-formation swimming meets. On top of this, he was roped in to represent the Singapore Armed Forces Swimming Association (SAFSA) in water polo competitions.

All throughout his childhood and teenage years, Mark has often exhibited a tendency to disregard authority. This could perhaps be seen as an act of rebellion to regain what he felt was his basic right – the control of his own fate. This mentality is evident during his early years, as he was frequently involved in gang fights and bullying. When he was 16 and working as a production assistant at Bridgestone Tyres while waiting for his GCE ‘O’ Level results, Mark remembers a brawl with one of the senior workers over a gambling debt. “The factory had hundreds, if not thousands of matured factory workers, and gambling during lunch and coffee breaks was a common activity,” he reminisced. “As a young boy, I was curious and gambled along with the seniors. Once I won but the banker refused to pay me. I was upset and challenged him to a fight. Of course, I was whacked.”

After surviving for six months at Bridgestone Tyres, Mark took on a job as a lifeguard at The Big Splash and this experience

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cemented the fact that he loved being in control and thrived in circumstances where he was given the opportunity to lead. “My one-year stint as a lifeguard gave me the satisfaction of being in charge. I finally knew what I enjoyed and was able to uncover this passion for authority and attention,” concluded Mark. At this defining stage in his life, Mark discovered that what he was good at and what he loved doing were essentially the same thing. To a certain extent, he had found his calling and knew that he had it in him to lead. And this would eventually turn out to be something that he would do and excel in, for the rest of his life.

## THE DREAM

In 1976, Mark took on a job as an office boy at Orchard Towers during his school holidays. It was a menial job where he was tasked to prepare the import and export custom documentation for a garment company that received samples from New York, which were to be reproduced in Hong Kong. Till this day, he still remembers once being accused of stealing the samples by his boss, who did not even have the decency to apologise when those very same samples showed up at the office a few days later. However, even though he hated his boss, Mark enjoyed working in Orchard Road because this was the first time where he was exposed to the rich. Everything was more expensive in Orchard Road. Everywhere he turned, he spotted well-dressed women and businessmen wearing ties and driving big, fancy cars. Even the supermarkets there sold products that were imported and more high-end. All throughout his life, he had never seen such luxury. But working in Orchard Road meant that Mark had to scrim and save to afford his lunch. “I had to buy 50 cents *Nasi Lemak* (a local Malay dish consisting of coconut flavoured rice and a small fried fish, all wrapped in a banana leaf) and

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eat it at the emergency exit. I was only earning SGD150 a month. That was only 5 dollars a day, for a five and a half day week, and I ate *Nasi Lemak* every day,” recalled Mark. “At that point of time I wanted to be able to afford the lifestyle of the wealthy, especially when I was working in Orchard and seeing all these people who were dressed so well.” Deep inside, a 14-year-old Mark determined that one day, he could and would escape the limitations of poverty to become one of those smartly-dressed, affluent businessmen. And in his future, he too, would earn the luxury of driving a Mercedes Benz down Orchard Road.

## **SELF-BELIEF IS HALF THE BATTLE WON**

One of Mark’s most defining strengths is his unwavering confidence and self-belief. In times of adversity, he has always been able to draw upon the belief in his own abilities. Once he has set a goal for himself, that goal will definitely be realised, regardless of what it takes. There was no doubt that the promise he had made to himself as a 14-year-old, that someday he will earn enough money to be able not to have to scrim and save for his meals, would be fulfilled in time to come. And true enough, at 32, Mark became a millionaire, as a result of that focus, discipline and commitment he had towards achieving his dream.

Mark admits that having strong self-belief is his most important strength, as it gives him the hope and confidence he needs to conquer whatever challenges that he has to face. “To be successful, we must constantly arm ourselves with the belief that we are capable of achieving better results than others. We must constantly remind ourselves that we are not losers, but winners in the making,” said Mark. Therefore, as a source of

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motivation in running his business when faced with obstacles, he reminds himself daily of the following credos:

*I believe I can perform better than my last try*  
*I believe I can win if I try hard enough*  
*I believe I can outperform all my competitors*  
*I believe I can do it:*  
*I can therefore I believe I can*

To Mark, self-belief is but a psychological game, and that the only thing holding us back from believing that we can achieve anything we set our minds to, are our own seeds of self-doubt. “Many times, we worry too much for nothing and before we can get our act together, our spirit has told us to give up,” continued Mark.

For someone who had already possessed so much faith in his abilities at such a young age, it is no wonder that Mark continues to leverage on this strength from within in order to accomplish goals that many may deem as being far-fetched. Mark once shared with me that he feels the reason behind his achievements is because he was forced to succeed. Driven by survival, he had no choice but to believe in himself and push himself further than the next person; he always gave that little bit extra and never gave up on himself and his dreams.





## Chapter 2

# GROWING UP

### DAREDEVIL, GO-GETTER

*"Many know what they want, few dare to go out there to get it."*

*Mark Phooi*

According to the Cambridge dictionaries, a daredevil is defined as someone who does dangerous things and takes risks. Often when we think of daredevils, images of men engaging in death defying acts would no doubt cross our minds. It may even be very likely that the man we are picturing is none other than Evel Knievel – an American icon and world-famous daredevil who made a name for himself by attempting highly dangerous ramp-to-ramp motorcycle jumps during the sixties to the eighties. His longest jump totalled 14 buses and he even broke the Guinness Book of Records as the survivor of the most bones broken in a lifetime. Evel Knievel was a man who feared nothing. Unlike most, he was the kind of man who craved for the thrill of staring death in the face; a daredevil in every sense of the word. An attribute that most daredevils have in common is the courage to take that step into the unknown and the determination to follow through until success is achieved. To a certain extent, a daredevil has to also be somewhat of a go-getter, who is defined as

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one who is very energetic, determined to succeed, and able to deal with new or difficult situations easily. If Evel Knievel chose to give up after failing time and time again during his practice sessions, would he be as famous as he was in his day? On the other hand, can success only be attained by being reckless risk takers? Surely there are examples of successful people who have gained their fame and fortune by choosing to play it safe.

In the German language, there exists a word that equates both the terms daredevil and go-getter. The word *Draufgänger*, are both one and the same, interchangeable and without difference. Those who know Mark well, either personally or professionally, would not hesitate to agree that he is both a consummate risk taker and a highly driven go-getter, which makes him very much a *Draufgänger* by nature. “Mark is a risk taker. He doesn’t consider too much and no one can change his mind if he wants to do something,” said Jasmine, his older sister. This sentiment is echoed by many of Mark’s closest friends and business associates who feel that it is this aspect of his character that sets him apart from everyone else. “Mark has the ability to see ahead and the guts to go ahead and do it,” said David Foo, the vice principal of First Media Design School and his business partner. And this mentality did not only apply to his business ventures, but also to his approach when it came to property trading. During the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008, most people were naturally hesitant about buying property, given the unstable financial climate and not knowing when the crisis will hit rock bottom. However, Mark was not deterred by this, and instead saw it as an opportunity. He was even busy expanding his property investment portfolio during this critical period. When I asked Winston Tan, his friend of 18 years and former property agent, what he felt Mark’s greatest strength was, he only had three words to say – “He has guts.”



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Evel Knievel once said, “Where there is little risk, there is little reward.” Similarly, Mark also believes this to be so, especially when it comes to running his business and investing in property. “We must never adopt a herd mentality. If we see the bandwagon, we are already too late,” he explained. A large part of Mark’s success in property trading can be attributed to his uncanny ability to read the trends in the market as well as having the guts to follow through with his hunches. While few would consider a rundown prostitute’s den as a viable property investment option, Mark actually bought it without any second thoughts. After moving into the premises for only less than two months after it had undergone an extensive renovation, there was interest in the property and he managed to sell it for a tidy profit. Over the years, choosing to adopt bold strategies has resulted in many timely investments for him. “I am always willing to try out new concepts and will never adopt a safe approach in business or investing. Even if I have less than a 50% chance of succeeding, I’ll still go all out and try it. Which means I have also failed in a few businesses and investments,” said Mark. Logically speaking, a less than 50% chance does not translate to particularly good odds and may very well come across as bad business sense. However, there may be something to be said that this method of madness has led to more successes than failures in his career. Most of us would opt to play it safe, or even simply safer. If like his *Draufgänger* predecessors before him, taking risk after risk is what it takes to succeed, one wonders though, if only those equipped with nerves of steel are viable candidates for success. The obvious question would then be this: is boldness a matter of nature or nurture? Perhaps for Mark’s case, it was more the former than the latter, and proof that his love for taking risks may, to a certain extent, be innate, was most evident during his years as a young adult.

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## MAKING A SPLASH

While waiting to be enlisted into the army, an important milestone in the life of every young Singaporean male, a 17-year-old Mark worked as a lifeguard for The Big Splash. “That was the first time I was working as a lifeguard and I was getting a lot of attention. The Big Splash used to be a very fun and popular place in the seventies. Every Saturday and Sunday, it was like a carnival there,” quipped Mark. At that time, the Big Splash had some of the longest water slides in Southeast Asia. Some of them were even up to 10 stories high. Back then, just for fun, Mark and his fellow lifeguard, Edmund Fong, would perform dangerous stunts like going down the slide while standing upright, and switching lanes from slide to slide, all within the span of that 20-second ride from the top of the highest 10-storey slide to the pool of water at the bottom. “We even used to somersault on the slides. We knew it was dangerous but it was also fun and both Mark and I liked the thrill,” recalled Edmund. Fortunately, both of them did not suffer any broken bones or fractures in the process. And as with everything he set his mind to accomplishing, Mark trained hard with Edmund to perfect their moves to the extent that their eye-catching, risky stunts became a regular attraction at The Big Splash, attracting hoards of crowds every weekend.

Being a risk taker, Mark did not really think too much about the consequences of his actions and loved the adrenaline he felt from performing those crazy stunts, even though he could have risked serious injuries. It was this thrill-seeking nature that also motivated him to disregard authority and take risks for most of his childhood and teenage years. In his third year of secondary school, Mark was even caught cheating during an examination, which resulted in him being publicly

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reprimanded during the school assembly. On top of this, he was branded as a cheater and his name was displayed on the school's noticeboard. Apart from cheating in school, Mark also had a tendency to engage in petty theft. "When I was 13 or 14, in the middle of the night, my Scout friends and I would go to Telok Blangah food centre to steal drinks. And when we needed lanterns, we would just take the ones hanging on the Public Works Department (PWD) roadwork signs," Mark recalled. "When I was working at The Big Splash, we would steal drinks and ice cream from the open tentage." Mark loved the rush of not getting caught, and all throughout his life, he had been fortunate enough to escape any kind of serious punishment. However, as fate would have it, this inclination of his to break the rules would soon cause him to finally come face to face with his actions.

During his stint at The Big Splash, because his workload was light, Mark also took on the midnight shift working at a diary production company. "One of my colleagues told us that the *Mama shop* (traditionally Indian-owned makeshift convenience store) nearby didn't have anybody mending the shop at night and that they keep their money there. He was trying to instigate us to join him. I was hesitant at first, but was eventually overcome by the thrill of it all, and I ended up joining them," recounted Mark. The plan was for the three of them to break into the shop during their 3am tea break. Not wanting to go inside the shop, Mark proposed that he would be the lookout. Both his friends proceeded in and used pliers to open the locks. As they opened the door, to their horror and shock, they saw the owner of the shop sleeping inside! All three of them quickly ran back to the factory and pretended that nothing happened. Unfortunately, an hour later the police picked them up, and the owner pointed out both of Mark's buddies from an identification parade, since they were the

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only ones he saw. They were both due for a court hearing but Lady Luck must have been smiling on them because shortly after, the owner returned to India and as a result they were acquitted. “It was a life-changing moment for me as it was the first time I had a brush with crime. That incident sort of woke me up, but I enjoyed the thrill, the thrill of pushing limits. I think it’s something that’s innate. I’m not a conformist by nature, and I would consider myself a by-product of our education system,” said Mark.

The course of Mark’s life could have taken a drastically different turn had the charges not been dropped. Nevertheless, in life, everything happens for a reason and perhaps this incident served as a valuable lesson in the grander scheme of things. For one, it certainly played a part in forcing Mark to mature quickly. It is true that it has consistently been in his nature to challenge the status quo and take the road less travelled, even when at times that road has led to trouble instead of glory. However, ultimately the choice was still in his hands. Paths veering off the beaten track that lead to a pot of gold do exist. All we have to do is be bold enough to choose that path. As he matured, Mark did in fact start to wise up and choose to leverage on his risk taking propensity for more positive ventures instead.

## **A DIFFERENT PATH**

“Change is inevitable. Growth is optional,” wrote the leadership expert, John C. Maxwell, in his bestseller, *Your Road Map for Success: You Can Get There from Here*. Successful people are always moving forward with purpose. They know what they want and more importantly, they understand that the only thing that will help them get from where they are now, to

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where they wish to be in the future, is the ability to improve and grow. To be able to achieve growth, we have to be bold enough to risk failure and attempt to do things we have never done before, for it is impossible to improve by remaining content with whatever we have already mastered. Although his behaviour may at times be perceived as reckless, the way Mark sees it is that taking risks is a necessary aspect of progressing further towards reaping rewards. With every risk he takes by venturing outside his comfort zone, he knows that he is that much more improved, and that much closer to reaching his long-term goals.

One of the most significant life decisions Mark chose to make during the early stages of adulthood was to go back to school again when he was 24 years old. At that point in his life, Mark was already a successful full-time swimming coach with over 200 students. He was earning around 3,000 to 4,000 Singapore dollars a month from teaching alone, which was quite a substantial amount back in the eighties. But although Mark thoroughly enjoyed teaching and could have made a decent career out of it, he knew that being a swimming coach did not allow him to fully maximise his potential. He needed to step outside his comfort zone in order to keep growing, and he believed that furthering his education was a necessary challenge he had to undertake, however difficult it may be.

“You have to set yourself ‘unrealistic’ limits sometimes. You have to push the boundaries to know where the breakthrough is, and when you push through, you’ll feel good because you’ve reached new heights. You can then go higher and higher from there,” said Mark. Being a weak student throughout his entire primary and secondary education, Mark was well aware of the uphill battle he had to face in order to obtain a diploma. “I chose design because my academic result did not allow me

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to pursue any engineering or business studies due to the fact that I did very badly in academic areas.” He was therefore determined to gain entry into NAFA, which was then still a private art school. His plan was to obtain his diploma so that he would be equipped with the necessary skills to start a career in an arts-related industry. This proved to be easier said than done, as Mark’s GCE ‘O’ Level results did not meet the minimum of three ‘O’ Level passes that was required to gain entry into NAFA. This however, did not faze him.

Being a go-getter by nature, Mark was driven to do whatever it took for him to fulfill his ambition of obtaining his diploma. This meant that he had to retake his GCE ‘O’ Levels as a private candidate, while still continuing to teach swimming full time. Having a weak foundation and no proper guidance, Mark failed to attain three ‘O’ Level passes at his first, second and third attempt as a private candidate. Most of us would have given up after failing at our first or second effort, but Mark knew that this was a hurdle he had to cross, in spite of his shortcomings, and he persevered on to find another way through. “After failing, I enrolled in NAFA’s part-time foundation programme as it did not have any entry requirements,” recalled Mark. “After that, I found out that I could combine the subjects I passed from my previous attempts to add up to three ‘O’ Level passes.” Finally, in 1986, at the age of 24, Mark was finally accepted into NAFA’s Fine Arts Diploma programme as a full-time student.

After finally getting enrolled into NAFA, Mark had to complete a visual test to determine the duration of his studies. “If I passed the test, I only needed to study for three years. But I flunked it and had to do four years on top of my foundation programme,” recalled Mark. At this point, he also realised that the majority of his 17- and 18-year-old classmates only had

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to study for three years to obtain their diplomas. “I was the oldest and by the time I graduated, I would be older than all my classmates entering the work force. I couldn’t afford to spend more time in school.” He immediately brought his case up with the Dean of his faculty and was granted a chance to prove his abilities. It all boiled down to this one visual arts test, which Mark regrettably failed due to his weak drawing skills. This meant that he still had to go through the four-year programme without any exemptions. However, this did not stop Mark from going back to the Dean to renegotiate. “I went back to talk to the Dean and by then, I had already converted from Fine Arts to Graphic Design. Finally, the Dean said that I must score 60% and above, or else I would have to complete my course in four years.” Sure enough, even though he had to juggle teaching swimming on a part-time basis to support himself, Mark managed to maintain his grades above that average, all through his three years of study at NAFA, and was even elected as the Chairman of the student union during his second year of study. He was also the first student from his graduating cohort to secure a full-time job in an advertising agency even before he graduated.

All throughout his life, Mark has always been determined to succeed in everything he set out to achieve. ‘Giving up’ are words that do not exist in his vocabulary. He knew that as long as he had the courage to look failure in the eye and carry on nonetheless, he would be able to reach his goals, however improbable they may have seemed in the beginning. Another proof of this is the little known fact that he actually had to take his driving test seven times before passing. He started going for driving lessons at the age of 22 when he was working at a desk-bound job at an oil field company called Cameron Ironworks, while also teaching swimming part-time. “I wanted to do things fast and didn’t have the luxury of sufficient training.

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I didn't go for many lessons," recounted Mark. "I failed the test six times and on my seventh try, I bumped into my swimming student's parent, who was actually my tester for that day and he eventually passed me!" It can be said that the decisions made and experiences encountered during his teenage years and early adulthood are all in fact important stepping stones in Mark's lifelong quest for self improvement. They have all undoubtedly contributed to nurturing his risk taking sensibilities and conviction for success: all in preparation for the countless hurdles he would have to leap across on his journey to become the accomplished entrepreneur he is today.

## EYES ON THE LINE

*"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."*

*Aristotle (384 — 322 BCE)  
Philosopher*

What is it that separates the good from the great? How can we define that extra something that pushes a person to rise above mediocrity? The majority of us may have it in us to become good, but how many of us truly have what it takes to become great? As a mentor for most of his life, starting from being a swimming coach during his twenties, and progressing to become the CEO of his own successful design business during his thirties, to setting up and assuming the role of the principal of a private design institution during his forties, Mark has continually encouraged his students and staff members to pursue their aspirations based on this ideal – "It's not how good you are, but how good you want to be."

It's fair to say that even though Mark may not have been that good during his earlier years, he always wanted to be



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better; better than his peers, better than his role models, and most of all, better than the person he was yesterday. Till this day, even his closest sister, Jasmine, is surprised at how successful he has become. "The whole family is very proud of him. Nobody expected him to achieve as much as he has today," said Jasmine. Growing up with Mark, Jasmine remembers that her little brother was a mischievous kid who was constantly getting himself into trouble. Once when he was in his first year of secondary school, he was punished for making lewd drawings on the classroom blackboard. On another particular occasion, Mark remembers being scolded for rebutting when his British Literature teacher said: "There's no way that this can be done." To which, Mark replied: "If there's a will, there's a way." Interestingly, the response he gave when he was a teenage boy, can be seen as highly definitive of the way he approaches his goals in life – always with determination and perseverance.

From Mark's perspective, success is a choice. Period. To be successful, we have to take it upon ourselves to assume the responsibility of self-discipline and hard work. Mark also understood that preparation would be key for him to become the best version of himself in the quest of reaching his full potential. Although on the surface, most of this preparation would come in the form of physical training during his early years as a lifeguard and swimming coach, the result of those countless gruelling hours spent swimming 120 laps non-stop per session, was also a major contributing factor to cultivating the attributes of perseverance, determination and incredible self-discipline, all qualities that would later become the pillars of his success.

As a swimming coach, Mark took part in various inter-constituency swimming competitions and made it a daily routine to train his stamina and increase his strength. "Swimming gave me the best form of discipline. It helped me

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cultivate discipline, focus, and undivided attention. Swimming 120 laps every day and looking at the black line, your mind is just thinking – pull, push, stretch, bubble,” recalled Mark. By keeping his eyes fixed on the continuous 46m by 0.25m lane line marking on the floor of the pool, the only thing that occupied Mark’s mind was his breathing patterns and the movement of each muscle that was required for him to swim that much further and faster. Whenever he started to feel the pain of muscle strain towards the end of the session, he would resist the temptation to simply give up and stop. Instead, he continued to focus on that persistent black line. Each training session not only improved Mark’s muscle endurance, but it also helped to strengthen his energy levels as well as mental strength. In hindsight, the hard work and dedication to excellence that Mark put into his competitive swimming endeavours were in fact the perfect tools he required to prepare him for the next phase of his life.

Till this day, even though he no longer trains in the pool, Mark still practises a lot of self-discipline. “Since I was 20 years old, without fail, I will do 70 push-ups and 120 sit-ups every morning and every night before I sleep. If I don’t do it, I cannot sleep,” said Mark. Similar to how he had always persevered on during his training sessions in the pool, Mark has been able to continually tap on the high levels of self-discipline he had cultivated through his years of swimming to pull him through any challenge that he has encountered in his life. At the age of 27, armed with his innate risk taking edge, unwavering self-discipline and newly attained academic qualifications, Mark was now physically and mentally ready to fulfill his aspirations and start a career in design.



## Chapter 3

# THE DESIGNPRENEUR

### ON MY MARK

*“A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.”*

*John C. Maxwell (1947 — )  
Leadership Expert, Author, Pastor*

In 1989, at the age of 27, Mark was ready to make his mark on the world. It was a time of hope and new beginnings as he was about to expect his first son with his wife, Elisa. The couple had tied the knot during Mark's second year of studies at NAFA. Entering this new phase of his life, the stakes were substantially much higher for Mark now. He was about to become a father and sole financial provider for his wife and child. His entire family's livelihood rested on his shoulders. This meant that failure in his career would not be an option. He had to make it. After completing his last module at NAFA earlier that year, unlike his classmates who were still hoping to impress potential employers with their work at the upcoming graduation ceremony, Mark chose to skip the entire affair altogether. This was because he had in fact already secured himself a job as an account executive at a local advertising firm. His time at this relatively small advertising agency was short-lived, as his supervisor was constantly criticising his work and putting him down during meetings. Mark did not like how he was being treated and left the company after only two months. However, during his stint there, one crucial aspect of his personality became very clear to Mark – he hated working under people.

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“Taking instructions from others does not sit well with him. He wants to be the one giving them,” said Elisa when I asked her to share her views on some of her husband’s more striking personality traits. Although this was something Mark had already known since he was young, the time had finally come for him to deal with it – he could either suck it up and work around it, or he could figure out a way to work through it. He gave the first option a shot and soon after, Mark joined a typesetting company, which was to be the very last place he would be employed by. The supervisor at his new company turned out to be completely opposite to his previous one. He treated Mark well, but Mark felt that the working pace there was too slow, and his job scope was not challenging enough. He just did not feel that it was a good fit, and began toying with the idea of venturing out on his own.

Apart from coming to terms with the fact that being an employee was not something that suited his nature, there was also another factor that fuelled Mark to go all out to pursue his aspiration of starting his own company. All throughout his life, there had been more than a few occasions where Mark felt belittled and mistreated by those in positions of higher authority. Besides his boss at the advertising agency, there was the owner of the garment company who accused him of dishonesty when he was only 14, a colleague who was constantly making life difficult for him while he was working at an oil field company in his early twenties, and most significantly, Mark still vividly remembers an incident involving the owner of a company he was interviewed by after he graduated from NAFA. This particular company was one of the top advertising agencies in Singapore during the eighties. During the interview session, the owner of the agency asked him what his aspirations were, and Mark candidly replied that he wanted to run an agency, just like him. “This drew fire

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from him and I was told to come down from my ivory tower. I was in fact reprimanded for thinking too big because I had nothing back then,” reflected Mark. After the interview was over, the owner patted Mark rather condescendingly on the shoulder and said: “Go home and come up with 10 reasons why I should hire you.” At first, Mark rather naively thought that this meant that he had a shot at getting the job, but it soon dawned on him that he was actually being mocked at. However, instead of letting these experiences chip away at his self-esteem, Mark chose to view them as motivation to prove his naysayers wrong. “I work well with negative factors. If you say I can’t do it, I’ll always want to prove to myself that I can do it better. This is my fighting spirit,” explained Mark.

It would then seem that Mark would have to give the other option a go. He figured that the only way he could work through his issues with authority was to become a figure of authority himself. “I don’t like to report to anybody and I was just trying to discover for myself what would suit me best. The only way was to be my own boss,” insisted Mark. And in February 1989, Lancer Design Services (Lancer) was incorporated. “I started as a freelance designer and after I formally incorporated the company, I dropped the word ‘free’ to come up with Lancer Design. Up till today it is still running on a profitable track,” said Mark. “When I made the decision to start on my own, there were of course many objections from my family but when I do things I don’t have to get consent from other people, I’ll just do it.” With just SGD2,000 borrowed from one of his close friends, Patricia Tan, to purchase a computer and a dot matrix printer, Mark left his stable job at the typesetting company to begin a new phase of his life. He wanted to prove to himself that he could in fact make it on his own. “When I started the business, there were a few things going on in my life. My first son was just born. I was also taking up evening

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classes twice a week, for a post-graduate diploma to increase my management knowledge. I knew this was a necessary sacrifice I had to make in order for me to run my agency well. I enjoyed the thrill, the challenge, and I managed to sacrifice socialising with my circle of close friends,” said Mark in one of his interviews in 2007 for *The Executive*. Mark operated Lancer from his bedroom and was basically a one-man show, taking on all the roles required to sustain a design agency. Back then, when his potential clients asked him how many people were working in his company, he used to tell them that there were five positions in his organisation: a Creative Director, a Designer, a Copywriter, an Account Executive and an Administrative personnel. Little did they know that Mark was all of the above rolled into one.

“For four or five years, I never went out with anybody, it was just family and work. It was a constant struggle, I was working around the clock and back in those days, I only had a 200 sq ft office cubicle, with no windows at all. I didn’t know whether it was day or night, rain or shine,” recalled Mark. Those first few years were no doubt physically and mentally draining for him, considering that the burden of his family’s survival rested solely on his shoulders. Even though this translated to a huge amount of added pressure on his part, it motivated him to work even harder. And he thrived in these stressful conditions because now at least he had total control of his own life; he did not have to answer to anyone’s beck and call. He could finally do things his way.

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## THE BIG PICTURE

*"Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world."*

*Joel A. Barker*

*American Futurist, Author, Lecturer*

A visionary is often seen as someone who is equipped with the foresight and uncanny ability to predict, to a certain extent, what will happen in the future. Unlike others who may lose sight of the goal in times of adversity, he possesses the ability within himself, to always focus on and work towards attaining the big picture. He is someone who has the capability to connect improbable connections with the aim of reaching an outcome that he envisioned right from the start. With this in mind, it is of no coincidence that great leaders tend to be great visionaries as well. For businesses to flourish, it is crucial for the head of the organisation to know which direction he needs to steer his team towards, at all times. Without a solid vision that is being championed by a leader who practises what he preaches, an organisation will most likely fail to become one of the key players in its field of expertise.

When Mark started Lancer, he already had a very clear vision of what he wanted his company to achieve. And not having any experience in running a business was not about to stop him from thinking big and aiming to be the best in his industry. Looking back on his accomplishments during an interview session on Mediacorp Radio's 938 Live, Mark candidly shared with his interviewer his perspective on success: "I feel that whatever the reason we want to start a company, just give it your best and be the best in the market. Doesn't matter if it takes one year or 10 years, if you have this principle or

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concept, you can be deemed as successful in your own right.” Armed with the right attitude and an inexhaustible spirit, Mark’s goal for Lancer was to develop it into a *First Class Design Agency*, one that was above the rest in terms of service quality, creative standards and staff welfare. And today, after 23 years since Mark started the company single-handedly, Lancer has not only survived where many others have faltered, but it has actually grown to become one of the leading players in a highly competitive market.

Having the vision of creating a *First Class Design Agency* is all well and good, but being able to pull off such an ambitious goal would require a whole host of factors. The most important of which would be having an effective commander-in-chief. Therefore, apart from having entrepreneurial foresight, what other qualities does a successful business owner have to possess? “Wanting to be better than other people, the competitive drive in me that makes me think harder and drives me up the wall. I feel like I’ve got to do something more and something much better to differentiate myself from them. It’s the spirit of sportsmanship in me. Not so much the talent, I compensate my lack of talent with hard work,” explained Mark. “Ideas are cheap but turning them into reality takes a lot of hard work.” During the early stages of building his business, Mark spent his mornings and afternoons cold calling and arranging meetings with potential clients, while his nights were reserved for working on designs for whatever projects he could secure. However, working hard could only get you so far. Mark understood that he had to work smart too, and that there were still other pieces that needed to be put in place in order for him to complete his big picture.



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## **FIRST CLASS SERVICE = FIRST CLASS CREATIVE**

“When you’re young and new, nobody trusts you. So I played the emotional attachment card at that point of time. I would win my client’s confidence by telling them that if they are unhappy or unsatisfied with my service, they do not have to pay me for my service,” vouched Mark. “If you appeal to their emotions, dare to risk your service and reputation, clients would probably be more obliged to trust and take a chance on you.” As part of his goal to offer an unparalleled service quality to all his clients, Mark believes that the most important thing is to reassure them that he will do everything within his means to deliver their project to the best of his abilities. “I will always let clients know that I am at their disposal and always on call 24 hours a day. During each stage of their project, I will constantly update them on the development process, and offer new ideas that could excite them. This is how I managed to delight them and manage their expectations as well,” explained Mark. “If you love your customers, you will not want to disappoint them.” And this service-oriented spirit still thrives in him till this day. Every student in his design school is given access to his mobile number, and Mark is always ready to spring to action whenever a call is being made to him from any one of them.

With this perspective on client management, Mark has succeeded in forging many strong ties and relationships of mutual trust through the years. Once, he even personally delivered a project to a client’s home on a weekend. This willingness to go the extra mile gradually won him the trust and respect of his clients, which eventually translated into them engaging his services on many other major projects — even though he may not have possessed the necessary experience for the scope of work they required. One of these projects, and a significant milestone for his design business, was a

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three-day promotional campaign Mark oversaw in 1995 for one of the largest telecommunication equipment companies in the world. This garnered a half a million dollar paycheque for his company. When I asked him what he thought the client was most impressed by, he replied: “Probably my ability to go all the way out to do something regardless of time and resource constraints.”

Already having a clear goal in mind, coupled with an effective approach to distinguish himself from his competitors, all Mark needed was a steady flow of projects to kick-start his business. “When I first started Lancer, I discovered that there was nobody specialising in newsletters. The newsletter market was previously taken care of by printers, so I knew that I could tap into this market,” recalled Mark. “At one time, we were doing 20 over newsletters for large multinational corporations (MNCs). My take is that if we can do a newsletter well, it’ll spin off to other jobs.” Mark knew that with his expertise in design, he could convince organisations to engage him to produce their newsletters instead, since he would be able to create a more visually appealing end product as compared to what their existing printing vendors were able to provide. With each newsletter project raking in a nett profit margin of between SGD3,000 to SGD20,000 each on a monthly or bi-monthly basis, Lancer was very profitable, and dominated a market that no one was interested in. All in all, Mark’s business had the unique ability to cater to a gap in the market, and it made a huge amount of profit by being one of the only agencies specialising in designing company newsletters.

“I believe that good service standards can sometimes replace poorer creative quality,” professed Mark. “I think there was never a doubt about my capability but there were doubts about my creativity by others and that gave me the strength

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and drive to prove to others that I can make it. Personally, I work best under stress and under adverse conditions.” Even as a newcomer who had limited financial resources, Mark still succeeded in carving a name for himself in the industry by essentially adhering to one important rule – *the customer is king*. Unlike some of his competitors, he has never allowed his pride and ego to come between him and his clients. On top of this, Mark is someone who knows how to leverage on his charming personality when dealing with customers. “When he goes out for presentations, a lot of people like him because he can interact with different levels of people. He has a strong personality. People like talking to him. He is also very obliging towards clients and hardly says no. That’s why we can survive for so long,” observed May Lee. When Mark started Lancer in 1989, he already had the foresight to build his business on the foundation of creating a highly personalised service experience for his clients. And this approach has no doubt been one of the key factors that has contributed to his success.

## **FIRST CLASS WORKING EXPERIENCE**

In *The Art of War*, Chinese General and military strategist, Sun Tzu, wrote: “Treat your men as you would your own beloved sons. And they will follow you into the deepest valley.” As the commander-in-chief of his company, Mark also believed that his greatest assets are the people working alongside him, day in, day out. An organisation is only as strong as its weakest link, and he was well aware that the more satisfied and contented his staff members were at work, the more his company would flourish. Therefore, in line with his vision of building a *First Class Design Agency*, Mark made it a priority to create a working environment where, firstly, his staff members would be given the opportunity to improve their

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skills and grow with the company. Secondly, they would also always be appreciated and rewarded for their contributions. “They won’t care much about what is happening in the business, and what is surrounding the business, until they know how much you care for them,” said Mark. “Once they realise this, they will give that extra effort.” The way Mark saw it, providing a high standard of staff welfare would be critical in sustaining a group of dedicated people who would be just as invested in seeing the business prosper, as he was.

For the first 10 years of its operation, Lancer had to shift its premises a total of nine times to accommodate the increase in headcount matched by the robust growth and steady expansion of its business. No losses were incurred during that period of time and every year, it was just a question of how much profit was being made. A large part of Lancer’s success can be attributed to the impact of Mark’s leadership skills with regards to managing his team as well as on a business front where the key decisions he made were always based on his ultimate goal of elevating Lancer to become a *First Class Design Agency*. In order to achieve this, Mark adopted the following strategies:

## **STRATEGY #1: GROWTH**

*DESIGNER + ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE → MAXIMISED POTENTIAL → INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY = GROWTH*

In line with his plan of making client management a priority of his business, Mark felt that he should train his designers to take on the job of servicing clients as well. By merging these two roles into one, his designers would be given the opportunity to improve their interpersonal and communication

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skills when they were tasked to liaise with their respective clients and manage projects that were assigned specifically to them. Although most designers tend to be more introverted in nature, given the appropriate amount of time and practice, it is likely that they could also become good at servicing clients. “If you’re able to bring out their interpersonal talent and they can see themselves improving, they will enjoy it,” affirmed Mark. With their newly obtained skillset and the opportunity to maximise their hidden potential, Mark discovered that the level of job satisfaction amongst his designers increased, leading to an overall increase in productivity. Not having to go through a middleman (i.e. account executive) also meant that the designers were able to get a clearer grasp of the project brief as well as an undistorted understanding of their client’s preferences. This also resulted in increased levels of ownership for the designer when it came to the project’s creative output as well as client retention, eventually leading to design outcomes that would be met with less rejection. By simplifying the entire process through combining both roles, Mark in turn also managed to reduce his overheads considerably. For the first seven years of his business, he did not hire any account executives and it was only the designers and himself running the show.

When I asked Noelle Tan, a graphic designer who worked alongside Mark from 1996 to 2007, what her views were on this particular approach, she mentioned that working at Lancer helped her to improve a lot as a designer. Currently managing her own agency, Noelle feels that she is able to better manage her clients as compared to other designers who do not really know how to deal with clients. “Since my very first few projects with Mark, he already started bringing me to meet clients, which is why I think he sort of groomed me in a sense. And I became more eloquent and more confident

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when engaging in client servicing,” shared Noelle. “I gained exposure working directly with marketing communication people over the years, and I find that this has helped me because I don’t have any issues working with clients. Some designers are not able to articulate their designs properly nor able to express their ideas to their clients.”

*JOB ENLARGEMENT + JOB ROTATION → MAXIMISED POTENTIAL = GROWTH*

Studies have shown that job enlargement, which is defined as a horizontal expansion of job duties, can lead to increased motivation, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. With this in mind, once Mark observed that any of his employees was ready to take on more responsibilities, he would set up a smaller agency and offer them the opportunity to work independently in this newly set-up entity. This was one of his strategies for growing his business, and in 1997, Mark set up First Media Pte Ltd (FM) with the intention of it being a holding company for these smaller agencies that he would start for his employees-turned-partners to run. “When we first started, it was an organic group, meaning we trained our own designers to become managers, who will eventually become my partners. We set aside a certain amount of working capital plus a few projects for them to sustain themselves and start growing the company,” explained Mark.

With the opportunity of essentially becoming their own bosses, these hand-picked individuals would be given the chance to determine if they do have what it takes to succeed on their own. Although running a business comes with a whole new set of challenges, those who are able to excel in their new roles will likely be able to push their potential even more than they could have in their previous job scopes. In

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1999, Mark set up Matchbox Design and approached Noelle to run it. “Mark had this new idea of expanding his business. So he assigned me and another senior account executive to form another studio. That’s what he usually does. He will take one designer and one person from the sales department to set up another entity, and then they will be left to recruit their own staff members. He lets us have a lot of free play as to how we want to run it,” recalled Noelle. And even though Noelle decided to leave Matchbox Designs in 2007 because she wanted to spend more time with her family, the entire experience has no doubt helped her to become a more well-rounded designer.

In the case of job rotation, Mark understood that it would only be natural for some people to feel bored or restless if they were not being challenged in their current role. “After a while, when someone has become good at his job, implement job rotation. Give him a new job scope. This way the employees will feel that they are constantly improving themselves,” explained Mark. All in all, Mark knew that if he wanted his best talents to stay with the company for years rather than merely months, he would have to think of new ways to ensure that they were constantly improving and growing within the organisation, and alongside it. Only then would he be able to help them maximise their true potential.

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## STRATEGY #2: MOTIVATION

It is common for larger corporations to reward their employees' commitment towards the organisation through cash incentives and various benefits. By doing so, their employees would be motivated to work harder, which would in turn contribute to the overall growth of the company. Even though Mark's business was comparatively smaller, he understood the importance of showing his appreciation towards the dedication displayed by his staff members, and adopted a few key approaches to motivate them to always perform to the best of their abilities.

### *INCREASE IN COMPANY WEALTH = INCREASE IN PERSONAL WEALTH*

When it comes to managing his staff, Mark has always encouraged them to see the company as their own, and to also think of its success as theirs. He believes that it is only when they are interested in the business just as much as he is, that they will not hesitate to give their all. And in order for them to regard the company as their own, Mark makes it a point not to hold back any information from his employees – even sensitive financial information. Although his approach of complete transparency might have backfired on him more than once, the overall benefits have far outweighed the cons. “For each design job, there's a quotation that states how much is spent and received. Every month, everyone will know how much profit the company has made,” explained Mark. “This is a powerful concept because when everyone knows everything, they no longer feel that they are being blind-sided or shortchanged.”

With this strategy, Mark succeeded in securing the trust and confidence of members of his staff. And as the company's



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profits gradually increased, he also made sure that each employee was rewarded with an increase in their own personal wealth. Through the years, they have often been generously rewarded with bonuses and incentives. Annual company retreats to parts of Asia, Australia and Europe were also the norm. And apart from all these perks, as a form of appreciation of their loyalty and commitment towards the company, Mark would also present a Rolex watch to those who have worked for a duration of five years and above. “The company was making good money and everyone was well rewarded,” explained Mark.

### *$R^2$ = SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES, SHARED REWARDS*

Another approach that Mark adopted to motivate his employees to take ownership of their contribution to the success of the company was through  $R^2$  – a collective incentive that would be gained through the accomplishment of a combined sales target. With  $R^2$  in place, Mark created an environment within his company that emphasised the value of shared responsibilities and teamwork fuelled by a collective competitive drive to grow the company’s wealth even more. It was simple mathematics: the higher the profits earned, the more rewards his employees received. “If everyone hits the collective target, everyone will get cash incentives. Most of the time, the target was hit,” piped Mark. With each new target achieved, each member of his staff would then be motivated to push themselves that much further during subsequent months, having already once tasted the fruits of their labour.

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## DEEP ROOTS, STRONG BRANCHES

With a clear plan of how to mould his company into a *First Class Design Agency*, all Mark needed was an effective expansion plan to increase its revenue that would be worthy of that acclaim. Although a huge part of his success can be attributed to his risk taking nature, one of Mark's strongest approaches to building his business is, surprisingly, this – always have a safety net. Unlike most of his competitors who chose to focus their resources on securing bigger projects, Mark selected a different tactic altogether. "Agencies prefer high profile customers and high profile jobs, but they forget that their base has to be taken care of. High profile jobs can pay over SGD100,000 but do they come regularly?" he said. "I concentrate on building a solid base first, and I also have a hunting team to hunt for high-paying valued-added projects."

Even though Mark naturally appreciated the lure of targeting larger organisations, he was pragmatic enough to know that in order to sustain and eventually expand his business, it was crucial for him to concentrate on building a solid base of regular clients and projects that would guarantee him a certain amount of profit to meet his operating costs every month. Mark was the kind of business owner who understood that building a strong foundation would be crucial to ensuring the prosperity and longevity of his business; he knew that the deeper the roots of his business grew, the higher and further the branches of his tree could extend. And to implement this approach, he strategically split members of his staff into two teams and named them the Thunder Team and the Lightning Team.

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## *INTRODUCING...THUNDER*

The formation of the Thunder Team was based on an essentially simple concept, which was that the survival of a business ultimately boils down to one crucial aspect – the strength of its safety net. With a steady influx of projects being secured every month, Mark was better positioned to take calculated risks, while still keeping an eye on the bigger picture of growing his organisation in both a local and regional context. With the Thunder Team as a safety net, the pressure to acquire high profile clients by the Lightning Team, which would in theory already be a huge challenge, would also not be so great. “At the end of the day, if the Lightning Team fails, the Thunder Team will still be there. A core stream of projects will still come in. This gave the company a strategic capability.” This strategy also ensured that the business would not be put at too much risk, which was an important consideration for Mark in the grander scheme of things.

“All the regular projects were assigned to members of the Thunder Team. This provided a staple form of financial income for the company. Every month, there’ll be projects coming in without stressing on business development,” recalled Mark. “This gave the company stability and helped to increase its appetite to take risks. These regular projects were even able to support both teams so the Lightning Team didn’t have to worry if they didn’t get the job as they would still have support from the Thunder Team.” In order for this plan to work, Mark had to ensure that the individuals who belonged to the Thunder Team had the temperament to provide this stability, and the skillset to see their jobs through successfully, as a weak team would jeopardise the financial health of the entire organisation.

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## *THE ALLURE OF LIGHTNING*

“The Lightning Team would do the high-valued projects. They were the Commando team consisting of highly creative individuals who were passionate about design,” explained Mark. Working on higher priced jobs required a level of talent, finesse and passion that was rare in newcomers to the trade. Hence, most of the highly creative and experienced designers would be assigned to the Lightning Team. Unlike the Thunder Team, the Lightning Team had the licence to flex their creative muscles on projects that they were overseeing, and this was exactly the kind of creative freedom that junior designers craved for. It was precisely the kind of motivation that pushed them to improve their skillset in the hopes of gaining entry into the elusive Lightning Team.

This strategy in turn benefited the company on a whole, as it ensured that the lower ranked designers had something to aim for. They knew that the only way they were going to achieve their goal was to work hard to become better at their craft. And this was also the only way they could advance within the organisation. Choosing to keep each team at a comfortable size of eight to 10 employees was also a strategic decision on Mark’s part. This way, it provided his staff with better odds at progressing their career within a shorter period of time. In his mind, Mark had already envisioned a system of constant renewal, fuelled by an attractive career progression pathway, which entailed offering members of the Lightning Team a chance to become designpreneurs and business partners under the First Media Group of Companies. This business strategy worked successfully, and in the course of 10 years, Mark managed to personally groom more than 30 designpreneurs from his flock of designers and project managers.

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## *THE CYCLE*

For growth to be feasible, it is important to have a system of self-renewal in place. Adapting the concept of growth from Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution, Mark modelled his business to that of the life cycle of a tree – starting from a seed, needing soil for nutrients, roots to feed it, a trunk for stability, and sunlight to keep it growing. Mark saw his design business in this manner; and as the origin of it all, he would see himself as the seed that started the entire cycle. At the beginning, it was only him running the show and he needed to work on gradually building his client portfolio. The more profit he made, the more people he could afford to hire. For the sake of survival, he had to take in as much nutrients from the soil as he could. The more projects he had on his plate, the bigger his roots were able to grow. In this case, the roots that sucked in the nutrients that helped to grow his business were both the Thunder and Lightning Teams. The bigger and deeper these roots grew, the more branches were able to sprout out above. This was evidenced by Lancer producing more than 20 design studios in the local market by the year 2005.

“Get the first unit correct, and you can then duplicate that unit with the same operating system and business strategies, but focused on specialising in certain industries. However, the main tree trunk has to be deeply rooted and anchored,” explained Mark. According to his plan, once the Lightning Team was able to achieve a certain level of stability, selected team members would form a smaller, independent agency under the First Media Group of Companies. When aspiring designers from the Lightning Team are given the chance to become designpreneurs, it allows the renewal process to continue with members of the Thunder Team taking their place, and newcomers to the organisation being assigned

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to the Thunder Team. “The Lightning Team was always an incubator to spin off another team. This was how Matchbox Design, Firefly Studio, Pepper Advertising, Lancer Media, and Apical were set up,” elaborated Mark. “Constant renewal allows everyone to move up as we progress.” And this was the formula he used to grow a small seed into a vibrant tree that was able to self-sufficiently sprout out new branches. Eventually, all these new units, along with Lancer, would come under First Media Pte Ltd (FM) – which was essentially the tree that represented his entire business. In a nutshell, this was how Mark envisioned to turn his design business into Singapore’s largest communications group.

## **FAIR PLAY IS THE ONLY WAY**

It is common knowledge that the world of business is a cutthroat one. To get ahead in the game, some may even resort to ruthless and unfair measures. Mark, however, did not condone this particular method of rising to the top. When it comes to doing business with others, he dislikes negotiating or bargaining, and is commonly known for expecting a fair deal from his business associates, simply because he will no doubt offer them the very same. Amongst the 20 odd business partnerships that Mark formed as a designpreneur, negotiation was never a key event before officially sealing the deal, as he opted to go for more of a give-and-take kind of relationship between him and his would-be partners. And it is fair to say that this approach has worked well for him through the years.

“If someone gives me a bad business deal, despite it being a promising one, I will drop it like a bomb without a need for further negotiation,” said Mark. There have been a few

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instances in the past of him doing so, such as a partnership he had formed in the mid nineties with a Sydney-based design consulting agency, where Mark called it quits even though he had already invested a considerable amount of capital and manpower resources in it. Another recent case involved a large Indonesian property group based in Jakarta, which expressed interest in investing in Mark's design school in Jakarta. In this particular instance, Mark chose to listen to his gut and not go ahead with this deal, despite logically knowing that having this influential group on board as partners would be a promising prospect for his education business.

"He will not care much about the financial returns if the other party does not practise fair play," said Audrey Chong, managing director of Lancer Design. Those who know him well would agree that Mark possesses a strong inner equilibrium when it comes to fairness and justice. As an employer, he always prefers to err on the side of generosity where money is concerned. And in 20 over years of running his business, and having employed more than a few hundred employees within this period, no complaints about money has ever surfaced whenever his name is mentioned. "If Mark does not want you to be on his team, he would rather pay you off to leave," said May Lee. To him, if fairness can be restored using financial means, he will never hesitate to do so, close that chapter and move on.

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## CHANGE IS THE ONLY CONSTANT

*"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."*

*Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882)*  
*Theorist*

According to Darwin's *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1872), when members of a population die, they are replaced by others who are better adapted to survive and reproduce in their chosen natural habitat. This process will then preserve and create traits that fit well for the functional roles they have to perform. This means that the better a species is able to adapt to changes, the higher its rates of survival are. In life, change is inevitable. Those who prefer the security of stability would find themselves feeling uncomfortable when they are forced to deal with any kind of change, however major or minor. And then they are those who see value in the transformative power of change. These are the people who thrive in situations of ambiguity. They understand that change is necessary for progress and growth, tending to embrace it rather than shun away from it. At the end of the day, these are the ones who will survive.

"I like to try out new business concepts, so that I can see the dynamism that results from their various outcomes. In every change I implement, I will see a problem, but I will also see a hidden opportunity," said Mark. For those who have had the opportunity of working with Mark, it is obvious that he is a man who welcomes change. "Even if it's not fully broken, we should still try to fix it." Unlike those who prefer to steer clear of uncertainty, it seems as though Mark feels more at ease when he is knee-deep in it. "He always says



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that in an environment, you must always change to adapt. Especially in this consulting business of ours, we are faced with pressure from both renowned international agencies and established local ones. Something is wrong if there are no changes,” recalled May. “Even when a design is approved, and the client still wants to enhance it, he will say okay, but this will make the designers feel very stressed out.” Of the many strengths that Mark possesses, his predisposition to change his mind frequently could be deemed as a major weakness. When I asked David Foo, what he thought Mark’s biggest weakness was, he replied: “He changes his mind frequently and his staff members can be caught off guard and be frustrated. For some who do not thrive on uncertainty, they will lose confidence easily.” Since dependability is by and large viewed as a critical aspect of leadership, would it be possible for someone to be seen as an effective leader if he consistently revised his decisions?

“Over the years I’ve worked with him, from the beginning even until now, maybe now less so, you can always expect changes where Mark is concerned. Every week there is a new direction, and every day there are new ideas of what we can do to reach that direction,” recalled Audrey. When I asked her why she thought he changed his mind so often, she said: “I would say that this is his strength and also his weakness. His strength is that he sees things faster than a lot of people. And therefore he sets his sights and he moves very fast. A lot of people may see the same things, but they may not move as fast as him, so he will have the advantage. However, the fact that he moves fast means he hasn’t really given it enough thought. So along the way, he will feel that this is not working out and he will change his mind.” Judging from Audrey’s remarks, perhaps it is Mark’s impatience for results that has caused him to garner a reputation for being somewhat impulsive.

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During the course of his career as a designpreneur, Mark has always been known to be an impatient boss. "He's not very patient. Sometimes he doesn't care about the process. He just wants to see results. He is very typical in that sense, like in Singapore, everyone talks about productivity and results," added Noelle Tan, who interviewed at Lancer in 1995 and stayed on in his organisation for a little over 10 years. Impatience may be definitive of Mark's character, but interestingly enough, this character trait may well have stemmed from his childhood and his constant battle for survival. As in Darwin's Theory of Evolution, it may well have been that Mark realised very early on, that the only way for him to gain an edge over others, is quite simply to accomplish things at a faster speed. "My father used to tell us that when he was young, during dinner time, he had to eat faster than everyone else, just to make sure that he had enough to eat," recalled Mark's 19-year-old son, Kenneth. Growing up in a family that, at times, struggled to make ends meet, Mark was forced to adapt to his circumstances and perhaps grew up learning that a single moment of delay could make the crucial difference when one's survival is at stake.

"Mark's mind is very alert and he thinks very fast. He thinks fast and acts fast. Being fickle-minded is one of his weaknesses. But to him, he finds that it's nothing unusual. He just wants to try different variations to get the right answer," explained May. When I approached Mark to comment on this perceived weakness of his, he responded confidently by saying: "If you don't give it a try, you'll never know if it works." In line with this perspective, through the years, Mark has had his fair share of misses, and it is inevitable that a consequence of having to go back on his choices after discovering that there could be better alternatives, would lead to many people evaluating him as being indecisive. For instance, in 2002, Mark decided to

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venture into publication with the idea of a “Discover Singapore” themed series. However, although it was well received in the beginning, its success was short-lived and was canned after its third edition compounded by the onslaught of the SARS epidemic. “It wasn’t making money. He didn’t put enough thought into figuring out what he really needed to do and the resources that were required to execute it. Although the idea was fantastic, how it was run was basically left to the devices of the people who were running it,” observed Audrey. “Mark is a fantastic leader with good vision but if he doesn’t have someone to support him, it’s very tough.”

Nevertheless, with all this being said, most who know Mark in a professional context would not hesitate to still deem him as a highly effective leader. Initially, it would no doubt be a challenge to adapt to how often he changes his decisions, but according to May, as long as that person “knows how to work with him and work around him, he’s not that hard to work with.” And this is coming from someone who has worked with him since 1995, and still does to this day. And even though Noelle admits to feeling stressed out working in such an unstable environment, in hindsight, she admits that Mark’s approach does have some merits. “You’ll find that it’s a bit unpredictable. But in a sense, that also helped me become more used to accepting changes. And I realised that you can’t expect things to remain stagnant,” revealed Noelle. “It also helped me get out of my comfort zone because sometimes when you get too comfortable for too long, you’ll start getting complacent. If you are able to accept his way of doing things, you will survive quite well.”

“The only thing permanent under my management is change,” he said. And true enough, in 2006, Mark decided to roll up his plan to retire from being a designpreneur before he turned

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45, and focus instead on realising his dream of setting up a design institution. This milestone was all along a part of his overall life plan, and he was quite satisfied to leave on a high note, having already groomed Audrey to take over a position of leadership in his business. Since leaving his business in Audrey's capable hands, Mark's temperament has also gradually mellowed. Even though his drive for success remains consistently strong, he is no longer as impatient as he used to be, reaching a point where he is able to let nature take its course. And now that his duties as a principal precedes that of his role as a businessman, his attitude towards making changes too quickly has also altered in order to adapt to the vastly different environment he finds himself in. This, along with the wisdom gained through the many personal and professional experiences he has weathered, may have led to him sharing the following revelation with Audrey during a recent company retreat to Bintan: "I was talking to him and he was telling me that he has learnt that sometimes you can't just see and then do. You must take time, think about it, and you must make sure that the people behind you can back you up, then you can go ahead and do it," revealed Audrey. At the end of the day, even though his transformation within may have taken some time, internal change is often deemed as the most significant kind and an essential ingredient in surviving the odds. At the age of 50, it can be said that Mark has indeed come a long way, and has no doubt left his own unique mark on this world.



## Chapter 4

# THE MENTOR

### A LIFE OF TEACHING

*"Our lives are unimportant, except for the influence we have on others."*

*Jackie Robinson (1919 – 1972)*

*First Black American Major League Baseball Player*

**M**ore often than not, the teachers we remember are more likely those who have inspired us, impacted us emotionally, or helped us through difficulties we could not have coped with alone. As we transit from childhood to adulthood, we will naturally tend to look back on the mentors who have played an instrumental role in transforming our minds and our behaviour, and those who have made a substantial difference in our lives. What then does it take to be an impactful teacher? Effective mentors are often leaders by nature. We see them as our role models; people we look up to and aspire to become. They have the ability to identify our strengths and weaknesses, constantly challenging us to go beyond our perceived limits. They are those who will always root for us to succeed, ever-ready to guide us through our mistakes. But most of all, the best kind of mentors are the ones who are deeply passionate about teaching and who genuinely want to be a part of improving the lives of others.

In 2007, when Mark was asked to expound on his current business goals in an interview with a local magazine, he

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replied: “My goals have shifted, both personal and financial. As for my personal goal, it has shifted from being a professional manager to a mentor. The reason being that I find satisfaction and fulfilment in nurturing young minds, bringing them to a different level of exposure and experience. This experience gives me more meaning and purpose. That is the reason why I started a school. From the financial side, anything that comes my way will be an added bonus as I am no longer driven by financial gain.” At this point in his life, Mark is fully committed to pursuing his greatest love – education. He sees First Media Design School, in essence, as a culmination of his lifelong passion for teaching. During the entire course of his adulthood, from swimming coach to designpreneur, to principal, and above all, as a father, Mark has essentially never stopped imparting his knowledge and mentoring his students, employees, partners and sons. And it would not be far-fetched to think that he will continue to impact the lives of others, till his very last breath.

## **BIRTH OF A PASSION**

Since his days as a Scout, Mark has always been comfortable assuming a position of leadership. In fact, he thrives in situations where he is put in charge. This meant that although teaching would be a new challenge for Mark, it would be one that he is more than ready for. His teaching journey began as a swimming instructor and went on for close to 10 years before he officially retired from coaching at 29. During the early stages of his career as a swimming instructor, Mark started out with only a handful of students, aged between six to 10 years old. However, over the span of 10 years, he managed to increase this number to around 200 regular students.

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Harnessing the leadership skills already achieved during his Scouting days, Mark developed a unique manner of coaching that gradually gained popularity amongst his students. “I acquired my teaching methods through personal swimming experiences. Once you are able to match their physical build with the right stroke and the right distance, the swimmer will find it very comfortable and enjoy building on their strength,” recalled Mark. “And when you’re able to fit them into the right distance, either short sprints, medium or long distances, coupled with the right teammates, you will have the formula for a very motivated team that will go all out to win any competition.” As a coach, Mark derived fulfilment from playing a defining role in helping his swimmers reach their full potential in the pool. The sense of satisfaction he gained from moulding a student from a struggling non-swimmer to a medal-winning one was beyond the glory of medals; it was because he succeeded in developing the mental toughness and improving the personal discipline of his young charges. He took pride in developing students who were able to withstand his tough training methods and go on to win countless swimming competitions at both school and community levels. This is why he loves teaching.

With 10 years of experience under his belt, Mark was able to hone and perfect his teaching approaches as he matured as a coach. And during his final year of teaching swimming, he was invited to coach at the Warren Golf and Country Club by one of his students’ parents. He taught there for a year before formally resigning and switching careers to become a designpreneur. “From coaching, there are a lot of training theories that I also use in my business. I use these theories for my designers as well,” reflected Mark. Keeping with the same principles and theories, even as a business owner, he kept at his passion for teaching, and groomed inexperienced

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designers to become his future business partners. Decades have passed since Mark began coaching, but where teaching is concerned, it would seem that at the core of it all, he is still very much the same as he was 30 years ago – uncompromising, impactful and deeply passionate.

## TOUGH LOVE

What kind of teacher, then, was a young Mark Phooi? The first time Elisa met her future husband was at the Pandan Gardens swimming pool. Mark was coaching there at that time and he was only 21 years old. When I asked her what her first impression of him was, she replied: “He was very tanned. He seemed to have a playful nature and was caring towards the kids.” One would then immediately assume that Mark was the kind of coach who was warm, amiable and encouraging; one who would choose to take a softer rather than harder approach to teaching. Well, interestingly enough, it was quite the contrary.

“When I’m in the pool, I’m a different animal altogether. I’m a disciplinarian, a very tough and fiery coach,” Mark reflected. “Kids initially didn’t take too well to my tough lessons, but they learnt to adapt and slowly began to like it.” Throughout his career as a swimming coach, it was clear that Mark had a strong passion for teaching, one that extended beyond the confines of the pool. “I’m a very involved person and they can sense my passion and aspiration of wanting to make sure that every one of them learns. I’m willing to punish them and yet still *sayang* (translated as ‘to love and show affection’ in Malay) them.” Till this day, Chris Lee, who began taking swimming lessons from Mark when he was only 11 years old, still remembers that one of Mark’s warming up tactics was to



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make his students wash and polish his car for an hour before the actual lesson starts. “After two hours of solid swimming, he would still expect us to achieve our competitive times, and he would make us repeat the set until we achieved it, or when the pool lights were finally turned off. This was how hard he pushed us. And still, we did not want to miss his next training session,” recalled Chris, who became Mark’s assistant coach when he grew older. He also joined Lancer Design years later, and eventually became one of Mark’s business partners, when he offered him the opportunity to manage Matchbox Design.

As a coach, Mark always wanted the best for his students and did not hesitate to go the extra mile for them. When two of his students were selected to train under the national swimming team at one point, he would make the effort to pick them up from their homes in the wee hours of the morning, so that they were able to make it for their training sessions that began at 5am. To build a spirit of camaraderie among his students and their parents, he would also often organise regular gatherings such as Christmas parties, birthday celebrations, outdoor adventures, sea sports and occasional short trips to Johor Bahru, Genting Highlands and the Kota Tingi Waterfall. “I still remember once, one of my student’s parent said: Without Mark, we will all be a headless snake and the headless snake will wriggle in all four directions,” recounted Mark. Everyone saw him as the leader of their close-knit group and his open personality brought them all together. The team spirit amongst his students was so strong that they all felt like they were a part of a big family. “Everyone enjoyed each other’s company so much that even though their swimming class starts at 6pm, they’ll come at 4pm to hang out and chat, and they won’t go home until 10pm.”

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Regardless of him being a tough and fiery teacher, his swimming students could sense that Mark genuinely cared for them. This sentiment has also been expressed by one of his closest mentees, Audrey Chong. Audrey has been groomed by Mark since she started working with him as an account executive at Lancer when she was just 23 years old. Ten years on and she is now managing Mark's entire design business while he focuses on running his school. "Mark practises tough love. I think this is true not just in the way he manages and leads people, but it is also true in the way he interacts with his family – particularly his three sons. He is caring in his own way. However, this care and love is not spoken of nor actively displayed. So, whether the person is aware or not, it depends on the person's ability to infer," explained Audrey. Till this day, Audrey still remembers how tough the first three years of working with Mark were. Within the first two months of joining Lancer, Mark decided to transfer the only other account executive who was in her team to another team. "I was left to my own devices and not knowing very much, I was taken under his wings directly. I distinctly recall that there was at least about a year where I was constantly under his scrutiny for anything and everything."

When I asked Mark if he thought Audrey's strength was, to some extent, imparted to her by him, he replied: "I was very tough with her initially and she is one strong lady who can rise to the challenge. She is someone who is so objective and adaptable to situations. During her initial two years, I think she submitted her resignation twice, but I held her back as I saw the leadership potential in her. As a matter of fact, she has not failed me. It is hard to find someone as capable and trustworthy as Audrey." It is true that although Mark may expect and demand more than most from anyone under his mentorship, his method of tough love has taught both his swimming students and his employees how to excel

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in whatever they do. Some may not be able to endure his unconventional approach, but those who can will become all the better because of it. “There is nothing wrong with this tough love really. But in a world where people are a lot more protected and sheltered these days, they may find it hard to see the love beyond the tough bit. But one thing is sure, if one can triumph the toughness, they will surely become stronger – more so than the rest who cannot,” remarked Audrey.

## **PUSH AND PULL**

As a coach, Mark’s training methods were strict, and although he cared deeply for his students, he did not hesitate to be tough on them as he knew that that was a necessary aspect of their growth. “Push them to the point of pain, and make them expend the last ounce of their energy. And when the training is over, I’ll motivate them through my words. Most importantly, I’ll inspire them by swimming the full length alongside them. Their pain is also my pain,” noted Mark. “I also used to hang out, talk, play and dine with them.” Unlike most coaches, Mark was willing to challenge the extent of hardship his students could bear because he believed that that would be the most effective way for them to be inspired and motivated to improve. However, despite his tough training methods, one of the reasons why his students formed such a strong affinity towards him through the years, is because they knew that they could count on him to get his hands dirty with them. “It is not typical for coaches to do so, but I trained with them. While they swam their favourite stroke, which was typically the front crawl, I swam the butterfly stroke, which was harder and more energy-sapping. I was not a ‘dry’ coach who would just stand at the edge of the pool, shouting instructions at my students.” Mark was the kind of teacher who would be there for his students through thick and thin. And it would seem that this would still be the case years later.

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When Mark was managing his design business and school, he also adopted this very same approach with his employees. “A lot of account servicing staff got scolded by him. It was very bad. They were scolded left, right, front and back,” recalled May Lee. “Imperfection was not an option”, retorted Chris who joined Lancer as an account executive in 1996. “He made me amend my sales letter seven times, which resulted in seven pieces of gold hot-stamped letterheads being wasted that morning.” Another one of these staff members was Audrey Chong, who still remembers that her first nine months working with Mark was the toughest she had to endure. “Every day was rocky. Every day I knew that I would be scolded. During the first few months, he told me this: ‘Don’t come to me with questions. Give me answers.’ So whenever I had to make a decision, I’ll think and re-think, worried that it is wrong. At the end of the day, I just did whatever I wanted to do and be prepared to get scolded. So the only way to know if I got it right, is if I didn’t get scolded,” recalled Audrey. However, in line with the push and pull technique he uses as a form of mentoring his staff, Mark also treats his employees well. “We’ll even have our regular social outings and special events. When they work late, he’ll work late together with them too,” recalled May. “He is also willing to reward you well to recognise your commitment.” In hindsight, as a result of weathering many storms from Mark, Audrey admits that his abilities as a mentor and leader are indeed tough to emulate. “He is able to reach deep into the hearts of people, not in a sense to make them feel like they love him, but he is able to inspire them to bring out the best in themselves,” she said.

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## **START AND STOP. REPEAT**

A typical swimming lesson under the tutelage of Mark was gruelling to say the least. As is the usual practice for most sports, light warm-up exercises are normally carried out at the start of each session to get the athlete's blood circulation flowing in order to prepare him for the actual training that will ensue. Mark, however, chose to adopt a different approach with his students. "My warm-up sessions are the toughest forms of training. You should exhaust all your energy by the time you finish your warm-up. Because only after you have exhausted all your energy, then you will start building up new energy and new muscles over your exhausted energy. This is the method of accelerated learning," explained Mark. His rationale in doing so was based on the belief that his students would only be able to tap on their reserve energy, if and only if, they have already depleted the amount of energy that they think their bodies were able to produce. "This way you can find out how far you can go. I want them to use that reserve energy to excel. By the middle of the training they would have been totally exhausted. Actual training starts after that."

Mark then continued with another technique that would train his students to increase their core power, levels of endurance and strength. "The quickest way of training to make sure a person loses all his energy is the start-and-stop technique. After they're totally exhausted, their training session will be followed by swimming long distance, which will help them start developing new levels of endurance," explained Mark. The training circuit that he organised consisted of the following sets: five sets of eight laps, followed by five sets of six laps, five sets of four laps, five sets of two laps, and finally ending with one set of 10-lap sprints. The completion of each lap will be followed by 10 to 20 push-ups, depending on the timing

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achieved. “This is an unorthodox way, but the fastest way of building endurance and speed.” By utilising this method, Mark forced each and every one of his students to challenge their limits, both physically and mentally, and find out just how far they were actually able to push their bodies and minds to go. “Before they finish their session, they’re already totally exhausted. Their batteries are flat and you can see ‘smoke’ coming out of their bodies if the weather is cold. But everyone will feel good about themselves.”

Likewise, Mark also adopted the same principles behind the accelerated learning method as well as the start and stop technique, when it came to the assessment of new staff members who joined his organisation. “During their three-month probation period, I’ll give them nine levels of hell so that I can test the maximum workload they are able to handle, their stress tolerance level as well as their willingness to stretch. I won’t accept a slow start,” said Mark. “Any newcomers who come in as designers, I’ll give them a lot of projects with tight deadlines and I’ll let them go and juggle, and see how they manage it. Once they are able to get through that period successfully and transit into full time employment, it’ll be peace time for them.” Through the years, although adopting this method meant that he would have to fire quite a high number of individuals who did not make the cut, it also meant that he was able to efficiently build a highly dynamic and competent team of people who have what it takes to make a difference in the company.

One such person was Noelle Tan, one of Mark’s select group of designers-turned-business partners. “His business approach is always sales-heavy. So one designer will have to take on a lot of jobs and service a lot of clients. That was what I’ve been through. He worked the guts out of me,” recalled Noelle. “Two weeks later, I said I couldn’t take it and

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I wanted to resign.” Sensing that Noelle was someone who had the potential to excel in his organisation, Mark eventually convinced her to stay. And she did, for more than 10 years. Audrey also remembers that even on the very first day of work at Lancer, Mark had already set very difficult targets for her to hit during their first meeting. “He had started off talking about some sales figure and where the team stood at in terms of achieving that target. Then he turned specifically towards me and said, ‘Now that we have you on board, I believe we should look at another SGD500,000 sales to be closed by end of the year’,” disclosed Audrey.

Mark may often come off as an intimidating teacher, but judging from how the ones he has taken under his wings have turned out, it can be said that his somewhat extreme and unconventional methods have been effective. Since their very first encounters with him when they were only in their early twenties, Noelle and Audrey have come a long way and have both tasted success in their own right. Despite them being very different people, Mark has still been able to groom them from inexperienced newcomers into his seasoned business partners. “Mentoring these designers who knew nothing honed my skill in mentoring, and I was able to bring out the best in people. I enjoyed nurturing and moulding them,” recalled Mark. Till this day, even though it has been more than five years since she left his business, Noelle still keeps in touch with him. “I will still text him occasionally. I still remember when his birthday is. He will also call me occasionally. Maybe it’s because he saw me grow up. I was only 22 when I started and he saw me through my marriage and childbirth,” shared Noelle. “On the whole, it was an interesting journey. Because of the fact that I’ve worked with him for so long, it made up a large part of my life. It was memorable, and now that I’m in a different phase of my life, I think he was one person that was very important.”

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## AN EYE FOR TALENT

*"A cow will always be a cow. A cow can never win a horse in a race or sprint."*

*Mark Phooi*

It is not surprising that the idea of being talented is often associated with something beyond our control, as talent, after all, is commonly seen as a gift; a natural aptitude that one is born with. But is this necessarily true? And if it is, what then is to become of the rest of us who are, in the conventional sense, not born with talent? What chance would we even have of making it in a world where we are deemed to be not as good? Albert Einstein once said, "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." Perhaps we are all born talented in some way or another, and all we have to do is figure out what it is that sets us apart from the rest. And although it would be naive to assume that being talented is enough to guarantee us success, knowing what we are good at and knowing how to harness it, would definitely take us a step closer towards fulfilling our goals in life.

Midway through his coaching career, Mark realised that he had exhausted all he knew through his self-study, and hence embarked on a training programme to attain the Class One Swimming Coach qualification. As part of the programme, he was attached to the People's Association swimming team in Toa Payoh, under the mentorship of the late Kee Soon Bee, a prolific national swimming coach. Kee was well known for being able to spot and groom competitive national swimmers such as Junie Sng, Mark Chay and Joscelin Yeo. Throughout his time under the mentorship of Kee, one of the



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most significant things that he learnt was the importance of being able to identify and maximise a student's talent based on his or her innate abilities. Mark would also soon realise that he too, had an eye for identifying talent, and would later use this skill to good effect in both his careers in swimming and design. "When it comes to the anatomy of a person's body, we must understand whether this person is suitable for a sprint, mid distance or long distance race. Therefore it's for me as a coach to decipher my students' stamina, endurance as well as the degree of their reflexes," explained Mark. "It's up to me to detect the talent of a person in terms of the body and physique of this person, whether he or she is suited for short, mid or long distance, and which particular stroke will suit the fluidity of their respective types of body movement." Leveraging on this particular approach to identifying talent, Mark would then go on to adapt and apply these principles to mentor the different personalities who worked in his design agency and school. "What your competency is, may not necessarily be your talent," explained Mark. "Between you and me how can I maximise your talent so that it benefits both of us. It's about capturing talents and knowing where to place them to lead them to their highest performance level."

As a coach and mentor, Mark knew that to be able to draw out the best of his students and employees, he had to first point them in the right direction. Once they know where their talents lie, the sky would be the limit for them. It may be that a cow can never win a horse in a sprint, but isn't it true that a cow can do things that a horse cannot? It takes a good mentor to be able to identify the 'horses' from the 'cows', but on top of having an eye for talent, a great mentor is one who understands that it would be a mistake to force a cow to become a horse and vice versa. For he knows that it is only in accepting who we really are, that we will be able to become the best version of who we want to be.

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## LEARNING, SHARING AND TEACHING

It has always been important to Mark to maintain an open and honest relationship with those under his mentorship, and part of his success in training them to excel in their careers can be attributed to his dedication to developing a learning, sharing and teaching culture within his organisation. “The good thing about him is that he is open to sharing his business models and strategies. He is not afraid to share in a sense. Because there are some bosses who are very elusive, very reserved and they keep to themselves a lot,” recalled Noelle. “But he is the sort where he will open up to you, it’s a give and take relationship.” This open personality sets Mark apart from employers who, at the end of the day, only care about how much money their business can make. And because of this particular character trait, teaching has always been second nature to Mark. It has no doubt been his greatest passion in life. In a sense, when he was running his design business, even though he gained fulfilment in seeing his business grow, he was equally proud of seeing the young people he had mentored through the years, excel in their careers in design.

“I’ve always embraced young talents who possess a positive attitude to learn. I’ll guide them along and show them the trade,” shared Mark. He enjoyed sharing the knowledge he had gained from his past experiences and his own further studies, and would regularly give his employees lessons on how to effectively present their ideas and communicate with clients. Mark genuinely wanted each and every one of them to improve and grow together with him and his company. When I asked Noelle what she has gained from Mark’s mentorship during her 10 over years of working with him, she replied: “The one thing I learnt from him, is to get things right the first time. Even until now, I will use that on my

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daughter. Because the way I see it, if you have the intention of getting things right the first time, you will actually be able to cut short a lot of processes and you won't have to go by a longer way," resolved Noelle. It would be hard pressed to find another business owner who would be willing to expend that much time and effort, and adopt such a hands-on approach to mentoring their employees.

Through the years, some of Mark's former employees have ventured out on their own to set up their own design agencies. According to him, there are at least more than 10 of his direct competitors out there in the market, that were started by those who have once worked with him. It is unfortunate that some of these former employees have attempted to pinch his customers, based on having served them previously, by offering them lower rates. However, as proof of his passion for sharing and teaching, he says that this does not dampen his spirit of mentorship. "To a large extent, I feel good that I've trained them to the level that they can survive on their own," reflected Mark. "Most people will stop training and become guarded, but I'm still very open. I just tell myself to work harder and smarter, so that I'll be able to outpace my competitors."

From my conversations with those who tend to see Mark more as their mentor than their employer, one thing is clear; even though all of them have learnt different things from him, it is a testament to him as a mentor that his influence on their lives has been great. "From the very beginning when I knew nothing till now that it is my turn to impart what I know, Mark has been many things to me. He was a tough teacher in the beginning. Consequently, he became a nurturing mentor, and now, an understanding partner," shared Audrey. Most of them have changed in some way or another because of him, and are all the better for it. Judging by the mentorship philosophies that

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he still adopts and carries out on a daily basis, it is obvious that Mark's passion for teaching and sharing is just as strong as it was 30 over years ago, and would arguably still be for the rest of his life. Mark will always be one of those teachers who not only teaches us what we need to know, but helps us find it within ourselves. He will always be one of those teachers we remember.



## Chapter 5 FATHERHOOD

### THE REASON

*"We may not be able to prepare the future for our children, but we can at least prepare our children for the future."*

*Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882 – 1945)*

*32<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States (1933 – 1945)*

To many, the most measurable form of success in terms of one's career, would be wealth. Quite simply, the richer a man is, the more successful we perceive him to be. How would we then be able to determine if a man has excelled as a father? Is the perfect father one who showers his children with unconditional love? Is he a role model who is able to teach his kids the important lessons in life? Or would he be someone who is good at taking care of his family's needs? The truth is, there is no absolute measure for success in parenthood. A large part of parenthood is instinctual and the rest is an acquired trait. A father has to learn not to be too strict or too soft, too protective or too distant. But would it even be possible to straddle both extremes? It would seem that there is rarely such a thing as a perfect father. And maybe all we can really ask from our fathers is to know that they have given their all to become the best kind of father they can hope to be.

One day I asked Mark what it is that he fears most. I was half expecting his answer to be something along the lines

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of what most of us would fear – an attack on our personal inadequacies. I waited to hear words like ‘criticism’ or ‘rejection’, but what he said took me by surprise. “My greatest fear is family disharmony,” he answered. It was only then that it became very clear to me, what was most important to him. At the crux of it all, this was a man who saw his family’s needs as his top priority. “I always think of myself as a good provider. My personal philosophy is business first, not family first. But the motive behind building my business is because I want to provide for my family,” said Mark. “If the business fails, what kind of quality of life can I provide for my family?” It was also this very same instinct that fuelled Mark to venture out on his own and start his own business. “He told me that he wasn’t getting any younger compared to most of his peers, and he needed to find a way to make more money to support his family,” revealed Patricia Tan, his ex-colleague and friend. Patricia has known Mark for more than 30 years, and was also the first person he approached to lend him money to start his company.

Even before the birth of his first son, Mark’s focus for a large majority of his life has been on his business, which he admits, required a lot of his time and attention. In turn, he has accumulated a sufficient amount of wealth to afford giving his wife and three sons more than what the average Singaporean male is able to. This includes an exclusive four-storey bungalow located in one of the most expensive residential districts in Singapore, lavish family holidays a few times every year as well as overseas education for his children. The success of his business has essentially provided his family with anything money can buy. However, as with everything in life, there are trade-offs. “To be honest, I am not a model father,” said Mark. For a man who has achieved so much success in his career, admitting that he felt he was not up to

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par when it came to being a parent must have been difficult. “I feel that I have not done enough as a father. A father should be more inward looking, building bonds with his kids or wife. But I focused more on external aspects, like building the business.”

His first son, Marcus, was born in October of 1989. That was also the same year that Mark started Lancer. At that point, he was already working 18-hour days from his bedroom, trying to get his business off the ground. A typical work day for him would start by him dropping Marcus off at his in-law's house to be looked after, sending his wife to work, returning home to make cold calls to prospective clients, going for meetings, fetching his wife and son home, having a quick dinner, and then back working on his projects into the wee hours of the morning. “He was busy with Lancer until I was 15. It was only during holidays that we could spend time together,” recalled Marcus. “That’s why he makes an effort to organise holiday trips together every year, since we were about three or four years old.” Mark’s hectic schedule hardly even allowed him the time to take a breather and relax for a few minutes, let alone spend time with his son. “I neglected him because he was born at a stage when I was building my business. I didn’t have time for him,” Mark later reflected. “I know that Marcus is not very disciplined and focused, but I’m able to overlook that because I feel bad that I didn’t shower him with sufficient care and attention when he was young.”

Four years down the road, his second son, Kenneth, was born at a time when his business was growing. Although at this point, he could already afford to hire a few designers to assist him, his average work day was still packed to the brim. All his attention and energy was now directed to expanding his business since it was already considerably stable. “Kenneth was looked after by a nanny at an early age. He always

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stayed at his nanny's house and I had very little contact time with him," recalled Mark. Once again, because he had missed out on a large part of his childhood, his relationship with Kenneth during his formative years was somewhat strained. "Kenneth is closer to Elisa. I can't conduct a full conversation with him. I'll only get monosyllabic answers from him. When he needs me, he'll come to me but when he doesn't need me, he'll just not bother about me. I can understand this feeling because I was once like that, so I just let it be." Although their relationship may be the most distant one out of the three, in terms of personality, both Mark and his wife, Elisa, agree that Kenneth resembles his father the most in terms of his resourcefulness and street-smart nature.

Another four years after Kenneth's birth, Mark and Elisa welcomed their third son, Nicholas, into the Phooi household. During Nicholas' childhood, Mark's design business was already considered one of the top agencies in Singapore. At that point, Mark felt that Nicholas was his last chance to become a more involved father, and so he chose to spend a lot more time with him. "Nicholas is very pampered. He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and has become more temperamental and stubborn," said Mark. "But I can bond more with Nicholas." According to Elisa, being the youngest of the three, Mark tends to give Nicholas more leeway than his older brothers.

Even though Mark's relationship with all three of his sons seems anything but perfect, no one will doubt that he loves them and will do anything for them. This is obvious as soon as you step into his personal office space and discover that an entire wall is filled with more than 50 photographs of family portraits and holiday snapshots of his sons and himself. When I asked Winston Tan, one of Mark's closest friends, what kind of father he thought Mark is, he replied: "Every man must



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have a goal. Mark's goal is not only for himself but for his family. He doesn't outwardly say that it's for his family but I can tell that he does everything for his family." Although it would be easy to peg Mark as an overly-ambitious, power-hungry businessman who chose his career over his children, this is hardly the case where Mark is concerned. Ultimately, the key motivation that drove him to build and grow his business, is an even stronger drive to provide good living standards for the ones he loves.

## **A HEAVY HAND**

Similar to his persona as a coach, Mark was also the same as a father to his sons during their childhood years. However, unlike how he was in terms of mentoring his swimming students, he admits to not having the same kind of patience when it comes to his own kids, even choosing to hire a coach to teach them swimming instead of doing it himself. "Because I don't have the patience, I tend to be more strict with them," asserted Mark. "They find me very hard-handed and a disciplinarian, resulting in a bigger gap between me and my kids. It is only when they got older and I know how to teach a young adult that I started to bond better with them." When his sons were younger, Mark adopted tough methods to discipline them – often punishing them by caning, beating and slapping them whenever they got into trouble. It was then no surprise that Mark was someone that his sons feared when they were growing up.

"He had a lot of mood swings. When he's happy, he'll give you anything you want. You can ask for anything. But when he's angry, you just want to get out of his way," recalled Kenneth who is currently 19 years old. When I asked him what it was like growing up with Mark as his father, he told me about one

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particular incident that happened when he was young, that he still remembers clearly. "There was one time my cousin was staying over, and my dad just got really angry. I don't know at what, but he was in a really bad mood and he caned us in front of my cousin," he recounted. "My cousin got so scared that in the middle of the night, he ran downstairs and called his father to come pick him up. It was quite funny, he just got so scared that he ran off." Likewise, when I asked Marcus to share some of the experiences he had with his father in his younger days, he said, "I remember when I was 15 or 16, I got caught for smoking by the police outside. He used a broomstick and whacked me with it, on my leg. And the broomstick broke in half." It was during this phase in Marcus' life that he had many discipline problems in school. Mark would often receive emails and calls from his teachers, and even had to meet his principal on more than one occasion. "His favourite weapon was probably the cane. I remember there was once he hit me seven to 10 times, and there were marks on my back. This was when I was around 16. I was quite a naughty and mischievous kid," admitted Marcus.

Mark has realised that Kenneth and Marcus are scared of him now because of how strict he was with them when they were kids. "I'm the weakest at parenting," he said. "It's very difficult to teach your own kids sometimes." However, during that phase of his life, disciplining his children in that manner was the only way he knew how to. "Being a father at a young age, sometimes I didn't know how to handle some situations, not knowing what is good and what is bad," he later confessed. "But fatherhood is such that you learn from your experiences, you see the results and you try to improve along the way." Thus, when it came to bringing up his youngest son, Nicholas, Mark has figured out that perhaps being so strict may not be the best way to get through to a child, and he has adapted

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accordingly because of the experiences he had gone through with Marcus and Kenneth. As his two older boys matured into young men, Mark gradually became more comfortable with his parenting role, and his relationship with both of them has in turn improved. This is reflected in what Marcus, who is now in his mid-twenties, had to say about his perspective of Mark as a father: “I’m very appreciative of what he has provided for us. Although his punishments can be harsh at times, we know that it is for our own good.”

## **A HEAD START**

“You have to be ‘cruel’ to be kind.” Those words of advice were said to him by his friend, Alex Yong, some time back. And for some reason, they seem to have stuck with Mark. “He saw the way I pamper my kids and he feels that my kids don’t really learn much because they haven’t been through any hardship in life. Therefore he says I have to be cruel and cut off everything and let them struggle, then after that they will learn and grow,” recounted Mark. “But this is a concept that I cannot stomach. I can subscribe to it but I can’t bear to do it. Because I love my kids a lot and I don’t want them to go through the same kind of hardship that I did.” Although Mark does see the merits in Alex’s approach, identifying as the provider for his family, it has always been his instinct to provide the best kind of intellectual, emotional and material environment for his children to flourish in.

Born into a family that constantly struggled to make ends meet, Mark did not want his sons to endure the same circumstances that he had to go through. “I’ll always fight for the best for my children,” he said. “I’ll openly tell my kids that what I’m doing now, building the business; this is because I want to make

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sure that they will have a head start in life.” It is the norm for the majority of parents in Singapore to send their children to a government or government-aided local school, where the primary and secondary school fees are heavily subsidised and cost less than SGD10 a month. However, Mark chose to send his three sons to ACS International, a prestigious private Methodist school with tuition fees of SGD22,000 a year. Apart from assuring that his sons could receive a more holistic education, Mark knew that sending them to ACS International would also give them the advantage of forming shared experiences with a group of people who were most likely going to become entrepreneurs and business-owners later on in their lives. With such high tuition fees, most ACS International students are children of highly successful and influential business owners who would eventually pass down their legacy to them. “When I was young, I always looked back on who I can partner with to start my business. I’ll look to my old friends and secondary school friends, but I couldn’t find anybody,” observed Mark. “If I send my kids to a good school, they can start building their network at an early age. When they get older, they will have someone to start their business with.”

Since he was young, Mark had always envied his more affluent friends who could pursue their studies overseas. Back then, this was a big deal. “It has always been my dream to study abroad but I couldn’t do it,” he said. “That’s why I want my sons to go overseas to study, so I can fulfil my childhood dream through them. It’s also good for them to have a taste of independence and experience living overseas.” Mark decided quite early on that he wanted his sons to enjoy the opportunities that he was not privileged to have. He hoped that all his boys would grow up to become well-travelled, independent young men, who have had the

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chance to experience different cultures from all over the world. In his opinion, this exposure would be important for their growth. Having dabbled in property investments while he was managing his business, Mark always believed in the value of investing, and also hoped to inculcate this same mentality in his sons. With this in mind, weekend house viewing trips became a regular family pastime between his boys and him over the years.

Within a span of 23 years, the time and energy Mark has spent on his business has paid off in terms of what he can now provide for his children with the wealth he has accumulated as a result of it. He is able to comfortably set aside funds for what he feels are important stepping stones for his three sons – a well-rounded academic education and an investment portfolio. Despite the fact that many may feel that he spoils his children and does not teach them to fully appreciate the value of money, Mark cannot bear to be ‘cruel’ enough to let them learn to fend for themselves. Through his personal investments, Mark has even ensured that his boys will be well taken care of when he is no longer around. “Whether it’s good or not, I’m not sure. Am I planning too much for them, compared to how I started out with nothing?” reflected Mark. I suppose at this point, that is something he may never really know for sure.

## **ANOTHER EDUCATION**

It is important for a child to be able to look at his father and see the man he wants to become. From the moment we enter this world, in most cases, our parents will automatically become the very first role models in our lives. As we progress from childhood to adulthood, we will inevitably take to their

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moral standards as our own and look to them for cues on how to lead our lives. Growing up, Mark observed that his parents were both very hardworking people. His father often worked long hours at his job at the PSA, while his mother took on a back-breaking sub-contractor job as a labourer to help to supplement the family's income. When Mark was 17 years old and waiting to be enlisted in the army, he worked with his mother for three months. Every day, he had to load 5kg bags of detergent into large 20- or 40-footer containers. "Loading the goods into the container was a very dehydrating experience. These containers were made of steel and it was parked under the hot sun. By the time you walk in and out, you're dehydrated already," recalled Mark. "I learnt that money is not easy to earn. It was solid hard work and I learnt the true meaning of hardship through this job."

As he matured, Mark has kept the values that his parents taught him close to his heart, and those lessons have served him well in his life. When it was his turn to become a father, he knew that it was critical for him to do the same for his own sons. "My role as a parent is to cultivate the right values and give them the right experience. Experience through education is only one part. Experience through life lessons is also important," he said. "How will they know these values? Through how and why I make certain decisions and uphold certain values, and in terms of me sharing my life experiences." As a father, Mark hopes to teach his sons that respect, honesty and filial piety are all important virtues to have. Those who are not personally close to Mark may not know this, and it would seem contrary to the often intimidating impression he leaves on others, but Mark is, in fact, a very filial son. His older sister, Jasmine, still remembers that when his business first made a profit during its second year, the first thing he did was purchase a holiday to Beijing for both

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his parents. Another habit of his that may seem surprising to most is that even with his busy schedule, he makes an effort, without fail, to have coffee with his elderly mother at least twice every week. "By sitting there together, it's good enough for my mom. There's no need to talk and there's little to talk about. By knowing that someone made the effort to spend 20 to 30 minutes to drive her to have coffee and then send her back, I can feel that she feels fulfilled," he told me. "She appreciates it and knows that someone is concerned about her."

Mark believes that even though at this juncture, his sons may not fully grasp why it is so important for him to have coffee with his mother every week, he does hope that through the observation of his actions, they will in turn also learn to do the same when they're older. "I'll always tell them, 'When papa is no longer around, please have coffee with your mom.' I hope that my kids will subscribe to these values if they see me doing it. I believe that they will." Although he may not be the perfect father, Mark has made it his goal to set a good example for his children. It is clear that his 19-year-old son, Kenneth, respects and looks up to his father, hoping to emulate him in some way. "Once he told me that he had to put himself through school by working as a lifeguard and a swimming instructor. He had to struggle with his work in the day, and study at night," recalled Kenneth. "I was quite surprised. I never really expected my father to be that hardworking. When he told me, I was like, 'Whoa, you'll only read about this kind of thing in the newspaper.' And then I thought, 'Wow, my father is one of those people.' It's very impressive." It would seem that Mark has gotten through to at least one of his sons. And that teaching by example has paid its dividends.

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## A DIFFERENT APPROACH

“My dad will always tell us that picking a partner is like going to the market to buy fruit. When you go to a fruit market, you’ll usually stop for the brightest looking one, the most appealing one,” explained Kenneth. “First you’ll maybe touch it, and then feel it. If you like it, maybe you’ll try it, and if you don’t want it, you can just put it back and continue your search for other kinds of fruit. What you see might not be what you get. I do understand his moral behind the story, which is that ‘you only live once, so you might as well be selective.’ And I kind of heed that advice in some sense.” Kenneth may not be as close to Mark as both his older and younger brother, but it is clear that he does appreciate his father’s unique perspective when it comes to relationships and life in general. “It’s good that he thinks in a very modern way, not like those very traditional parents. Maybe it’s because he is in the creative field. Maybe it has something to do with that, I don’t know. His way of thinking may be more open and liberal.”

It is often the case that Asian parents tend to take on a more conservative approach when it comes to parenthood. One common stereotype consists of having unrealistically high expectations of their children, accepting nothing less than straight A’s from them. Their sons and daughters are expected to adhere to strict moral codes, and they see every mistake their child makes as a disaster. Asian fathers are also usually perceived as being emotionally closed off. Even though it may be true that the values Mark upholds and hopes to impart to his sons are very Asian in a sense, he is hardly the stereotypical Asian father. Mark is the kind of father who encourages his kids to make mistakes, although they are still punished for the ones they make. He also does not see high academic results as the be all and end all of having a successful career. And unlike the common



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perception of Asian fathers preferring not to talk openly about their feelings, Mark is for sure quite the opposite.

Even though he thinks of himself as more of a by-product of the education system because of his poor grades and non-conformist nature, Mark has still succeeded in carving an extraordinary career for himself from very little. Thus, he has never pressurised his sons to perform well in school. "My expectation of my kids is just for them to pass and I'll be happy because I know that education is only a gateway and will not determine your success," said Mark. "What determines your success is being street smart, and having strong personal values as well as integrity. I want them to be exposed to many scenarios and make a lot of mistakes while they are still growing up." Having also made his fair share of mistakes, Mark knows that his failures have played a significant role in shaping and conditioning him to become the man he is today. And he wants the same for his sons. "I'll always explain to them that you can make mistakes, so long as you can accept the consequences and be accountable and responsible for your actions," he said. "If you can't, don't do it. If you can, take a risk."

"Words can't say much. I can tell my kids not to do this or that, but at the end of the day, they'll end up as nerds. I'd rather they go get themselves burnt and then come back and I'll teach them," he said. However, in 2010, the merits of this particular approach of parenting would be severely tested in an incident, where his eldest son had to face a mistake that may have had irreversible repercussions in his life. When Marcus was 21 and serving his National Service with the Singapore Civil Defense Force, Mark caught him forging medical certificates in order to dodge his duties. As a result, Marcus was sentenced to 42 days of solitary confinement in military jail. When Mark found out, he was furious and slapped his son. But being a parent,

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he was also naturally worried for Marcus; breaking the law was about the worst kind of mistake that his kid could make. "When he found out that I was forging MCs, he went all out to try to help me lighten my sentence. What he did really got me a really good life in there. My dad made a few trips to try to talk to the guy in charge. But I wasn't allowed to see him. He did a lot," confessed Marcus. "I was supposed to be in solitary confinement but he actually convinced them to let me serve food and do custodial work around the barracks, rather than being locked up in an isolated cell like all the other inmates. I'm grateful for all the trouble he went through to talk to the relevant parties to make my life in there much more bearable." Eventually, Mark even succeeded in helping to reduce Marcus' sentence to only 28 days. "When he found out, I don't think he was that harsh because that was beyond his control. I was getting into trouble with the law. So he said he'll try to do what he can to try to make things better. But of course he was disappointed. He told me to just take it as a learning experience, and he emphasised that we should make mistakes while we are young and learn from them." At the end of the day, Marcus served out his punishment and gained a valuable life lesson. And as a result of this incident, he also grew closer to his father. "It was good bonding for us. And Marcus learnt that he has to bear the full responsibility by himself now that he's an adult. I told him that there are things within the law that we can push a little bit, but there are things that we can't," said Mark.

The aftermath of Marcus' brush with the law also compelled Mark to reflect on his parenting methods, particularly pertaining to his relationship with his eldest son. Being the oldest of the three, Mark expects Marcus to set a good example for his younger brothers, and thus tends to be more critical of him. "I was scolding him every time I talked to him. I started to fault myself for doing so, and I asked myself why I was doing that.

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So I decided that I had to change my mindset,” explained Mark. “Last year, I just told him: ‘I’m not going to treat you like my son, but my future business partner.’ If I treat Marcus as a future business partner, I will treat him with respect and mentor him like all my business partners.” Thus, Mark started to see his relationship with his son from a different perspective. He patiently taught Marcus about his business, sharing his decision making process with him, and explaining to him how he would overcome various problems at work. “Business partners have to stand on their own eventually. So it’s my responsibility to give them as much information as possible. They will have to make their own decisions,” he said. “Even if I succeed or fail, I will still explain my rationale to him so that he can learn the concept behind it. This way, our relationship has also gotten better.”

During the past couple of years, Mark’s temperament has mellowed considerably. Both his older sons have noticed this change in him, especially since they were at the brunt of his erratic moods and corporal punishment methods when they were younger. When Kenneth crashed his father’s favourite Jaguar in October, he was expecting to be severely punished, but surprisingly, he was not. “He told me he wasn’t angry with me because it’s not my fault. It was the other driver’s fault, because he was drunk driving and he cut into my lane,” recounted Kenneth. “I guess in some sense, as he grows older, he doesn’t just get out and start raging. I think if it was last time, I would just get hit. He is more reasonable now.” When I asked Mark what his reaction was when he found out about the accident, he replied: “I didn’t scold him. Although it could be contributed to partially his fault, as he could have been more diligent. Any parent would jump to a fury, but material objects can be purchased again if spoilt. I simply saw it as an opportunity to show my graciousness.”

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Marcus also admits to fearing his father less, now that he has become a lot calmer and easier to get along with. "Especially after I left for Melbourne to study, I started talking to him more after that, because absence makes the heart grow fonder. I feel that it's much easier to talk to him now. If I have problems and I need help, I will ask him, because he'll know what to do," said Marcus. "As a role model, I couldn't ask for anything better. The wisdom and discipline he has is what I look up to and admire the most. Also being mentors to other people, I am fortunate to be living under the same roof as him. Having known him since the day I was born, I've seen his best and worst sides, and how he works his way around problems by finding the most effective ways to solve them. He's always been very open about his life and he wants to impart some of his knowledge to us."

As it is when he mentors his swimming students, employees and business partners, Mark has also always used an open and honest approach to raise his kids. Now that his sons are older, it would seem that they are mature enough to absorb and understand all those life lessons he has shared with them since their childhood days. "I've learnt a lot from the experiences that he shares with me; from management skills used in his day-to-day work to lucrative property investments that he has undertaken. The risks being taken regarding his investment plans always leave me in awe whenever he mentions them to me," said Marcus. And although Kenneth admits that at times he is reluctant to join his father during their Sunday bonding sessions, he still appreciates that Mark will always make the effort to spend time with him and his brothers, even when he is busy with work. "I know that it's the kind of thing that I will miss when I'm no longer this age. I may not like it now, but I'm sure next time it'll be something that I'll miss when I'm abroad studying or when I grow up," said Kenneth.

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"I'm a very sentimental person. The older a relationship gets, the closer I become to the person," said Mark. "During my younger days, I won't utter words like 'I miss you' or 'I love you', but especially in recent years, I'll openly tell my sons that I love them. I decided that it was time that I should be more expressive, so as to build a closer bond with my kids." Thinking aloud, perhaps he was picturing his sons as grown men starting their own families, while also reminiscing on a time where he first started his. Fatherhood has indeed impacted Mark a great deal. His approach to parenting may differ to most, but at the crux of it all, his intentions do stem from a deep love for his sons. Being a father has also unwittingly changed something inside him, allowing him to view his life and the world in a different light.

During a recent business trip to Milan, while taking some time off to reflect and soak in the beauty of his surroundings, Mark sent the following message to all three of his sons and his wife:

*12 September 2012*

*For Papa to be able to sustain a long trip, I know I need to be with the family. To be with you boys and Mommy is the best thing in life other than work. Papa values the limited family time we have and knowing the fact that soon, you boys will be away pursuing your priorities and interests, it makes me value our precious family time together. Just so that you know, Papa looks forward to our forthcoming family ski holiday. I am not excited about the destination, but for all of us to be together is what I relish most. Goodnight sons and Mommy.*





## Chapter 6

# THE LEGACY

### THE BEGINNING OF THE END

*"My game plan to end well means that I have a change in my life's direction. It is now directed towards the family and my boys' future, while keeping a love for what I do, that is FMDS."*

*Mark Phooi*

**W**e all start our lives wanting to achieve different things. Some of us spend our childhood pretending to be superheroes and dreaming of one day saving the world. Others may aspire instead to grow up rich and famous, carving a name for themselves in areas where their passions lie. For most, the dreams of our youth will remain unfulfilled, washed away by the practicality of time or buried deep within a sea of regret and weak resolve. Life can often be impatient and unkind to those who fail to respect that which is after all, finite, choosing to favour instead, the ones who plan ahead and see each day as an opportunity to inch a step closer to building the legacy they wish to leave behind. A fine line separates success and failure, and it is of no coincidence that only the ones with strength of mind will be able to obtain the rare privilege of living their dreams.

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Mark's passion for education can be traced back to his early days as a swimming coach, where he discovered a love for grooming his young students to become better swimmers as well as teaching them important values that would shape their character as they transit into adulthood. Being very open by nature, he enjoyed sharing his experiences and knowledge with them, while deriving a sense of fulfilment through playing a part in helping them identify and nurture the hidden talent that they possessed. Even while managing his design business, his passion for teaching and mentoring did not diminish. He continued to mentor members of his staff instead, grooming inexperienced designers and account executives to become his future business partners. While still running his design business, Mark often shared his passion for education and his ideas of setting up a training arm, with the people in his organisation. Despite not having any experience in the field of education at that point, he knew full well that that was something he wanted to completely devote his time and energy to, some time in the near future.

When asked what she thought was one of Mark's greatest strengths, having known him for more than 20 years, May Lee had this to say: "Once he sets his mind to something, he will go all the way to achieve it." This observation indeed rings true, especially in the case of Mark's strong desire to venture into the business of education, for as early as the year 1998, Mark had already had his sights on setting up a design school of his own. Now all he needed was a plan and a dash of luck. Firstly, he felt that if he wanted to truly compete in the education industry, it was important for him, as the founder of the school, to have the proper credentials. Therefore, between the period of 2000 to 2002, he successfully obtained his Master of Design from the University of New South Wales, while still heavily involved in managing and growing his



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business. For the next couple of years, Mark concentrated on taking his organisation to the next level, with the intention of eventually leveraging its undisputed status in the design industry and his reputation as a successful designpreneur, such that it becomes a stepping stone to launch his school. In 2005, under Mark's leadership, First Media broke new ground and expanded its reach regionally through developing partnerships and subsidiary studios in Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Taichung, Bangkok, Manila and Shanghai. It was also within that year that First Media became one of only five recipients, and the only communications agency, to receive the Enterprise 50 Start Up Award – an annual business award recognising Singapore's most promising privately-held companies. Later in 2006, Mark was awarded one of the prestigious Top Entrepreneur of the Year Awards, which was organised by the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (ASME) and the Rotary Club of Singapore. This was indeed a huge achievement for him, based on the fact that this award is by far, one of the highest business award recognitions in Singapore, and one that no trained designer had ever attained previously. The following year, Mark was also selected as one of the finalists in Singapore's top design accolade – the Singapore President's Design Award. All the hard work and dedication that Mark had put into his business, since he first started it single-handedly in 1989, was finally starting to be recognised by his peers and industry experts.

“Going into education was something that he had planned a long time ago. I see all the plans he has made, and he has hit one milestone after another. Even though we were all very skeptical, if he believes in something, he will just try and execute it,” recalled Noelle Tan. True enough, Mark never stopped believing that he would one day fulfil his dream of starting a school. In fact, his passion for this dream was so

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strong and unwavering that in 2005, he even turned down a lucrative multi-million dollar offer from a global market leader in digital and non-traditional media solutions to take over his business, because of their refusal to support him in using the First Media brand to launch his design school. This undoubtedly cemented his commitment to forging ahead with his plans to go into education. He was ready to take the leap and it seemed as though the right kind of opportunity presented itself when he was invited to invest in two private design schools in 2005. Things progressed quickly thereafter and Mark formed a partnership with Tiger Tay and Chay Yee to form First International Design School (FIDS), which would consist of Coleman Creative Design School and Inspiration Design School. FIDS was later rebranded as First Media Design School (FMDS) when Mark became a majority partner. As part of the agreement, Mark would take ownership and manage the Graphic Design and Multimedia faculties of this new entity, starting from January 2006.

At this point, Mark was determined to dedicate all his time and energy to his new venture in education, choosing to retire from his design business and entrusting it in the capable hands of Audrey Chong. Although it seemed like his aspirations were finally coming to fruition, 2006 would turn out to be a highly challenging year – one that continually tested his resolve to the fullest. Having no prior experience whatsoever in running a school, and finding that the daily operations involved in managing an agency was totally inapplicable in the context of operating an educational institution, Mark had to figure everything out from scratch. On top of this, he also had to iron out long drawn out internal disagreements with one of his partners pertaining to the financial aspects of their partnership, issues with university partners, problems with personnel as well as various operational challenges. Throughout that first year, he had to continuously endure a series of hard

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knocks and disappointments, to the point where he actually contemplated just throwing in the towel and letting his dream die a natural death. However, he knew that it was not in his character to do so, and he chose to persevere on, time and time again.

“I was very frustrated, but I was determined to get it up and running successfully,” said Mark, while sharing the various difficulties that he faced during the early stages of establishing his school. Armed with a never-say-die attitude, it was absolutely clear how committed Mark was to the cause when he revealed that back then, he even risked the security of his family by putting his house on sale to accumulate more funds to purchase the very building that currently houses the school. That was how much he wanted it to succeed. Failure was never an option for him, and a huge part of the reason why his dream of starting a design school was fulfilled was due to the fact that he had the guts to make risky decisions at crucial moments in its history, which helped to gradually advance its stature as a reputable educational institution in its area of specialisation.

## **PASSION AND VISION**

Back when he was still running his design business, Mark used to give this piece of advice to the young, fresh-faced designers eager to make a name for themselves in a highly competitive industry: “Just having passion is not enough. You need to have some business sense too.” Having seen his less business-savvy competitors dwindle in numbers through the years, Mark has always maintained a predominately business-oriented approach to running his suite of creative studios. Unlike most of his peers, his motive for starting his own design house was not solely borne out of passion, but

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rather more so out of survival. Although it is true that passion can help a great deal to fuel ambition, often the difference between the ones who succeed and the ones who do not, lies in the knowledge of how to transform one's passion into currency. And perhaps the reason why Mark was able to not only survive the industry, but thrive in it, was because he knew that on top of having a keen design sensibility, good business management know-how and leadership skills were just as essential and critical to how far he would be able to advance in his career.

As the founder and principal of First Media Design School (FMDS), Mark's overarching vision for his school was, quite simply, to equip his students with the necessary expertise and proper mentality to excel as designers or designpreneurs. Through FMDS, he hoped to play an important role in nurturing future entrepreneurs for the design industry, towards fulfilling his 10:100 vision of grooming a 100 designpreneurs. Having already had first-hand experience mentoring selected designers from his agencies to become his business partners, Mark strongly believed that he could adapt those past experiences into an effective academic programme which would serve as the foundation of FMDS' teaching ideologies. "I see designers as craftsmen. While they have the creative skills, the talent, and the flair, they can't manage projects well, let alone a business. I am trying to equip these people with management and entrepreneurial skills, so that they will be able to see things beyond the short term," he explained. With this intention in mind, Mark took a big risk by deciding to opt out of the school's existing UK-based college curriculum, and instead develop from scratch an industry-based curriculum that included a key module in Design Management. Against his partners' better judgment, this bold decision did eventually pay off when the Council for Private Education (CPE) in Singapore awarded FMDS with a

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four-year EduTrust accreditation in August of 2011 based on its exemplary performance in key areas of management and the provision of educational services. This was indeed a huge achievement for a boutique school, and at that time, a first for a design school.

Being passionate in both education and design, FMDS became the perfect vehicle for Mark to create and build his very own legacy. From the very start, the plans he had for his school included the expansion of its reach both locally and internationally. And sure enough, during the past six years, Mark has played a crucial role in gradually forging partnerships between FMDS and educational institutions from the UK, Australia, Indonesia, India and Mauritius, while also investing in setting up a subsidiary school in Jakarta back in 2007.

In a sense, seeing himself as a by-product of the local education system, Mark also hoped that FMDS could serve as a platform to offer those who, like him, struggled to excel academically in their pre-tertiary education. Essentially, his aim was for FMDS to become a school that helped to transform the lives of others – a place where students could learn about themselves, be educated about design and the business of design as well as develop the necessary foresight to succeed in their future careers. To Mark, only then would FMDS be able to continue spreading his vision through the test of time.

## **LEGACY OVER CURRENCY**

“Most people don’t feel that he empathises with them. They usually just see him as first and foremost, a businessman. Even his students may not think that he’s there to nurture them

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and give them opportunities for a better future, but that he's just a principal there to make sure that they pay their fees on time. They don't think of him in a more holistic sense." Making the above observation about the outward persona that Mark usually portrays, Audrey Chong, who is also a member of the Academic Board at FMDS, shared that although this was what most people thought of him, there was, on the contrary, another side to him that was not obvious to many who do not know him well. Where FMDS is concerned, Mark has always maintained that the school was founded on the principle of education first, and business second. Crafting the school's vision, goals and values to support this fundamental ideal, any profit earned from the school is seen, not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to help sustain the operation of the school and improve its teaching facilities, towards the aim of raising its overall teaching standards. "If you're passionate about education, find a way to invest more money into your business, and improve your capabilities. Let financial rewards be a by-product of your success, and not the sole determinant of it," he said in an interview with *The Business Times (Singapore)*, a financial based newspaper, in May 2012.

Through setting up FMDS, Mark no longer saw himself as a business owner, but chose instead, to define himself as an educator. To him, FMDS was so much more than just another one of his business ventures. He cared deeply for the school, its lecturers, staff and most of all, he cared about the welfare and future of his students. Using his sincerity and openness to convince his team members to put their faith in him as a leader, Mark easily came across as an inspiring motivator who genuinely loved his work, day in and day out. "He made an effort to convince everyone of his vision. He could convince them to care about the school the way he cared about it, and people were able to sense his passion," said David Foo. During the early stages of FMDS' history, when the school

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experienced a period of low student intake, Mark was still able to keep the overall morale high amongst members of his staff, convincing all of them to take a temporary pay cut and stay on with the organisation. Eventually, the strength of his leadership did ensure that things took a turn for the better, and they were all reimbursed accordingly. Their faith in him was indeed affirmed.

When you put your heart and soul into something, it is only natural that the stakes will be raised considerably. Due to the fact that starting a school was, in essence, a dream that he always had, Mark had very high expectations for the people he had chosen to help him in this important journey. Those who worked closely with Mark during the school's earlier years, are sure to remember him as a temperamental and fiery boss who did not hesitate to reprimand them when their performance was not up to par. 'Checking the weather' for what mood he was in each day was an ongoing ritual amongst members of his staff, and stories of him throwing a whiteboard duster at a certain someone out of frustration, or profanity-ridden rants originating from his office, were the norm. During their first few months working at FMDS, members of his staff are sure to remember Mark micro-managing them constantly, but in hindsight, most of them would understand where he was coming from, and that his impatience for results stems from his passion for the school and eagerness to get it off the ground and running smoothly. Once things were more stabilised at the school, Mark did in fact start to trust his team to work independently, and overall, his temperament also changed for the better.

As proof of his commitment to being first and foremost, an educator, Mark has in fact made decisions that were fuelled by improving the school's quality of teaching, in spite of an increase in its expenditure. For instance, he makes it a point

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to engage experienced part-time lecturers, even if at times their expected rates do not fall within his budget. And for those of his students who are struggling financially, Mark has also launched a ‘Study Now Pay Later’ financial aid scheme, in order to provide them with the opportunities that he feels they deserve. Also, despite having to juggle overseeing the strategic and academic planning as well as operational matters for FMDS, Mark’s love for teaching continues to remain unwavering and he still makes it a point to allocate time to teach a couple of Design Management and Personal Professional Development classes every semester. True as it may be that a number of his students find him intimidating at times, it is those who have gone to him for advice on their personal problems, who know firsthand that he is the kind of principal who will be more than willing to go the extra mile for them. Standing out as evidence of how much Mark cares for his students was an incident involving an international student’s dispute with his landlord earlier this year. During the school’s Chinese New Year break, this particular student feared for his own safety when his landlord started becoming violent towards him. And even though this incident took place on the night he was celebrating his Lunar New Year reunion dinner with his entire family, it did not stop Mark from being there for his student and helping him arrange for a safer place to stay in the meantime.



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In a recent memo circulated to members of his staff, Mark further exemplified his passion for education and how much he believed in FMDS through the following statement:

*August 2012*

*Despite our short history, FMDS has indeed come a long way. For those who are not aware, the earlier years of FMDS' history were plagued with a multitude of problems and challenges. In my humble opinion, any man who is motivated by money, with an average threshold for pain and agony, would have given up if he had to deal with that much adversity. However, it was through this love for teaching and the thought of sharing and mentoring, that has strengthened my tenacity to chase and fulfill this dream of mine. It has taken me almost 10 years of preparation as well as turning down a multi-million acquisition deal for my consulting group to fulfil my dream.*

All in all, it is undeniable that even though a likely impression of Mark by most, may still be that he is a shrewd businessman whose mind is constantly looking for opportunities to get ahead in his career. It is only those who have taken the effort to get to know the man behind the public figure that are able to see a different side of him – a side that reveals a man full of life and exuberance, fuelled by passion and perseverance, in pursuit of a simple dream to share his vision with the world and leave a worthy legacy in his wake.





## Chapter 7

# BALANCE

### YIN-YANG

*"It's difficult balancing optimism and realism, intuition and planning, faith and fact. But that's what it takes to be effective as a navigating leader."*

*John C. Maxwell*  
*Leadership Expert, Author, Pastor*

The ancient Chinese believe that the concept of Yin and Yang represents the understanding of how all things work. 'Yin' and 'Yang', translated as 'Shadow' and 'Light', is used to explain the coexistence of two completely differing, but complementary types of energies. While the 'Yin' is generally viewed as being dark, passive, and cold, the 'Yang' is often seen as bright, active, and hot. They are not completely black or white, just as in life, nothing is completely black or white. We live in a world of in-betweens; a world where darkness and light are intertwined and cannot exist without each other. At times, we may struggle to come to terms with the presence of this duality in our natural surroundings and more importantly within ourselves, battling to suppress one over the other. Yet it is only through the process of acceptance that we will be able to harness the power of these two varying forms of energy, towards the

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pursuit of inner harmony. We are but two sides of a coin, spinning constantly to create a perpetual state of balance.

At the age of 50, it can be said that Mark has more or less achieved a certain level of balance between the 'Yin' and 'Yang' inside him. The most striking example of this would be the change in his temperament within the last couple of years. Gone are the days of fiery outbursts and unpredictable mood swings. He is by far a much calmer man now. Having said that, there are still many facets of him that exist on completely opposite sides of the same spectrum. On the surface, he is known to be a high-handed and intimidating leader, but those in his inner circle are quick to share stories about his compassion and generosity. He largely identifies himself as being an extrovert, but he does enjoy reflecting, thinking and exploring his thoughts and feelings, which are all characteristics of introversion. Although he is analytical, organised and always plans ahead, he relies heavily on his intuition during his decision making process, and at times he is prone to letting his natural instincts get the better of him. As someone who takes his work very seriously, it may be surprising to know that Mark does, in fact, also have a playful and mischievous side. Sometimes it is only natural to wonder how so much contradiction can exist in a single person. But perhaps it is these very contradictions, and the fact that he uses these varying facets of his personality to his advantage, that makes Mark the larger-than-life character that he is.

## **THE COMPASSIONATE TYRANT**

For a man who is not bothered by being known amongst his employees as a high-handed tyrant, and who even seemed, to a certain extent, to wear it proudly like a badge of honour, it would be unlikely to assume the existence of a softer side

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to his personality. Yet there is a completely different side to Mark that only those who know him well are given access to. "Mark is someone who has a heart. Although he runs his own business, he has compassion. Even though monies were due to him, if debtors could not afford to pay, he was willing to let it go," recalled Felicia Ng, who has been Mark's lawyer for the past 20 years. "He was always very humane and felt that people do have a living to make too." Felicia often advised Mark that it was his right to pursue what was owing to him, and that he should not let the matter rest so easily. However, Mark chose to see things from a different perspective, possibly because he knows full well what it feels like to be in situations when one is pushed against a wall.

Generosity stems very much from a compassionate heart. Although at times Mark can be harsh with his words, it would be unfair to peg him as cruel at heart. When I asked him if he ever feels bad about saying mean things to others or when he goes too far when teasing someone, he unabashedly admits that he never filters his thoughts and most of the time, he does not even realise how cutting his words can be. It is only when he is being confronted by those he has unknowingly hurt that what he has done finally dawns on him. And in such instances, he would be more than ready to offer his apologies. "Mark is mean with his words, but not with his heart," shared Hally Chang, a friend of Mark's who was also once at the brunt of his cutting remarks. She recalled at first being angry and upset by what he had said to her, but after cooling down, she did come to terms with the realisation that he was not a cruel man by nature, and that there probably was no malice in his intentions. This was later reciprocated when Mark apologised extensively after she mentioned how his harsh remarks had made her feel. It may be a mystery as to why Mark does not think twice before speaking, but for all it's worth, it is an imperfection that is often overlooked

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by those who know him well, simply because of the spirit of generosity that he exudes.

“One of Mark’s biggest strengths, I think, is his generosity. This generosity extends beyond his willingness to spend money on people (as in the case of many other people’s definition of generosity). Mark is generous in the sense that he is always ready to share his knowledge, his time to help and listen, and his experience,” commented Audrey. “This is a rare trait in many businessmen as they have been conditioned by their role to guard their competencies. But in Mark’s case, over so many years, he has shared his knowledge with many people. For that matter, some of our competitors today, their founders had worked and learnt from Mark. Of course, Mark’s eventual decision to start a school also stems from the spirit that he wants to share.” While speaking to Audrey, it was clear that she holds Mark in high regard, and thinks of him more so as a mentor than a business partner. And she is hardly alone in this observation of his giving nature. This sentiment is also shared by Chris Lee, who has grown up and matured under Mark’s mentorship, while remaining a close friend of Mark’s for more than 26 years. “Many people who trained and worked directly under him have grown in personal value and are now living better lives. Mark has indeed created a chain-effect phenomenon,” shared Chris. And even though Winston Tan is only three years younger than Mark, he reveals that he has also learnt a lot from him, particularly in terms of how Mark manages his business and his attention to detail. “He’s the most generous person I know,” said Winston, who met him about 18 years ago when Mark decided to engage him as his property agent. Winston has since become one of Mark’s closest friends, and when he wanted to start a business of his own, Mark was the only person who believed in him and trusted him enough to help him raise SGD1 million to invest in his business, without

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anything written in black and white. That was the extent of Mark's trust and generosity towards his friend.

Mark believes that in life, you only need four good friends to carry your coffin – a piece of advice shared with him by his friend, Alex Yong. This resonated greatly with Mark and he has always been a dependable and loyal friend to those who genuinely care for him. “Not many people will help someone who is down and out. Usually, most will shun away from that person,” retorted Alex while explaining that Mark actually approached him and offered him a job and an office (when he thought that Alex was let go by his former company, although this was not the case). This willingness to help those in need was also commended and appreciated by his sister-in-law, May Lee. She recalls the time when Mark heard that one of her uncles, who was mentally ill and unmarried, had passed away. Even though Mark did not know her uncle personally, he did not hesitate to contribute a substantial sum of money for his funeral, which helped the rest of her family a great deal. “To give is better than to receive. When you give, you'll feel that you're adding value to that relationship, and you'll feel good when you know that you're helping that person,” said Mark. The truth is, where Mark is concerned, the more time you spend with him and the more layers you start to peel off, you will find that beneath the hard exterior that he often portrays, the core of his being is actually quite the opposite.

Compassion may be a great virtue, but being too soft-hearted may also be seen as a weakness that can be exploited. With his commanding stature, thick eyebrows and a natural frown that causes him to look rather intimidating, most of us would not think that Mark would allow himself to be taken advantaged of in any manner whatsoever. Yet because of his inclination to trust people easily, he has been burnt badly on more than one occasion. One of these instances,

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in particular, has affected him the most. When Mark was still managing his design business, he discovered that one of his most trusted partners was gradually planning to poach his team of top designers to start his own agency. Mark had a high regard for this individual's talent and had favoured him tremendously, offering him attractive wages, additional benefits that included country club memberships, and even a substantial amount of shares to his business. This made the betrayal all the more hurtful, and it led to a series of battles in court. "Mark was not prepared to let this one go because wrong was done to him and he wanted to send a message to the opposing party," testified Felicia, who was in charge of overseeing the legal case. As someone who holds true to his principles, he was insistent on pursuing the matter till justice was served. However, despite having to go through this painful experience of betrayal from a partner, along with other incidences where his generosity was misplaced, Mark is one who will not bear grudges. Till this day, as a testament to his character, he still maintains an open and honest outlook on life, and will probably always continue to do so.

## **THE INTROSPECTIVE EXTROVERT**

Susan Cain, an American writer and lecturer, made the following observation about extroverts and introverts in today's society: "Culturally we need a much better balance. We need more of a Yin and Yang between the two types. This is especially important when it comes to creativity and productivity because when psychologists look at the lives of the most creative people, what they find are people who are very good at exchanging ideas and advancing ideas, but who also have a serious streak of introversion in them." Spending a mere five minutes in the presence of Mark is enough to



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reach the conclusion that he identifies as being an extrovert. He comes across as an outgoing and assertive individual who is confident in social situations and enjoys being the centre of attention.

On the other hand, he admits that he also treasures having the time and space to reflect on his thoughts alone. In the 1990s, he used to take trips to New Zealand by himself, driving from Christchurch at 7am and only reaching the small town of Fairlie in the evening. "I just wanted to get away from the routine. It was exhilarating being alone, going to places no one goes to, and thinking about what I should do and how I should do it," he told me. "These trips alone made me feel detached from reality. I didn't have to make decisions that affect people's lives. And I was able to let go of everything for awhile, be in my own thoughts, and think about my life." At times, it would seem that even the extrovert in Mark would prefer a little bit of solitude to fulfil his desire to be quietly introspective.

On his recent trip to Italy, Mark penned the following thoughts on the day before he was returning to Singapore:

*12 Sept 2012*

*I finally left the group after two gruelling days of disorientation. Am on a train leaving for Venice now. Expected to spend the whole of late morning to evening, before leaving Sheraton Hotel for Milan airport for my next morning flight home.*

*My personal insight –*

*The joy of being detached from the group gives me a feeling of freedom. Being part of the group and being in a position which I play no part nor control gives me a sense*

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*of helplessness and disorientation. Not knowing precisely what I am expecting, whom I am meeting, how long is the journey, which direction we are heading, what are my expectations and the inability to manage the situation, freaks me out.*

*Somehow I managed to survive two full days out of seven. Being herded from one meeting to another without being in control, disoriented me. The choice I made to join this trip was not a wise one indeed. These two days have emphasised the need and importance of protecting my personal space (i.e. my freedom of choices). Without the above, I'll become a lost soul being led by others whom I know little about. Somehow, I still managed to move out of the group activities, such as roaming around when the rest were at lunch, doing some quick shopping and dining alone. It is in these moments of isolation that I find happiness and joy. When I'm with the group, I feel stressed out, and am intrigued to a certain extent as to why the rest are able to comply with the routine, but I am not. I suppose we all come from different backgrounds, and while they are willing to surrender their freedom readily, allowing themselves to be led by others, I am protective of mine.*

*From a positive perspective, I have learnt the value of family togetherness, which is something I have missed the most.*

## **MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE**

Someone once said: "If you judge a book by its cover, you might miss out on an amazing story." It is true that more often than not, first impressions are the ones that we remember most. It is a common practice to make judgements very quickly when

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meeting someone for the first time. As soon as the customary handshake is over, that stranger in front of us is automatically categorised into a stereotype of sorts. A smartly dressed man who speaks his mind freely is suddenly shoved into a box labelled 'Opportunistic, Power-hungry Businessman'. A student who prefers to lunch on his own rather than make small talk with his classmates will tend to be seen as an 'Anti-social Loner'. Like book covers, first impressions may often be misguided representations of something more, and perhaps an amazing story or journey awaits the ones who are willing to take a chance to turn the page.

First impressions of Mark may vary according to whether the person in question is a client, a business partner, a potential employee, or a friend, but the one thing that everyone will take away from their first meeting with him, is that Mark makes a lasting first impression. To clients, he will most likely come across as creative, charming and very persuasive. Alex Yong, a former client-turned-friend of Mark's, met Mark for the first time in 1999. Mark was one of the people pitching to design Penguin's annual report and Alex recalled that the first thing that struck him about Mark was his flamboyant presence, as he was dressed in a pink shirt and white spectacles. Alex and his boss eventually chose to go with Mark's pitch because they liked what he presented. On the contrary, Noelle Tan had a very different first impression of Mark when she was interviewed at Lancer 17 years ago. "I felt that he was very different from the usual design house bosses. He didn't look very creative. He looked very much like a businessman. And he liked to ask very open-ended kind of questions, like 'What are your plans three years down the road?'. Very HR kind of questions," recalled Noelle. This perspective is also shared by Chris Lee, who recalls telling Mark this during one of their sales presentations to a prospective client: "You sell

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like a businessman, and *not* like a salesman. I think you'll be able to sell anything under the sun."

Yet another varied account of him also came from David Foo, who met Mark eight years ago. Back then, David was working at an advertising agency and Mark was actually a competitor of his. "I could tell that Mark was a go-getter and a man with big dreams. He came across as focused in wanting to expand his business," remembers David. And then there is Audrey Chong's candid anecdote of what she really thought about him when she stepped into his office for the first time. "Well, our first meeting took quite a while. It took place at the office back then at 159 Neil Road. He shared with us some of his personal philosophies, particularly his infamous personal seven laws for success. He also took a personal interest in each of us, as in our family background and our interests. According to him, the family background has a strong impact on the way a person's character is shaped," observed Audrey. "My first impression of him at that point was: 'Gosh, this uncle has eyebrows that looked like those ancient Chinese warriors. Bushy. Angry.' The truth is, by the end of the meeting, I decided that I don't really like him. Somehow, he came across as patronising and not sincere about helping us, which by the way is true. He did not really help us in anyway thereafter."

Mark once mentioned to me that one of his overseas partners made this comment about Singaporeans – that most Singaporeans behaved the same, comfortable with living in a suppressive culture, with a preference to blend in with the masses. In his partner's opinion, with Singaporeans, what you see is what you get. There may be some element of truth in this observation, but where Mark is concerned this is hardly the case. Since he was a child, he has always wanted to stand out and be the centre of attention. In the report card he received during his very first year of primary school, his

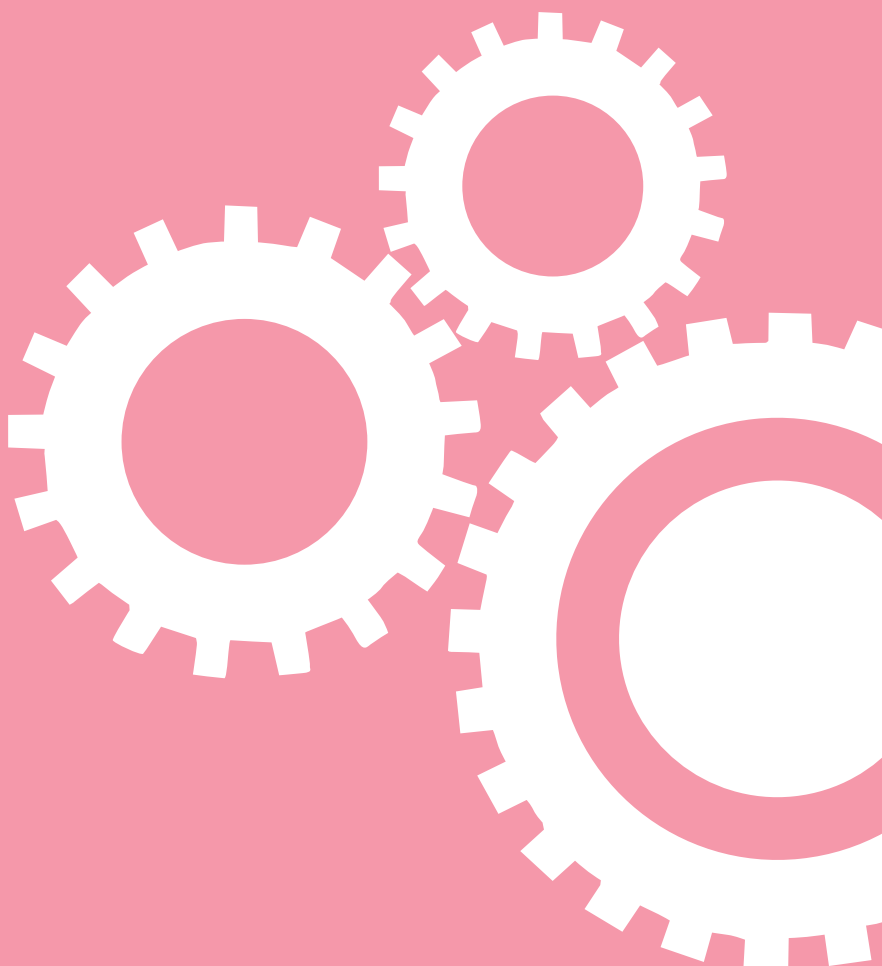
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teacher wrote the following remark about him: "Often likes to bully others." And even at the age of two or three years old, Mark was already lording over the kids that he played with. A non-conformist by nature, Mark yearned to be 'King of the Kampung' back then and in fact, still does to this day. Perhaps this innate desire to be distinctly different from others has played a decisive role in shaping the many facets of Mark's multi-dimensional personality. "For what I am and what I have become, I am very comfortable with myself. I'm still able to run a successful enterprise, so why do I have to change to suit other people?" he said matter-of-factly. Taking into consideration all that has been said about Mark, one thing is for sure: there is nothing typical about him, for what you see is hardly what you get. And that's the way he likes it.



## PART II

### *The Business of Design*



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## Prologue

# THE MARK OF A SUCCESSFUL MAN

*"Man is a maker of his character;  
the molder of his life;  
the builder of his destiny."*

*James Allen  
Author*

The fundamental strength and weakness of a man lies in his thoughts. He is conscious of and knows that he yields the key to his success through his mental prowess. Every successful man must have a strong mind. His mind is the master, and his body is the servant who is following through his actions according to his thoughts. The circumstances he operates in is a result of his own doing. It is the result of what his mind dictates.

A successful man will have a legitimate purpose in his mind. He will then focus all his time and energy to seek his desired outcomes. In the process, all his undertakings will naturally gravitate towards this central purpose of achievement.

### *Key To Success — Strengthening our Mental Toughness*

It is only natural that he may fail from time to time, until the point where he is able to overcome his own weaknesses. He knows that strength can be developed by effort and practice, and will continue to exert himself by putting in the work and having the patience to grow it.

However, over time, the strength of his mind and willpower is bound to give way. Inevitably, exercises to strengthen his



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mental toughness will form the starting point of every man's quest for success.

This road to attaining self-control and true concentration of his thoughts is not an easy one, but it will form the foundation for the success formulas of his future triumphs.

A successful man is well-conditioned in his mind, and is cautious of what he hears and reads. He listens carefully to every reason in order to detect the motives that define it. He is wise enough to know when to discard what's bad, and adopt what's good.

### *A Successful Man Always Reflects on His Own Actions*

Commonly, a successful man will watch, control and adapt his thoughts in order to trace the effect they have on him and his ultimate goals. He is able to link cause and effect through patient practice and investigation.

Utilising every experience in his life, even the most trivial ones, as a means of obtaining knowledge of himself, a successful man is able to obtain the understanding, wisdom and power to improve and progress in his daily undertakings.

### *The Enemy of Success — Doubt and Fear*

*"He who conquers fear and doubt will conquer failure."*

Doubt and fear are two disintegrating elements that will lead to a man's failure. A man of weak thoughts will never succeed, as he will likely indulge in self-doubt and fear.

A successful man is fully aware that his strong thoughts will be demolished when doubt and fear creep into his mind. And if so, he knows that he will never accomplish anything.

Mark Phooi

An adaptation from James Allen's *As a Man Thinketh*

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## Introduction

# MASTER OF YOUR OWN DESTINY – YOUR ROAD TO SUCCESS

As designers, we are a special breed of people. We are dreamers confronting realities through the practice of commercial art. We live by our dream of trying to decode the thinking and creative process. However, creative recognition may not guarantee sustained interest over time. Financial rewards do. Hence, the combination of design and entrepreneurship provides this attractive appeal of offering us both tangible and intangible benefits, through the creation of wealth and the building of a designer's reputation respectively.

Remember that the decision to be a master of your own career destiny is yours alone. You have a choice to make, either to work for yourself, or for others. It is you and no one else who is the author of whether your life story turns out to be one of success or failure.

To equip yourself with a champion's mindset, I will share with you the five most important actions required for you to become a successful designpreneur –

### *1. Keep Dreaming*

Your dreams must be kept alive at all times. We must not stop dreaming of attaining our aspirations, along with its host of benefits. Subconsciously, it is these very dreams that will drive you forward, and direct all your thoughts and actions to helping you set your life's priorities, in order to prepare you for the eventual actualisation of your dreams.

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## *2. Keep Questioning*

Never take things at face value. One has to keep pondering and questioning every experience that has taken place in our lives and business as well as that of others. We need to satisfy our curiosity about occurrences in our daily lives, various kinds of human behaviour and reactions, market happenings, our surrounding environment as well as general matters, including the world economy, politics, investments, etc. We need to stay constantly informed in order to make wise decisions. Satisfying our curiosity is one good way to be market savvy and street smart.

## *3. Keep Thinking*

Our mind should never cease thinking. We should always engage our brain in different thinking modes at all times. An engaged mind is often a well-oiled mind. Through constant questioning and thinking, we will be able to gradually increase our mental capacity and bandwidth, leading to a higher level of wisdom eventually.

## *4. Keep Looking*

Design and business ideas can literally be found everywhere. We just need to be curious and observant. Every good old idea can be imitated, improvised and innovated to become novel again. This process of regenerating old ideas into new and better ones, simply requires us to engage in proactive thinking.

## *5. Keep Trying*

Perfection can never be achieved through a single attempt. Through the process of trying, you will increase your level of perseverance and resourcefulness. And you will likely uncover more ways of doing things; unravelling new wisdom and sharpening your skills along the way. Best of all, you might discover hidden talents that you never knew existed.

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Always remember that knowledge without action is useless. Real change must come from within you. Your only limitation lies only in your mind. If you think you can, you will. If you think you cannot, nothing else will matter.

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## 1. Attitude is Everything

My personal achievements and successes all these years can be attributed to one key trait – a positive attitude.

I didn't realise the importance of this trait till much later in my life when I started talking to my peers, who are equally, if not, more successful corporate honchos and entrepreneurs. In comparison, I began to realise that although I may not be as enterprising as they are, I do have a tendency to see an opportunity in a problem, rather than the other way around. Even in the face of adversity, I will always be full of optimism, believing that I can turn things around to make them work in my favour.

Attitude is a very intriguing subject. It all boils down to personal choice and I have witnessed firsthand that even the slightest shift in my attitude can alter my decision making process, and in turn change the entire course of it in a significant way.

Creative pitching is part and parcel of the design business. To survive and prosper, one has to win more than one loses. Often, we will have to pitch against the best local and foreign brains in a multi-corner fight. Through conditioning my mind and attitude, I have learnt to treat creative pitching as a competitive team sport. It requires precision planning, careful execution and a slick presentation, supported by thorough research that covers specific industry domains, the client's project objectives and the end-user's preferences.

During the implementation process, I will not take no for an answer, and failure is never an option. A common behaviour displayed by team members who have failed, would be that of disappointment and frustration stemmed from a wounded pride. The remarkable thing about me is that every rejection

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spurs me on. Instead of wearing me down, it pushes me to excel. My winner's mentality is always locked in my mind throughout times of failure, ensuring that I will carry on the fight to win when the next opportunity arises. This is where I differ from the masses. Instead of dwelling on frustrations, which will turn into negative energies, I choose to treat failure as a personal challenge. It is in my nature to do my very best to compete well, and I have always thrived in doing so.

Each time we lose a pitch, I will enter a point of reflection to seek out our weaknesses. And even though I know that I will not be able to change how my clients react, and that there are always tons of reasons why they chose not to select me and my team, I am convinced that the only way to succeed next time, is to change myself. If I don't improve, nothing else matters. I am a fighter and competitive by nature, and I am determined to win the next time round. This spirit of competitiveness and a strong self-belief system, along with treating failures as learning opportunities, have continued to serve me well through the years. Through this process, my experience and skills have both been honed and sharpened.

On the business front, I have always adopted this 'must win' and 'can do' attitude in my approach to problem solving. The merits of my decision making process and how I react to challenges have both contributed to making me an accomplished designpreneur.

*"We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can change is ourselves. I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we react to it. And so it is with us... we are in charge of our attitudes."*

*Charles Swindoll*  
*Evangelical Christian Pastor, Author, Educator*

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## 2. Build Your Reputation Around Excellence

To be a master of our trade, we must treat our business as a marathon instead of a sprint. As a designpreneur, our reputation should always precede profit, and prioritising this correctly is critical. We are designers first and entrepreneurs second. One has to bear in mind that during the development stages of our business, we need to place great emphasis around our reputation to be seen as a creative hothouse. If one is serious about doing long-term business, a good name will go a long way, and it will be worth every ounce of energy to build one.

In order to build a good reputation, we need to secure high profile clients and highly visible projects. With a good name, more business will flow in and it will be easier to recruit talent and attract clients. A good reputation takes years to build, but only takes one project to destroy, hence we must protect it at all costs.

Here are some basic business management tips to build a wholesome and well-regarded reputation as a designpreneur.

### **As an Employer and Mentor**

- Pay your staff fairly, but treat them superbly.
- Be their servant leader.
- Be a role model they would want to emulate.
- Be available and generous with your time. Do not be protective over your personal time and space.
- Be prepared for the worst. Stay cool and collected when in times of crisis.
- Be generous with giving them benefits. They are your workhorses and assets.

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### **As an Entrepreneur**

- Be inquisitive. Explore, experiment and experience new things.
- Be bold enough to challenge the norm.
- Be ever ready to jump at opportunities. Don't hesitate even when you have less than a 50% chance of success. Don't wait till you are 99% sure. That time will never come.
- Be a chili padi, although small, you must be feisty and ready to fight.

### **As a Consultant**

- Your clients are your paymasters.
- When billing your clients, never use a cleaver. Increase your rates gradually, and not drastically in one shot.
- Turn your clients into your friends – that's my motto.
- Be bold enough to admit your mistakes. Always apologise and make good on your mistake.
- Your time does not belong to you, but to your clients.
- Always delight your clients with more ideas.



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### 3. Map Out Your Battle Plan

More often than not, many designers-turned-entrepreneurs go into this business without a proper business plan. Their common attitude is: there is money in there, let's do it and see how it goes. To me, they are kamikaze pilots on a suicidal mission, who would typically not last long in the business.

In my two decades of managing the First Media Group, I have always had a plan. My plan covered the constant reviewing of my business' vision and mission, identifying new growth and market penetration strategies, manpower planning and training as well as financial and staff welfare plans. From a broader perspective, these plans are underpinned by the most important plan of all – my personal life plan, which is divided into short (two years), mid (five to 10 years) and long (till I drop dead) term plans. This personal life plan is paramount and is closely linked to my business plans.

By charting my future, my path is now well-lit and I can then walk through it with confidence. This also gives me a clearer understanding of the required resources in terms of skills, knowledge, finances, manpower and market trends that will help me achieve these goals.

In terms of business plans, we should always be specific as to the type of industry, projects and clients we wish to target and we should proceed to develop a set of penetration strategies.

I have always loved the corporate market segment of the design industry. Business-to-business corporate clients pay well and expect the best out of us. This in turn helps to sharpen my skills, while pushing me to new levels of professionalism. However, this is also a very sensitive market where service quality and reliability matter most, as compared

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to business-to-consumer clients. In contrast to designing for corporate clients, retail designing can be seen as being worse off, especially because you will end up at the bottom of the food chain. This is because with retail clients, there is very little money to be made and payment terms are typically long.

Always treat your approach to life and business as fighting a big war with multiple battlefronts. Be ready for the unexpected and remember to stack up an arsenal of strategies for the inevitable. And, always be prepared for crises.

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## 4. Commando and Support Teams

You do not need to have a Master's degree in business to be a good businessman. A good understanding of business management, coupled with a clear vision, is all you need to get you started.

On the management front, I make it a point to ensure that our charges are always battle ready. Subdividing the studio and sales team into separate platoons or battalions with designated commanders-in-charge, will help to drive a competitive spirit amongst members of the staff. While running my design business, my strategy was to always plan for two design teams instead of one, namely the Thunder Team and the Lightning Team. The talent making up these two teams will consist of people who differ in terms of personality and character traits. The selection process will also take into consideration each designer's aspirations.

The designers in the Thunder Team would be tasked to execute regular design projects, along with handling client relationships. Other than designing skills, the designers in this team must also be equipped with good interpersonal skills. They are seen as the stabilising force of the company, and therefore they must be reliable and dependable to ensure the financial safety of the organisation.

The Lightning Team would then focus on finding new business and building relationships with new clients. The members of this team are usually more ambitious and driven. They are individuals who are more gung-ho, and who have what it takes to secure projects and pave the way for new opportunities. Once these clients become recurring customers, they will be passed to the Thunder Team to handle.

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With a maintenance team (i.e. Thunder Team) and a builder team (i.e. Lightning Team) in place, I am able to enjoy greater flexibility in terms of staff deployment when I am faced with tight project timelines. This arrangement also helps to job fit the designers based on their personal aspirations. Serving as a critical strategic growth catalyst for the business, the Lightning Team members would usually consist of young, ambitious and highly creative talents who are more upbeat and dynamic. On the other hand, the Thunder Team would serve as a support team, and would consist of more matured designers who are less ambitious. However, they do play a critical role in ensuring the financial stability of the business through their contribution of regular project billings.

This model enables better utilisation of existing talents, and the ability to job fit them accordingly. It also allows me to have a clearer picture of my financial position, which in turn helps me to plan my cash flow projection more accurately. A good sense of my financial position gives me the confidence to be more aggressive and creative during my marketing and pitching sessions.

It is important to review and revise your strategies frequently. Tweak or fine-tune your organisation's operating system even when you feel that it is working fine. A good team is one that is always ready for battle.

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## 5. Right Price, Right Resources

To optimise studio performance, I will evaluate the types of clients based on the nature of the project, profit margin, and the merits of each project in terms of its overall potential to add value to our agency portfolio. In a typical scenario, I would classify each project and client based on their respective financial value, categorising them under different classes, before deciding on the amount of studio time and type of resources that should be appropriately allocated. This will be done through a simple categorisation procedure, which is similar to how credit cards are divided into Platinum, Gold and Classic categories.

### **Platinum Category**

This category consists of clients with deep pockets who have a high appreciation of design.

#### **A+**

An elite group of clients who demand the best in terms of service and design requirements, and are willing to pay whatever it takes to get the results they want.

#### **A**

An elite group of clients who demand the best in terms of service and design requirements, and are willing to pay a high amount to get the results they want.

#### **A-**

An elite group of clients who demand the best in terms of service and design requirements, and are willing to pay a fairly high amount to get the results they want.

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### **Gold Category**

This category consists of mass market clients who may at times upgrade or downgrade categories based on changing market conditions.

#### **B+**

Clients who expect above average service and professional design outcomes, and are willing to pay a slightly above market rate to get the results they want.

#### **B**

Clients who expect above average service and professional design outcomes, and are willing to pay the market rate to get the results they want.

#### **B-**

Clients who expect above average service and professional design outcomes, but are only willing to pay a slightly below market rate to get the results they want.

### **Classic Category**

This category consists of the least desirable clients and we should try to avoid being engaged by them at all costs.

#### **C+**

Clients who expect fair service and decent design outcomes, but are only willing to pay below market rate to get the results they want.

#### **C**

Clients who expect fair service and decent design outcomes, but demand freebies and are only willing to pay below market rate to get the results they want.

#### **C-**

Clients who expect fair service and decent design outcomes, but demand freebies and further discounts, and are only willing to pay below market rate to get the results they want.

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## 6. Grooming Talents – ‘Eagles’ and ‘Turkeys’

As a boutique consulting firm, it is always difficult to attract good talents. The best talents will typically be attracted to either join an MNC agency or set up shop themselves. Hence, one of our key functions as a designpreneur is to be able to spot young talent at an early age and to groom them. Under proper guidance, young designers may turn out to be ‘eagles’ in waiting; but it is more likely that they will be ‘turkeys’ instead.

Eagles had long been associated with strong leadership, freedom, independence and solitude. They are also perceived to be self-sufficient creatures. Designers who tend to resemble the ‘King of Birds’ are those who are natural leaders and have what it takes to lift our organisation to greater heights. However, because of their self-reliant nature, at times these designers do not work well with others and will prefer to go at it alone.

On the other hand, although turkeys do not possess the same regal statue as eagles, they do have some qualities that eagles do not. Turkeys are known to be intelligent, social beings who nurture and protect their young. They usually also thrive in their natural habitat. Thus, designers who fall within this category will tend to be more loyal towards the organisation, once they start to feel a certain degree of attachment towards it. This category of designers often work well within their limitations. They are also crucial aspects of every organisation.

Under my management, I am often regarded as a high-handed and highly competitive employer. Working in an intense business environment, where competition is rife

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between local and international agencies, has conditioned me to be the person I am.

Throughout a decade of working with designers, and having groomed more than 30 business partners locally and regionally, I have been the cornerstone of all their companies' survival. I have also been there for them during their personal crises. Being high-handed has indeed served me well, but I must admit that I have mellowed down since entering the education profession.

Borrowing the local ruling government's concept of meritocracy, I have made it known to my fellow junior colleagues that how they fare will determine what I have planned for them.

I often have this saying: "Let the eagles take on the more challenging work, and the turkeys will do the more straightforward work". However, everyone will still be given the opportunity to learn and grow at their own pace. Given the appropriate space and time, you will be pleasantly surprised to find late developers in the midst. Ironically, it is often the turkeys who are easier to teach. They are more loyal and dependable as compared to the eagles, who are always seeking new pastures to fly to.

In my opinion, for any agency to be dynamic and progressive, one has to be less understanding towards staff members who are incompetent or complacent. Under normal circumstances, I won't over-invest my energy and time with those who are not willing to learn new things or seek improvement. It is my approach to test the commitment and capacity for stress of newcomers, by first giving them more tasks to complete than the average workload. If they fail to meet the bar, I am all but ready to ship them out at any time.



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## 7. I've Fired More Than I've Hired

This is a saying I have often used: “I’ve fired more than I’ve hired”. Firing is an art that is mentally excruciating, and difficult for many to master. As for me, I am immune to it, and I find it to be a good excuse to demonstrate the level of seriousness that I adopt in managing my business.

As a late developer myself, I often give young aspiring design talents an opportunity to work in my agency. I will tend to give in to the temptation to hire anyone who has expressed a desire to learn and has the will to succeed. Like them, I’ve succeeded simply because I wanted to. Hence, I believe in giving them similar opportunities as well. As a businessman, the cost of these hires are not too expensive, but could possibly provide the company with huge potential financial returns if some of them turn out to be good catches. Unless one tries it, one will never know. That’s my attitude towards hiring new employees.

It is my habit to give them a shot. It is also my habit to make known my democratic employment terms. If at any time, they fall short of my expectations, off they go. Similarly, if at any time the company falls short of their expectations, they are also welcome to leave. This is considered an open understanding among my staff members. However, the success rate of this approach is typically very low and many do overstay their welcome. In such cases, I would have to show them the exit.

This is what I’ve learnt from my former swimming coach, the late Mr Kee Soon Bee – a cow will always be a cow. With the anatomy of a cow, it can never outrun a horse in a sprint. One must learn how to optimise their strengths by fitting them to the right race.

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Likewise, in our talent-based consulting business, there are bound to be cows and horses. The worst kind of scenario is when a cow thinks he is a horse. It will then be left to me to determine each person's calibre and how to capitalise on their talents. The ability to identify their potential strengths and draw out their talent in order to job fit them, is in itself a challenging task. However, this is the only way they will be able to attain their best performance.

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## 8. Pay Your Staff Fairly, Treat Them Superbly

The design consulting business is a competitive one. Due to its low barrier to entry, you can expect to face keen competitors, ranging from one-man operations (OMO) to large international consulting groups. During the pre-computer era of the eighties, all visuals were hand-sketched and all pre-production artwork were typesetted, casted out in bromide paper with CMYK overlays, and mounted on boards using cow gum. It was a truly talent-intensive business back then, and staff poaching was a common headache. Design consulting was still in its infancy, thus qualified designers were a rare breed. To survive and win, I understood the need to build a strong and committed team consisting of talented designers to fight alongside me. Through my management training, I learnt the importance of having personal motivation and aspirations. Through the years, the following pointers have helped me build strong and committed teams.

### *NO. 1 – AS THE KEY MAN FOR YOUR TEAM, YOU HAVE TO BE A ROLE MODEL.*

As the owner, you have to believe in your business more than anybody else. If you truly love your business, you will be out there every day, trying to do it the best you possibly can, and very soon everyone around you will catch the passion from you.

The phrase 'key man' also has a double meaning to me, as I am often the first one to open the office door, and the last one to lock up.

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*NO. 2 – SHARE YOUR PROFITS WITH YOUR STAFF.  
TREAT THEM AS YOUR POTENTIAL PARTNERS.*

Retain management control, but always behave like a servant leader. Increasing staff ownership through profit sharing is something many find hard to do. However, I implemented a 'Shared Responsibility, Shared Rewards' scheme in my agency, and it worked perfectly. Often, when someone works late, the rest of his team members will follow suit, or offer to help him out without being told to do so. This approach also reduces staff attrition rates and increases morale.

*NO. 3 – OPEN AN EMOTIONAL BANK ACCOUNT WITH  
YOUR STAFF.*

Money and ownership alone aren't enough to keep your staff committed. You should constantly think of new and interesting ways to grow the emotional bank accounts that you have established with your staff members.

At Lancer Design, we used to organise a series of regular staff social welfare programmes, including annual overseas holidays, birthday celebrations, breakfast meetings, weekly staff lunches, monthly dinners, long service awards, dedicated sharing and training sessions (i.e. design critique sessions), black bag days, etc. These were all organised with the aim of increasing the spirit of camaraderie amongst staff members. Through the years, I have grown emotional bank accounts with my senior team members, and in turn, I was able to garner their respect and loyalty.

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*NO. 4 – BE TRANSPARENT. COMMUNICATE EVERYTHING.*

Conduct regular weekly production meetings with the purpose of cross communicating between staff members and various departments. The more they know, the more they will understand and appreciate. The more they understand, the more they will care. Once they care, there's no stopping their commitment in the workplace.

*NO. 5 – LOOSEN UP.*

Always try to inject humour into your workplace. Music should be encouraged to be openly played. Loosen up and everybody around you will loosen up too. Have fun and show enthusiasm, even in times of failure.

*NO. 6 – ENCOURAGE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION.*

The feedback from staff members and clients is one of the most important channels for me to review the current situation for internal change and improvements.

Smoke breaks and coffee breaks are two of the best times to hear someone's expression of frustration and disappointment in regards to projects, or the workplace.

*NO. 7 – CHALLENGE YOUR STAFF.*

Everyone loves a challenge. Put your staff to the challenge and you will be surprised by how thrilled and excited they will be when they succeed. Some ideas include simple challenges such as winning design awards (i.e. progressing from local to regional, and finally to international levels), winning pitches

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against the big boys, and best team performance (i.e. most projects completed). Of course, rewards are essential to drive their motivation.

To learn to treat staff superbly, we have to be believers in people.

- Employ staff who have aspirations and are trainable.
- Believe in them before they succeed.
- Emphasise their strengths by listing out their past successes.
- Instil confidence in them when they fail.
- Experience some wins together.
- Help them visualise their future success with the organisation.

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## 9. Up Your Service

In life as in business, you don't need to be the strongest to succeed, as long as you know how to win. In any business setting, when all the dust has settled, you will find that everything boils down to one key consideration – the strength of your relationships.

No one enjoys engaging in one-off businesses. The test of having continuous success in our business is highly dependent on the strength of our client relationships. Turning a professional relationship into a friendship is only the beginning. Nurturing this relationship is the key to building lasting friendships.

Providing service dependency can be likened to our clients being hooked on the quality of our service, like a drug. The level of attentive service showered on them and our responsiveness to their requests are basic ingredients in providing a high quality of service to them.

The easiest trick is to get our clients hooked on our prompt action to the point where they will find us irreplaceable.

Knowing when and how to satisfy the client is critical, especially during the early stages of building the relationship. Saying the right things such as, “Here’s my mobile number and you can reach me anytime, even after office hours” or “I’m leading this project and I enjoy working on weekends, so anytime is always a good time to call” will reassure our clients that we are on top of the job.

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These small actions will help to enhance the relationship by building their confidence in our service standards. Over time, the client will then subconsciously buy into the quality standard of our personal service over the agency's creative prowess.

For this to develop, account executives must possess a high level of this service mentality – the customer is king.

### *9 Pointers on providing Client Service Excellence*

1. Never say no. Always say that you will try even when you are unsure of the answer. But be sure to check before committing.
2. Always let the client feel that they are your only client and that you are at their disposal at all times.
3. Make connections among your group of clients. Introduce your clients to people you think might be beneficial to their business. This way, you may be able to kill two birds with one stone.
4. Love your client and you will hate to disappoint them. This will in turn increase your commitment to their project.
5. Offer information and news readily when you think it might be of use to them.
6. Connect with your client by building common grounds. Get to know your client's personal interests and preferences, including their hobbies, interests, birthday, family, education, place of residence, etc.
7. When in doubt, ask. But never betray your self-confidence.
8. Provide periodical project updates any time of the week, even during weekends and holidays.
9. In a crisis, be the first to offer solutions. Always be ready to take the blame. Never argue with your client.



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## 10. Cheap, Good, Fast and Convenient

In this competitive marketplace, price leadership will never be a good strategy in the long run. Aside from the strength of the agency's portfolio, it is critical for any business development personnel to know how to win clients using the following four broad pointers.

### *1. Cost – Entry Point Pricing*

Clients will never willingly reveal their true budget for any design project. It will take a few tricks for them to reveal the truth. One common trick is when preparing a project quote, always offer a few quotations ranging from the lowest to the highest price. Being 'cheap' is at times merely a perception. You will find that clients who opted for the lowest price at an entry level will soon be more open to negotiate for a package deal at a higher price. Also, once you have one foot in the door, you can add on other miscellaneous fees (depending on the type of project) without the client feeling the pinch.

In terms of raising your fees, many would opt to use the cleaver, but I would rather choose to use the penknife, slicing them slowly instead.

### *2. Convenience – Solving the Client's Headache*

Winning our client's confidence by offering the idea of 'convenience' will sometimes help to seal the deal. It is about giving them the peace of mind and letting them know that we are at their disposal at all times. This gives our clients a 'feel-good' understanding that we are 'on top' of their projects. It also gives a perception that he/she is our only client, or our most important one.

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Often, confidence can be easily built this way, but only if we are prepared to commit our time and attention to developing a long-term relationship with our clients. Building trust along the way through this approach of ‘convenience’ provides us with more opportunities for communication and to stay in touch, which will in turn help to build a strong foundation for a good interpersonal relationship with them.

### *3. Speed – Giving a Sense of Urgency*

“I want the project to be delivered yesterday.” It seems like a common expectation for design agencies to be able to react and respond swiftly to this request. Being ‘fast’ means delivering promptly at all times. It also means that the agency should be prepared to bend over backwards for the clients, in order to accommodate last minute changes. It does not necessary equate to giving super fast service to our clients, while sacrificing on quality or cutting corners to meet a quick delivery deadline.

It is useful for agencies to provide a detailed project development timeline, along with their quotations. This way, it offers the client a clear and informed understanding of how the project development process will be carried out.

### *4. Good – Idealistic yet Practical Creatives*

Being ‘good’ is the universal expectation of providing quality (creative and customer service). Always bear in mind that no client wants to pay for inferior service even if they know that they are getting a good deal. Expected levels of quality differs from client to client. Providing quality in design consulting means having the ability to wow the client. However, proposing unpredictable design outcomes may not necessary

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mean our clients will accept them. On the other hand, this will leave a good impression of our creative abilities for sure. Often, our clients will settle for something in between a 'wow' and a 'predictable' design concept.

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## 11. 7 Laws of Personal Success

Success cannot be achieved overnight. Although it is commonly perceived that hard work, determination and ambition are the driving factors of success, adopting the right personal values and a positive attitude are key to enhancing our willpower and increasing our levels of endurance.

I have these '7 Laws of Success' displayed on my office wall during my early years to remind me of my vision and goals. Throughout the years, they have served me well, keeping me focused and in check.

### *Law No. 1 – GOAL*

Aim as high as you can. Even if you cannot achieve your goals, you will get a lot further by aiming high, than if you have not aimed at all.

1.1 Chart your goals – A big goal may be seen as a mountain when it is looming before you. However, If you break it up into smaller, more reachable goals, then you will be less inclined to procrastinate towards achieving it.

1.2 Plan with an end in mind – Visualise these goals through forward/reverse planning. You may change your course of action to suit your external environment, but you should never change your eventual goal post.

1.3 Stamp out procrastination – Every achievement starts with a dream that should be followed through by action. If we do not begin, we can never get to the end.

### *Law No. 2 – EDUCATION*

Acquiring knowledge is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Knowledge is a collection of facts. Wisdom is knowing

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how to apply it, and having the ability to see beyond the challenges, while discovering the opportunities within.

2.1 Keep learning – Increase your academic knowledge and related work experience to enhance personal and professional growth. Learn from the experts. Also, read as widely as possible.

2.2 Have an explorer mindset – Have a strong thirst for knowledge and develop an inquiring mind. Never cease exploring and experimenting with new ideas for you might chance on your next big discovery.

### *Law No. 3 – HEALTH*

Your health affects everything that you do. The key to good health is to eat right, sleep right, and exercise right. You have to be fit, not for a life of leisure or for any sort of culture, but for the struggle ahead.

3.1 Health is wealth – Sustain a strong body. Your body is the most important vehicle that will carry you through hardship and troubled times. A strong body will help you withstand a longer period of struggle.

3.2 Healthy body, healthy mind – A positive attitude is crucial. A person's main cause of trouble is often all in his mind. Your mind is like a garden – tend it well by filling it with positive and encouraging thoughts throughout the day.

### *Law No. 4 – DRIVE*

Anything you've ever wanted, dreamed of, or hoped for, can be yours if you put passion, zeal, and enthusiasm into everything you do. These are the fuel of your drive; they help you get to where you want to go.

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4.1 Remove all safety nets – You should not have a U-turn or contingency plan. This will help you adopt a do-or-die attitude.

4.2 Be passionate – Develop a strong burning desire and be passionate in your pursuits. With passion, work becomes play.

4.3 Heed your calling – Do not be distracted by the financial gains of others or their successes. Stay focused and committed to your goals. Always put in your best in every endeavour. Soon your reward will come.

#### *Law No. 5 – PERSEVERANCE*

Even if everyone says you don't stand a chance, don't give up on your dreams. Life is a combination of successes and failures. Both are needed.

Challenges come in three broad categories: easy, difficult, and impossible. Those who take on only the easy challenges will have a safe and boring life. Those who take on the difficult ones will have a tough but satisfying life. Those who take on the impossible will be the ones who will be remembered.

5.1 Life is never a bed of roses – Quitting should never be an option, and remember that things will never turn out the way we want them to be, however much we plan. So be prepared.

5.2 There are no problems, only challenges – Your attitude of growth is highly dependent on your attitude.

5.3 Learn, unlearn and relearn – Go ahead and make mistakes, but only if you know how to resolve them. Best not to repeat the same mistake again.

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### *Law No. 6 – RESOURCEFULNESS*

Resourcefulness is the idea of turning the impossible into the thought that “I’m possible”. If you can’t get through the mountain, go around it. If you can’t go around it, go over it. If you can’t go over it, sit down and ask yourself if getting to the other side is all that important. If it is, set about digging a tunnel through it.

6.1 Tap into the power of information – Have an in-depth knowledge of local market intelligence. Know who has what, and know where to find it. Knowing how to use information to achieve maximum business benefits is an art.

6.2 Stay connected with the market players – Develop a diverse network of friends and associates. Do not make enemies as you will never know when you need them.

6.3 Know your strengths – Know your personal strengths and weaknesses. And learn to exploit your strengths and strengthen your weaknesses as you grow.

6.4 Develop strong work competencies – Build up a strong presence and persona so that people will respect you. In extreme cases, they should also fear you.

6.5 Be the extremist – Stay clear from conventional thinking and common practices. Challenge the status quo.

6.6 Develop an appetite for risk – You will then likely see opportunities in a problem.

6.7 Solution bank – Build up a war chest of business strategies for future implementation.

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*Law No. 7 – GOD*

Faith in God is the best insurance when you're faced with a personal setback or tragedy. An insurance company can reimburse your financial loss, repair your home or car, and help you start again in business, but only God can mend your broken heart and soul.

7.1 Acknowledge God – He is the supreme being who has given us all the blessings that we have. Do good as a person. Be peace-loving, righteous, merciful, considerate, etc.

7.2 Faith in God – Seek His help to build an upright and righteous character. Your character and personality will help to sustain relationships better than your capabilities.

7.3 Life is a journey; heaven is the destination – When old age, disease, or sorrows strike us, there is a strong inclination for almost every one of us to think there is God, or something like him. Plan for your demise and have all your affairs in place.



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## 12. 3 Types of Entrepreneurs

It seems like some people have all the luck in the world, while some don't. In the business world, sometimes we will come across successful businessmen who seem to have the Midas touch. Little do we know about their success secrets, except to pass it off as luck. For me, luck equates to timing plus preparation. Let me share my understanding through a typical analogy.

There are 3 common types of characteristics that categorises what kind of entrepreneur we are. These traits can be divided into groups such as Builders, Maintenance People and Fire Starters. I shall elaborate as follows:

### *Builders*

The first group belongs to enterprising trailblazers who are usually visionaries and are innovative by nature. Usually small in numbers, builders are typically high achievers who seem to possess a higher calling in life. They also possess a higher consciousness and greater sense of enlightenment, acquired through the meaningful lessons they have learnt throughout their lifetime. They are very open to expressing their aspirations with others. This helps to potentially open up more opportunities for them than others.

They are also dreamers, but they are people who dream with their eyes wide open. They will attempt to shape the environment rather than allow the environment to shape them. Driven by their dreams, this kind of people will introduce innovative ways to revolutionise conventional businesses. You will generally find them to be captains of industry.

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### *Maintenance People*

The second group of entrepreneurs possess qualities that are more maintenance driven. They are easily contented, and after investing much effort in building their dream business, they are happy to simply sit and fan the fire. They will not go the whole nine yards because of their risk-averse nature or subconscious limitations. Typically, they possess a limited vision and commonly lack innovative ideas.

### *Fire Starters*

The last group of entrepreneurs are fire starters. They are often very idealistic and easily excited by ideals. They are often restless and commonly lack the discipline and patience to see through the entire implementation process of their ideas. Before the entire process is carried out, their interests will start to wane. These are the kind of people who quit easily. Often, they lack the determination and perseverance, and tend to see problems in an opportunity rather than the other way around. You will find them to be common whiners who will put the blame on everything else, instead of taking the responsibility for their own failures. This group of people are typically driven by financial gains instead of passion.

The first group of rare business builders and leaders possess innate leadership abilities, and are armed with a stronger courage to fail than to succeed. They exude influence unconsciously in their surroundings, and are able to react to problems efficiently. The key difference lies in their ability to create their lives and environment around their dreams, instead of happily being a by-product of their environment.

Which group do you belong to? Unlock your potential today to find out.

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*"Life is an opportunity, seize it.  
Life is a dream, realize it.  
Life is a challenge, meet it.  
Life is a duty, complete it.  
Life is an adventure, dare it.  
Life is a struggle, overcome it.  
We have only one life, fight for it."*

*Mother Theresa*

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### 13. Starting an Agency

One has to be well prepared before setting up an agency. If possible, visualise the following questionnaires and predict their outcomes. This will surely minimise your headaches in the future. In the process of brainstorming these questions, always use the 5 'W's and 1 'H' (i.e. Who, What, Where, When, Why and How) to help you determine the outcomes.

- Why set up an agency?
- What is the vision and strategies of the agency?
- When can we attain these goals?
- Who is responsible for what?
- Where is the market?
- How much paid-up capital is needed and how are the shares distributed?
- What do we have to do to run the operation successfully?
- How can we work as a team?
- What sort of returns are we expecting and when?
- What contingency plans do we have if things do not turn out accordingly?
- What is our exit plan?

#### *Studio Operation*

- What is our reporting system?
- Who is in charge of what? How often will meetings be scheduled?
- Who is in charge of what? (i.e. procurement and approval of vendor services)
- What are the ground rules for the following:
  - Work ethics and culture
  - Financial goals and discipline
  - Key performance indicators of staff

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### *Sales/Marketing*

- Who is our targeted market?
- Where are they located?
- How do we plan to reach out to these markets?
- What are our promotional tools? (i.e. website, portfolios, testimonials, etc.)
- Who is in charge of the business development aspects?
- What is our sales plan or strategy?
- What are our sales targets?
- What if we do not achieve these sales targets?

### *Finance & Administration*

- What are our monthly operating costs?
- Who is in charge of approving payments?
- What happens if there is a cash flow crunch?
- What is the future expansion plan like?
- Who takes care of the administration work in the agency? (i.e. employment contracts, recruitment, etc.)
- Who takes care of the accounting system in the agency?

Here are 7 common management sins that we should all avoid:

1. Management bottleneck. Avoid procrastination when it comes to decision making.
2. Being resistant to change, or slow to adapt to a changing environment.
3. Hiring someone you cannot fire.
4. Poor enforcement of discipline at the workplace.
5. Willingness to compromise on work quality.
6. Having a self-centered mentality and a guarded attitude.
7. Not practising what you preach.

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## 14. A Leader and Manager

A leader can be a good manager, but a manager may not necessarily be a good leader. I have discovered that there are too many conventional managers or followers in the field of design. Most design agencies are small to medium-sized, and I have hardly seen any breakthrough with these agencies going regional.

### *Difference between a leader and a manager*

Managers are task oriented and trained to resolve problems when they arise. A good studio manager is one who adopts a predictive management approach, and knows how and what to do to prevent problems. However, most of the managers I know are likely to stick with a status quo game plan, instead of innovating new ideas. They are restrained in their thoughts and actions, and hence will produce predictable results as they are unlikely to go beyond the boundaries of their self-imposed limitations.

Leaders are those who will chase after their dreams and are willing to make heavy sacrifices (i.e extra effort, time and money) to fulfill their vision. Dynamic leaders are natural risk takers who dare to challenge unconventional wisdom to discover uncharted trails.

Those we can regard as true leaders in our design industry are too few and far between. True leaders are self-motivators who can decide and act independently, with or without the support of others. They are highly resilient, dynamic and resourceful individuals who can perform well under any given circumstances, with or without the right kind of talent or resources. They are passionate dreamers, but they are not idealistic. They are hungry and driven to pursue their vision, and have the foresight to move ahead of others. They

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possess strong personality traits that are hard to ignore. They also seem to possess an unlimited supply of energy, and are able to take on difficult challenges without fear.

The life and motivations of strong leaders will revolve around their dreams. To others, they may seem like loners, but it is through these quiet moments of self-reflection that they are charting their next strategic move. They are impatient and highly-charged when they want to embark on a new venture.

And once their minds are made up, they are decisive and not easily swayed by the opinion of others. These are the trademarks of a successful leader.

### *My Personal View*

The success of a leader is not based on wealth alone, but on the number of lives he has successfully inspired and transformed. It is through this process of imparting my acquired skills and knowledge to others, and to see them do well in their career or business, that is most rewarding.

A true leader is like a beacon of hope. Being able to make an impact on the career journey of others has been very fulfilling and satisfying in terms of my leadership experience.

As a leader, I am harsh but never mean. Generous but not wasteful. Tough but not overbearing. Open but not vulnerable. Over time, I have developed this 'Push and Pull' leadership and management style, which uses the 'head and heart' approach, and this has worked well when managing my staff, as it has helped to increase their commitment to and morale within the organisation.

*"To command is to serve, nothing more and nothing less."*

*André Malraux, French Novelist*

It is not what you have, but what you give that counts.

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## 15. Know Yourself

Where do you start? Begin by discovering exactly what your convictions are. Clarify and codify for yourself what you believe in. Then, take a step back and see how these beliefs are playing a part in your organisation as it stands today. Don't start with an assessment based on financial figures or your opinion about others. This is not about them. This is all about you.

### *Ask Yourself:*

- Who am I? What do I stand for?
- What are my values, beliefs, ethics?
- How am I demonstrating those values, beliefs and ethics every day in the workplace?
- Is my entire organisation designed to support my values, beliefs and ethics?
- Where are the disconnects within my immediate organisation and myself as well as in relation to my entire business as a whole?
- What can I do to change how I behave with my immediate organisation in order to demonstrate my belief in them?
- What additional assistance do my employees need to succeed?
- How can I ensure that they get everything they need and more, in order to create their personal success, along with success within the organisation?

Realistically, you'll go through this whole process not once, but many times.



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### *What's Next?*

After you identify your convictions and begin aligning your values, action and behavior with those convictions, you are going to need to take steps to build a collaborative culture within your organisation based on your vision.

- First, you should seek input from your employees about what they need and what their aspirations are for their career and the organisation as a whole.
- Talk to internal and external customers and suppliers about their needs. Find out what more and what else you can be and do to create a win-win situation for all parties.
- Engage in conversation and communication with your staff.
- Demonstrate your personal value system in your workplace. Turn it into an open declaration, through the type of work ethic, code of conduct and company mission statement, to be implemented in your organisation.

Above all, be truthful to all those things you have always believed about yourself. Words can lie, but actions cannot.

### *Strong Leadership*

Leaders aren't made or born. Leadership is a choice – a belief in and a commitment to everything that is good and noble within you.

In the business of design, where talent is a major asset, it is considered best when we can lead from both the front and back. The growth of First Media is a result of strong leadership. Its achievements are a result of focus and determination, rather than luck and timing.

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My leadership strength has often been tested, but whatever the outcome, I have just gotten stronger and more courageous after each challenging period.

Leaders often have to take on different challenges. The degree of your leadership strength can be determined by the size of your tasks, and the difficulties you will face.

When dealing with difficult situations, it is always good to uphold your professional and business integrity at all times. Always be mindful of the company's vision, objectives and interests. I have always dealt with issues squarely, and I do not take sides prior to knowing the full facts. This way, I can maintain a non-biased position when it comes to decision making.

I understand my personality traits well, and I have often used different aspects of my personality to effectively deal with various matters at hand. When handling a crisis, I will be in a pensive mood, actively engaging in analytical thoughts and always putting on a confident front (even when I do not have a solution). In times of joy, I will wear a broad smile on my face and talk about happy things. When I am in a formal setting, I will put on my thinking cap and take on a serious persona. At times, I can be dictatorial and autocratic, especially when I'm dealing with a staff member's attitude problem. On the other hand, I can also adopt a consultative approach when it comes to overcoming project obstacles, and being empathetic when it comes to counselling others. I will also always have the last say, since full responsibility of the final outcome is borne solely by me.

My leadership approach is anchored on the following key principles that have played a pivotal role in connecting me with my staff, partners and clients.

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### *Be Goal Driven*

To achieve success, we have to be very result and reward oriented. Short, mid and long term goals and rewards have to be charted and communicated to everyone in the organisation.

### *Be Attentive*

- Always maintain an optimistic outlook during good or bad times.
- Be open-minded enough to embrace new ideas.
- Be responsive at all times. Be proactive and do not procrastinate to quell the slightest problem or disquiet them before they become full blown ones.

### *Be Resourceful*

- Engage in continuous learning. Top up new knowledge and remove obsolete knowledge.
- Be bold enough to step out of your comfort zone.
- Relish in the process of putting an idea into action, but always be prepared for any undesired outcomes.

### *Be Committed – The P.H.D. concept*

- Passionate in our trade.
- Hungry for results and success.
- Disciplined enough to follow through with our commitment and goals.

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### *Be Empathetic*

- Adopt a people-oriented leadership style. Always lead by example. Typically, your staff won't care how much you know till they know how much you care.
- Always uphold an honest and responsible relationship that is transparent, fair, just and respectful.
- Always be trusting and willing to give others the opportunity to grow.

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## 16. A Leader with Many Hats

As a leader, we are expected to wear many hats and take on many roles within our organisation. At times, we have to put our creative hats on to become designers. We will also be required to take on the role of company director when we are dealing with important contractual or financial matters. Then, there are times where we have to become a business development manager when we are trying to close a sale.

There are also many other roles we have to take on within our organisation that have often been overlooked. These include roles such as being a disciplinary master when dealing with disciplinary problems like reporting late for work, lack of respect for others, etc. Another important role is that of the emotional manager. In such cases, we have to be someone our employees are able to confide in when they are depressed or disillusioned either with their work or social life.

Bridging the understanding between the leader and his/her employees is a typical challenge. However, it will be a much bigger challenge to ensure that our employees are comfortable accepting us in our different roles during different circumstances. It is also often difficult to remain objective towards employees who have disciplinary or emotional problems. While we do not want to create double standards when dealing with such issues, it is necessary for the leader to showcase his/her soft as well as hard side from time to time. When handling difficult situations, it is good to explain to the rest of our staff why we chose to take this particular approach, and what our considerations were.

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### *My Personal View*

Taking on a leadership role in the design industry has become more complex and challenging, especially in a large organisation like ours. Designers expect us to be highly creative and innovative, mid-level managers expect us to be their solution provider, and partners require us to lead them out of the woods when business is bad.

While we are managing a big team of designers, account servicing personnel, and business partners who are all working under the same roof, we need to adapt to understand various motivations and take on different roles. And when it comes to management reporting, task accountability and job responsibility, there may be some ambiguity about who is in charge of what. However, as a leader we are expected to set an exemplary model to everyone, regardless of their rank in the organisation.

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## 17. Creative Awards – Who's the Winner?

Winning awards is always a motivation to many designers. Almost all trained designers and young aspiring design companies place a high priority on winning creative awards, especially during the early stages of their business. Understandably for practical reasons, this is considered to be the quicker route to get themselves noticed and recognised in the industry. Design companies that are usually run by 'right brain extremists' will no doubt take pride in such wins, proudly displaying their trophies and certificates in their office. They will see winning awards as a key strategy for building their credentials and reputation.

Participating in local and foreign design competitions is a costly affair, considering the participation fee and time invested involved. It can easily cost as much as SGD300 to as high as more than SGD1,000 per submission. Many designers will go to great lengths to persuade their employers to participate. In my opinion, this way they will get to enjoy a free ride to personal fame, since nothing came out of their own pockets. In an attempt to win awards, designers will often spend countless hours and great effort in conceptualising innovative concepts to awe and impress their bosses and customers, hoping for a complete buy-in.

Often these concepts tend to be aesthetically overindulgent. They are pleasing to the design senses, but have missed out on the crucial communication objectives. The pre-production and post-production processes of these ideas are also usually more complex and expensive.

Less savvy customers will often be taken in by these creative proposals. However, they will end up having to pay more for these designs, not knowing that it was all in a bid to fulfil a designer's award-winning aspirations.

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### *My Personal View*

Winning awards may be exciting, and a motivation for designers to work harder and more passionately, but it does not necessary equate to a better bottom line. In our competitive marketplace, award-winning design agencies do not automatically get to charge higher fees than other agencies. Nowadays, customers are smart enough not to fall into that trap. Thus, winning awards will not necessary increase a client's loyal patronage to the agency.

What determines an award-winning design? Often, the judging criteria for most local and overseas design competitions are too broad and ambiguous.

Unlike business awards, many winning designs are deemed to be better than the rest solely based on aesthetic indulgence rather than realistic results. In my view, the client is the best judge of whether a design is good. A good design is one that answers the client's communication brief, and aids in producing quantitative and qualitative results.

All in all, the real winner should be the customer, and not the designers who have worked on the project, or the competition organisers who have charged an arm and a leg for each entry submission.

*"Design is about communication, and not about winning awards."*



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## 18. Excuses, Excuses, Excuses

How often have you heard excuses from your subordinates to explain their failure to meet timely submissions, poor punctuality for appointments, or inadequate preparation for meetings? Although at times, it may seem that their reasoning is justifiable, I've heard these reasons once too often, and on too many different occasions that they all seem like mere excuses to me.

Excuses used too frequently will inevitably diminish one's credibility, and your subordinates themselves have to know this. As a leader, there will come a time when enough is enough. By accepting their excuses, you are treading a fine line and compromising your requirements and standards, while also setting a precedent to allow them to renege on their responsibilities again.

As a leader, are you one of the culprits too? If you are, then I would not consider you to be a first-rate leader, but a struggling one. Ask yourself, how can you command respect from your subordinates if you cannot live up to your own expectations? As a leader, we should always look at ourselves first, and exact the same standards on ourselves before expecting others to follow suit. If we do not do so, where would we stand in the eyes of our subordinates? How can we then become an exemplary leader for them to emulate?

### *My Personal View*

If we are unable to accept the excuses of others, we should also not make excuses for ourselves. It's as simple as that. Leadership comes with a price – the price of self-discipline.

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We need to practise what we preach. If we want to stay on top, we must become a role model and set an example for others to follow. This is what is required of a model leader.

*“Leadership comes with a heavy price; one that includes self-discipline, setting high standards, and being a role model.”*

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## 19. The Concept of L.O.V.E.

*Some people are destined to succeed, but some are DETERMINED to succeed. Which one are you?*

Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice. It is not something to be waited for; it is something to be achieved. In life, as in football, you won't go far unless you know where the goal posts are. Success is very much connected with action. Most successful people keep moving. They make mistakes, but they don't quit. In my experience, if a man has made no mistakes or only a few, typically, he has not accomplished much. Let me now share with you my life's secret.

Embrace the concept of L.O.V.E. in your life. Try it out and let me know if it works for you.

**L**EARNING – Do not let your learning journey lead only to knowledge, but also to action. In the course of learning, be prepared to let go of your innocence because enlightenment comes only with a loss of innocence and naiveness.

**O**UT-OF-THE-BOX THINKING – Imagination is more powerful than knowledge. Many of today's inventions (i.e. the Walkman, Playstation, microwave, rubber soles, etc.) were derived from non-conventional ideas. Clearly this demonstrates the triumph of imagination over traditional forms of thinking.

**V**ENTURE BEYOND – Do not follow where the path leads. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail. Unless you try to do something beyond what you have already done, you will never grow. Be bold in your dreams and have courage in all your undertakings.

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**E**NJOY – Enjoy the journey of discovery. If you're happy in what you're doing, work becomes play and nothing is particularly hard to do. You'll gradually like yourself more and you'll find inner peace. Also, remember that what counts is not the number of hours you put in, but how much you put into these hours. It is your life that I am concerned with. Live wisely, as it is choice and not chance that determines your destiny. Start today by conquering yourself. Who are you and what do you want to become now, and in 10 years? Once you've settled in, you will find more meaning in your struggles, and life will become more meaningful as you will find purpose in all your work.

*"He who conquers others is strong. He who conquers himself is mighty."*

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## 20. A Fighting Spirit

Do you remember all the times you failed, and still managed to muster up your last bit of strength and spirit in order to put up a fight? In such situations, despite knowing fully well that you will probably not win, your inner voice still told you to pull yourself up and give it one last push. And somehow, you still managed to use that last ounce of energy to give your best shot. That felt good, didn't it?

If you are someone who has felt this way at some point in your life, you will know that during moments of anguish, despair and frustration, your spirit will find a way to muster up whatever energy that still exists in your being. During such moments of truth, your inner voice, or 'spirit' will call out to you. It is also this 'spirit' that we will turn to whenever we are down in the dumps.

During times of peril, we will naturally tend to recall our past challenges, and how we overcame them. Your inner voice will tell you that you've been there and done that, and this time is no different. It will probably also convince you that this fight is not as bad as the last, and that this time, you actually have a chance to win. These inner voices are the guardians of our fighting spirit. It is this spirit that lives in us, telling us not to let go or give up. It is just like how we are able to complete a 10km run, simply because we have successfully completed many full marathons before.

It is a known fact that if one was able to overcome a string of past challenges, he/she is likely to pull through struggles and difficulties easier than those who have not.

A calm sea does not make a good mariner. To discover new frontiers, a good mariner must be bold, and prepared to lose

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sight of the shore. As an entrepreneur, our past records can reveal the strength of our tenacity in an event of turmoil. This can be likened to a weather-hardened mariner who does not fear death. A true blue entrepreneur who has survived many setbacks will in turn be seasoned enough to know how to successfully maneuver a ship under turbulent weather conditions.

How strong is your fighting spirit in the face of trouble? Do you shy away from your responsibilities? Or do you tackle them head on? To me, a good entrepreneur cannot be measured merely by the amount of profit he/she makes. Since each industry is different in its own way, a comparison of the risk profile and profit measurement of the businesses in question will also not be a fair judge of superiority. Rather, how good an entrepreneur is should be measured by the amount of risks, pains and failures that the individual had to overcome to be where he/she is today.

*Are you cut out to be an entrepreneur?*

Are you bold enough to tackle business challenges? Or will you simply pack your bags and leave when the storm comes? Education can only give you a head start. It is your degree of experience, perseverance and resourcefulness as an entrepreneur that will differentiate you from the mediocre. It is how you are able to steadfastly overcome your current challenges that will determine how you will tackle your next fight.

*"Quitters never win. Winners never quit."*

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## 21. Never Underestimate the Power of Passion

A friend recently shared with me his business philosophy, which is also one that has led to him building a successful design consulting business – Live, Life and Love.

As we talked over coffee, the conversation started to unravel the key ingredients that he feels have brought him his success. Inside every successful designpreneur, you will uncover that the foundations of their success often include a strong personal value system, a set of guiding philosophies, and their own personalised success formulas. All of the above will contribute to their daily decision making process.

Throughout my career, I have always emphasised that a genuine designpreneur should never be primarily motivated by monetary success. We are designers first and entrepreneurs second. Hence, we must continue to pursue the very thing that we are passionate about – design. And this will be what sets the good apart from the great.

Nothing great in this world has ever been accomplished without passion. Simply put, if we are not passionate in design, how can we expect our designers and students to be passionate about their work and study? As a designpreneur myself, passion is the catalyst that increases my energy level and gives me the focus and perseverance to complete my work successfully. It keeps me awake while others are sleeping. It gives me hope when everything else around me is falling apart. It offers me a greater sense of fulfilment than money ever can. It is embedded within me, and because of this, I look forward to going to work every day.

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Delving deeper into my friend's "Live, Life and Love" philosophy, here is what I have uncovered about the true meaning of a designer's life –

## LIVE

**L**abour – As designers, we should live to work rather than work to live.

**I**magination – Our imagination is more powerful than knowledge.

**V**aliantness – We should have the courage to take risks, and the determination to follow through with our goals.

**E**arrestness – We should always treat our fellow colleagues and clients with sincerity, regardless of what circumstances we find ourselves in.

## LIFE

**L**aughter – When we toil, we should not forget to laugh. Laughter is life's best medicine.

**I**nspiration – We should strive to be the kind of designer who is a role model for others to emulate.

**F**ellowship – The best ideas are often created through the act of sharing. We should remember that no one man is an island.

**E**xperience – We should embrace our lives and relish in every moment of joy and discovery.



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## LOVE

**L**earning – Design is everywhere. We should continue to observe our surroundings and learn something new daily.

**O**ptimism – The thrill of creating gives us the hope that we can do better. And we should always try to do so.

**V**alue – We should appreciate and treasure the ‘gift’ that we have been blessed with.

**E**xcite – New ideas should never cease to excite us. This excitement for discovery will keep our love for design strong.

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## 22. Excellence and Destiny

*"It is not how good we are but how good we want to be."*

*"Destiny is not a matter of chance, but a matter of choice."*

These two quotes are always etched in my mind, and I have constantly drawn on their underlying messages to direct my actions in the pursuit of excellence in all my undertakings. Be it in my professional or personal life, I see my quest for excellence as a guide post on my journey to success. Eventually, it has also served as the key to unlocking my personal achievements in my career as a designpreneur and educator.

Without a mentor or teacher throughout the course of my life, I have very much worked alone. My hunger for answers and my voracious appetite for knowledge have both led me to many moments of self-discovery. A substantial part of being able to fulfil my dream of creating a *First Class Design Agency* in my early years as a designpreneur, to building this agency into one of Singapore's largest communications group, was a result of adapting the management concepts I acquired from different self-development books that I have read over the past few decades.

My attempts at turning these acquired concepts into actionable business plans also required me to have a big appetite for risk to be able to follow it through. Satisfying my curiosity was my biggest motivation, and my willingness to accept failure and disappointment was my biggest asset. Change for improvement became my personal motto.

*The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* by John Maxwell was one particular self-development book that helped to shape

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my thoughts and condition my mind to seek out new changes and challenges. It was instrumental in helping me define my leadership style. In his book, Maxwell adopts Christian moral values as a basis for his principles on leadership. I find favour in his approach, and it has taught me to adopt an attitude of 'servant leadership' when it comes to managing my employees.

To be a good leader, we must first learn to serve others before expecting others to serve us. This was a humbling starting point for a new leader like me. This idea of 'servant leadership' basically removes the hierarchy of traditional leadership structures, which are commonly found in many organisations. With this in mind, I was prepared to roll up my sleeves and go down to the ground to lead my charges.

Through the years, I have also formulated my own principles of leadership and various management styles from the scores of books I have read. Whatever I have learnt, I have put into practice. And if it works, I will share it with my fellow colleagues. 'Learning, teaching and sharing' became part of my organisation's working culture. 'Change is the only constant' was another motto practised in my studios, which I knew irked many of my employees who disliked the notion of disruption, as it gave them a sense of insecurity. 'Shared responsibilities, Shared rewards' was another one of my ways to secure the commitment of my staff, through converging their personal interests with the goals of the organisation.

For what I cannot control or change, I will not bother to fight. For what I can change or control, I will be committed to. Over the years, I was able to shape the environment within my organisation with my dreams and thoughts. Personally, it has been rewarding to witness the vast amount of improvements

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in my employees when they are able to change their mindset from a personal perspective lens to an organisational perspective lens instead. This has helped to reduce their work-related frustrations and increase their morale.

Over the years, my attitude and obsession towards excellence have become a cultivated habit for me. In whatever I do, nothing short of excellence is expected; just like what Winston Churchill once said: “I am a man of simple tastes, easily satisfied with the best”.

My pursuit of excellence has also unexpectedly led to more business opportunities opening up in my life.

*“The quality of a person’s life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavour.”*

*Vince Lombardi*  
*American Football Coach*

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## 23. My 10 Work Mottos and 20 Golden Rules

In the course of my professional life, I have always strived to be a model employee, committing a 100% of myself to my work. In spite of this, I was still not able to find a boss who appreciated my talent. This was part of the reason I decided to embark on my entrepreneur journey.

While managing my business, I have learnt to adopt a set of mottos and golden rules that have served me well through the years. I have also made it a point to inculcate them in my new colleagues.

### *10 Work Mottos*

– Circulated to the staff of First Media Design School (FMDS)

1. **Dare to Change** – Always adopt an inquisitive attitude and stay proactive. Be aware that your knowledge will become obsolete one day, hence you should always stay at the forefront of your industry, keeping yourself updated with the latest happenings and trends.
2. **Be Meticulous and Thorough in Your Thoughts and Actions** – Whenever possible, always arm yourself with facts when you are making a point.
3. **Be Bold and Courageous Enough to Speak the Truth** – Showing sincerity and warmth will help to communicate harsher truths in a more amicable manner. On the other hand, you should also always be ready to accept constructive criticism.
4. **Dare to Make Mistakes and Admit to Them Readily** – Constantly engage in self-reflection; learn to recognise personal weaknesses. Be willing to change in the name of progress.

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5. Learn to Accept and Work with People Who are Smarter Than You – Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses; learn from one another as it will help to sharpen your mind.
  6. Work Yourself Out of Your Job – Be FMDS-centric. Be ready to hand over the reins to someone who is better than you. Everyone has a certain limit. Beyond that, you must be prepared to step back and let others lead. You are my pioneers and you will never be out of a job – that's my promise to you.
  7. Push Your Limits – You will never know your limit until you step out of your natural habitat. Either you push yourself or I will push you – the choice is yours.
  8. Be a Role Model – Earn the trust and respect of your colleagues through carrying out the above pointers.
  9. Be Yourself – You will never become the person you want to be if pressure, tension and discipline are taken out of your life. I believe that every single one of you has the capacity for outstanding achievement.
  10. Your New Career Motto – “Life begins at the end of your comfort zone.” Many of us, including myself, need to continuously examine and redefine our self-concept and self-worth.

Throughout the past five years, I am glad that you guys have put forth your commitment and loyalty to bring FMDS to where it is today. As we continue to strive to attain the status of a first class design institution, let's not forget our roots and struggles because they are the ingredients that will make our future success taste all the more sweeter.

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*20 Golden Rules on how to be the BEST Employee  
(or Intern)*

**Reporting for Work**

1. Report for work 10 minutes before the start of your official working hours.
2. Observe basic courtesy – Please call your superior if you are going to be late for work.
3. Please call your immediate superior, as soon as possible, if you are on sick leave. Submit a medical certificate the next day.

**End of the Day**

4. Never leave on time. Unless everyone does so.
5. Before going home, please check with your immediate supervisor if you can be of help to him/her in any way, before you call it a day.
6. Always be prepared to work late.
7. Write down your laundry list of 'Things To Do Tomorrow' before you leave the office.
8. Leave your desk neatly organised, so it looks just like you have not been to the office that day.

**Basic Courtesy**

9. Use these magic words frequently: Good Morning, Excuse me, Please, Thank You, Good Night, Sorry, and always say these words with a smile.
10. Never argue with your superior even if you think he/she is wrong. Chances are you might be wrong.
11. Be organised. Put things back in their original place.

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## **Display Your Best Work Attitude**

12. Don't leave things to chance or assumptions. When in doubt, always ask.
13. Never say No. Always say, "I can try".
14. Always bring along a notebook and pen when attending meetings.
15. Find out your supervisor's expectations of your performance. Periodically ask for his/her comments for your improvement.
16. Please ask your boss for a written testimonial a week before your internship ends.
17. Offer your help to your colleagues whenever you have spare time.

## **In Case of Doubt/Emergency**

18. When in doubt pertaining to your job expectations, always seek consultation with your superior.
19. If you find your superior or boss unreasonable, or if you think you are being exploited for whatever reasons, confront your superior or boss for his/her reasoning.
20. Do not undertake any task that might result in physical injury. You have the right to refuse.



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## 24. Learning to Deal with Uncertainty

As a designpreneur, we may rejoice at being a master of our own career destiny, but a big trade-off is that we often have to deal with many uncertainties.

It takes courage to embark on the journey of entrepreneurship, and unfortunately many lack the guts to do it alone. The thought of uncertainty, instability and insecurity will dissuade most from taking up the challenge. And even the most talented ones are often put off by these discouraging factors.

Designpreneurship is reserved only for the bold. Many enter this trade with the thought of hitting it big. From my experience, big does not necessarily mean big profits, but it sure means having bigger problems to deal with.

Learning to master the art of dealing with uncertainty requires a leap of faith. Being human, it is not in our nature to enjoy dealing with constant change or insecurity. However, this designpreneurship journey will commonly be fraught with mystery, disappointment and frustrations. Unless one embarks on this journey armed with a different perspective, such as I did, one will most likely be disappointed.

In Singapore, there are far too few designpreneurs we know who have made a financial killing from this trade. Ours is a business that relies heavily on talent, and talented designers would probably want a shot at entrepreneurship themselves, if they are indeed so widely sought after. A high percentage of designers also tend to turn to working on a freelance basis instead of being their own boss, as managing a business comes with its own set of risks and problems.

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Real entrepreneurs are not fearful of the unknown. We will not hesitate to choose this particular path, simply for the unlimited opportunities it offers. However, we are equally prepared to embrace the mystery and uncertainty that come with it. The idea of being able to have total control of our own lives will push us to perform to the best of our abilities. To do so, we will have to learn to adapt and squeeze as much as we possibly can out of ourselves. This will in turn lead us down a path of self-improvement and self-mastery.

As a designpreneur, I am fully aware that there is a multitude of external factors that are beyond my control, and that 'doing everything right' does not translate to instant success. In a talent-centric industry like ours, we are expected to deal with egocentric designers, and self-serving partners and employees. The ability to pull together the diverse viewpoints and differing needs of these various individuals, and to channel all of them towards one common goal, is indeed a difficult skill to master.

Being in the industry for more than two decades, I have embraced uncertainty as part and parcel of my entrepreneur journey. Often, I see it as a personal challenge to test my management skills, tolerance and perseverance. I'd like to think of myself as a bottomless pit when it comes to handling these challenges.

Even during the darkest days of my later years in the education trade, when I was put through tremendous internal and external pressures, I would still hold on to the thought that all that was merely a test of my resolve and entrepreneurship abilities. Quitting was never an option for me. I could have opted for the easy way out and given up, but that's just not me. I chose instead to see all those challenges as short-term hurdles to my long-term goal of becoming an educator.

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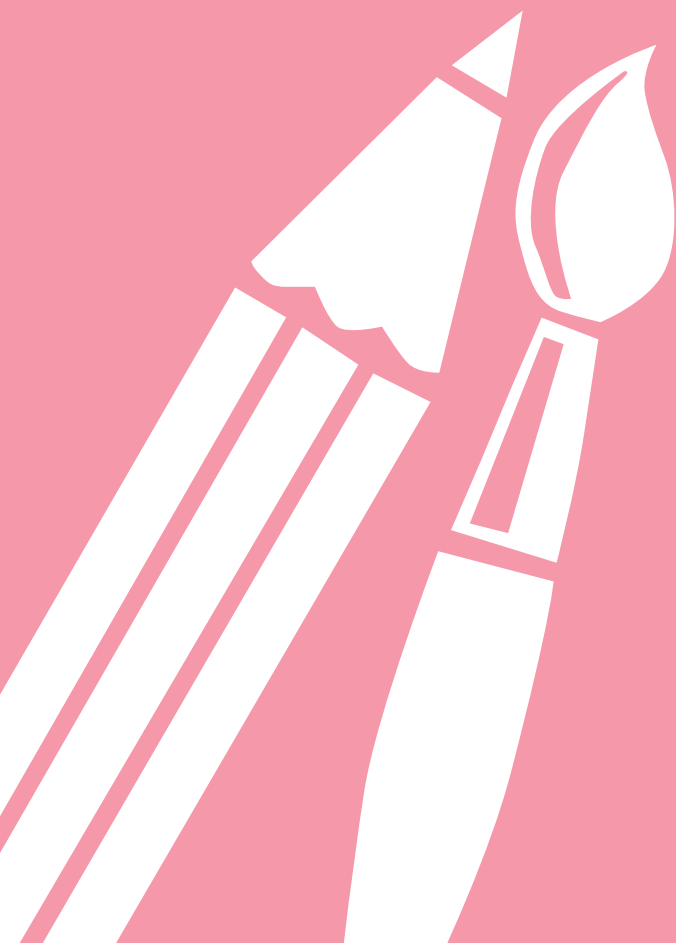
In every one of these perilous journeys, there will always be a tiny light shining through. How did I do it? It is that very light of optimism that pushes me forward and helps to keep my hopes alive. Looking back, it is these ups and downs that have made my designpreneurship journey so interesting. And in spite of it all, I realised that I have finally mastered the crucial art of dealing with uncertainty.

Are you ready for your own designpreneur journey?



## PART III

### *Self-mastery and Design Thinking*



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## 1. Developing Self-mastery

*"Self-knowledge is a more superior knowledge than any other knowledge."*

*Plato*  
*Philosopher*

### *Know Yourself, Grow Yourself*

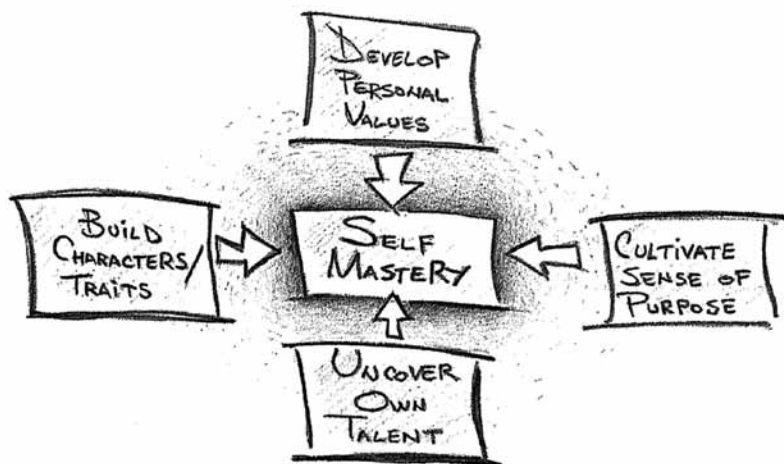
Through the study of self-knowledge, we aim to attain full ownership of ourselves by uncovering and understanding our nature, talent and potential. Our future success comes from discovering who we already are, and to use what lies within us to our advantage. Simply put, we must learn to apply our natural talents and abilities intelligently.

*How Do We Do it?*  
*(see FIGURE 1)*

Self-reflection or self-analysis will enable us to recognise the patterns of our thoughts and action, and in turn evaluate the results through these actions.

We are endowed with talent, skills and ideas, and it is left to us to recognise and harness them. Through this process of finding themselves, we will find it easier to pinpoint our interests and narrow down our aspirations. Through understanding our personal traits, we will be able to capitalise on our strengths, while minimising the exposure of our weaknesses.

By practising self-mastery, one can be certain to minimise confusion, mistakes and distractions, and live with confidence and zest in the pursuit of one's vision.



**FIGURE 1** © Mark Phooi. Illustration by Dimitrije Curcic

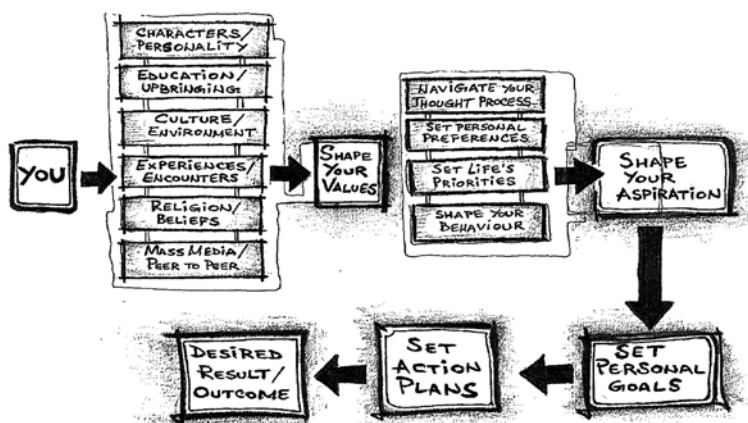
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## 2. Developing Personal Values

### *Aspirations and Character*

It is important for us to cultivate our own personal value system. It is this very set of personal values that will consciously and subconsciously determine how we set our priorities, and allocate our resources (i.e. time and energy) to pursue our interests and personal goals.

To live right, it is important for us to adopt and uphold the right set of values.



**FIGURE 2** © Mark Phooi. Illustration by Dimitrije Curcic



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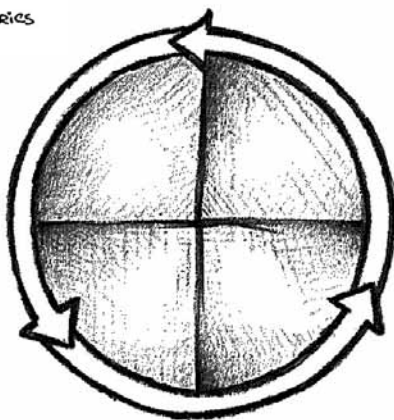
### 3. The FMDS 'Whole Brain' Teaching Approach

#### ANALYTICAL

- DEFINES THE PROBLEM BY DEVELOPING A CLEAR PICTURE OF THE CURRENT SITUATION
- HAS IDEAS FOCUSED ON REFINING
- SELECTS SOLUTIONS BASED ON PROS/CONS ANALYSIS
- EMPHASISES METRICS

#### CONCEPTUAL

- DEFINES THE PROBLEM BY COMPARING TO A CLEAR VISION FOR THE FUTURE
- HAS NOVEL, TRANSFORMATIONAL IDEAS
- GETS THINGS STARTED, TENDS TO LOSE ENERGY AT IMPLEMENTATION
- PAINTS A PICTURE



#### SOCIAL

- BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER TO DISCUSS AND DEFINE THE PROBLEM
- IS ATTRACTED TO PROBLEMS INVOLVING INTERPERSONAL INTERACTION
- LOOKS TO SEE WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING (BEST PRACTICES)
- MOTIVATES AND ENCOURAGES

#### STRUCTURAL

- FOCUSES ON PROCESS AND PROCEDURE
- IDEAS FOCUS ON IMPROVING EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS WHILE RETAINING STRUCTURE
- IS ENERGISED BY PLANS, INITIATIVES AND IMPLEMENTATION
- SEEKS CLOSURE

FIGURE 3 Illustration by Dimitrije Curcic

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## 4. 5 Common Types of Thinking Modes – G.R.A.S.P.

The process of self-mastery begins with our thoughts. We are what we think we are, and our actions are a manifestation of our thoughts.

How many people actually pause to think how they think? The catalyst for change starts with our mind. It fuels our passion and directs our course of action, which ultimately shapes our destiny.

The ability to know how we think, and understanding the process of thinking using the right thinking mode, will help us to apply appropriate thinking methods in order to give us a competitive edge in our personal life as well as enhance our professional careers.

Our repository of knowledge and experiences, along with our intrinsic talents, will already provide an abundance of resources to aid our problem solving skills. Even though this will give us an edge, it will not necessarily make us better because the more experienced we are, it is likely that the less creative we will become.

Chances are that we will fall back on tried and tested methods or latch onto existing answers from our mental repository, instead of trying to think out of the box in order to find a solution.

*“Creativity is thinking up new things. Innovation is doing new things.”*

*Theodore Levitt  
American Economist*

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It was interesting to read about the following five thinking modes, and it has helped to awaken my innate sense of creativity and innovation.

### *Generative Thinking*

This is a thinking mode that a person or team can adopt to generate a substantial quantity of logical and spontaneous ideas through the use of visual/word mind mapping tools. For a quick way of engaging in the word mind mapping process, one useful tool would be [www.visualthesaurus.com](http://www.visualthesaurus.com). This website helps to facilitate your search process.

Key pointers:

- Generate a large quantity of ideas, including far-fetched ones, through divergent thinking methods such as mind mapping.
- Avoid judging or being biased against any ideas. This will help to increase the quantity of ideas produced.
- Connect selected ideas through convergent thinking to get meaningful outcomes.

### *Reactive Thinking*

This is a thinking mode that is preprogrammed inside us, allowing us to react to situations without involving much thought.

Key pointers:

- This autopilot thinking approach suits our daily routine, and aids in increasing our efficiency levels.
- This mode of thinking is often a result of the experience and knowledge gained from all the external challenges we have faced.
- Allows for a swift and responsive tactical way of thinking that often leads to short-term solutions.

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### *Analytical Thinking*

This is a critical thinking mode that one will apply to examine all problems and ideas at hand. Adopting this mode of thinking helps us to evaluate the implications, consequences, and repercussions of the solution as well as the relationship between things taking place in a logical or hypothetical situation.

Key pointers:

- Aids in sorting, screening and selecting ideas that give long-term solutions.
- Evaluating of ideas through the use of left and right brain analysis.
- Adopts a strategic approach by breaking down ideas into smaller ideas that will lead to desired outcomes.

### *Selective Thinking*

This is a thinking mode that will process information selectively and interpret it in a biased way, based on one's entrenched beliefs or background.

Key pointers:

- Fixed way of thinking that is highly influenced by individual beliefs and preferences.
- Highly resistant to change because of narrow-mindedness or fixed-focused approach.

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### *Proactive Thinking*

This is a thinking mode that allows for individuals to think in advance of a future situation, and in turn take control and make things happen in their favour.

Key pointers:

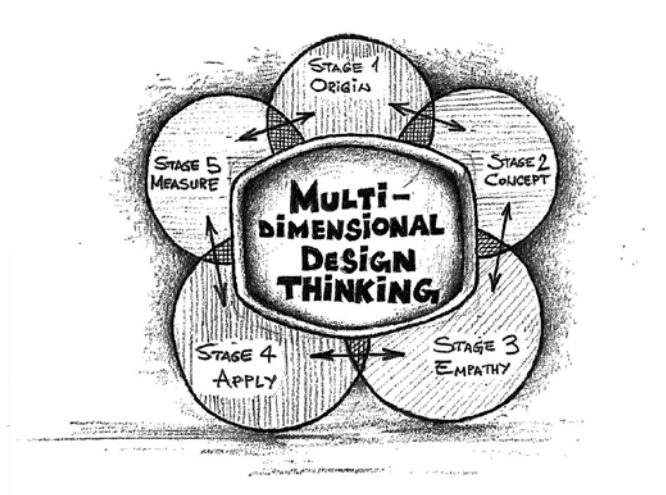
- Allows for an out-of-the-box thinking approach that leads to innovation.
- Adopts a strategic method of thinking that leads to meaningful outcomes.
- Consists of orderly and thoughtful thinking processes.

*This chapter is an adaption of GRASP The Solution by Chris Griffiths.*

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## 5. The Multi-dimensional Thinking (MDT) System

The Multi-dimensional Thinking (MDT) System is FMDS' proprietary thinking tool when teaching design thinking. It is a thinking framework designed to provide learners with a thinking structure. It is formulated based on a five-stage thinking platform. The MDT System must be used with the five common thinking modes (G.R.A.S.P.) and an understanding of *Whole Brain Thinking* preferences.



**FIGURE 4.1** © First Media Pte Ltd (FM). Illustration by Dimitrije Curcic

### *Stage 1 – Origin*

Uncovering the root cause and the challenges at hand. This stage helps to clarify the problems, and define the goals or possible learning outcomes.

### *Stage 2 – Concept*

Continuous development of an idea that meets the final objective.

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### *Stage 3 – Empathy*

Use of one's intuitive feelings and approaches when building ideas.

### *Stage 4 – Apply*

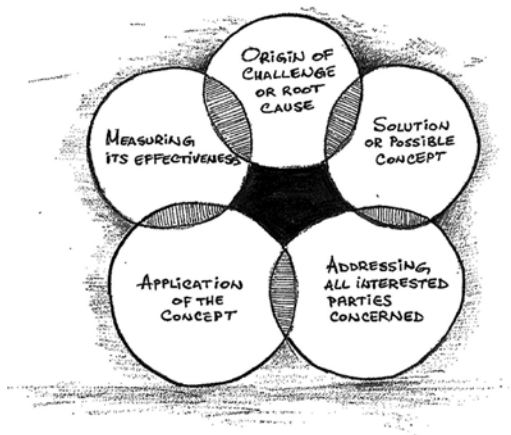
Selection of the appropriate tools to execute ideas.

### *Stage 5 – Measure*

Analytical approach to ensure ideas meet the objective.

The aim of the MDT System is to help learners recognise problems and define solutions leading to concept development, implementation and evaluation (use of G.R.A.S.P. thinking modes).

Learners who are commonly puzzled as to where their inspiration comes from will realise that it all boils down to their ability to think in the right way.



**FIGURE 4.2** © First Media Pte Ltd (FM). Illustration by Dimitrije Curcic

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Our education system has taught us to be left-brainers who focus on the training of our minds to store and analyse information in a rational and logical manner. Through the years, every adult would have accumulated a repository of knowledge and successful problem solving solutions that are tried and tested. Hence, it is typical that we will outgrow our creativity abilities and cultivate a habit of relying on ready-made solutions, instead of finding new ones.

This MDT System is a structured five-stage approach, covering Origin, Concept, Empathy, Apply and Measure, or OCEAM in short. It aims to widen the thinking perspective of learners when they are finding solutions to a problem.

During each stage, learners are also encouraged to turn on their 'Proactive Thinking' mode and examine the benefits and possibilities, which will enhance the selected ideas.

Using convergent thinking methods, learners will connect selected ideas with the aim of producing solutions that are better for the consumer, simpler to understand and cheaper to produce.

They should also apply the 'Analytical Thinking' approach to examine the possible downsides of their ideas and the likely consequences, impact and possible repercussions of those ideas.

The MDT System also acts as a critical evaluative thinking process, allowing room for the further expansion of ideas when new perspectives are introduced during each thinking stage.



# PART IV

## *Personal Reflections*





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## 1. Never Covet Your Neighbour's Wealth and Success

As a young adult, we will want to be seen as intelligent, smart and popular. We will enjoy also being flattered and praised. However, the moment we start working, our priorities will tend to change; we will now want to get ahead in our career, be respected for our professional opinions, and be recognised for our contributions to the organisation we are a part of.

As we progress in our chosen profession, we will begin to enjoy the authority of vested power, finding satisfaction in the decision making process as a result of our newfound status. We will finally be convinced that our lives are starting to take a turn for the better. The additional money that we now have will increase our array of choices. Upon tasting success, we will begin to yearn for the finer things in life.

At some point, we will start to compare our recently acquired success and achievements with those of our peers and friends, only to realise how little we have attained, and how slowly we have progressed. We will then begin to envy their success, measuring their wealth by the value of their material possessions. And suddenly misery will strike us and cause us to want to get rich quickly.

At the back of our minds, we will aspire to be among the top echelons of our field, all the time wondering why our lucky stars are not shining on us, but on them. We will secretly yearn to have the kind of success that they have, silently hoping that by following a similar pathway to theirs, we will be able to pick up on the unique formulas that have contributed to their achievements.

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We will then try very hard to emulate and adapt these factors into our endeavours, but will never seem to really measure up to the same level of success as them. We will wonder why this is so. Nevertheless, we will still invest more time and energy to pursue it. Still, success seems to elude us, causing us to grow impatient and disillusioned with each new struggle and sacrifice we make. Our daily toils will seem increasingly meaningless to us, and soon, we will become discontented with ourselves as well as with our colleagues. Saddled with these burdens, we will start to question the circumstances of every aspect of our lives.

This is the moment when the thought of quitting will start creeping into our minds, prompting us to reflect upon the matter. We will begin to think: "Why am I chasing someone else's dream of success instead of my own?" During this process of reflection, we will realise that what we perceive of the success of others is merely at face value. We have also conveniently forgotten about the struggles and sacrifices that they had to go through to build their success to its current state of achievement. It will then begin to dawn on us that their objectives in life lie not in the accumulation of material wealth, but first and foremost, in the building of legacies. As a result, their daily struggles would have in turn come across as more meaningful, and their work routines more purposeful. They would see their workplace as a 'playground', where tension has given way to pleasure. And gradually, because of this, their charisma and influence as leaders would also increase. Little do we realise that the reason their work attitude could not be duplicated is because their ultimate personal goal was not to achieve financial success, but to build a legacy instead. Their material wealth, which was the envy of many, was in fact only a by-product of their aims.

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The above may be a familiar tale to many, particularly the thirty or so former employees of mine who have tried to emulate my success in the design industry. This tale is also very much a slice of my life, and it has manifested as a part of the struggles I have faced in my career.

*Moral of the story*

Ability will only bring you limited success. It takes character and vision to take you to the very top. You should not envy or covet your neighbour's wealth and success, but instead, you should focus on building your own legacy.

Many people fall into the trap of defining their dreams based on the goals and aspirations of others. This is a sad fact of life.

Achieving our own ideals and success is the key to attaining personal satisfaction and happiness.

And that's a true fact of life.

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## 2. Living Out My 12 Personas as an Educator

These 12 personas are adapted from the concept of 'Archetypes' originally conceived by famed Swiss psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung, who used it in his theory of the human psyche.

Archetypes represent fundamental human motifs of our experience, as we evolved through the ages. Although many different archetypes exist in the world, Jung defined 12 primary types that symbolise basic human motivations. Each type has its own set of values, meanings and personality traits.

These are the 12 personas I personally embody as an educator:

1. I am an **innocent** who believes that my students are inherently good and capable of doing good. I prefer to hear the truth, even if it hurts.
2. I am a **caregiver** who is warm to my students, and generous with my time and advice to those who seek it.
3. I am an **orphan** who cherishes my personal space. I am highly independent and resilient, and I teach my students to be the same as well.
4. I am a **warrior** and a defender who supports the underdogs. I dislike inequality and I will always uphold the principle of fairness.
5. I am an **explorer** who likes adventures and loves the challenge of conquest, such as shaping and transforming minds.

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6. I am a **lover** who is grateful and appreciative of others who have helped me.
  7. I am an **outlaw** and a contrarian. I like to push boundaries, especially when it comes to my teaching methods.
  8. I am a **creator** who enjoys building, especially if I am required to build something from ground zero, as in the case of First Media Design School.
  9. I am a **ruler**. I like to take charge even when I am on the losing end. I am especially courageous in the face of adversity.
  10. I am a **magician** who is able to build a dream around an idea, and turn it into a meaning and purposeful pursuit.
  11. I am a **sage** who embraces an open attitude towards learning. I set high personal learning standards for myself and my students.
  12. I am a **jester** who is fun loving. I may be mean with my words, but never with my heart. After all, a smile can go a long way.

The understanding of my different personas and my ability to use it appropriately have helped me to overcome obstacles in both personal and business capacities. These 12 common traits are frequently played out consciously and sub-consciously in my mind. This has served me well in visualising success through the right use of different personas when overcoming different types of challenges.

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### 3. Father's Day – A Father and Principal's Pledge

It was one wet, early Sunday morning on a Father's Day when I was overwhelmed with inspiration and emotion that I penned this pledge of my values and commitments.

*To my family...*

On this special Father's Day, I would like my sons to know that one of their father's greatest values is treasuring their love. Regardless of what happens, they will always be my sons and I will always be their father. As a father, I will always be by their side to teach, nurture and support all their life aspirations. I will always be there to provide comfort, counsel and lend a compassionate ear during their times of pain and struggle.

*To my students...*

Setting up FMDS is one of the biggest fulfilments of my life. Through sharing, my passion in teaching and design has been rekindled. It is indeed my pleasure to be able to share my knowledge, wisdom and many experiences with all of you. You will one day become my competitor in the design trade, but to me, you will always be my students and I am your teacher for life. My door will always be open to you for mentoring.

*As your principal...*

It is one of my duties to inculcate the right kind of values in all of you – that being having discipline and always working hard. These are 'necessary evils' to prepare you for your higher education, and to ensure a smooth transition into your dream career.



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It is also my duty to provide you with the best teaching and mentoring. To see that your learning needs are met, I will promise to always take your complaints seriously, and see to it that they are being resolved.

If your personal problems are affecting your studies, I will always be there to listen to you. To the best of my abilities and within my means, I will endeavour to lighten and lessen your burdens whenever possible.

When it comes to working on your design projects, there are many ways to skin a cat (i.e. to craft a workable concept). Hence, I will always prompt you to challenge the status quo in design thinking and never be satisfied with what you have produced today, as what you produce tomorrow will be better. To all my students, I promise to be your mentor for life, and you will always be my students. This is my personal pledge to mark this special occasion.

Thank you and have a blessed Sunday.

Yours sincerely,  
Mark Phooi

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## 4. My Personal Journey with Changi Inmates

It was timely that the call to volunteer my time with the Score Digital Media (SDM) inmates came in during July/August of 2011. I did not hesitate to take up the offer immediately. As a matter of fact, this coincided with the earlier shift in my personal direction of setting up a school and wanting to live a life that is purposeful and meaningful.

Having attained success in Singapore's competitive design industry, I am well regarded as an accomplished designpreneur by my industry peers. Still, there lies a vacuum inside me that cannot be replaced with material needs. I have done many incredible things in my life, and becoming an educator was one of them.

Since that call, I have been working with Score SDM inmates from Cluster A3 for close to six months. I have been impressed with the computer facilities and the conducive environment that the inmates are assigned to work in. Personally, I have also learnt much during several of these sharing and teaching sessions. The virtues of humility and the meaning of life have really hit me hard. Honestly, there were times where I have questioned my existence and the purpose of my struggles. Although I might be successful in spite of my unprivileged background, I am after all merely another successful rat competing in the rat race.

Through the sharing of design thinking techniques with over 26 SDM inmates, which I was tasked to do, I discovered that they were all looking for a role model and inspiration in their lives. I also found that many of their backgrounds resonate with mine, and hence I would often inject my personal struggles into these sessions. These include me having to take the GCE 'O' level three times as a private candidate,

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taking the driving test seven times, and building a multi-million dollar consulting group with only SGD2,000 in startup capital.

The inmates were all amazing – attentive, warm and respectful. Through these sharing sessions covering Design Management, Personal Values, the Multi-dimensional Design Thinking System and the Whole Brain Thinking methodology, I certainly hope that these inmates will be able to put their new knowledge to good use at SDM, and to find wisdom and solace in their own ways.

On a personal note, this journey has been very rewarding and I am glad that I was able to make a slight difference in their lives, of which I am thankful that the call to volunteer came at the right time in my life.

Since then, three inmates have been released – two of them are currently in my employment, and one is pursuing his degree studies.

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## 5. Straight Talking – The Secrets of my Success

Yes, I acknowledge that I have made my mark in the business of design, attaining much financial success as a result. There is no doubt about this. As a designpreneur, compared to my peers in the industry, the number of assets I possess now is quite sizable – known only to my family and the Inland Revenue Department.

How did I do it? Many have wondered.

Let me be candid here. It was the environment I was in that shaped me to be what I am today.

I was born poor. Academically, I fared poorly too. Because of these factors, I was an outcast in school and suffered from an inferiority complex. However, deep inside me, I was rebellious and craved to outshine all those who thought they are better than me.

*Moral of the story – I dislike the idea of being poor.*

Outside school, I was sure of my own likes and dislikes. I took it upon myself to make things happen. During my Scouting days, I was assigned to be a patrol leader with eight scouts under my charge. I was adventurous and an extrovert. Without any money, I managed to lead them during many outdoor activities including hiking, mountain climbing, camping, and trips to faraway places in Malaysia.

*Moral of the story – As a young Scout patrol leader, I have learnt to be resourceful in many ways, mostly the wrong ones. Yes, I begged, stole and lied to get the things I wanted.*

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I love sports, especially swimming. I am an accomplished swimmer, certified lifeguard, licensed open water diver and a Class 1 swimming coach. As a coach, I have always practised what I preached. I was demanding and nasty, but was also a well-liked swimming coach. I trained alongside my students, and I had approximately 50 to 70 of them under my tutelage at any one session. My regular warm-up routine was 30 laps of the butterfly stroke. Few people could match my toughness.

*Moral of the story – Attaining excellence in swimming instilled a competitive spirit in me. It toughened my mental strength, and also conditioned my body to withstand long hours of hard work without failing.*

In the seventies, when Singapore was undergoing industrialisation, studying engineering was the preferred choice of many. In contrast, an education in the arts was deemed as unseemly. Due to my background, I started working full-time from the age of 16, with the exception of two years in the army, taking on several kinds of odd jobs. I also wanted to pursue my studies in the arts, but my academic results did not meet the minimum entry criteria for any arts institution. Undaunted by this setback, I attended evening classes and retook the exams as a private student, with the singular aim of passing the academic subjects I had failed in previously. Over the span of three years, I failed not once, but thrice and gaining admission to an arts institution continued to elude me. Eventually, my persistence paid off. The dean of the school I wanted to enter took an empathetic view in regards to my case, and accepted my application. From then on, I never looked back. I was 24 then, and at the age of 27, I eventually graduated with a diploma.

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*Moral of the story – Failure is good. It makes our success taste even sweeter.*

I started a design agency with only SGD2,000. Working from home, I made countless calls to potential clients to introduce my services. At that point, the design industry was already saturated with many established players. I was a nobody. I had no network, no relevant working experience, and zero employees. I struggled, but continued to stay very driven. I knew my end game – I wanted to build Lancer Design into a first class agency. I also recognised that management skills would be crucial for building a business, so I went back to school again and took evening classes in management studies.

*Moral of the story – Start with the end in mind. This will narrow your focus and help you concentrate on your goals.*

I like design and I enjoy meeting people. I have a natural instinct to connect with people from all walks of life. Although I am a demanding leader, I am also a reasonable one. I pay my staff fairly, but treat them very well. Thus, I am respected by many. Rolex watches, winter holidays, bonuses and incentives were a rarity amongst agencies, but members of my staff enjoyed all of the above. With the support of a strong and cohesive team, my design business flourished, and it even managed to outlast many of my strong competitors.

*Moral of the story – Treat your employees well, and they will in turn treat your clients well.*

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Over the years, I have built a strong portfolio of clients, and many of them have become my friends. My reputation in the industry is well regarded by both my clients and my competitors. None of my competitors can dispute my business integrity and honesty. That was how I built my reputation, and that's the way I've kept it ever since.

*Moral of the story – Build and guard your reputation. It is your ticket to more business opportunities.*

In the past couple of years, my focus has shifted from being a design practitioner to an educator. Starting a school is no laughing matter. A school sells hope, and mine offers students a head start in design as a career. And I am very confident that I can deliver this hope.

This path that I have chosen in education feels like a natural progression because I truly enjoy imparting business wisdom and industry experiences to whoever wants to learn. In all honesty, I hope my designpreneurship journey can help serve as a shortcut with regards to the learning journeys of my students.

*Moral of the story – You do not need to convert someone to pursue the study of design, as it is like having faith, and hardly needs convincing. The most important decision is the choice of institution to study at.*

### *The P.H.D. of Success*

All in all, the secrets of my success boils down to this: It is my my P.H.D. qualities (P.H.D. – Passion, Hunger and discipline) that have motivated me to stay hungry and foolish in my pursuit of success.

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## 6. Death and Poverty

There are two things in life that are certain — Death and Poverty.

Regardless of background or heritage, Singaporeans tend to always consider themselves poor. Even if we possess riches, we will never be contented with what we have, as we will compare our wealth with those of others. To me, poverty is a relative term. Compared to the destitute, we are by far luckier, and we should consider ourselves rich.

Many Singaporeans are poor by nature. And when I say poor, I am making reference to a poverty that is spiritual and not material. Do we all have to live poorly, just because we are constrained by our financial situation? The answer is no. We can always compensate this ‘financial poverty’ with ‘spiritual riches’. Everyone is armed with a unique personality that God has graciously bestowed upon us. Used wisely, this can provide us with a spirit of optimism and proactivity — both of which are crucial in creating a life of happiness and satisfaction.

These positive qualities can replace our need for financial wealth. Having the right attitude will help us to see things from a different perspective. It will shape the manner in which we think, act and behave. Our optimism and proactivity will automatically be manifested in our actions and the way we carry out our daily tasks. Having these attitudes will no doubt impact a person’s professional and personal life. We will be able to easily win the trust and respect of others. It will then only be a matter of time before our colleagues, superiors, clients, family members and friends notice the change in our mindset, and begin to favour us over others.



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A person's influence is highly instrumental in the achievement of success. Consistent practice of good habits will lead to second nature reactions in time. These positive personality traits and characteristics of ours will then eventually become a source of influence on others. And soon they will respect us because of this. In a nutshell, this is how leaders are made.

On the topic of death, all of us are growing old with each passing day. In other words, we have been dying since the day we were brought into this world. No one is immortal and we must regard ourselves as sojourners on this earth. Although we are faced with this certainty of death, why do we not choose to simply live happily by doing the things we truly love and enjoy? For many of us, work takes up a huge chunk of our lives. I have known many friends who pursue careers not of their choice, but that of their parents. Sadly, many of us are living out our parents' dreams.

Life will become a drag when our career is regarded as a chore. For these people, they work to live. How wonderful would it be if they were able to pursue a career of their own choosing. They would feel more fulfilled and happy with their lives for sure. If we enjoy the work we do in our chosen fields, we are bound to shine in our career and become a cut above the rest.

In a world filled with uncertainty, where many aspects of our lives are beyond our control, the one thing we can choose is not to be spiritually poor. To do so, we need to take stock of ourselves, revisit our life's purpose, and approach life with the courage to chase our dreams.

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Optimism, boldness, and a dose of the right attitude will give us a good head start in our journey to live well. Otherwise, we will only find ourselves heading for the gates of heaven (or hell) sooner than expected, filled with nothing but pain and regret.

*"The deepest secret is that life is not a process of discovery, but a process of creation. You are not discovering yourself, but creating yourself anew. Seek, therefore not to find out who you are, seek to determine who you want to be."*

*Neale Donald Walsch*  
*Author of Conversations with God*

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## 7. My Reflections – 15 Years On

*My personal insights (or compilation of fragmented thoughts) written in 2004, recollecting my past business experiences in the design consulting and communications industry during the past 15 years.*

### *Are You On the Right Trail?*

“Sonny, if you are looking for a windfall, you are on the wrong bandwagon.”

The design business is not for the faint-hearted. This business is akin to a very demanding marathon, which requires one's boundless energy, undying passion in design, absolute drive, perseverance and resourcefulness. As with any business, one should not aim for a quick kill, for those seeking instant riches and fame will be utterly disappointed. Like a massive war lined with multiple battle fronts, the design communications war is arduously fought — idea against idea, project against project, and account against account. It will rarely be a win-all situation; you will end up winning some and losing some, often without knowing the actual reason why. As such, the euphoria of success and the abject disappointment from losses are all part and parcel of the business process.

According to American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, the pursuit of one's aspirations is driven purely by one's interest. In my case, it lies in design. This design business infuses various types of personalities, and melds them into a dynamic workforce pursuing one common goal — to creatively and freely express one's ideas with the aim to win fame and hopefully financial rewards.

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Over the past few decades, I have seen enterprising designers and marketers-turned-design-entrepreneurs try their hand in this business. Many have ventured into the design industry as there are few barriers to entry in this business. Unfortunately, most have not been successful, and very few survive. As such, liquidation processes and partnership breakups are very common. Statistics have shown that generally 80% of businesses in Singapore will not survive their first five years. Personally, I think that failing businesses in the design industry do contribute to this statistic.

### *The Business of Design – For Love or Money*

Of the multitude of business entrants, a large proportion of them are design-trained. To this group of design practitioners, their business is seen as a labour of love.

On the other hand, there are also a number of non-designers who have jumped onto this bandwagon, misguided by the idea that the design industry is a very lucrative one. By assuming that there is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, they tend to be the ones who suffer the biggest losses.

Like myself, most design practitioners and owners of design firms share similar goals: to perfect our craft and our practice, build a solid business reputation, enjoy the creative process, and push the boundaries of this business.

### *Design — The Evolution of an Industry*

Growth within the design industry has been considerably exponential, considering that there are increasing choices of communication channels available today, as compared to a decade ago. The emerging trend for a more sophisticated

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business community with greater accessibility to information, and the presence of more affluent consumers, have all fuelled a higher demand and expectation for better designed communication pieces.

The relatively short design history in Singapore has also revealed crucial inadequacies encountered within the design industry. These include the absence of a definitive guideline for design and management practices. This has resulted in an industry that operates on various different standards. In addition, the lack of open communication between professionals and practitioners has resulted in an absence of cohesiveness within the industry.

This problem is exacerbated by the guarded attitude usually adopted by business owners, which in turn often contributes to the onset of poor relations between employers and their employees. Consequently, such inadequacies stifle the vibrancy of the industry, and impede the potential of creating a consistent local design identity within the global market.

If there is no impetus to change things for the better, our entire industry will experience a retardation of its overall growth, and will eventually fall into a state of stagnation.

On the other hand, with strategic planning and proper policies put in place by our government, the once fledgling industry has gained considerable recognition over the last two decades. This is because the government had come to the realisation that the creative services sector is one of the key contributors to our country's economy.

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### *Building a Business from Scratch*

I have three areas of interests — sports, fine arts, and management. As a design graduate from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (1989), a graduate in management studies from the Polytechnic of East London (1991), and a Masters graduate in design management from the University of New South Wales (2002), I have learnt to combine elements from my educational pursuits and keen interest in sports to manage my own design practice. And already having some business acumen, I aimed to inject a competitive spirit into the very industry that I was about to venture into.

My design business started, literally, from ground zero. I had virtually no money, no relevant working experience in design, no business managing skills and no business networks or contacts! This was deemed to be an insurmountable task then, especially since a pool of established design firms, who were thriving in a climate of double-digit economic growth, were already dominating the market.

I have always considered myself to be a gritty fighter who adopts a never-say-die attitude in all my endeavours. Often curious to test my capabilities, I am constantly eager to challenge myself. My motivations go beyond financial rewards. From the very first year I started my business, I already aspired to build the biggest design group in Singapore; this was something that seemed unrealistic and totally out of reach at that time.

### *There is No Substitute for Hard Work*

While running my business, I have never been content with merely being the market average. I have always aimed

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to excel in all my mental faculties, and I have persistently worked on honing my design and management expertise as well as execution techniques.

To accomplish this, I imposed a strict discipline on myself to pursue my dream – of achieving firsts in every aspect of the design industry. My aim was for my organisation to become a pioneer in the business of design, in terms of its size, being the very first integrated marketing communications specialist, and being the first regional player in our field. Nothing came before my work. With such an impassioned drive, I was prepared to trade whatever that was required to accomplish my dream. To me, work had become play, and it still remains one of my key indulgences today.

### *The Journey So Far — From Prey to Predator*

Today, the First Media Group of Companies and its overseas subsidiaries is composed of a total staff strength exceeding 200, making it one of the largest design groups in Singapore. As a result of the size of our organisation, we have been propelled to a different level in the industry, causing a shift in our business focus.

As such, we have to revisit our business goals, and constantly refine our strategies moving forward. As a strategic thinker, I am once again revitalised and re-energised.

### *Criticise Yourself before Criticising Others*

When it comes to running a business, perpetual ignorance and being complacent can be seen as catalysts for disaster. As a people person, I have learnt to effectively read people and understand their individual qualities. In an organisation

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full of dreamers with lofty ideals as well as talented and high calibre individuals, I have encountered my fair share of opinionated cynics, hypocrites who profess to be wise, and many who are a little too quick to pass judgment. Regardless of this, their opinions have had a profound impact on me as I strove to prove them wrong. However, the feedback and comments from clients, staff, and partners have taught me to be more critical of myself, and I have in turn raised the bar on my self-imposed standards.

Through a consultative management approach, I have directly been taught how to do my job better because of my employees.

### *Designers with P.H.D. Qualities*

My business is largely fuelled by a sizable group of designers who subscribe to the virtues of passion, hunger, and discipline. Through the years, it has become a personal challenge for me to provide meaningful employment to my staff. The American poet, Robert Frost, once wrote: "The world is filled with willing people; some willing to work, the rest willing to let them." As my design business expanded regionally, exporting our local design talents overseas became crucial. While I must admit that there was no shortage of talents, there was certainly a shortage of P.H.D. talents who were prepared to move out of their creative comfort zone to undertake fresh challenges in new territories.

I count myself fortunate to have been able to recruit and groom many trustworthy partners and colleagues over the years. As a staunch believer in acquiring talent and ideas, I have learnt to put my trust in people and ideas, rather than circumstances. Honestly, I would never have been able to make it this far without the consistent support of my loyal and



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committed partners and staff, who have repeatedly delivered on their commitment.

### *The Key to Survival – Adapting to Change*

On the home front, promoting the importance of design has become a priority of mine. With my business already secured and stable, the task of elevating the respectability of the design trade is now paramount. This seems like an insurmountable challenge. However, with adequate support and in good time, I am confident that it can be achieved.

The advancement of new communication technologies like wireless mobile communications capabilities, have revolutionised the way we work and think. The creation of multiple trading blocks in the global trading business arena has also established a different business dimension. As such, it is very important that business owners realise this change in dynamics within the industry, and how these changes will affect the performance of small businesses.

From preceding cut-and-paste execution methods, design has dramatically evolved into an industry that relies on high-tech functionality, requiring less time and fewer resources to achieve better end results. The Internet explosion has also generated new means of communications and how research work is conducted. Such advancements have inevitably accelerated the pace by which newer design standards have been developed.

### *Creative Rejuvenation*

As changes continue to unfold in the global communications landscape, the need to roll out communications strategies through new digital channels has made implementation

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methods more challenging, especially for a designer like myself, who was trained in the pre-computer era.

Design will continue to play an integrated role in marketing communications, even as the design community continuously searches for more innovative, more strategic, and more creative directives in this digital age.

### *Our Community Needs a Common Voice*

Generally speaking, the design community at large has never been well represented. Neither has it been able to command broad-based industry support from the design community. The lack of cohesiveness, due to players in the industry often possessing a guarded mentality, is clearly evident from its passive involvement in mobilising ground support, especially since a small membership base does not give them the clout to command respect and exert control within the industry. The failure to attract sufficient members is partly due to a lack of strategic planning and implementation at the macro level.

The current Designers Association in Singapore needs to reassert its position and reassess its role within the community at large. It desperately needs to revisit its hackneyed strategies and policies to rejuvenate the vibrancy of the design community. This would eventually draw out the best talents, boost the design industry's standards and develop a standard code of business ethics. In doing so, the design industry might be able to find its niche in crafting our local design identity, and cement the profession of design as a well-regarded trade. The association also needs to enhance its role as a conduit to eliminate all possible practice discrepancies among designers (i.e. in terms of pricing,

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pitching and protection, acting as an arbitration centre for dispute between clients, staff and employers), education institutions, design business owners, design buyers and users, and the relevant government ministries.

Personally, I think it's about time that the association rejuvenates itself by infusing new blood. The constitutions and obsolete policies have outgrown their purposes and do not match the current and future needs of practising designers and business owners. The community is craving for an active and progressive association, whose priority is to propagate the interest of design. It is about time the association wakes up from its slumber to reassert its cause and redemonstrate its worthiness.

Here are some pointers that I feel practitioners in the new economy should take note of. They include, but are not limited to the following:

- Re-evaluate the guarded mentality of business owners that is inhibiting the vibrancy of the creative industry.
- Introduce new design management initiatives to improve the management skills of owners to ensure good practices, and ultimately business survival.
- Address career prospects of practising designers, including areas such as pay scale, welfare and skills upgrading pathways.
- Rethink speculative design. Should it be abolished totally?

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- A strong voice and proactive actions are much needed to avoid abuse by design clients.
  - Introduce the inception of an arbitration centre for design-related disputes.

### *Conclusion – My Personal Thoughts*

Regardless of the development of these external forces, I recognise that life is short. I need to diligently pursue what I deem worthwhile, and pursue it with a single-minded focus. As a practical designpreneur, I have learnt to change and adapt with the times. I will not let my acquired knowledge stay only in my head, but I will strive to incorporate these acquired experiences to enhance the practical strategies and solutions that I have developed along the way. As I enter the 16<sup>th</sup> year of my design business, I journey forward with renewed zeal, passion, and energy. I know that I must act now — at a more furious pace — lest my energy and passion dissipates.

To remain relevant in this ever-changing industry, I need to be armed with a sharp mind and a competitive spirit; with the goal to ultimately outwit and outlast all my competitors.

In my opinion, my destiny lies in my very own hands. I will continue to fight fervently to achieve my dreams. Although very few of my fellow competitors have succeeded in this industry over the years, I am much more determined to excel and perform better than they have.

That's my spirit of achievement.

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## 8. Turning 46 – Taking Stock

Wow, how time flies. Life has been good to me, and God has endowed me with the good health, knowledge and wisdom that I have always prayed for. These blessings have brought me many enriching experiences; experiences that have sharpened my skills, wit, humour and intelligence, leading to the growth of my network and personal wealth.

Through all these years of hardships and difficulties, I have often bitten off more than I can chew. However, thankfully everything has fallen in place for me. It is now a time of consolidation and careful planning for the next chapter of my life.

Unwanted relationships are a cause of some concern, as my welcoming personality and wealth tend to invite unnecessary attention at times. I need to work on this. My family is the cornerstone and motivation for all my struggles, and I should not allow anything to jeopardise the relationships that matter most to me. Nothing should derail my plans for my next lap.

This song aptly describes the journey I have taken to get to where I am today:

### **MY WAY**

*Song by Frank Sinatra from the album "My Way (1969)"*

*Written by Paul Anka*

*And now, the end is here*

*And so I face the final curtain*

*My friend, I'll say it clear*

*I'll state my case, of which I'm certain*

*I've lived a life that's full*

*I travelled each and every highway*

*And more, much more than this, I did it my way*

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*Regrets, I've had a few  
But then again, too few to mention  
I did what I had to do and saw it through without exemption  
I planned each charted course, each careful step along the byway  
And more, much more than this, I did it my way*

*Yes, there were times, I'm sure you knew  
When I bit off more than I could chew  
But through it all, when there was doubt  
I ate it up and spit it out  
I faced it all and I stood tall and did it my way*

*I've loved, I've laughed and cried  
I've had my fill, my share of losing  
And now, as tears subside, I find it all so amusing  
To think I did all that  
And may I say, not in a shy way,  
"Oh, no, oh, no, not me, I did it my way."*

*For what is a man, what has he got?  
If not himself, then he has naught  
To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who kneels  
The record shows I took the blows and did it my way!*

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## 9. Turning 49 – My Paradigm Shift

*This 49<sup>th</sup> birthday brings sweet thoughts and new meanings to me.*

Personally, the motivations in my life have changed considerably in the past year. Along with this, my priorities have also shifted, and so have my habits. My drive to attain greater success is overshadowed by other thoughts. In terms of my self-discipline, tasks like waking up early, exercising regularly, eating and smoking more sensibly as well as a host of other habits, now all seem to require more effort for me to follow through. As a result, the overall pace of my life has also slowed down considerably, as now my work and my personal life both carry different meanings and motivations.

It is funny how many things have changed in just one year. I have repeatedly told myself that maybe it is time I should enjoy life and stop struggling. I've asked myself this: After what I have proven and attained, is there need to prove myself again? Do I still harbour thoughts of living in a 'Good Class Bungalow (GCB)'? The answer is NO. Right now, what I want is to do more meaningful things, and inject more happiness in my life instead of piling on tension and pressure.

### *My Life So Far*

I count myself significantly blessed because I have an understanding and loving spouse, and obedient children. My boys are all in the midst of going through their rites of passage. My oldest son, Marcus, is pursuing his first year of study at Monash University in Melbourne. My second son, Kenneth, has just been enlisted into the National Service, and my youngest son, Nicholas, is happily studying at ACS

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International. In terms of my career, I am glad that I have embarked on my dream to become an educator, and I am truly glad that God has been kind enough to bless me with the right temperament and attitude to be a good one.

Going through all the struggles during the early stages of the school's history in 2006, was one of the worst nightmares I had ever had to experience. And the amount of anguish and frustration I felt dealing with my partners back then would honestly have dissuaded most to continue fighting on. I am glad I managed to pull through it all successfully. Today, I am truly proud of what I have built, and how the development of the school is shaping up. It was indeed an uphill struggle against all odds, and I had to fight my battles literally alone.

2006 was an extremely hectic year for me. I was busy dealing with the business fall out pertaining to Firefly Studio, one of the studios under the First Media Group of Companies. I had to juggle four major relocations in that year alone – the school relocated once in February and another time in October, I relocated my office in June, and shifted my house in October. I was also concurrently teaching and conducting several speaking engagements locally and regionally. And on top of all this, I had to see through seven pending lawsuits with ex-design partners and employees, and one lawsuit with an existing partner of the school. In spite of all the above, I still managed to take the time to prepare and participate in rigorous interview sessions, dinner and networking sessions, and I eventually attained one of the Top Entrepreneurs of the Year Awards for that year.

In the same year, under my leadership, the school took major steps forward by undergoing several key implementation processes, including curriculum improvements and brand



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introductions in local and regional markets. I was also frequently featured in the local newspapers as well as television and radio talk shows.

I am glad that I made the decision to switch to the field of education, and that I saw it through to the end. My life has indeed gone through a 180 degree transformation.

Today, I am more carefree, less tense, and I feel happier doing what I love doing most, which is being in the education business. My role as an educator has reignited my passion, and it has extended my career in design. By far, it has been one of the best decisions I have ever made in my life. And I am glad that I did.

### *Perceptions*

My perception of life has changed and in my opinion, one will never run out of things to complain about. However, life is too short to hold grievances or hatred against others. For if I do, I'll have no time to enjoy the simple pleasures that life has to offer.

I have learnt to enjoy living and to stop worrying too much. I have found more meaning in the word 'legacy' than the word 'wealth'. Thus, I have decided to work towards a revision of my life's motto – I now want to lead a live that is meaningful and purposeful. In a nutshell, I want to end well.

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*Today...*

I have less to worry about today as compared to yesterday, and more to live for tomorrow.

I have less drive, yet I want to accomplish more things in more meaningful ways.

I have less to struggle with, yet more to look forward to than yesterday.

Today, I will put a smile on my weary face.

Turning 49 today, I feel healthy and am very contented and fulfilled. My birthday wish is to end well. Whatever happens, I will never be fully prepared when it is time for me to go.

Thank you Lord for the countless blessings you have given me. The knowledge, wisdom and good health you have blessed me with, have allowed me to be the person I am today. Without these, I will never be who I am today. Amen.

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## 10. The Importance of Self-reflection

Discovering my true self was the most important knowledge I gained in my life. I will only be able to make peace with myself if I know myself well enough to know what I want, like and dislike. Throughout my life, my regular self-reflection sessions have helped me realise the true power of self-awareness.

During these sessions, I was able to identify where my interests and passions lie, and what my strengths and weaknesses were. Throughout these soul searching sessions, I managed to discover that my aspiration was to become a designpreneur. To realise this goal, I went on to map out the required managerial skillset and leadership qualities that were necessary for me to actualise my dream. Throughout my two decades of being a designpreneur, I feel that I have made real progress as a person as well as in my professional career. The disappointments, frustrations and sacrifices gave me deeper meaning, and made my struggles more purposeful. Through regularly reflecting on my thoughts and actions, I was able to break free from the pain and agony of my struggles through coming to terms with their purpose. Eventually, I persevered through them, and even came to enjoy every aspect of doing so.

The bountiful benefits I have reaped from my moments of self-discovery have allowed me to capitalise on my intellectual strength, and at the same time, I have used that knowledge to optimise my leadership performance. The ability to reconcile with myself, and use criticisms towards me as a motivation for continuous improvement, has pushed me to scale higher peaks. These criticisms have never succeeded in dampening my spirits, but instead they have proven to be effective in

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increasing my enterprising drive and resourcefulness to excel and prove my critics wrong. During this short period of realigning my passion from design consulting to education, I managed to regain my footing in this industry.

As a result, I began to immensely enjoy doing what I love. I have also learnt to always dream the impossible, and doing so has led to the birth of First Media Design School. As an educator, I have renewed my zest in teaching and found my calling, and I now receive great satisfaction and fulfilment as an educator. Without any prior experience in the education business, I was able to overcome all odds to attain seemingly impossible goals for the school. This includes forming partnerships with overseas schools, and garnering the trust and respect from government agencies like the Council for Private Education and SPRING Singapore.

It is through these self-reflection sessions and my thirst for knowledge that I have learnt to embrace a few key life lessons:

*Lesson No. 1* – It is most important to know what is the most important thing.

*Lesson No. 2* – Breaking free from our old selves to discover our new selves allows us to enjoy our uniqueness and the experience of being different.

*Lesson No. 3* – Never let the things that matter most to us be at the mercy of the things that do not.

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## 11. My Confession

I have a confession to make.

Not too long ago, I was financing a money lending operation. It was not my idea to start it, but my intention was to help a close friend who was facing a mid-career crisis. From an initial investment amount of SGD200,000, profits shot up to SGD\$1.1 million within seven months. The money lending business was brisk, and the influx of borrowers was increasing at a furious speed. Despite exorbitant interest rates of an average of 20% per month, there was certainly no shortage of borrowers.

In Singapore, most Singaporeans are asset rich by means of owning a subsidised HDB flat. My friend was formerly a property agent and was able to see that an opportunity laid within this group of HDB dwellers. Despite Singapore having the reputation of being a cash rich nation and our government having more than SGD500 billion in assets, most of that belonging to people like you and me, there are still many people out there who are experiencing financial problems. Based on the profile of these borrowers, 97% of them are gamblers. The owners of our city state's two casinos have certainly picked the right spot to start their business. Among the Chinese, there is a common saying that gambling lies in the blood of most Chinese people, hence we all like to take risks. From news reports, both casinos are raking in a SGD500,000 million profit per quarter, or a total of almost SGD2 billion dollars per year in profits. It is a common truth that the odds are always against the gambler, and this is where all the profits from casinos are derived from. I could clearly see the misery in the eyes of those borrowers, and I

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could also imagine the amount of pain that was being inflicted on their household. Thus, this was something that I felt was morally wrong.

Typically more than 80% of Singapore's population live in HDB flats, with 95% of them owning their own HDB flat. The flat is their only prized asset. Hence, some gamblers choose to dispose their HDB flat as a means to obtain quick cash to feed their gambling habit. In a typical scenario, flat sellers have to wait approximately three months before they are able to receive their cash proceeds. A large chunk of this will be returned to the seller's CPF account, while the balance amount (capital gain) will be returned to them in cash. With the processing period of approximately three months, obtaining fast cash was the answer to their gambling addictions.

I got back my initial investment amount within 10 months. After slightly over two years of operation, it grew to an almost SGD15 million revenue business. To understand why there are so many illegal money lenders willing to risk their lives to carry out their business, all you have to do is a simple calculation based on a 20% interest rate per month.

But somehow, my conscience overwhelmed me. Making money from the poor did not seem to be a good proposition and I decided to give up my involvement. This short episode has manifested in many ways to create a positive transformation in my life. I began to realise and appreciate the philosophy behind life and money from a different perspective. Largely, it contravened with my values and principles of me venturing into the education business. I have learnt that a person's worth is contingent upon who he is and not how much he has. Building a legacy is better than chasing financial success. After all, our success cannot be measured by our wealth alone, but by what we do with our experience that benefits the community.

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The following quote aptly describes this:

*“If you think you do not have enough, even the rich will become poor. If you think you have enough, even the poor can be rich.”*

Living a meaningful and purposeful life has become my ethos for the rest of my time on this earth.

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## 12. Personal Value Scorecard

What keeps me going despite all these years of having to overcome insurmountable pressures, and juggling managing my business, investments, partner relationships and family matters, is largely due to my commitment in keeping a personal value scorecard.

Everyone has values and our values reflect our personal preferences and priorities. They serve as a guideline to enable us to align our action plans with our aspirations, and they represent what is most important to us in our lives.

Underpinning this personal value scorecard is a set of my personal principles and a value system that have helped me to keep my behaviour towards all aspects of my life in check. I have used these values to determine my actions and growth as a leader, father, educator, entrepreneur and most importantly, as a person. These beliefs also help me to keep my focus, strength, faith and commitment in place. The value I place on various aspects of my life also reflects how I spend my time, money and resources, and the selection and decision making process I engage in. On the whole, having a personal value scorecard enabled me to know myself better. This scorecard includes financial and value indicators pertaining to areas such as commitment, knowledge, health, faith, empathy, wealth, contentment, happiness and legacy.

My personal values and business goals are closely intertwined and aligned with one another. I have categorised them according to how they would affect me as a person, the head of my family, an entrepreneur and an investor. They are then further broken down into objectives and action plans. My personal value scorecard also includes a chart of my personal



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financial performance. Having this allows me to view my life, business, money, religion and family from a better perspective.

Incidentally, these financial goals must also satisfy my personal values. It gives me great comfort to know that the partners I have selected and the investment decisions I have made, comply with my personal value indicators. Overall, it provides me with the ability to make clearer decisions. One will not work without the other, and often, I do have to turn down business and partnership opportunities that go against my personal values.

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### 13. Learn, Unlearn and Relearn

As we age, our mind subsumes various kinds of knowledge through the countless good and bad experiences we have gone through. To me, a life that has not experienced anything at all can be likened to a glass of completely clear water. With each new experience, good or bad, a drop of colour is added into our bland lives.

Is your glass filled with drops of brightly coloured water, representing that you have had a smooth sailing life filled with pleasure-seeking experiences? Or is it filled with dark colours, indicating that your experiences have been mostly unpleasant and marred with mistakes and failures? I would prefer the latter, as it would mean that I have gone through many bad patches, which have made me wiser and will provide me with a strong foundation to have better years ahead.

Personally, I have always advocated making more mistakes in our developmental years, as it serves as a good form of education for us, leading to us committing less mistakes when we are older.

However, sometimes, while we are going through these countless experiences, there may be a possibility that our minds will get clouded by views from others. This may in turn affect our decision making process.

Living is a journey of learning. Knowledge acquisition must lead to a change in our actions. As we grow older, we must be constantly mindful of alternate viewpoints and prepare to seek truths and understanding from these differing viewpoints on our own. Through the years, I have learnt to unlearn to relearn.

Changing our behaviour is the purpose of knowledge acquisition. Without real change, knowledge is useless.

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## 14. God is Real. He is Not an Emergency Hotline.

This is my final entry and I would like to share this real life experience of mine. In the course of growing up, I have personally witnessed and been touched by the grace of God. It was a unique experience and I am blessed to have found Him at an early age, which has in turn set the foundation and values in my life's pursuits.

Whichever God you believe in, always be mindful that there is a Supreme Being watching over us, and that we can count on Him in good and bad times.

I came from a family of Taoists, and during my early childhood years, when I was around nine or 10 years old, I did attend church a couple of times. I attended because I was attracted to the fun, food and games, but I could not understand the meaning behind sermons or prayers. I even remembered that once I attended a church service on a Christmas Eve without my shirt on. Times were rough in the sixties, and kids running around without a shirt on their back was not an unusual sight. It was a last minute suggestion from my friends, who told me that food and gifts would be given to children on such occasions. I only received one red apple in exchange for sitting through the two-hour sermon.

I was a never a believer and when I was 17, I was going through a bad patch in my first relationship. And I was introduced by a friend to use supernatural means to save this relationship. I was doubtful initially, but still went along. The *bomoh* (*Malay shaman*), who was already in his senior years, was hesitant to help me at first, but after a few rounds of questioning, he relented, realising how much I was suffering emotionally. I was warned that for the spell to be effective, I must believe in it wholeheartedly, without even an ounce of doubt. Without going into the details, yes, I admit that the spell was

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extremely effective, and my relationship was amazingly fixed immediately. This brought me some short-lived happiness, but soon I was overwhelmed by my conscience. By then, I was serving my National Service, and I also began to feel bored with the relationship. I tried to break it off many times, but always failed miserably. I felt terrible for the next three years, as I knew that what I had was an artificial kind of love, and there seemed to be no way out. It seemed like a dead end for me. Towards the third year of our relationship, I tried to visit the *bomoh* to undo the spell, but unfortunately he had already passed away. I was introduced to another younger *bomoh*, but despite two rounds of effort, the spell proved too strong to be undone. As the relationship was now a one-sided affair, I suffered through the relationship, and I was plagued by guilt. It was an indescribably horrible feeling.

Around that time, I was introduced by a friend to attend service at a Charismatic church, but was initially against the idea. I finally relented, with no idea whatsoever if my problem could be solved. However, I knew that I had to find a solution to untie this relationship, as it proved to be increasingly torturous for me. It was after a few worship sessions that I finally come to accept Christ into my life. My first prayer to God then, was to request for Him to undo the spell. I did not know if it would work, but to my amazement, my girlfriend at that time, who had been literally glued to me for the past couple of years, suddenly stopped communicating with me, and disappeared totally from my life, all within just one week.

This was a life-changing moment for me, as I had experienced God's miracle first hand. God is real and He lives in us. Since then, I have always prayed for three things in my life – knowledge, wisdom and good health. Through these three things, I have been blessed with the qualities of inquisitiveness

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and boldness all throughout my life. With my good health, I was able to be actively committed to competitive swimming and training. I have also gradually acquired a mixed bag of experiences that have deepened my wisdom. Over the past 30 years, I have transformed from a typical neighbourhood *Ah Beng* (a stereotype applied to young Singaporean Chinese men who lack cultural refinement) with no qualifications and poor language skills, into a design-savvy, eloquent and successful designpreneur.

I have never prayed for financial wealth or success, but through His grace, I was blessed with different qualities that have brought me success. I am glad He found me at an early age, and I have learnt to anchor my faith in Him. He has taught me to uphold certain Christian values, and I am humbled to always act as a servant leader.

God is real and He is not a form of insurance or a hotline to be called only during times of emergency. Many will find that as we progress towards the end of our lives, the likelihood of us embracing Him seems to be higher. I am not a preacher, and despite sharing my lessons about Him with my sons, they are not fervent believers, simply because they have not seen His work.

My question to others has always been, why do we choose to believe in Him, only when we need Him to save us in our times of suffering or trouble? I suppose that it is human nature to do so. Personally, I recognise that my life has been enriched not because of my own doing, but through His grace.

My parting words to you is this – get to know your God early. Trust in Him and let Him work his wonder on you. The more you believe, the more you will receive. God is not an SOS

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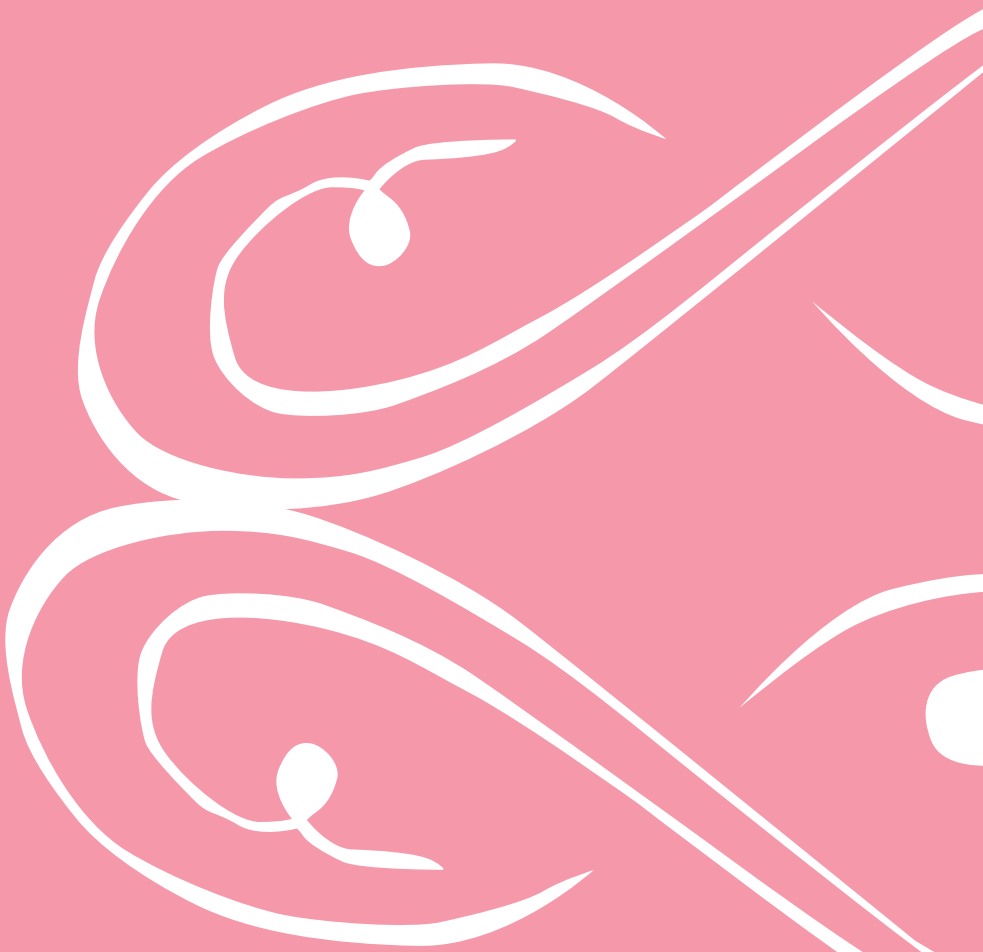
hotline where you can just press a button for your problems to be solved. Like in any relationship, you need to put in the effort to build and strengthen your ties with Him. Only then will you receive his grace.

God is real.

Thank you for reading, and may you trust in Him like I do.

# PART V

## *Personal Favourite Quotes*



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Life is like a roller coaster, it has its ups and downs. It is important that we uphold a higher spirit of optimism as an armour to face our daily challenges.

Over the years, I have learnt to supplement my mind with plenty of vitamins – knowledge and wisdom – to keep me going. Here are some personal quotes that I hope you will find useful in your daily struggles.

Through the years, these quotes (some original and some borrowed) have become a part of my favourite collection. They work like supplements to nourish my mind, and keep me focused in my long-term pursuits. I hope they can have the same effect on you, helping to guide you through your struggles.

### About My Attitude – ‘To Dream the Impossible Dream’

*“You are what you think you are.”*

*“To many, I am a misfit and a rebel, but with a good cause.”*

*“The recipe for perpetual ignorance is to be satisfied with your opinions and content with your knowledge.”*

*“He who conquers others is strong. He who conquers himself is mighty.”*

*“A man of honour regrets a discreditable act even when it has worked.”*

*“The most difficult secret for a man to keep is the opinion he has of himself.”*

*“A man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can’t read them.”*



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*“A person’s IQ or job title matters little if he refuses to admit there is still considerable room for his growth.”*

*“Unless you try to do something beyond what you have already mastered, you will never grow.”*

*“People may doubt what you say, but they will believe what you do.”*

*“Life is an attitude – good or bad, we decide.”*

*“In your life and career, you set your own rules of engagement. If you uphold these rules, you will see results.”*

## **On Leadership**

*“Those who have done nothing in life are not qualified to be the judge of those that have done little.”*

*“The world is full of willing people; some willing to work, the rest willing to let them.”*

*“The best type of leadership is a servant leadership.”*

*“Indecision is often worse than the wrong action.”*

*“It is the character of very few men to honour, without envy, a friend who has prospered.”*

*“The view from the top is always beautiful, but it is a lonely one.”*

*“The person who knows ‘how’ will always have a job. The person who knows ‘why’ will always be his boss.”*

*“The only way to maintain an attitude of generosity is to*

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*make it your habit to give – your time, attention, money and resources.”*

*“Just the very act of letting go of money, or some other treasure, does something within us. It destroys the demon of greed.”*

## **On Education**

*“A generous man will prosper, he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.”*

*Proverb 11:25*

*“Give the man a fish and he lives only for a day. Give the man a skill and he lives for a lifetime.”*

*“Education is not acquired for the purpose of earning a living; it's learning what to do with a living after you earn it that counts.”*

*“The greatest achievements are those that benefit others.”*

*“We make a living by what we get – we make a life by what we give.”*

*“Do not let your learning lead to knowledge, let your learning lead to action.”*

*“While trying to make a living, many forget how to live.”*

## **About Destiny and Dreams**

*“We certainly need high goals and lofty dreams. Dreams turned into action will accomplish great feats, make the impossible possible, change the course of our destiny.*

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*On the other hand, dreams left running idle have little worth, and will only float off to oblivion and fade away to rust and ruin."*

*"A champion listens to his dreams."*

*"Many people succeed because they are destined to, but most people succeed because they are determined to."*

*"Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice."*

*"Great minds have purpose; others have wishes."*

*"You must have long-range goals to keep you from being frustrated by short-range failure."*

*"Watch your heart, it translates into your thoughts. Watch your thoughts, it translates into words. Watch your words, it translates into action. Watch your action, it translates into habit. Watch your habit, it translates into your destiny."*

*"Some people own a lot of things, but many people's things own them."*

### **Putting In That Extra Effort**

*"I am not talented. I just need to spend more time and effort to practise and excel in the work I love doing."*

*"The difference between ordinary and extraordinary is that little bit extra."*

*"The man who makes no mistakes does not normally make anything."*

*"Procrastination is the thief of time."*

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*“What counts is not the number of hours you put in, but how much you put in the hours.”*

*“Our days are like identical suitcases – all the same size – but I pack more into mine than others.”*

*“It is the friction of thought, opinion, and passion between people that create sparks of inspiration and wisdom.”*

### **Staying Focused on the Design Business**

*“We know at the deepest levels of ourselves what is required for us to get to the top. Hard decisions have to be made. Sacrifices of time and energy are required. Many worthwhile pursuits have to be abandoned in order for us to excel in one particular area.”*

*“There are many distractions in my life. I have learnt to sieve out the noise and listen only to the signal.”*

*“Business is a marathon that has no finishing line.”*

*“A man is not finished when he is defeated. He is finished when he quits.”*

*“Do not follow where the path may lead – go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”*

*“Always adopt a hunter’s attitude. Wherever you go, there are always ideas and opportunities waiting to be discovered.”*

*“Do what you love best and give it your all. Uphold your principles and professional ethics. And soon, clients will be attracted to your abilities and your professionalism.”*

*“Never equate activity with efficiency.”*

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*"In business, nothing is particularly hard to handle if you divide it into small jobs."*

*"Never confuse our feelings with our duties."*

## **Success in Life**

*"Be in a hurry to seek knowledge and wisdom, but not wealth. With wisdom comes success."*

*"I always pray for three things: Knowledge, Wisdom and Good Health. Knowledge gives me a discerning mind to differentiate the good from bad. Wisdom allows me to make good choices, to offer helpful advice to those who need it, and to know when to say yes and when to say no. Good health allows me to work hard, to have high energy levels, to be in good physical shape, to be able to serve others, and to enjoy life more."*

*"I don't know the secret to success but the key to failure is to try to please everyone."*

*"The size of your success is determined by the size of your belief."*

*"Shallow men believe in luck. Strong men believe in cause and effect."*

*"To me, luck equates to preparation + timing."*

*"How can you soar like an eagle if you have to work with turkeys?"*

*"When you soar like an eagle, be ready to attract hunters."*

*"An iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another."  
Proverb. 27:17*

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*"Success is only a journey, not a destination."*

*"Success is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration."*

*"Success is a wonderful thing, but never underestimate the value of failure. Failure teaches us many more things than success ever can."*

*"If you've experienced the dark (failure), you can better appreciate the light (success)."*

*"Whether you succeed or fail is not as important... It is whether you do your best that counts."*

*"...everything is possible for him who believes."*  
Mark 9:23

## About Ideas

*"Watch your ideas and take care of them, lest they are left unattended and catch you unaware. For ideas left idle can slip away into the gray mass of nowhere land, into the cracks and crevices of complacency, where they will join the masses to rot and ruin, and go to waste."*

## About Love and Loneliness

*"Loneliness comes from being insulated from others, not only isolated. It is often self-inflicted. People build walls around themselves instead of bridges. What is the cure for loneliness? Loving others. Seeking to get love, to be loved, we need to give love unselfishly for the benefit of another. If you give love, you'll get love."*

*"People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care."*

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*“Many intelligent adults are restrained in thoughts, actions and results. They never move further than the boundaries of their self-imposed mental limitations.”*

### **The Workman's Common Plights**

- *Work is never too light.*
- *Rest hours are never too long.*
- *Responsibility is never too little.*
- *Pay is never too much.*
- *Problems are never too small.*
- *Holidays are never too many.*
- *Life is always unfair.*

### **Making Decisions**

*“Making a decision, whether it is bad or good, is still better than not making any.”*

*“It's better to try and fail than never to have tried at all. Some of our key regrets in life are the opportunities we passed up, and the chances we didn't take.”*

*“A man's countenance (face) tells you more about him than his clothes.”*

### **Making Mistakes**

*“When you make a mistake, do you get better or bitter? Every mistake is an opportunity to learn something new.”*

*“You are wiser today if you have learnt from yesterday's blunders.”*

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## Motivation

*“Progress in life, business, or any project comes through taking initiative and continuing to press on with new strategies, concepts and plans. The original momentum isn’t enough to keep you moving forward. Your progress will grind to a halt unless you refill your engine of inspiration with the fuel of fresh ideas.”*

*“We believe that there’s always a light at the end of the tunnel; the sun will shine after every storm.”*

## Competition

*“Each new working day is a new challenge. To stay fresh and alive in spirit, there must be change. Find new tactics, methods and modes of operation that are right for today’s situation; otherwise you’ll be left behind.”*

*“The best way to conquer your competition is to make them your friends. You will never know what can be achieved until you try to do it.”*

## Teamwork

*“A painting is made up of many different colours – each one is important and necessary.”*

*“Be the kind of person who is part of the solution, not part of the problem.”*

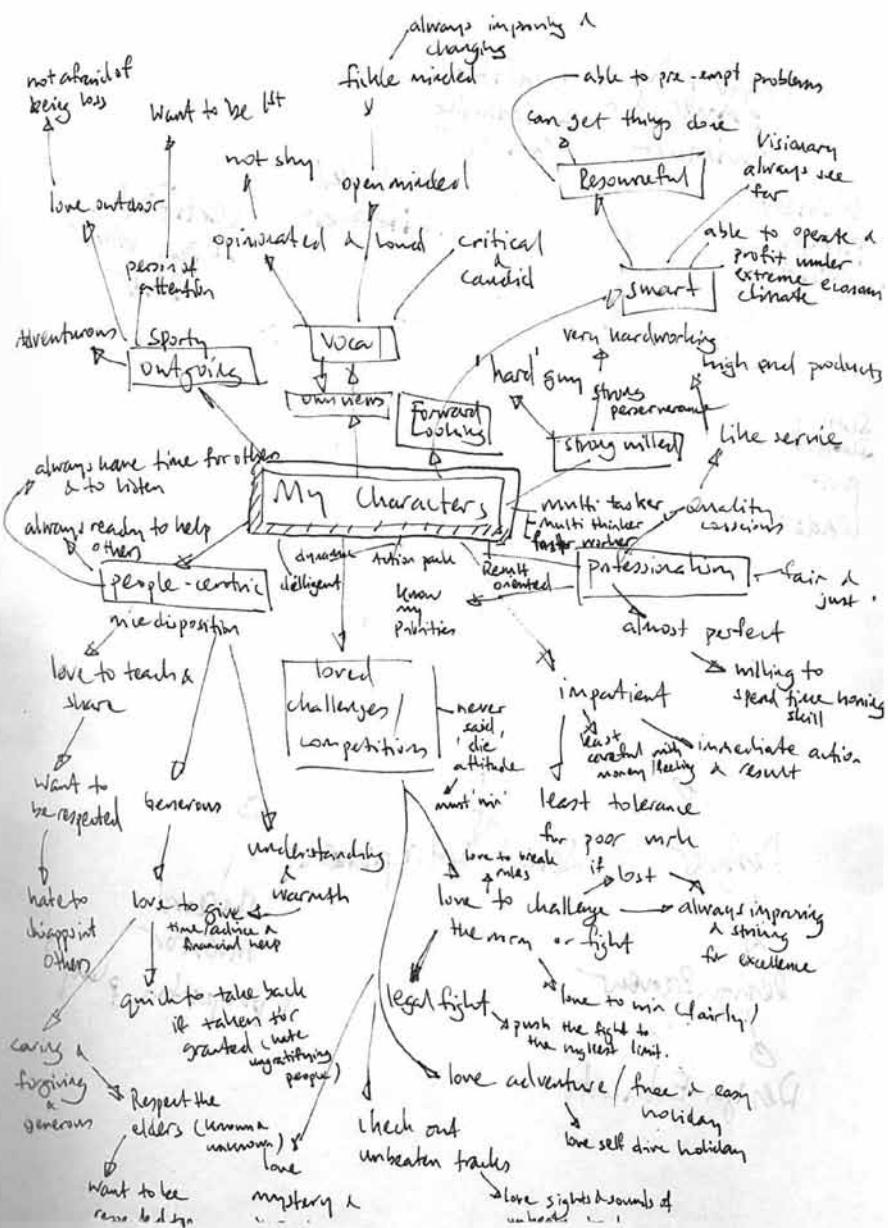




A family portrait.  
Illustration by Dimitrije Curcic.



A glimpse into the mind of Mark.  
One of the many self-reflection notes in his collection.



### Present Objectives in Finance Dec 10/1986

Aim: To save enough money for marriage, homeposon and further studies.

Action: To save a minimum of @1000.00  
every month.  
Start saving collection on the first  
week of the month.  
and dump it inside the bank.  
subsequent collections will be for  
POSB giro deduction and personal  
expenses.

Need to maintain good cond.  
reputation and remain as dedicated  
as before in teaching.  
Keep good rapport among students  
parent.

To apply new & interesting teaching  
practices during lesson.

Conclusion: A well financially sound & healthy person.  
Dec. 1986 - Sept 1989.  
Have at least 30,000 thousand dollars  
in saving.

### Present Objectives in Relationship Dec 10/1986

Aim: To improve the relationship  
the old age.

Action: To be more concern and caring in  
her life.

Spore a thought for our relation  
when converse with any idea of  
committing grave sins.

Need to improve better relationship  
when in public to avoid  
hurting her.

Conclusion: A loving couple with very  
good understanding of each other  
and a very strong love to  
bind us till death do us  
apart.

Journal entries dated 10 December 1988:

Present Objectives in Finance and Relationships.

1986 - July to 1989 July

Attending a full time course in Applied Art.  
- GRAPHIC DESIGN - 3 years.

1986 Dec. 24

Registry Of Marriage.

1989 Sept.

Marriage - customary

1989 Oct.

Europe trip - Homeposon  
Objective: To secure a place in one of  
the best Europe (preferably Britain) Art school.  
Preferably one or two years  
degree course.

1990 - 1992 - pursuing in degree course.

### Present Objectives in School Dec 10/1986

Aim: To be in the top ten position in  
each assessment.  
To be elected the class monitor again.  
To be the school student council  
in the next election.

Action: To pursue diligently in my graphic  
design course in Hongkong Academy  
of Fine Arts.

In order to succeed in obtaining the top  
ten position in school, I need  
to apply more time and  
practice continuously in every  
single project. Treat every project  
as important in order to achieve  
objective.

To be more gentle and polite to  
classmates and friends.

Conclusion: A well prepared, respectable  
and a very creative  
person good in design and  
also paint work in school.

Journal entries dated 10 December 1988:

Present Objectives in School.



*Malacca on route to Genting Highlands: A group photo taken in 1988 during one of the trips organised by Mark for his swimming students and their families.*



*Photo of a team of swimmers coached by Mark who represented the Ayer Rajah Constituency in the Interconstituency Swimming Championship. They were crowned champions for four years in a row from 1985 to 1988.*



*The Introspective Extrovert:  
Mark in Niseko, Hokkaido. Photo taken in 2011.*



*Mark's 25<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration at East Coast Chalet  
in 1987 with his pioneer team of competitive swimmers.*





*Tanglin Technical Secondary School:  
A class photo of Mark taken in 1975 at age 13.*



*Mark with his family. Photo taken in December 2012.*



*Mark at Arva Fashion School's Convocation Ceremony in Surabaya, Indonesia.  
Photo taken in November 2012.*





*159 Neil Road: The office that housed Lancer Design from 1999 to 2007 at the height of Mark's career as a designpreneur.*



*Fun times with good friends: Mark with his buddies, Joo Wan, Simon Khoo and Alex Yong (left to right). Photo taken in 2012.*



*Mark with his mother in Tokyo, Japan. Photo taken in December 2010.*





**Mark Phooi's unique way of leading his life – by thinking like a sage, working like a fool and acting like a criminal has seen him rise above poverty and mediocrity, against all odds, to become one of Singapore's most successful designpreneurs.**

**Mark's PhD qualities of Passion, Hunger and Discipline, have undoubtedly provided him with the answers to his success.**

*"He is able to reach deep into the hearts of people, not in a sense to make them feel like they love him, but he is able to inspire them to bring out the best in themselves."*

*— Audrey Chong, Managing Director of Lancer Design  
(2002 - Current)*

*"Not many people will help someone who is down and out. Usually, most will shun away from that person."*

*— Alex Yong, Former Client and Personal Friend*

*"I could tell that Mark was a go-getter and a man with big dreams. He came across as focused in wanting to expand his business."*

*— David Foo, Vice Principal of First Media Design School  
(2006 - Current)*

*"Mark is mean with his words, but not with his heart."*

*— Hally Chang, Personal Friend*

"Many people who trained and worked directly under him have grown in personal value and are now living better lives. Mark has indeed created a chain-effect phenomenon."

— *Chris Lee, Former Account Manager of Lancer Design and Business Partner (1996 - 2009)*

"He welcomes all challenges. He'll say 'Bring it on'. Because the market is so big, he knows that he can't possibly eat the whole cake. He enjoys the competition."

— *May Lee, Administration Manager of Lancer Design (1995 - Current)*

"On the whole, it was an interesting journey. Because of the fact that I've worked with him for so long, it made up a large part of my life. It was memorable, and now that I'm in a different phase of my life, I think he was one person that was very important."

— *Noelle Tan, Former Designer of Lancer Design (1996 - 2007)*

"He is a man of principles and has always been very gentlemanly in his dealings."

— *Felicia Ng, Personal Lawyer*

"He has guts."

— *Winston Tan, Former Real Estate Agent and Personal Friend*

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