

THE EDGE
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SAM FUNG / THE EDGE

C S Kong | MANAGING DIRECTOR OF UOA DEVELOPMENT BHD

Adapting to change with humility

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The Oak Room at Nexus Bangsar South is the venue for the interview with this year's *The Edge Malaysia* Outstanding Property Entrepreneur Award winner, C S Kong, managing director of UOA Development Bhd. The first thing one notices when meeting Kong is his sharp wit and on further acquaintance, his strong principles and business acumen come to the fore. His ability to make others feel at ease while being able to get across his views are skills honed over 35 years in the property industry, both in construction and property development, and many more years in other endeavours.

He graduated in 1964 as an Associate in Civil Engineering from the then Perth Technical College (now Curtin University) and possesses both the technical know-how and practical experience for his chosen vocation.

"I like the property business because it is tangible. You can see and feel a building when it is built. I take great pride in overseeing the successful completion of all our projects that grace the city skyline today with the support and commitment of my team. My motivation and satisfaction also come from the recognition of our company's achievements by our customers and stakeholders," he says.

Bangsar South is UOA Development's flagship mixed-use development project and it continues to grow in popularity, notably in terms of property values as well as good occupancy rates of its residential, office and commercial offerings.

However, Kong's journey has not been smooth. He faced many obstacles that have helped him become the entrepreneur he is today.

"I faced many difficulties in my younger days, such as making bad business decisions due to inexperience and arrogance. But, I learnt my lesson. Over the years, I have learnt to be flexible yet persistent and I have developed the ability to adapt to change with humility," he says.

One story that Kong relates goes back to the days when he first struck out on his own. He firmly believed that if someone could do something, he could do it better. So, he started out by asking a friend to give him one of several projects he was doing. However, without any due diligence, the "simple" project's cost soon ballooned. He realised that if he had done more research, he could have avoided the loss. But the experience taught him well.

"Actually, failure was a good thing for me. It taught me a big lesson, that you have to really work hard and not just ask for handouts," he says.

As Kong grew in experience and understanding, the property industry was where he wanted



MOHD SHAHRIN EMYA / THE EDGE



Kong with (from left) *The Edge Media Group* publisher and group CEO Datuk Ho Kay Tat, *City & Country* editor Rosalynn Poh, *The Edge Malaysia* editor-in-chief Azam Aris, and *EdgeProp.my* managing director and editor-in-chief Au Foong Yee

to make his fortune and he eventually decided he wanted to have a company on the stock exchange.

"In 1986, I was looking for a listed company. Most listed companies, even those with negative assets, cost RM30 million to RM40 million to take over. And most of the companies for sale were in trouble," says Kong. "I happened to go to Australia and learnt that there is something called a cash box company. Back then, you could list a company by raising A\$1 million through the issuance of shares. That is how we came to have a listed company in Australia."

Founded and listed on the Australian Stock Exchange as United Overseas Australia Ltd in 1987, the company moved its headquarters to Malaysia in 1989. Kong and his business partner, Kong Pak Lim (no relation), then started to establish the group in Malaysia and slowly built up a reputation

as one of the country's top property developers.

Kong attributes much of his success at UOA Development to the people he has working with him. His business partner for over 30 years, Pak Lim was introduced to Kong by mutual friends in Australia. At the time, Pak Lim was already in the property industry as a contractor and, somehow, the younger man and Kong clicked. Their relationship has grown stronger over the years and has endured. Certainly a feat in itself, but Kong recognised something in his business partner that would benefit the company in the end.

"Before I met Pak Lim, I had another company in a joint venture with others. From this, I learnt one thing -- in partnerships there are different types of people with different mindsets and you must be able to accept them. This company even-

"I always strive to give my best effort in everything I do with honesty, integrity, sincerity and humility. That is what I think is the secret to my success." – Kong

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Far left: The Sphere, the lifestyle hub in Bangsar South; The Vertical, office towers in the six-acre central park in Bangsar South

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tually closed down because the people were not able to accept each other. So I said to myself, if I am to go ahead and start another company, it must be with somebody who really complements me," he says, adding that respect also plays a big part in the business relationship. Being open to new ideas, opinions and approaches, and not simply having "yes people" around is also vital.

But what happens when there are difficult property development decisions to make? For Kong, the way forward is very simple.

"I think that in other industries, it may be difficult, but in the property sector there are always examples that you can examine — what people have done, how it has been done, and you can learn from them. You do not need to learn from Malaysia alone because you are in Malaysia, you can go to other countries to see what the solutions are," he says.

Of course, tougher business decisions may arise and in those cases, Kong believes compromise is needed to ensure that business and personal relationships are not affected.

"I take the 'agree to disagree' approach. I always welcome disagreements and differences in opinion. I give people a chance to disagree with me and I take criticism and negative opinions positively," says Kong. "I also consult external parties with vast experience in their respective fields for their opinions and viewpoints. If such views are constructive and can produce good end results for the company and the business, then I am more than willing to consider and accept them."

Apart from a good working relationship with his business partner, Kong recognises that building a good team is key to taking any company to greater heights.

"A truly successful team should be full of people who, when they do something, will do it better than I could, rather than doing what they are told. This is the difference between a good business and a great business," he says.

"One of the most important things I have learnt over the years is the impact of the people that you surround yourself with and the company culture you cultivate together. Investing in great people is one of the best ways to grow the company and increase our chances of success."

Additionally, taking care of employees is vital for the company to reduce staff turnover and provide a conducive work environment.

"I treat my staff like friends instead of just employees, through open communication and by building an honest, trusting and understanding relationship with them. This would give them a sense of belonging and create a more positive culture at work," he says.

"Also, people like to be appreciated. I always like

to show appreciation and, at the same time, I treat the employee as a friend. So the feeling is that we are friends and not strictly an employer-employee relationship. I will also say that encouragement is most important to give people the feeling of recognition."

Moreover, mentoring and guiding his employees is also important. Rather than taking their mistakes personally, he tries to help them learn from them to help them grow.

This open communication is certainly a breath of fresh air but, eventually, negative feedback will always arise. How does he deal with this?

"I am very happy to hear negative feedback. I encourage it to remind me that I may be wrong," he says with a smile.

Kong believes negative feedback actually helps him make better decisions, and he reiterates that humility is key to making people comfortable enough to share negative views with him.

After over 30 years with UOA Development, Kong's zeal and desire to develop property have not waned and, in fact, seem to have grown with each passing year. While running a business is

one thing, sustaining it is another matter. Kong believes one has to stay alert and not get carried away when times are good but plan accordingly.

"Do not be greedy in doing things when the market is good. It does not mean the market can sustain that good performance. Always have risk management so you can make sure you can make returns you can maintain," he says.

The resilience of a man who has weathered many storms in his life, and who is self-aware enough to change his ways and to improve himself even until today, is admirable and inspirational. So, what advice would he give to those who are looking to become successful entrepreneurs?

"We all know that there is no such thing as overnight success. Behind every overnight success lie years of hard work and sweat. There is no easy way to achieve success — and luck comes to those who work hard. I always strive to give my best effort in everything I do with honesty, integrity, sincerity and humility. That is what I think is the secret to my success," Kong concludes with a smile.

An aerial view of Bangsar South

