

A portrait of Nicholas Er, a man with shoulder-length brown hair, wearing a blue blazer over a blue button-down shirt. He is looking upwards and to the right with a slight smile. The background is dark.

# Nicholas Er

## The Man Behind The Company

A Memoir



# **The Man Behind The Company**



# The Man Behind The Company

Nicholas Er



Published in Singapore

2026

First published 2026

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Printed in Malaysia by GL Printing

ISBN: 978-981-94-2684-3

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# Foreword

## Foreword

*Clean shirt, new shoes, and I don't know where I am  
goin' to*

*Silk suit, black tie (black tie),  
I don't need a reason why*

*They come runnin' just as fast as they can,*

*'Cause every girl crazy 'bout a sharp dressed man*

ZZ Top's<sup>1</sup> seminal 1983 hit “Sharp Dressed Man”, was probably written about themselves—but if they'd ever met Nicholas Er you could easily imagine it being about him. Nick's one of those people whose Aura fills the entire room—when he walks in, everyone knows he is there.

Yes, Nick's well-versed in any geo-political matter you care to mention, but he can drink beer with the best of us whilst waxing lyrical about his beloved Liverpool, or find the perfect drink for

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<sup>1</sup> ZZ Top is an American blues-rock band formed in Houston, Texas, in 1969

dinner from a wine list that's over fifty pages long. And if you're ever looking for a restaurant, drop Nick a line, he'll definitely know somewhere to recommend!

We actually don't know how many languages Nick speaks (it's a lot) but the fact he actually takes the time to learn about the local culture and customs of everywhere he visits is one of the main reasons he's so engaging and so many people look up to him.

When we first met Nick in Hong Kong fifteen years ago, we knew he was someone we were going to get on well with. He was, and still remains, unpretentious, easy to speak to and always happy to meet with old friends and new acquaintances.

Velta International had been working with Mac-Nels for some time due to a mutual client and it just so happened that on a trip to Asia to see our Hong Kong agent, Daniel Yang, he let us know that he was meeting with his Singapore agent "Nick Er" from Mac-Nels and asked if we would like to join them.

Obviously, we jumped at the chance.

We made our way down to Wan Chai (the beginning, and the end, of so many good stories), found Nick, and the rest, as they say, is history . . .

Admittedly the original plan wasn't to stay out until three in the morning when we had to be up early the next day, but it was worth every minute!

Since then, Nick has gone from strength to strength, even in the face of adversity—growing his company internally whilst branching out, forming new partnerships and opening new offices around the globe.

So please, take this chance to learn more about Nick Er—the quintessential gentleman.

Well dressed, quick witted and the very personification of Singapore itself—a unique blend of East meets West and a master of both . . . but more importantly than any of that, our friend.

*Steve Burnett, Director of International Trade, Velta International Ltd*

*Doug Reynolds, Owner, Velta International Ltd*

# Preface

## Preface

When COVID-19 lockdowns started in Singapore in 2020, my life was abruptly changed. For years, I had spent half the year flying around the world, but the lockdown now forced me to stay home. During that time, I observed that before lockdown, people complained that they had too little time to do the many things they wanted to accomplish. But now that they were stuck at home with all the time in the world, they complained that they had nothing to do. I had no such complaints, since the shipping business kept me busy as ever.

And when I did have time to myself, stuck at home, I found solace in recording covers of my favourite songs. Although I only learnt four different guitar chords, they stuck with me and soon I was writing my own songs and lyrics. With the help of a former colleague's boyfriend who enjoyed transcribing music, I managed to create a few new songs that I genuinely loved, even with my limited chord repertoire.

The creative process prompted me to reflect on life's brevity, especially as I watched people with pre-existing conditions succumb to the virus. Thinking back on my life, from childhood to adulthood, it all seemed to unfold like a dramatic series on TV, and I felt inspired to write my own memoir.

In my search for a writer to help me, I came across John Lim, a Singapore-based ghostwriter. His openness about his mental health challenges spoke to me and so I decided to reach out to him. The first time we met, we clicked instantly. I knew he felt the same too, because during the holiday season of 2023, he gave me a touching postcard, thanking me for entering his life.

As I recount my life through the chapters of this book, I grow even more thankful for the time I have left with my loved ones, however fleeting it may be. Others have not been as fortunate as I have.

I hope that second-generation business owners who read my memoir can relate to the unique struggles I faced in my journey as an inheritor of my father's business. To my colleagues, staff, shareholders, friends, family and business partners, this book is a tribute to you all, a sign of my appreciation. I hope you can feel how much I value your presence in my life.

百善  
孝为先

*Filial Piety is the Foremost Virtue.*

## Chapter 1

# My Epiphany

I was sixteen.

It was February, three weeks into the new school year.

That afternoon, my dad arranged for us to meet after school for lunch. I was not too sure what this conversation was going to be about. But I could guess.

It was probably about how this was my N-Level<sup>2</sup> year, and what my plans were for the future. The N-Levels are the national examinations students in the Normal stream have to take.

These examinations determine where and what I would eventually study. The stakes were high. But as a student in

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<sup>2</sup> *National examinations in Singapore taken by secondary school pupils in the Normal stream.*

secondary school, I had not done particularly well. It was not that I had been slacking off, but that I hadn't found much in school worth engaging in.

My father never pushed me in my studies, demanding that I score a certain grade. But from time to time, he did take time to expose me to different things in life. Like his business. Since I was a young boy, he was already regularly bringing me to his Singapore office. Whilst my father would have serious business conversations, I would roam around his office.

Eventually, when I first entered primary school as a bright-eyed seven-year-old, things were easy. I aced every subject I had. I would score A's in every subject and be held up as the example to follow.

At the front of the class, every student's name would be listed in a column. The adjacent columns would leave spaces for the teachers to paste stars based on our performance for the fortnightly tests we had.

Score A+ at the maths test, and you got a star beside your name. Accumulated enough stars, and you felt like a star. By the age of nine, I had earned so many stars that I was now seen as the clever one.

Now, I suddenly realised that the smarter people were now speaking more to me. For them, perhaps it was picking someone "in their league". The ones who didn't get as many stars would play with friends that did not do that well too. Looking back, I don't think parents ever explicitly told their children to "mix with people who are as smart as you". But it instinctively happened, without any active intervention.

I didn't agree with this natural forming of cliques according to one's academic ability. I actively decided to make friends with those who were different to me. They were students who didn't do

as well in their studies. But they were big-hearted, funny, and saw that there was more to life than just how high you scored on tests. These experiences taught me how to better connect with each and every person. Whether it be speaking their lingo, laughing about how badly Liverpool's football season was progressing, or kicking a ball with them, these were the small, everyday moments that allowed me to see that the important things, like relationships, often began from the smallest and most insignificant interactions.

It was also at this age that I realised that there was more to life than just excelling at school. Sure, I could excel. But to what end? And for what? To prove to these smart kids that I was worthy to be their friend?

As a nine-year-old, I began to take my foot off the gas pedal. In class, rather than paying attention, I would have side conversations with my friends, read comics under the table, and look dreamily outside the windows. Most people buck up as the years go by. I went in the opposite direction.

Eventually, when the national Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) came, I did so mediocly that I was dispatched into the Normal (Academic) stream. The Normal Academic stream was for those who aren't as academically inclined. It's funny that they call it "Express" (for those who do better academically), and "Normal". Are those who do better necessarily on the fast-track in life, and those who are "Normal" confined to an average existence?

Again, there are no easy answers. But it hammered home the point that this wasn't necessarily a system I agreed with, nor a place where I fitted in. Part of that was what I wrote earlier—disagreeing with the school system and deciding to opt-out of an education system that ranked those who were better, and relegated those who were not as academically inclined.

I disagreed with how the school system went beyond grading students by labelling the A's and B's they scored, but almost seemed to class people according to their academic proficiency. In the 1990s, if you scored badly, it would be hard for you to make it to a higher social class. One's social standing almost seemed to stem entirely from how well they did in school.

But the other part of not fitting in came from the difference I saw in life priorities. In primary school, most of my friends were concerned about how to have the most fun in the least amount of time. For example, if you look at your kid today, you would often hear him say, "Can I just play for ten minutes? Please?" As an adult with a longer lifespan under your belt, you might sometimes be sceptical. How can someone have fun in ten minutes? But if you just let him run for ten minutes, you would be amazed at how fast he runs, how quickly he squirrels down the tubes, and how much fun a slide can be.

But at age nine, I was already thinking of how to grow a different set of skills, like singing and acting.

I thought of going to boarding school in England. It seemed like the only place where I could develop my interests in acting and singing. In a country like Singapore, what mattered was science and maths. Music and movement wasn't even considered a thing then.

But I ended up turning down that thought after seeing my mother spending time alone, at home. How do I explain it? You have the tangible comforts, but little of the intangibles that make life purposeful. Sure, I lived in a nice house, ate delicious food, and went on occasional holidays. It was more than what most could ask for.

Yet as a young boy growing up, if you asked me what else I wanted then, I would have traded those things for more time with

my dad. He meant the world to me. When he first brought me to his Singapore office, I remember being so proud that this was my dad's office. He had built something out of nothing. But that act of building required his full attention, and the business ended up stealing my father away from me.

As a primary school student, whenever I asked my mum where my dad was, the answer would inevitably be related to work. He was either overseas or settling an urgent client issue. It left me feeling distant, alone, and sometimes even abandoned.

Sure, I had friends that I could kick a ball with. But I didn't have friends who could truly understand the melancholy of having everything you want, but still feeling a deep sense of lack. Music became my best friend. Going to school and studying became a way to get by, like a job. You go to school, clock the hours, pass the exam, and you go on to the next year. Do that long enough, and you finally get out of the system.

Whilst my friends were thinking of their holidays, my priority then was thinking about how to exit the system so that I could eventually find my own place in the world. I was looking for a place where I could belong. Where I felt wanted. Where I felt that I mattered. That I wasn't just someone who was waiting for my time to come.

One of my earliest memories was of my mother waiting for my father, the light gently casting a warm glow on her face, as she fell asleep on the sofa, waiting.

Now in 1995, I was sixteen, older.

I remembered waiting for my dad to take me out to lunch. He turned up in a simple, beat-up car. Despite having the money to afford a bigger, fancier car, he chose something humble.

It's testament to his roots as a boy who came to Singapore with nothing, and how he built up this company with blood,

sweat, and a great deal of sacrifice, especially of his time with his family.

Arriving at the restaurant, we were quickly seated. And then came the usual questions:

*How's school?*

*What are you up to in school nowadays?*

*Do you need more money?*

Over the meal, I wasn't surprised when he asked how school had been. I reply in much the same way as before—"okay".

A slight frown appeared on his face as he heard me share about how school was merely "okay". I wasn't sure what to make of that frown.

My father and I had never been close. It was not by choice, but more because of circumstance. The company he started with three others in 1975, Mac-Nels, was a shipping business in the Singapore's shipping heyday. As a Non-Vessel Operating Common Carrier (NVOCC), Mac-Nels was in the business of buying container space from shipowners and then combining smaller shipments from different shippers to best make use of that space. As Singapore became a major transshipment hub, my father had to spend more and more time to take care of his growing cargo consolidation ("consol") business.

Maybe he was expecting more from his son. Logically, my mind told me that I could not blame him. After all, he left us with no lack. Perhaps my side of the deal was to work hard and to bring home the crowning glory of a top student.

That wasn't me though.

Suddenly, the table jerked. My dad gripped the side of the table. There was a brief clatter of dishes from the sudden

movement. He grimaced. His hand moved across to his heart, and he clutched his chest. His eyes were shut, and his face was contorted painfully.

I was not sure what was happening. I whispered, “Are you alright? Do you need me to call an ambulance?”

He did not reply. As quickly as this started, he relaxed. He gave a pained smile and said, “I’m fine. I have pills for this. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Nothing to worry about? How could there be nothing to worry about when it seemed as though he had just suffered a heart attack?

I wasn’t sure how to process this incident. What was this heart condition? How severe was it? Was he on the verge of death? What was happening?

We never spoke about that incident again. But the condition of his heart weighed heavily on mine. I didn’t know much about my father’s business. He never shared about his industry, and all I knew was that he did something vaguely related to shipping. In Chinese culture, there is the stereotype of the silent father who is the strong, invisible figure in the household that provides for the family. My father was the very picture of that. Indeed, my father placed bread on the table. I was grateful for that. But as soon as the bread was placed, he faded into the background.

Now, I was scared. The father I hardly saw at home, now seemed close to disappearing for good. That night as I sat at home waiting for my dad to come through the door, my throat tightened as I pondered the possibility that he might never step through the door again.

I couldn’t let this happen.

I love my family, even though I don’t show it.

Part of it had to do with my cultural context. I was born into a Singaporean Chinese family, where there were no explicit displays of love.

In Gary Chapman's theory on "love languages", or how one shows and receives love, there are five types: acts of service, words of affirmation, physical touch, quality time, and gifts. The more explicit displays might be through words or physical touch.

But growing up in the eighties in Singapore, it wasn't common for me to say "I love you", or hug my parents. They also did not show love to me this way. Rather, most displays of love were through acts such as cutting fruits and putting them on my table when I was studying (even though I said I didn't want them). Or they would slip a ten-dollar note into my wallet every few days.

But as much as possible, I tried to be there for my mum. As the only son of the family, there was the cultural expectation that the son would be the "(small) head of the family", whilst the father was out working. I would accompany my mum to the wet market, carry her foodstuffs, and spend time with her. I wasn't perfect. During those teenage years, there were times when I was paying more attention to my friends than my parents.

His near heart attack made me realise that I didn't know much about my father's health. I didn't know whether he would still be around to watch me grow up into a decent teen, or even an adult. You never know how much someone matters to you until you lose him.

Later, I learnt the distinction between regret, and remorse. Regret was the feeling you got when you failed to do something. Remorse was what you felt *after* doing something. This philosophy of trying and failing, rather than failing to try, was something that was inspired by the numerous singers and actors I had looked up to as a young boy. Hearing them sing of their failures in love and life taught me not to be ashamed of my own.

I didn't want to be in a place where I was regretting the loss of my dad, regretting that I never made more effort to know him, or to help him. I would rather be suffering remorse, where I had done something that did not work out. I decided to help him.

Before the month-long school holidays in June, I told my dad that I wanted to help.

“Sure, you can help out.”

Notice what he said? Help *out*. Not help *him*. Even when his health was suffering because of the stresses of business, my father was still eager not to place excessive burdens on me. Contrary to what people think, my father never forced me to join the business he started. He never explicitly said, “Come join me.” Rather, it was more that he offered chances and opportunities, and left it there for me to consider.

I was fortunate to have grown up in a middle-class family, where my family never placed a burden on me to work during the holidays to support myself. I confess, for much of my childhood, I led a sheltered life. Whilst some of my classmates had to take odd jobs to support their family, I didn't need to. But at sixteen, I had to step up. I finally saw that the comfort I enjoyed had come at a cost. It had always been invisible until the day of the near heart attack. My comfort came at the cost of my father's health, and possibly his life. That June holiday, when I asked my dad where I should start, he told me to start from the bottom. The warehouse. The beating heart of the company he and his partners had built.

I still recalled my first day as an intern. At age sixteen, walking into the warehouse, it finally dawned on me why my father had been absent most of the time. For the first time, I saw the magnitude of what he had built from nothing. It was almost as if you were at the gates of an armoury, and the doors were finally flung open. You walked in, and you saw the tools of the trade—

the trucks hauling the containers into loading bays, the containers being flung open, and the forklifts racing to extract the pallets from the container.

Working in a warehouse was a far cry from the acting and singing I thought I'd be doing. As a sixteen-year-old, the thought of being rich from what my father had built brewed somewhere at the back of my mind. I would be lying if I said money, fame and glory didn't feature in my decision.

But the more important thing was helping my father.

In Chinese they say it's 孝敬, or filial piety. This wasn't in a "I pity you, Dad. Let me help you" way. Rather, it was more "I see you, Dad. Let me support you."

For the first time, over that fateful lunch, I saw the vulnerable side of my father. Maybe not out of choice, but out of crisis. I was quite sure he did not want to worry me about business at my tender age of sixteen.

But that crisis with his health, revealed his vulnerabilities as a man. Not as a hard charging businessman, but as someone who had fought hard in business, and was now battered and bruised with severe battle scars.

On my first day working in the warehouse, I was overwhelmed. Walk into the warehouse, and you would quickly realise that there's no place to hide. Forklifts buzzed around, thrusting their forks into the wooden pallets, before spinning around to bring them to the containers. Unlike today, forklifts in the 90s did not have red lights and warning sounds. You had to get out of the way fast, or be crushed. You had to keep on high alert.

From Monday to Saturday, I would start working at eight in the morning, before finishing my shift at five in the evening. From the outside, this sort of work appeared to be menial, grunt work that required only brawn, not brains. But that experience

showed me that there was intelligence needed to load a container most efficiently.

It might seem like what they did was easy—simply unloading cargo from one container, to pack into another. But in that warehouse, I saw how they had to physically memorise where they placed different pallets across an entire floor. They had to bring pallets of different sizes into one container, lifting it up and down, in different configurations, like real-life Tetris, to best optimise the use of the container.

They also had to balance that with the priority of the cargo. Some cargoes were urgent and had strict deadlines. The workers there would constantly pore over the daily charts of shipments, to figure out what to ship. Decisions were made quick, and one had to be extremely adaptable to plans changing. A customer might suddenly need their cargo in two weeks rather than the previously agreed six weeks. They had underestimated demand for the product and their shelves would be empty soon. If you could not make it happen, you might clog up their production, or worse still, their sales, and they would never come back.

We were the oil in the engine of businesses. Without us doing our job efficiently and effectively, businesses would struggle to get or produce their goods.

It led me to see that it was the people working at the warehouse, who were the lifeblood of our work.

Without them, we would have no business to speak of. They were the ones who ensured that cargoes were loaded onto ships, that shipments were tracked and not lost, and that what was promised was delivered. It was in the warehouse that I saw how cutthroat this business was.

If you promised a client that you could deliver in two weeks, another competitor might counter and say they could do it in a

week, and at a lower price. How would you win in that scenario? It was through these people in the warehouse. We would tell them the realities of what competitors were offering in terms of speed, and cost, and they would take on the challenge of loading faster, and more effectively.

They would always figure out a way. It was this formative experience that led me to build our tagline—*Your cargo? Never say never*. Simple to say, difficult to do. The warehouse experience was formative in teaching me the value of reliability. In other words, it was the ability to effectively communicate what you do, and to deliver what you promised.

The Mac-Nels brand was built on this tenet of reliability. When we said we would deliver, we would.

It boiled down to the simple phrase:

*Say what you do, do what you say.*

If I were to ask you to think of why a business succeeded, you might reference qualities like innovation, charisma, and culture. What we often don't say is reliability.

When I first worked in the warehouse, and was exposed to the Mac-Nels business, I tried to understand what had made my father's business so successful. There wasn't a difference in what we did, compared to what others did. Even then, NVOCC shipping was a commodity business, with the lowest prices determining who got the most sales. Whilst we could say that we were the originators of the NVOCC idea within Singapore, and therefore had the first-mover advantage, this advantage slowly evaporated as smaller and leaner competitors started to compete in this business.

One key differentiator became the reliability of the routes we provided. Some NVOCC companies would not ship out a container that was less than full, resulting in delayed shipments.

Mac-Nels would. We would ship out containers consistently, as much as we could. Reliability sounds like a boring thing, but it's the most vital thing for service businesses. The core question that service businesses must answer customers is "How do I know I can trust you?" Beneath the question lies a deeper fear, "How do I know you wouldn't mess up my business?" This requires trust. You need to trust that your supplier works as he has promised he would work, so that you can make a livelihood.

You see this too in your personal life. You probably demand a high degree of reliability from your partner—that he puts down the toilet seat as he said he would, that he provides for the family, that he does not run away with someone else.

My first days at the port cemented my later beliefs that I could keep pushing for more cargo, because I had the workers who could and would deliver on those promises.

I knew that if you handed something to these guys at the port, they would get things done. In the warehouse, there would be workers shouting in Hokkien, Cantonese, and Mandarin. Some tried to be nice to me because they knew I was the boss' son. But I would insist and tell them, "Let me learn, I'm here to learn. I don't know anything and I want to learn."

They appreciated that I came down day after day to learn, sit, and eat with them. One worker confessed that he was a "small fry" of the company. He often joked with me not to get him sacked with all the new and inventive (and sometimes dangerous) ways he was using to load cargo quicker.

This experience also taught me how to connect with these workers—through speaking their language. This was Singapore in the nineties, where the Government actively discouraged the use of dialects to promote the use of Mandarin. I learned how to speak Teochew, Hokkien and Cantonese, deliberately choosing to

use them over the English and Mandarin I was used to. When I used dialects, I saw how these workers were much more expressive with me.

Language ceased to be the wall that separated the “owner’s son” from them, and they became more comfortable expressing their daily operational challenges with me.

It was also this initial linguistic experiment that showed me that I had the gift of picking up languages quickly. I used this to my full advantage later when I became CEO, learning Thai and Japanese so that I was able to build a stronger foothold in those markets.

And no, this is not humble bragging. A language is a bridge between two people. If you speak their native language, you would be surprised at how much faster people would trust you. This is a crucial part of what made Mac-Nels successful at our business. I believed that as far as possible, we needed to assimilate to the local culture, rather than forcing them to assimilate to us. Starting from their language was a key part.

Those four months at the port showed me what my father had built. But it also showed me that it was now teetering on the edge, because of his poor health. His heart was weakened from the stress he faced in business and continuing at this pace was unsustainable.

That year, I resolved to buck up, and not let my father worry about me again. I stopped hanging out as much with my friends, and started listening in class. I would ask my teachers questions after school. When my friends teased me about this change and said “Wah Nick, teacher’s pet now?” I would tell them that I had family stuff to deal with.

I would knuckle down, and work harder.

When my N-Level results were announced in December, I stood in the school hall, looking around expectantly. Students were crying, hugging each other, and trying to comfort each other over the results they had gotten.

I was nervous. This was the first time in years that I had tried as hard as I could to do well.

In the past, I could give the excuse that I had never given it my best shot. For years, I told myself:

*I didn't do well because I didn't give my best.*

*Not because I wasn't good.*

If I had never really tried, I could never truly fail. If I never fully gave my all, I would never feel the plumbing depths of disappointment. Disappointment would only come because you expected but failed to get a reward commensurate to your effort. I know. That was self-sabotage. I was hampering my own chances of success because I put up this defence to protect myself.

But now, there was no excuse.

For example, despite loving to sing, and knowing that I was a little better than the average Joe, I didn't go all the way with this possible career. I dipped my toes around the edge, even going for talent competitions like *Asia Bagus!*<sup>3</sup> when I was in polytechnic.

Looking back, I could have tried harder for this singing career in my childhood. I could have gone for singing classes, sang every day, and placed myself in front of more and more audiences. But I held back, content to use this skill when there was an occasion. A skill that could have extended into a career, became nothing more than a party trick.

When I look back now, there is that twinge of regret. I

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<sup>3</sup> A 90s star-search television program to promote young up-and-coming performing artists in Asia.

comfort myself knowing that duty to my father called, and I had to answer. My singing career became a sacrifice on the altar of duty.

But that day, when I received my results, I finally saw what sacrifice could produce.

When I stepped up to collect my results, my teacher smiled. She handed me my results and shook my hands.

*All the best, Nick.*

I looked down at the result slip she placed in my hands.

Straight A's? I checked again. I couldn't believe it. I let out a loud whoop. My friends gathered around me and slapped my back.

*Wah Nick, now so smart ah?*

That was my first experience seeing that if I gritted and put my mind to something, I could get it done.

For most of the sixteen years of my life, I had always been cruising. It's like driving a car, and you gently set it at sixty kilometres per hour. You never come out of cruise, and you never realise that the Toyota is so much smoother at seventy, eighty kilometres per hour.

Cruising in life can also mean you're always waiting for that catalyst to move you out of cruise and into exploring the full potential of your engine.

For the first time in my life, it felt good to push myself. It felt good to have a reason to push myself. That was the first time I saw the ceiling of my potential. I saw how little I had pushed myself to reach that over the first fifteen years of my life, before I gave it my best shot at this national exam. I knew how easy it was to get by by simply sticking close to the floor of my potential. Growing up in a comfortable environment, there was seldom the need to push myself. Deep down, I knew I held back.

*If I never truly tried, I could never have really failed.*

I gave myself excuses for making precious little of my childhood years. Excuses such as “results are not that important”, “there are more important things in life than results”, or “it’s not time yet”. I had drifted through the first sixteen years of my life, waiting for the right moment to come. Up till that age of sixteen, I was always waiting. Waiting for the school bell to ring, waiting to exit the school system, waiting for my time to come.

I didn’t want to wait anymore.

No, scratch that. I wasn’t going to wait anymore.

And I can’t wait anymore, not with my dad already wearied from business.

It’s time.

创业容易  
守业难

*It Is Easy To Start A Business, Harder To Keep It.*

## Chapter 2

# Standing in the Shadow of My Father

In 2005, I was twenty-six.

Suddenly it felt like the weight on my shoulders increased, and I found myself struggling for air.

I was now CEO. That evening, I sat in the plane with one of my directors. We were coming back from an overseas trip.

The trip had been difficult and painful. We had agents who refused to meet us. When we met potential business associates, we didn't always get what we wanted. I saw how laid back our offices were in most of the countries we operated in, and gave them an earful.

I was harsh, fierce, and scary. But more importantly, I finally saw how difficult this job was going to be. Inheriting a company at the top of its power seemed to have given me an easier job.

But one only needed to look at the vast majority of once-great companies that lie in the graveyard today to show that greatness may not last.

One story I'm reminded of is Apple, the technology company. If you look at its simple product lineup today, you would find it hard to believe that there was a time when it was creating printers, scanners, and monitors.

In its storied Macintosh division, it was even more confusing. In 1997, it had four main lines—the Quadra, the Power Mac, the Performa, and the PowerBook. But there were confusing product names like the Performa 5200CD, Performa 5210CD, Performa 5215CD, and the Performa 5220CD. When Steve Jobs reflected on his return to Apple, he said, “What I found when I got here was a zillion and one products. It was amazing. And I started to ask people, now why would I recommend a 3400 over a 4400? When should somebody jump up to a 6500, but not a 7300? And after three weeks, I couldn't figure this out. If I couldn't figure this out . . . how could our customers figure this out?”

All this had been done with the aim of growing profits.

But It also coincided with Apple's decline. In 1994, Apple commanded nearly ten percent of the worldwide market for personal computers, making it the second-largest computer manufacturer in the world after IBM. In April 1996, it reported a loss of \$69 million and laid off 1,300 staff.

Apple's story is always a reminder to me about how the mighty can, and will, fall. When a company grows bigger, there is the temptation of pursuing growth. But growth rates as a company with one million dollars in revenues would be significantly different in a company earning ten million yearly. Some companies make the mistake of chasing the next shiny

object, without understanding what their core competencies are. They end up losing in the long run.

My father had built up a great company. Within the industry, he was known as a legend for pioneering the NVOCC model within the Southeast Asia region. But as we got bigger, we started chasing other types of businesses to grow our profits. For example, we opened a new company dedicated to these specific trade lanes. These weren't necessarily bad businesses. But it increased the amount of things we had to focus on, and distracted us from the core challenges of winning in the Less than Container Load (LCL) niche of services.

The wider consolidation industry was also facing a seismic shift. The goods that were coming into the warehouse halved. Singapore was no longer experiencing as much demand as a transshipment hub, where goods were consolidated before being shipped onwards to its destination. More countries had enough cargo volume to warrant a direct route, instead of being shipped through Singapore. Furthermore, bigger and quicker vessels had emerged. This further reduced shipping costs and the need to stopover in Singapore to collect more transshipments for the economies of scale. The economies of surrounding countries were growing quickly, and the volumes shipped there warranted direct Freight All Kinds (FAK) box services, although it still used feeders in Singapore before merging with a larger mother vessel.

In many ways, Apple's turnaround mirrors how I tried to reposition Mac-Nels. When Steve Jobs returned to Apple in 1997, he began a thorough product review. He called in the product teams and got them to present their products. As time went on, he became increasingly agitated. One day, during a big strategy meeting, he screamed, "Stop! This is crazy." He went to the whiteboard and drew a graph of Apple's declining revenues. It

graphed the drop from \$12 billion a year to \$10 billion, and then to \$7 billion a year. He explained that Apple couldn't be a profitable \$10 or \$12 billion dollar company, but it could be a profitable \$6 billion one. It meant drastically simplifying Apple's product line. On the board, he drew a two by two grid, with "Consumer" and "Professional" at the top, followed by "Portable" and "Desktop" down the sides. He cut Apple's product lineup from more than forty products, to just four.

I had a sense of what we needed to do. We needed to focus on the NVOCC business by increasing our cargo volumes. We needed to have our own offices in key, growing ports. But I wasn't sure about my judgement. I was only twenty-five.

Now, seated next to this director, I wanted some validation. I leaned across and joked,

*How long do you think I will last in this business?*

I expected him to tell me that I would go far. After all, hadn't I done well in demanding that specific office to refocus? He put down his glass, and looked straight into my eyes. Without flinching, he said,

*Three years. I give you three years before you're out.*

I wasn't sure how to respond. Deep inside me, I was angry. But I tried to keep a poker face.

*What about until I'm thirty? That's only two more years.*

He shrugged and turned away. He looked out of the window and silently sipped his wine. That was it. Conversation over.

I nursed the cup on my table, pondering about what he had said. Where had I gone wrong? Hadn't I set standards by pushing our foreign offices and demanding more from them? Hadn't I set the tone for what excellence was? Hadn't I communicated well about our strategy moving forward, and what our plan was?

What went wrong? Where had I failed again?

What more did they want from me?

I had seen many instances of this over the past nine years since entering the company as a sixteen-year-old, interning at the warehouse. There were the instances where the old guard, those who were previously brought in by my father, would scoff at most of my ideas. When I sat in on meetings with the different export and import managers, I would share what the people overseas were doing. I would point out that it was something we could do as well. They would hear the perspective I shared, and look at me as if I were stupid.

When I tried to influence people to implement what I said, I could sense the resistance within them. They might eventually do what I say, but it was not done well.

There were other times when potential associates I met would be dismissive of what I said. I would share passionately about how we wanted to take the company forward. They would nod, listen, but when you went back to them a few months later, one of two things might happen.

They might ignore your instruction. Or worse still, they would give you an eloquent answer on why your idea might not work. It always left me feeling small, and inadequate.

I get it. Not many would willingly listen to a twenty-five-year-old CEO. They thought I was a 富二代 (wealthy second-generation). They wrote me off as someone who was simply lucky enough to be born with a silver spoon in my mouth. They thought I was an ignorant, undeserving heir to my father's hard work. Even though they didn't say it, I could see it. When I shared an idea, or gave an instruction, I could see them thinking,

*Who do you think you are?*

That's true.

Who am I, really? Beyond the fact that I was the son of the founder? In various industries, it takes on average twenty years of pure hard work to rise to the top. I had gone from starting in the warehouse as a sixteen-year-old, to suddenly becoming the CEO at the tender age of twenty-five. If I subtracted the three years spent in polytechnic, and the two years in National Service<sup>4</sup>, I had only worked in the company for four years. I was inexperienced, and I didn't have the track record to merit this position. Naturally, the veterans did not like it.

People who were used to telling me what to do now had me telling them what to do.

There were days when I felt embattled on all sides. It felt like I was battling both the industry and the company. On one hand, we had growing competition that was chipping away at our position at the top of the industry. Smaller players were now offering direct routes that gave our customers different options. They could now go directly to their final port of destination, instead of waiting for us to consolidate their cargo with others in Singapore, before shipping theirs. This meant faster deliveries, cheaper fees, and less business for Mac-Nels.

On the other hand, some multi-national forwarders were encroaching on the cargo consolidation business. They were exploring new ways to profit from the rosy growth the world was enjoying. This growth was leading to increased consumption, and naturally, an increased need to ship what consumers wanted. Going into the consolidation business was a natural next step for these forwarders. With the economies of scale that multi-national liners enjoyed, and the fact that they owned ships, the onslaught

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<sup>4</sup> *Mandatory two-year enlistment in the army or civil defense for all Singaporean males.*

on our business was brutal. As a pure-play NVOCC, there were not many other diversified sources of revenue we could depend on. Because I had given all my focus to the consol business, I knew exactly what we needed to do to navigate these choppy waters. But I could not do it alone.

I needed all the help I could get.

Yet within the company, I sometimes felt like it was me against the world. Managers would disagree with doing things my way. They would go behind my back and complain to my father. Can you imagine? A fifty-two-year-old veteran, instead of addressing disagreements directly with his boss, would rather speak to the boss' father? It was like primary school all over again. When you were naughty in primary school, your teacher would report on your behaviour to your parents, expecting them to discipline you.

Now, this was happening in the company where I was the CEO. I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

I was *not* the enemy.

Yet somehow, my father's old guard seemed to take me as the enemy. Didn't they get it? I was merely trying to protect our interests and bring us up to date to the industry's standards. Whilst our competitors raced forward, some of my father's old guard insisted that their ways were correct. Out of respect to my father and their previous contributions, I did not fire them. Trust me, there were many times when I wanted to. I had to work with them, and sway them to see the realities of the industry's sweeping changes.

I did not want to be just known as the CEO that was parachuted in because he was born lucky. I was going to be my own man. Yes, I had inherited a company at the peak of its powers. My father had developed the business from its birth in 1975 to its current, strong, beefy self in 2005. Despite our previous success, we could

not survive without continued reinvention to our business. As Andy Grove, the former CEO of Intel, once said:

*Success breeds complacency.*

*Complacency breeds failure.*

*Only the paranoid survive.*

Now, it was up to me to ensure the survivability of the business. Some thought that I was being lazy. Was I cutting myself some slack by just aiming to survive? No.

In the years leading up to my final position as CEO, my interactions with partners and competitors showed me how our business was not adapting with the times. I knew that my first few years would be spent convincing the old guard to change with the times. Additional business was a bonus.

If we survived.

I was not sure if I had the cold heart needed to implement change, without worrying about how it might hurt people. I had grown up being the warm, compassionate friend that others enjoyed having around. Many of those early memories were formed in secondary school, where I invited friends weekly to my home to play, sing karaoke, and enjoy the lazy afternoons of a teenager with few worries.

Now, I had to be cut-throat, brutal, and clinical. There was little space and time to be nice, when the health of our company was on the edge. Some of the old guard thought I was just being paranoid. Things were good, they said. Why did we need to change things when they were working? Even after I explained that these changes were what competitors were doing, and that we risked being left behind, it was hard for them to understand

why we needed to introduce changes that would result in more work for them.

That was when Mr. Hyde began to appear.

Since I was young, I've been struck by the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, written by Robert Louis Stevenson. In that story, Dr. Jekyll is the kind, loving doctor. Mr. Hyde is the rough, violent, and aggressive man.

In the opening scene, close to midnight, whilst the streets lie silent from the dwindling activity, a girl skips along, being one of the few rays of light in the darkness. In the other direction, a dark, brooding presence appears.

It's Mr. Hyde.

The girl, caught in her tunes, accidentally bumps into Mr. Hyde. Mr. Hyde is startled and explodes in anger. He pushes the girl to the floor, violently stamps on her chest, before making a run for it.

The secret at the heart of the story (spoilers here), is that Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll, are both the same man. I've long been struck by this story because it reminded me that there can be opposite sides to a person, each brought out at different times.

In my personal life, I was Dr. Jekyll. With friends, I found belonging with the friends I had made in my teenage years. I've heard it said that you "outgrow" your friends. But I don't believe that. As I grew in my role in the company, I naturally rubbed shoulders with those who were wealthier or more influential. It was tempting to drop my friends and appear as the socialite, spending time in rarefied social circles. Yet my secondary school friends remained my closest group of friends.

Why? Because it was in them that I found belonging, and the ability to be fully myself. I did not have to pretend to be the hotshot CEO of a global company.

With them, I was the playful life of the party. During karaoke sessions, I would be serenading my friends, persuading them to take the microphone to sing with me. My friends respected that I stuck with them through thick and thin. There were several times when I made out loans to my friends when they were going through big life transitions, like being retrenched. An outsider would probably have shaken his head, thinking I was foolish for making such big loans, with little more than a handshake and a smile.

But in business, I was forced to bring out a more aggressive side of myself. I needed to project strength and confidence, even when I didn't always know what the right answers were. If I didn't, my father's old guard would be proven right. That I was there simply because I was my father's son, and not because I was truly someone who had the credibility to take over.

It was not enough for me to just have the birthright to the business. I wanted to prove that I had the moral right to assert myself in the business. I had to prove that I was a worthy heir. The birth of Mr. Hyde was not just because I needed an ego boost. Rather, it was to protect my father's business.

I don't know how to explain it. But at the age of eighteen, I was already thrust out into the world. My father sent me abroad to places like England, Australia, and Canada to work with his business associates and to build independence.

As an eighteen-year-old, I was first sent to Australia to live alone. As the saying goes, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. I quickly learnt how to connect with the Australians there. Drink with them, and you would establish a stronger bond. They laughed about how an eighteen-year-old like me could hold my liquor. At eighteen, I was once again competing, even though it was for a seemingly meaningless title—"Champion Drinker".

It even came down to adjusting my accent to fit the Aussies, so that I sounded more like them.

At that point, I could already sense these associates sussing me out. They were seeing if I was there for the taking, ready to be taken advantage of. At eighteen, I was already sitting across the table from accomplished CEOs, trying to understand how they structured and negotiated multi-million dollar deals to ship cargo that allowed for their companies to make money. Seated at the table with them, I felt out of my depth. I had to rely on Mr. Hyde to protect me and the business interests of my father's company. I appreciated my dad for exposing me quickly to that side of the business, where it was a brutal dog-eat-dog world. But just as quickly as he exposed me, I needed to grow the guts to hold my ground.

*Alone.*

These repeated experiences living alone abroad in my early years helped me to grow comfortable being by myself. It was hard to be alone in Singapore. Everywhere was bustling with life. When I hung out alone in school, people would think that I was "weird". My first time travelling abroad alone, my dad handed me the plane tickets, and gave me the address of his associate in Australia. That was it. The year was 1999, and that was my first solo trip. There was no WhatsApp or Google Maps. It was not all that easy to stay connected or find your way. All you could depend on was your own wit. I was filled with panic initially but tried not to let it show. I didn't want to worry my dad. My father was probably equally anxious. Imagine putting your child on a plane, with no certainty if he would ever return in one piece.

All these experiences were vital in the building of the more aggressive Mr. Hyde, who was preparing to take over the business. If I trace his development, he matured when I became CEO.

As someone who was used to quickly finding belonging even amongst different socio-economic groups, I saw for the first time what it meant to be kept at an arm's length. There was a hush whenever I entered the office. Whatever jokes the staff were sharing would suddenly disappear. They would suddenly sit up and focus intently on the papers they were preparing.

I was friendly, but I knew I could never be their friend. It was not that I didn't want to be their friend, but there was a quiet recognition that I was their boss. Few would haphazardly jeopardise that relationship.

The Dr. Jekyll in me would search for belonging, and intentionally return to the places where he had found belonging, like amongst my secondary school friends. But the emerging Mr. Hyde learnt to say, "I might never belong. But I must be strong."

## **Starting at the warehouse**

This grit was built from my early days in the warehouse. I had to learn to grit through the loneliness of being alone and the difficulty of the job. My solitude was a result of my circumstances. As the son of the boss, workers treated me with respect, and sometimes held me at an arm's length.

But the warehouse job was even more difficult. Go to the table tucked at the corner of our warehouse, just in front of the loading berths, and you would see a clipboard, with papers indicating the imports and exports for the day.

As a scrawny sixteen-year-old, I knew that I could not impress people based on my muscles. I chose to impress them with my mind—and more importantly—my heart.

The brain work involved in coordinating cargo from different ports and times, and having to fit them into the customer's schedule,

was exhausting. Every other employee would spend three days at the warehouse, as part of their onboarding, to get a feel of things. I spent four months here over two years. I spent every month-long June and December holiday to learn every single part of how to coordinate imports and exports in this freight forwarding and NVOCC business.

It was my job to learn how to arrange these imports and exports efficiently, and effectively. It seemed like an impossible task. During the first time I coordinated the import and exports, I was lost. There were so many elements to take note of. The warehouse manager handed me the list of cargo that was arriving that day, and another list of the cargo that was due to leave that day. Match the imports and exports, and make sure that each container is as full as possible. It sounded easy so far.

But I soon got a call about how a customer needed his cargo expedited. The paperwork for the goods to clear the port's authorities was also outstanding, and I had to scramble to find the necessary information. Let me paint a picture for you.

Imagine walking into the warehouse. You've just received a container full of items. Immediately, you have to unload the goods, and place them within the warehouse. Contrary to the fancy Amazon warehouses you might have seen on the news, there are no high-tech systems here. The technology for remembering where everything is placed, is your head.

Then you have to arrange the goods for export. You have to consolidate the different goods you have going to the same port, put them together, and then ship them.

For example, at the front of the warehouse, near the loading bays, there are two containers open, and ready for export. These containers are going onto a ship that's sailing to three different

ports—Busan in South Korea, Shanghai in China, and Los Angeles in the United States. You have three goals:

1. Ensure that the container is loaded as fully as possible
2. Ensure that the shipments arrive on time
3. Ensure that no cargo is damaged

Singapore has a meal called *rojak*<sup>5</sup>. It's where they throw ingredients like pineapples, fried flour fritters, cucumbers etc., into a bowl, mix them up in a sweet and savoury shrimp-based sauce, and serve it with peanuts.

For me, consolidating cargo was like making a meal of *rojak*, and trying to export it to different countries. Some days, you wouldn't have enough of one ingredient (like cargo to a specific port). But because the ship was sailing soon, you had to stop waiting for the ingredient to arrive, and simply ship the half-finished *rojak* there. There were costs to shipping the container before it was at full capacity. You were still paying the same price to the shipping company for the container they were shipping for you. Each half-finished *rojak* we sent out cost us money.

In simple maths, it meant that we might be paying \$3000 to the shipping company. But the ten clients whose goods we were consolidating within one container were only paying us a total of \$2500. Even though we sent that shipment, we lost money.

Some find this boring. But this revitalised me because you could not hide in such a business. You had to keep showing up to make on-the-ground, quickfire decisions. Should you wait for more shipments to come, or just go? On the warehouse floor, I finally learnt that there were no perfect decisions. Just good enough ones that were sufficient to keep things moving forward,

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<sup>5</sup> The term “*rojak*” is often used colloquially to describe situations where many disparate things are mixed together.

always. Decisions simply had to be communicated clearly, so that clients felt a greater sense of control.

When you hesitated on your decisions, your clients would scold you, and the people on the warehouse floor would look at you with tinted eyes, with their suspicions validated.

The stakes were high. If I lost trust with these workers in my opening months, they might never see me as a leader to respect. There would be little way to convince them about the merits of my ideas in the future. As Will Rogers once said, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” First impressions stuck, especially bad ones.

In my first month, I did everything I could to understand how best to load a container quickly and effectively. Every cubic metre of space was money, and I quickly learnt how to maximise what we were putting in each container so that we could effectively allocate space.

Beyond the science, I also learnt the art of freight forwarding and NVOCC. These were the nuances and subtleties that could not be captured with the hard numbers. For example, how did you communicate to a client that their cargo had been damaged? How long could we hold an odd-sized shipment for a client, which might take too much space in a container? Just depending on the numbers or the estimated timings wasn't enough to make a decision.

Over those four months, spread across two years of school holidays, I learnt how to build better judgement on making these difficult decisions by observing what these warehouse workers did. I was like a sponge. Each day, I would pepper them with questions, trying to understand every intricate detail of the process. Working in the warehouse, what I studied in school came to life. Simple math concepts like percentages became important

to calculate one's margins. It was this that led me to take more interest in my studies when I returned to school, from the holidays spent at the warehouse. No longer were classes just about passing an exam. It was about helping Mac-Nels.

In addition to being book-smart, I learnt how to be street-smart. I would hear of the tricks of the trade and see how cutthroat the industry could be. As a sixteen-year-old seeing how businesses literally went for each other's throats, it forced me to grow up. Fast.

It was a dramatic change.

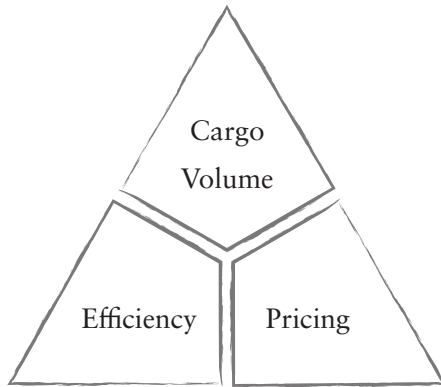
For most of my early years, my head was in the clouds, being the artist who loved singing and acting. I had a privileged childhood where most days were spent in air-conditioned malls and the comfort of my home.

But over the course of those two years in the warehouse, I was forced to step up and learn the way of a warrior. For one, there was no air-conditioning in the warehouse. It was not a physically comfortable place. I had to learn how to fight on the frontlines, learn what competitors were doing, what tricks they were using to cut costs and corners, and see how to counter them effectively. It was intellectual judo. Looking back, much of the aggressiveness I showed in later years developed from those first two years in the warehouse.

Slowly, colleagues began to trust me as they saw my interest in the business. When I came into the warehouse's office, they would joke with me, and invite me to their meals. They saw that I wasn't there just to make an impression. Singaporeans call it "showing face", or doing the bare minimum to be polite and respectable, before retreating into one's comfort zone. There had been no need for me to "show face". My father never forced me to show up at the warehouse, nor did he say "you have to work two years at the warehouse before moving on".

Rather, I knew that for me to help my dad well, I had to learn the fundamental building blocks of the business. Mac-Nels was built on the foundations of these containers. Load them well, and load them full, and you would have a constant stream of profit.

Sure, it would have been easier for me to sit in my father's office in Tanjong Pagar, and enjoy the gentle air-conditioning on my face. But would it have helped me to better understand how to balance the tension between cargo volume, pricing, and container efficiency?



*Fundamental Building Blocks of Mac-Nels' business*

Everyone expected me to be a lazy 富二代 (wealthy second-generation). I knew I could not change how they started thinking about me. But I would change how they would eventually remember me.

The people at the warehouse knew that I sacrificed my school holidays. What they did not know was why. Some thought I was there to learn how to take over the company. Taking over was secondary. The primary reason why I sacrificed every school holiday was because I loved my father. I cared for his health. I

started off in the warehouse hoping to take on some of his burden, so that he could be less stressed. But later, having seen the intricacies of the warehouse, I admired what my father had built. I now understood how much strain was placed on his heart. For me, this was more than an internship. This was a journey to lessen my father's burden, and in my own small way, to show that I cared for him.

Years later, when I took over as CEO, it hurt when eventual business associates read my aggressiveness as arrogance. Yes, I felt misunderstood. But that aggressiveness was born out of a tenderness, and a desire to be my father's keeper.

## **First day in the office**

At the age of twenty-two, after the mandatory two-year National Service every man must serve in Singapore's military, I started working in the Mac-Nes office.

When I told my father about my decision to join his company after my military stint, he stared at me for a long time, considering what I had said.

*Are you sure you don't want to go to university?*

I shook my head. To me, there was no point in getting another piece of paper to prove that I was ready. The best experience could only come from the frontlines, not studying the frontlines. What additional experience and expertise could theories taught in university add to what I was doing? If I knew where I was headed, there was no need to take a three or four year detour through university.

During my first day in the corporate office, I recognised a familiar look, one that I had seen in the warehouse as a teen. The guardedness, mixed with resentment and jealousy. It was never

explicit, like cards shown on a table. There was no outburst—no one in my father’s old guard shouted, “You’re just your father’s son!”—but their eyes said just as much. There were times I would share an idea, and I would see their eyes roll. Other times, they would interrupt me before I finished speaking. It was stereotypical of how some in Singapore tended to see younger colleagues. They were to be seen, not heard. Make yourself heard, and they would hurt you.

The doubt about my capabilities was always there, hanging like unspoken tension in the air. It appeared in the strangest of places. For example, during my regular meetings with my dad, he would bring up an incident where I had told off a colleague. In my mind, I would think, “How did he know?” But the answer was obvious—from the people who were still loyal to him.

Perhaps they were putting me in my place, reminding me that I was still a man in my twenties who had just entered the industry.

I had no formal job role in the company beyond “Executive”. I would go into each department, and learn everything about how the department functioned, what their challenges were, and how they generated value for the company.

I would meet the overseas partners that came to meet my father in our office. Once, in the 2000s, our partner came from Japan to visit us. I was shy and didn’t know what to do. I asked him if he wanted to sit in my two-seater coupe. I had never given a ride to anyone else before in that car. He was the first.

I didn’t know what else I could do to form a bond with him. So, I suggested the first thing that came to mind. And it worked! He was touched and kept repeating that to me. The fact that I would give him a ride, even though he was “just a sales manager of a larger company”. But that was the first turning point that

helped me to see how important these personal moments were. Going out of your way to give a personal touch could build bridges between people that run-of-the-mill gestures could not.

Instances like these, where my father introduced me to our agent in Japan, became ways for him to build my ability to present myself professionally in front of key partners. He would check in with our partners and colleagues to gauge my progress. He would point out things I would not have thought of when we met. He would then rotate me to the next department when he thought I was ready.

I was grateful that my father took me under his wing. Even though I was chomping at the bit, desperate to start negotiating deals, my father patiently guided me. When I asked for the authority to implement changes I felt were necessary, he would show me another perspective. He would explain why in some cases, his old guard was right. Yet he was also ready to concede when my observation was accurate and would adjust accordingly.

Whilst I wanted to step out of my father's shadow as quickly as possible, it was clear that I was not entirely ready in terms of my temperament.

This was a season of my life where I felt like a fish who had just found water again. The concepts, ideas and practices came to me easily. It was only later when I began to onboard my own staff, that I realised these things did not come naturally to most. I do not necessarily think that I was more gifted than anyone else. But the freight forwarding and NVOCC business was a good blend between art, and science. You had to have a clear understanding of the rates that determined your profit. But you also had to grasp the nuance of looking past those rates, when needed. There was a lot of creativity needed to understand how to work with the rules to create newfound value for clients.

As someone who enjoyed the creative arts like singing and acting, I relished the creative aspect of this work. Over time, I also developed a love for hard data. My work allowed me to combine my creativity with hard data in rewarding ways. I like thinking that I didn't find a career in freight forwarding and NVOCC, but rather that it found me.

## **I am CEO, or am I?**

In 2005, I was twenty-six. This was the year I was handed the reins as CEO. There was no big party. That year, my father sent out an email informing our staff and partners that I was formally the CEO. He asked that they give me the support I needed. That was all.

I was not sure what led my father to make the judgement that I was ready to take over. I have never asked him. Perhaps the biggest reason was that in the lead up to 2005, he finally saw my drive and ambition to take the company to further heights.

I spent long days at the office, starting in the morning, and then meeting with clients at night. Even when I was sick, the Mr. Hyde in me dragged myself in. I couldn't show that I was weak. Not when there were so many eyes on me, wondering if I was able to fill my father's shoes.

Whilst my father never articulated it, perhaps his initial concern with me was that I would not work hard enough. After all, in my early school days, I was not the high-flying student who was acing my academics. I seemed to be a boy with his head in the clouds, singing and performing.

Filial piety was the foundation that spurred me to start, but the desire to shine on that stage was what showed me the next horizon to push the company to. I demonstrated the gumption to

take new tactics that were being used by competitors, and to trial them in our company. I wanted to open more offices abroad.

But as a twenty-six-year-old, I knew that I still had much to learn. Whilst I could be stubborn and adamant about how things should be done, I also saw that my judgement had gaps. I set myself the task of establishing good relationships with key partners. I flew to different countries to interact in-person with agents, and to understand the intricacies of their markets.

Some might think that this was just me giving myself excuses to travel at the company's expense. Trust me, when you live out of a suitcase for half the year, and wake up in a different hotel every week, the novelty of travelling becomes a chore. Others might say that you could just call. But the benefits of an in-person meeting outweighed the costs. You could shake a person's hand, look into their eyes, and see if they were lying to you. You could walk into their warehouses and tell if they had the volumes they promised. You could hear what competitors were up to.

I wanted to be the link between the Eastern and Western markets. I wanted to be the hub through which insights flowed. I saw how the agents that sent us the most cargo did not just stick to us because of our service. Their continued trust in MacNels stemmed from our place at the nexus of power players. Our position gave us a leading role in becoming a key source of insights they could use to drive their business. For example, when an agent in Shanghai wanted to send cargo to Port Klang, they would want to know which agents they could trust. I wanted to be the go-to person who facilitated those connections. As Eddie Temple said in the movie *Layer Cake*, "The art of good business is being a good middleman". The NVOCC is fundamentally a middleman business. We connect many different people who have cargo, and slice that up into the various ports.

More importantly, it was knowledge arbitrage. I made it a point to know most people in the industry. I understood where the alliances were, and where there were arguments. When there was an opportunity, I would broker a connection, or make a connection on my own. My knowledge of the complex web of relationships that stood in different markets allowed me to win more business.

To build trust amongst our network of agents, one of my first trips began with touring China, as CEO. During that trip, I met all of the agents my father had first partnered with. I also said hello to the agents of competitors to gain knowledge and insights.

One of them, Daniel Yang, our agent in Guangzhou, became a close associate because of that early, face-to-face interaction. That was the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship. He was the kind of partner that was willing to make early losses to reap later gains. It wasn't always easy to stomach, especially for partners who might be more focused on the bottom-line. In many ways, Daniel epitomised the type of agent and partner I wanted to cultivate in the different countries we had a presence in. It was Daniel who introduced me to Steve and Doug from Velta in the U.K., another two enduring partners.

My pushiness and seeming aggressiveness offended many people. In my twenties, I offended so many people that whenever I came into contact with a new acquaintance in the industry, I could see their guardedness. They heard of how aggressive I was in driving Mac-Nels forward, and my willingness to stomach losses. This naturally put off some potential partners.

As a younger man who was not fully mature, I had a very low level of tolerance for what I perceived to be "bullshit". I did not want to put on a show to please people for the sake

of making them happy, or to please them to gain any sort of respect, acceptance, and friendship. In simple words, I did not enjoy kissing arses. I believe people can see through you if you do it for the sake of gaining their favour or getting more business. I cannot accept people who are two-faced or people who are fake, regardless of how successful they are. As the cliché goes, you gain some and you lose some.

My aggressiveness in driving business for the company lost me lots of friends and potential friends, but it also made me many long-lasting friendships. Through that, I learnt to go to where you're welcomed, not where you're merely tolerated. You work with people who want to work with you, not with people who fear you. But when I could not change the people I had to work with, I had to try something different.

As artisan watchmaker Mr. Jean Claude-Biver<sup>6</sup> once said:

*In the river, only the dead fish swim with the current,  
in the direction of the current and at the speed of  
the current.*

*A fish that is alive goes to the left and the right of the  
current, and against the current.*

*I don't want to be a dead fish, I don't want to do what  
others are doing.*

*All my life, I've always wanted to be first, different  
and unique.*

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<sup>6</sup> *Legendary Swiss watchmaker who headed brands like TAG Heuer, Hublot and Omega. A key figure in the rescue of the Swiss watch industry in the 70s and 80s.*

When I first became CEO, as a young twenty-six-year-old, I took a gung-ho approach. I did not wish to be a young man who was indecisive. If a young person was hesitant, giving excuses, and not pushing himself harder, what was the point?

But I had a problem. I could push myself, but I could not yet push others. I didn't know how to push my father's old lieutenants to change. It was true. We were successful. Why was change even needed? Even when I showed them the raw, hard evidence about how other companies were doing things differently, they would dismiss it. That's not our way, they would say. Their best argument was:

*We've not done this before, and we still succeeded. Why should we do this now?*

It was hard to win this argument.

It was frustrating. It was like standing on top of a mountain and seeing a pack of hunters coming for our camp. I would yell at my managers, "Look! There are hunters who are coming for us with guns!" Standing at the foot of the hill, they would say, "It's okay, we have swords to fight them off." The older managers believed that shipping was a cyclical industry. As long as they survived the trough of this wave, they would eventually crest it. To them, the 40% cut in revenues between the late 1990s to 2004 was seasonal. It would pass eventually. Why bother losing on a 20-footer to win a 40-footer? Why not just win less of both, but at profitable rates, and slowly wait for the industry to turn? They argued that my strategy of losing first to win later, would not help the company. They were set in their ways. The good old times

they enjoyed in the eighties and nineties were over. Times had changed. People had changed.

But their thinking had not.

Don't get me wrong. Indeed, shipping is a cyclical industry, with freight rates moving up and down through the years. But as we moved into the mid-2000s, the world, and most importantly, China, had opened up. The world had shifted much of its manufacturing to China. Ports in China were now exporting larger volumes. What was concerning was that we did not have a substantial share of those volumes being exported out of China.

Secondly, what was also different this time was that the world's information had also become more accessible. The internet changed how our customers found shipping services. Whilst we still used slower dial-up modems in 2005, the introduction of Google meant that any business, anywhere, could find a consolidator. Mac-Nels' previous advantage of in-person connections was slowly eroded with the discoverability of more shipping companies via Google. If we did not offer concessions, there would be little reason to use Mac-Nels.

An oft-cited example of companies that fail to change, and end up being decimated, is the Finnish phone company Nokia. Many stories have been written about how it failed to innovate and were made obsolete as a mobile phone manufacturer. The reason for its failure was that it grew complacent, and did not see the disruption of the technically superior Apple iPhone coming.

What's not said is that Nokia's decline might have been because of the organisational culture of fear. One article shared how top managers were extremely afraid of the external environment, and not meeting their targets. This fear of not meeting the expectations of investors and stakeholders resulted in them exerting more pressure on the middle managers to meet

targets. Top managers were seen as temperamental, reportedly shouting at people at the top of their lungs. It stopped the middle managers from bringing bad news that senior management did not want to hear, but which might help the company.

Similar to Nokia, some of my father's old guard might not have admitted it, but they were scared of the negative outlook facing our industry. The smaller revenues made for painful reading. Back then, inflation was not as high. Wages were lower. Everyone in the industry was generating decent revenues and profits against both the cost of living and operational costs. Competitors were not hurting other competitors in an outright price war. Whilst there had been glimpses of such price-cutting in the past, when competitors wanted to take bits and pieces of cargo volume off the other, there had been no all-out price war before.

But when selling rates went down for exports, and destination arrival charges went up, it became a contest to see who blinked first. Whoever took the most drastic actions to win would have the upper hand. My competitors began slashing prices. But my offices failed to follow suit aggressively. I, however, agreed with the approach of my competitors and decided to fight toe to toe with them.

I was all in.

The rapidly changing external environment exacerbated the internal culture of conservatism and fear. After all, why would you want to rock the boat when it was clear that the company wasn't doing well? If the boss didn't like you, he could fire you, and you would lose your means of survival.

Furthermore, my father had developed such an aura around him that some executives were scared of speaking directly to him because of the difficult questions he asked and how sharp he was

at spotting mistakes. So there was the fear driven by the external environment, and the internal culture of fear that prevented good ideas from being surfaced, heard and implemented.

Faced with this, some of the old guard became like deer, frozen in the headlights of an oncoming car. They suspected that a crash was coming, but they would insist on repeating the same actions. For example, when Mac-Nels didn't meet its sales targets, they would say that we had dropped our prices too much. They suggested that we hold our prices steady. Their approach was *less, no, stop*.

My approach was *more, faster, better*. Earn less profit per shipment. Say yes to doing more. Stop expanding other non-core services, and focus on consolidation, such as Freight All Kinds (FAK).

Shifting the company in this operating environment was like dragging a man out of quicksand. On the surface, Mac-Nels seemed to be doing a lot to keep things going, with salespeople grinding through phonebooks, walking through industrial estates, and trying to get more cargo. But deep down, the company was slowly becoming subsumed by the changing environment.

My strategy was to shift the company policy from playing on safe bets, to a broader investment approach. I wanted 50% of our business to become medium risk, medium reward; 30% being low risk, low reward, and the remaining 20% being high risk, high reward. For example, in some quotes that I wanted to give to potential customers, I was willing to lose money at the beginning in hopes that they would stick with us, sending us more cargo in future. But my father's old guard believed in profits and not shipping freight that did not make us any profit. Profit became the altar they worshipped on, even when it was clear that this was resulting in the slow but steady death of our company.

My second strategy was to focus on smaller businesses. I started searching for more small-and-medium businesses as customers. We shifted our customer mix to become a majority of small-and-medium-sized businesses, and a minority of selected, bigger-sized businesses. Weekly, I would look through the list of imports and exports, observing which ones sent us cargo. I would call on them personally, travelling to meet them in-person.

All this work was painful. One night, I stared at the mirror with my bloodshot eyes. Seeing the growing wrinkles on my forehead, and the shadows beneath my eyes, I thought,

*I'm working so hard. What exactly am I chasing?*

It's a good question. When I first started, it was simply to help my dad. For a long time, I stood in my father's shadow. There was no way I could achieve what he did.

When did I feel like I was stepping out of my father's shadow? I felt like I took the first steps three years into my tenure as CEO. The directors from the different offices finally acknowledged how I had turned things around. Volumes had increased, business was booming, and we now had a growing network of partners.

Fast forward from 2006 to 2015, and volumes and revenues had now gone up.

It felt as if I had finally stepped out of my father's shadow. It was not about outdoing him, but reworking some of the fundamental tenets of Mac-Nels. Like growing our profile, and not merely focusing on profits alone.

As a CEO who had turned around the business, I should have been proud. I was still only in my mid-twenties.

Yet it was hard to celebrate. I only saw the work ahead. There were many more things to adjust. I still made use of Singapore's transshipment hub to grow. But there were three factors that were making business more difficult. Firstly, more

fuel-efficient vessels were entering the market, reducing the cost per shipment. This would cut even further into our net margins. Secondly, as surrounding nations grew in wealth and also started trading more goods, cargo going directly to and originating from these countries increased. This reduced the need for Singapore as a transshipment hub. Cargo could now go directly to these countries. Lastly, more competitors were now offering direct shipments to these countries, reducing the need for them to book with us. To address these challenges, difficult decisions had to be made.

Moving our LCL shipments away from the Port Klang office felt like another step out of that looming shadow. Our office in Port Klang had been quite resistant to providing the LCL business. This was when we provided a shipping service with cargo that did not fill the entire container. Some in Port Klang thought that doing this service would lose them more money. They chose to focus on other parts of the logistics business, such as providing warehouse services, and custom clearances. But I wanted us to provide the LCL service because I believed that over time, building an extensive consolidation network would benefit all offices.

Faced with this resistance, what could I do? I ended up shipping our cargo to another agent. Some call this heartless.

Contrary to what people think, it hurt me too.

Who wouldn't want to use their own office to ship cargo? Our name is on their door. My father put his blood, sweat and tears into opening this office. I could not help but feel a bit guilty. But Mr. Hyde did not. He knew that you have to pick the battles you fight. With the Port Klang office, I saw that I couldn't change their mind about the LCL business. Faced with this resistance, if I could not change them, then I was the one who had to change.

Today, I no longer stand in my father's shadow.

My ambition has now outgrown mere filial piety. My gumption has grown. I want to become the best of the second-generation owners. There are the three largest NVOCCs in the world. MacNels might never be of that stature. But we can be the best of the rest. We can be the best of the other NVOCCs, punching above our weight. But what did “best” mean? Being the best did not necessarily mean competing with mere figures, and being the biggest in revenues. Sometimes, being the best meant keeping the company in the race, for as long as possible. Keeping any company surviving for fifty years was no mean feat. As long as we were still in the race, fighting, we may not yet be the best. But we were on our way of becoming the best of the rest.

To remind me of the constant fight, at the bottom of my computer screen, I taped a fable I saw from years ago:

*Every morning, a lion wakes up.  
It knows that it must outrun the slowest gazelle  
or starve to death.*

*Every morning, a gazelle also wakes up.  
It knows it must outrun the fastest lion  
or be killed.*

*It doesn't matter whether you are a lion  
or a gazelle.*

*When the sun comes up,  
you better be running.*

I want to be that lion.  
But I never knew what becoming the lion would cost.

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*Only Polished Jade is Useful.*

## Chapter 3

# Through Failure I Become

In 2010, I was thirty.

For the first time in a long time, I cried. I didn't expect to cry. I didn't expect to be so affected by this failure.

I had just closed the Dubai office. But I couldn't stop sobbing. There was a lot of me tied to the failure of this office. In 2008, this was the first overseas partnership *I* started, three years after I had formally become CEO. With this shutdown, it felt like a significant part had been knocked out of me. It wasn't just the office that failed.

I had failed.

Dubai was a growing transshipment port and I saw a chance for us to grow the Mac-Nels profile in the region. I found a partner, and started.

I had given it my very best shot for two years. My partner didn't. I thought I had chosen right. The person looked like he had the same passion and vision to make something work. But it turned out that he simply wanted the money, not the work that accompanied it. I had hired the wrong general manager.

After that failure in Dubai, when I first returned to our office in Singapore, I could not keep my head up. Whilst my father's old guard never said it to me, I could almost hear them jeer, "Told you so!" It had happened before. Whenever I proposed ideas of a new office abroad, they would tell me many reasons why it would not succeed.

The market isn't right. The correct people have not been found. There are already bigger players there, how can we win?

It almost felt like there was a scorecard at the front of the office. On this scorecard, my mistakes and failures were listed row by row. My successes were not recorded. They were expected. My failures were flaunted, whilst my successes were glossed over. Each failure delegitimised my position as CEO in front of others. It would make people second-guess whether my instructions would end up resulting in failure. It also shook the confidence I had in myself to take the next step forward.

Who would not be affected by a decision which cost hundreds of thousands of dollars?

I slowly learnt to reframe the black and white thinking of failure versus success. Rather than saying "I failed", I learnt to say that this decision "did not work". That taught me to see how my decisions were not always my fault, but that it did not work in that circumstance. This is business. There is no such thing as 100% certainty of success. I would rather take the chance and trust my instincts. I would rather feel remorse than regret. Like Dubai, sometimes, it would not work out initially. But as long as I

kept at it, it would. Eventually, Dubai was re-opened successfully and is today one of our best performing offices.

Why would I choose to take risks? As I quoted earlier:

*I don't want to be a dead fish, I don't want to do what others are doing.*

*All my life, I've always wanted to be first, different and unique.*

—Jean-Claude Biver,  
Owner of Biver Watches

I wanted to be a fighting fish. Not one that swayed with the current, but one that fought against the current, forging one's own path.

Many successful businessmen had great innovations that represented their greatest contributions and successes. But such early success could also become a curse, as these businesses could become wedded to these early successes, failing to reinvent themselves. Ideas that worked in the past had no guarantee of working in the future. For example, my father had been one of the early pioneers in bringing the idea of consolidation into Singapore. This had paid off successfully. But from what we could see of market forces, doing more of the same within Singapore might not yield the same degree of success. I had to keep trying new ideas, and even if it meant failing, I had to keep going.

Even though this first failure in Dubai was emotionally difficult, I tried not to let it get to me. As hard as it was, I had to get up. There was no time to wallow in sorrow, and throw a pity party for myself, hoping for people to sympathise with me. Years later, I tried to open another office. This time, in January 2018, I finally opened a South Korea office. We had been shipping

through an agent there since the early 2000s. Whenever I went to Korea, I would visit him. We would have nice food, spend time together drinking, and get to know each other better. We shared our joys and sorrows. He eventually became my friend without anyone knowing.

When he finally shared about his desire to start an office of his own, I spotted the perfect chance to work with him. Over the months, we spent even more time together. We were first friends and became business partners later.

Some say that business and friendship should not mix. I believe otherwise. It's nigh impossible to do business with someone you don't have a good relationship with or wouldn't trust with your life. It's because I've bared my soul to these business partners, sharing with them about my pains through life that we've been able to trust each other to deliver on the promises we make to each other.

Finding a business partner is like finding a trustworthy, loyal confidant. The thing that often leads to fights, is also the thing you talk about everyday—money. The numbers are there: how much money you earn, and how much money you've spent. The judgement comes when we make a value judgement on whether that money you spend is worth it, or if what you earn is good enough. That's what leads to fights.

But when business is built on an underlying relationship of trust, you do not second-guess your partner's intentions. You trust them. You assume the best of them, even when the worst comes to pass. After much discussion, we finally opened a Korean office in January 2018. It's been one of our most successful ventures.

But even then, it is hard to celebrate this success. No one patted me on the back to congratulate me. Being the stereotypical Asian father, my father did not come behind me, wrap his arms

around my shoulder and give it a gentle squeeze, saying “Well done.” Nor did the old guard clap their hands and cheer when we kept seeing cargo volumes grow in Korea.

This was the bare minimum. I was expected to succeed.

Or perhaps it was just me, having high expectations for myself. I believe each person is blessed with a different degree of talent. It’s not a binary yes or no, where you have the gift, or you don’t. Rather, the gifts we have are expressed in different degrees. It’s how we nurture these gifts that allows us to best express them for our impact in the world. Even though I do not practise the Roman Catholicism that I was baptised into as an infant, I remember the Parable of the Talents<sup>7</sup>, as told in the Bible.

In that parable, a master was going on a journey and called his servants. He entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to yet another, a single talent, each according to his ability. Then he went away.

The servant with five talents made five more. The servant with two, made another two. The servant who had received one talent went and dug into the ground and buried his master’s money. When the master came back, each servant gave their report. To the servant who had made five more with the five talents he had received, his master said to him,

*“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”*

The master said the same to the servant who had made two talents with the two he was given.

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<sup>7</sup> A talent is ancient unit of measure for money

But to the servant who buried his master's money,

*His master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed?*

*Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents.*

*For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance.*

*But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.*

— *Matthew 25:26-29*

*English Standard Version of the Bible*

In this story, the mistake is in thinking that the servant who received five talents received more than the others. Instead, it's recognising that each of us receives a different number of talents. It's not that starting with quantitatively more talents is better or beginning with less is worse. Rather, it's how we steward the talent we have that matters most. That's why I've tried to do as much as I can with my knack for business.

I don't want to squander what my father has given me. I want to be a good steward of it. I want to multiply it. I wanted to be the best of the second-generation NVOCC businesses that were still run by family.

One doesn't have to look far to see how some second-generation children have destroyed the businesses their parents

had built. But even when you steward these gifts to the best of your ability, there are times when you would still fail. Failure, success, failure, success. It is a cycle. You win some, and you lose some. To stay in business, you just have to make sure that you win more than you lose. Over the past twenty years as CEO, I've had my fair share of failures.

I opened an office in the United States in February 2018, after seeing how e-commerce had accelerated through the likes of Amazon. Countries like China were now shipping rapidly to the U.S. After speaking to many operators on the ground, and doing my due diligence, I observed how the four major players were doing business. I thought we had a reasonable chance of winning. I knew the world needed a good option in America. I went with the hope that the network we were cooperating with would give me an opportunity there.

I went in alone. We kept at it for three years, before I finally realised that it was going nowhere. The U.S. office came to an end in May 2021. In hindsight, my choice of partner was not the only reason for the failing of the U.S. office. I had needed China's exports and potential shareholders like the Aussies, Kiwis, British, and Irish (yes, I am biased!) to build upon. Ultimately, a more calibrated approach might have sufficed. But I did not wish to have regrets in my life, as I had experienced in my own love life. I went all in with all of my gumption.

Was I wrong to have built an office in the U.S.? Yes, it might not have had the success I expected. But I still believed in the adage, "If you build it, they will come." It was something I took away from the Academy Award-nominated movie, *Field of Dreams*. In that movie, Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella built a baseball pitch in the middle of Iowa, after hearing a voice telling him, "If you build it, they will come." He initially was resistant. But after

hearing it many times, he had faith and decided to go ahead to build the field. It eventually became a place where others came to enjoy baseball.

I had believed that if I built these different offices, more cargo and talented people would come our way. This might not always be the case, and there were some unexpected outcomes along the way. But it did not mean that I was about to give up that easily on our dreams of building.

In March 2019, I opened an office in France after realising the need to have a presence in continental Europe. I picked a local French partner who I gelled with quickly.

My colleagues had warned me about trusting this partner. But I went ahead.

This partnership ended faster than my U.S. office. It took just a year or so before I called it quits. This partner was not able to bring more clients to the company.

When I ended our partnership in November 2020 through an email, he still owed me money. The amount was big enough to raise eyebrows from my dad and other colleagues who knew about it. But I wrote off the amount and did not try to get it back.

I knew that they whispered about my poor decision behind my back. My father also spoke to me about this failed venture. But what else could I do? Stop and analyse how badly I had done? Beat myself up for my mistake?

If I stopped to think about how and why those offices failed, I would be stuck in analysis paralysis. It was far better to keep moving forward. I had grown past battle-weariness. I was battle-hardened. And no, I wasn't giving up the fight. Not this early. With business, I always tried to remain young at heart. Whatever happened, we would live to fight another day. We could always go again. We did not have to get too happy when we won, but we

also should never look back when we lose.

Easier said than done—but it definitely had to be done.

These two failures showed me the challenge of trusting my sixth sense and my gut instinct. No one is ever perfect. In doing business, we must ultimately be able to make good judgments of people's character. In these instances, I had trusted my gut instinct, and the decisions had not worked out in my favour. Did I have regrets? No. Why? Because to me, many intelligent people would read too much into the other party's IQ. I placed more weight on the emotional quotient (EQ) these partners demonstrated, and I was proven wrong.

Deep down, I knew that life could never be free from failure or suffering. I am reminded of the Japanese philosophy of Wabi Sabi, which is founded on the three major Buddhist principles of impermanence, suffering, and emptiness. Wabi Sabi teaches that nothing ever lasts, nothing is ever finished, and nothing is ever perfect.

This especially hit home for me during COVID-19, when all of us were in lockdown. Suddenly, I saw how all the businesses I had been building over the years suddenly ground to a halt. It stopped because of a virus we could not even see. This moment of truth led me to see how everything I built would eventually fade away. As Percy Shelley, celebrated 19th-century English writer and Romantic poet, wrote in the poem *Ozymandias*:

*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

The poem was a reminder that even the legacies of kings would fade away. What more a human like me? What would I be remembered for after I was gone?

That evening of 4 April 2020, when lockdown was announced in Singapore, I sat at home, stuck, for the first time in years. After fifteen years of racing across the globe, flying every fortnight, COVID-19 forced me to stop, and think about what I really wanted. Those reflections culminated in this book, to remember the ups and downs I had gone through, and hopefully support others in our industry.

But on the other hand, lockdown reminded me of all those years spent fighting to get out of my father's shadow, and to prove that I was worthy. Yet despite the successful new offices in the likes of Korea, Dubai and Australia, it did not feel like I had reached the top yet.

Success is a drug. It's strangely addictive. Success demands more success. Was there ever an end to this?

What did being at the top look like?

For me, succeeding meant that we were known globally, and that we were the preferred NVOCC partners for businesses. Trying to explain why we want to be known globally is difficult. It's trying to answer the question: "Why am I so driven to take Mac-Nels to become the best of the rest?"

When I was first asked this, it was hard for me to find the words to describe why I was still pushing so hard. Part of this is because of, as footballers say, "the love of the game". Many who don't run businesses struggle to understand that business can be like a game. I have heard it described as "productivity and problem-solving in hard mode".

The company my father left me was financially robust and

healthy. I did not have to push myself this hard. Doing business as usual and sustaining our profits would have won me respect, especially when our company was already amongst the biggest in Singapore. But as the Chinese saying goes, 逆水行舟, if a boat stays stagnant in a river, even the river's current will push it back. It's a reminder that we cannot afford to stay stagnant.

To constantly stay ahead, I started more offices abroad to grow our share of volumes. The first milestone was always the ability to survive from your business' revenues, without depending on external capital inflows. Being able to independently generate money, without the need for another organisation, brings an irreplaceable feeling of freedom. But what I enjoyed was the ability to consistently find new challenges that could not be replicated anywhere else.

When I look back at the course of my life, I realise I loved activities like football, singing, and acting because they blurred the line between work and play. On the surface, these pursuits are fun, but those who reach the top of these fields have spent years perfecting their craft.

In my work now in Mac-Nels, the stakes are high. Not getting a shipment in on time can result in losses on both ends. Take an example where a shipment was delayed at an Italian port because of a confusion around the documents. This shipment contained the items that an exhibitor was planning to show at a conference. Without those items, the exhibitor would have flown into Italy, but have nothing to show at his booth. Fortunately, our Singapore office worked through the weekend and the night, trying to get the port to approve the documents. The payment for this shipment was not the highest, but that shipment represented the customer's business proposition, and the hopes of his company. Some of these losses could never be measured in dollars, but they were

losses nonetheless.

As we grew the business across more geographies, more operational issues like this would occur. But I had to continue expanding, or risk plateauing, and having our business fade away. But growing the geographies where Mac-Nels operated required me to systematically push the business skills I possessed to a higher level.

All this work comes at a cost. Even my father thought that I was working too hard. But for me, this was the picture of a successful businessman: always flying, always fighting.

I even commissioned a picture book to showcase what a successful businessman looked like, filled with pictures from a photo shoot of me in different suits. We gave the thirty-page book to customers and partners.

I knew what this looked like to some people—a vanity photoshoot. It's true. I have an ego, and a fairly big one. I did not want to hide that. I did not have to hide it. In a traditional conservative, Confucian society, having an ego can be seen as a negative. But a healthy ego is important to maintain your own sense of self, and to keep getting up, even when the world is tossing more problems in your direction.

More importantly, I wanted potential partners to know the man behind the company. That's why in this photoshoot, I even had a cigarette in my mouth for some shots.

I wanted to be as real as possible, and not to put on a false image in front of others. Yes, I had an ego, but yes, I could also be trusted. It was only by showing them who I truly was, through images like that, or even a memoir like this, that they would trust that I was reliable enough to deliver their cargo.

One afternoon in 2019, my father and I were having one of our regular meetings. After finishing the business of the meeting,

he hinted that I should stop flying so often. Deep down, I knew that he was concerned. I was pushing myself too hard. He had personally experienced what the business did to his health, and he did not want that for me. That afternoon, my dad's question prompted a deeper level of self-questioning.

Physically, I was tired. But my heart and mind had pushed me on. For years, I had worked hard so that my father could step away from the business and rest. But now, his suggestion that I should take a break, hinted that he had seen what I had done, and was proud of it. But what was next for me?

Slowly, I knew I had finally come out of my father's shadow. He had accomplished big things by taking Mac-Nels from an office with four partners, into a reputable top-of-mind brand in Singapore.

From the time I was handed the reins in 2005, I had been trying to bring the business up to date with what was happening internationally, and amongst our peers. The global tides of commerce were shifting away from Singapore as a transshipment hub because of factors such as bigger vessels that resulted in direct services, higher transshipment costs, and faster turnaround times at ports.

The number of competitors had increased. There were many small and medium players offering direct routes that were faster and cheaper. Many were handling direct retail clients, and could generate better incomes through direct routes, rather than co-loading. Big ocean liners, with millions of dollars raised from public capital markets, were also competing in similar services to us, chipping away at our flagship services in consolidation.

It might have never looked like it from the outside, but if nothing had changed, Mac-Nels might no longer exist today.

I want to take no credit away from my father's old guard

because they had done a lot to bring Mac-Nels into the twenty-first century. But past success was no guarantee of future success. Bringing Mac-Nels into a position to grow in the twenty-first century was painful, but worth it.

I was now crafting my own legacy through two strategies—growing our network trust and customer trust. To grow our network, we were taking Mac-Nels into more geographies. I had now succeeded in taking Mac-Nels into Korea, Australia and Dubai. We were getting different agents on board so that we could have an increase in cargo volume. Through this network, we were getting more customers. It was a virtuous cycle.

But I was also slowly becoming the man I had saved my father from becoming. The hard-charging, heavy-drinking, frequent-flying business executive that nearly died from a stress-induced heart attack.

Yet how could I slow down, when there were so many challenges we still needed to solve? Would I be executing my responsibilities dutifully if I scooted off for a holiday?

That year, I read a poem that touched me deeply, and reminded me of the role our business played in the lives of our staff. This is *The Cloths of Heaven*, from 20th-century Irish poetry great William Butler Yeats:

*Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;*

*Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

Day after day, our staff bring their dreams into work. It might have been a dream like working in a multinational company, buying their first home with their savings, and eventually having a family of their own. They lay those dreams at our feet. As their employer, I held those dreams and had the power and authority to nurture them, or trample on them.

When I first started, the business was about my duty to my dad. When I began to expand our business regionally, it was about emerging from the shadow of my father's legacy. But now, it was also about the staff.

It was no longer just about me.

情  
深  
緣  
淺

*Emotions are Deep but Fate is Shallow.*

## Chapter 4

# Relationships and Regret

*If I could ever say it right  
And reach your hostage heart, despite  
The doubts you harbor, then, you might  
Come to believe in me*

*The life I lead is not the kind  
That gives a woman peace of mind  
I only hope someday, you'll find  
That you can believe in me*

— Dan Fogelberg, *Believe in Me*

“倦鸟”比喻我当时犹豫不决、感情居无定所、没有勇气信心去试追求最喜欢的女生、直到某一天累了、倦了、才发现人事已非、感慨万千。

那“余花”当然指的是女生了、总是孤芳自赏、对爱情坚定不移、不怕流言蜚语、只怕倦鸟认不得归家的路。

其实每一位渴望爱的人都眷恋最登对的情侣脸般的幸福、即使得经历倦鸟余花也毫无遗憾。

“倦鸟”从几年后醒了；女生已经属于他人。

“倦鸟”对她只有留下人生最大遗憾、后悔、可惜、内疚。

“倦鸟”就是本书作家。

*The “weari ed bird” metaphorically reflects my indecisiveness and emotional uncertainty at the time, lacking the courage and confidence. Showing cumbersome foolishness to pursue some of the girls who came into my life at different stages, for whom I had developed a strong feelings. One day, exhausted and weary, I realised things had changed, leaving me overwhelmed with emotion.*

*The “lone flower” of course refers to the girl, always self-admiring, unwavering in her love, unfazed by gossip, only afraid that the “weari ed bird” would lose its way home.*

*In fact, everyone who longs for love longs for the bliss of a perfectly matched couple, even if they have to experience the “weari ed bird and the lone flower” experience with no regrets.*

*The “wearied bird” awoke a few years later; but the girl already belonged to someone else. The “wearied bird” left her with only the greatest regrets of her life. Regret, pity, and guilt.*

*The “wearied bird” is the author of this book.*

*—Reflections after losing the  
love of my life at the time*

I woke up, alone, lonely, and feeling all my thirty-three years of age. My relationship with my girlfriend was in shambles. I could see her pulling away because I could not give her the time and attention she deserved. Many times after coming off a flight, I asked to see her. She turned me down, saying that she was spending time with other friends.

I felt jilted, but I could not help but feel that it was what I deserved. She was treating me the same way I treated her: cold, unavailable, always busy. I was the unavailable, busy boyfriend that she did not sign up for.

I felt broken. The cab ride home that night from the airport was unbearable. Instead of the happy feeling of homecoming, all I could feel was numbness. This relationship did not have the smoothest of starts. When I first got to know her, she was amidst the final stages of her divorce. She did not know if I would stick by her. But I did, because I saw in her a fragment of myself. Someone who was a fighter. Willing to go all out to get the happiness one deserved and who was willing to cut one’s losses when it wasn’t working out.

She had said over and over again that she hoped I would spend more time with her. She did not want us to be doing the

same things over and over again—going to restaurants, having a meal, and then going our own separate ways, back to our own homes. Part of this was because of how exhausted I was after all my overseas travels. Couldn't she see that I was already giving everything I had by initiating these dinner appointments with her? But she wanted more than just meals with me. She craved fun and excitement, but in the end, I chose longevity and consistency.

But deep down, I knew I couldn't give more. I wanted to give more to this relationship, but I had nothing left to give. Deep down, I had always known that the life I led could not give my partner peace of mind. But there was something in me that craved connection. That was why I wanted to try. But there we were, at the inevitable end.

I wasn't doing this to hurt her, but to protect my family's interests. Didn't she understand? Couldn't she understand? Why was she doing this to me now?

My career was, and is, my life. I couldn't give that up. At least, not now. Not after all I had done over the past seven years since becoming CEO. More than half of my time was spent travelling out of the country in service of Mac-Nels.

We had a hard year in 2015. We were experiencing severe competition from many fronts. There was weaker demand in the market. The small and medium players were now aggressively expanding into the LCL business, offering endless discounts and better rates.

There had been protracted capacity oversupply due to the new and more efficient ships that had been built over the years. These new ships could sail faster, and carry a greater load. There was no better reason for customers to use these new ships. Being an NVOCC meant that we were not limited to the ships we

could use. We could easily send containers on these new ships. But we had to position ourselves very carefully in such a market. Price ourselves too high for the added speed that these new ships offered, and we would price out our customers.

If we used the older ships, we could price ourselves lower. But customers might wonder what they were losing. Any salesperson would know that once the customer starts having doubts about your quality of service, you are close to losing the sale.

Part of me loved this game of fighting, scrapping, and building a great business, but part of me also recognised the cost it bore. Something had to give.

That morning, I sat on my bed, wishing that I could reverse time, that I hadn't chosen Mac-Nels at first. But now that I had chosen it, I needed to push through with that decision.

Building a business is like feeding a beast. It always demands more of your time, energy, and still it never gets enough. I wrestled with the decision and knew that I couldn't face her to tell her that I had chosen the beast, rather than the beauty.

I wrote an email to her to tell her that it would be better for us to go our separate ways. She had every right not to be with me. I pecked away at the keyboard, scrambling for the right words, searching for the appropriate song lyrics and poetry that would express what I felt, but still never feeling that it was enough. Eventually, when I plucked up enough courage to click "Send", I sat on my chair, and tore into myself. I knew how to expand my businesses into new territories, but I could not seem to make headway into the territory of the heart. This is the part my associates and colleagues don't see. The cost to one's personal relationships in the process of building a business can destroy the soul. It's like the story of Lord Voldemort in Harry Potter. To gain immortality, he tore his soul into seven pieces through the brutal

act of murder. He gained immortality, but in doing so, lost the essence of his soul.

Don't worry. I've not murdered anyone. But in my quest for the continued survival of Mac-Nels, it sometimes felt like I had to discard the deepest yearnings of my soul. My desires for someone to care for me, to pull me close when I had a hard day, to be my soul-mate, were not being fulfilled. I was my father's keeper, but who was mine?

In hindsight, I saw that I was self-sabotaging. My yearning for love kept moving me in ways that prevented me from finding said love. It was a vicious cycle. When I failed in love, I spent more time in business, which resulted in me having less time to devote to romance. Without any romantic relationship to occupy my time meaningfully, the only friends I had became my peers in business. And so I devoted even more time to my business. Rinse and repeat.

It did not take a lot for me to step back and see that this was a downward spiral, rapidly racing to the bottom of a loveless abyss. They say you bring your fears and traumas from the past into the present, thinking that they would repeat. They say history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes.

It was almost as if I was eight again, waiting in the dark. I could see my mother's face in the glow as I stepped through the door. I was the one she was waiting for. With the heavy commitments of building a business, all my other relationships had to wait. I did not have time for the people I loved. Just like my father.

It took me three years to get over my ex-girlfriend. Somehow, my approach to the personal didn't seem to match my approach to business. In business, I could be clear-headed. If something wasn't working out, cut, and move on.

But in the “business” of romantic relationships, the pain lasted. As much as I hated to admit it, I was sentimental, especially when it came to human relationships. I was no Mr. Hyde. I was the soft, sentimental Dr. Jekyll.

Come into the Mac-Nels office, and you would quickly see signs of that sentimentality. Hooked onto the walls are corkboards with Polaroids of my staff and me at karaoke or movie nights. Next to my table is a grille with handwritten cards that some of my staff wrote to me in 2022, after I gave a bigger bonus to thank them for their hard work through COVID-19. My financial controller once laughed when I showed her the ticket stub I kept from a concert when I was fourteen. That held memories, because it was the first concert I went to with my secondary school friends. It was the first time I felt I had a family that would make time for me, whatever the cost.

It took me a long time to see my deeper yearning for a family that I could call my own. Yes, I had my biological family who loved me. I loved them too. But that love was born out of duty, not desire. I didn’t want to feel like I needed to love out of obligation or tradition. I wanted to give of this love freely. But now with this breakup, there was no one left for me to love.

All I had left was my company.

It was only when I acknowledged that I could not have the life that my friends led, that I finally got over her. I was a citizen of the world, but I belonged nowhere. We might not usually think about this sense of belonging because we often take it for granted. It’s walking into your apartment block and saying hi to the neighbour you recognise. Or it’s regularly attending your weekly gym class or church group and making friends there.

You would not notice you lack this sense of belonging until it’s not there.

I was housed, but not home. I had an apartment I purchased for investment, but it wasn't home. When I first bought it, I thought it would be the place where I could finally relax during my free time. But living in that unit felt empty and lifeless. For the first few years, it became the place I hosted my closest friends. I would invite them and their families to that apartment. They would swim in the pool and sleep over at the apartment. Friends would bring their children, and I bonded closely with their children over those months. One night, as I stood leaning against the doorframe, watching my friend's kid sleep, I felt a strange sense of bliss.

So this was what family felt like. Playing with a child, ruffling their hair, cooking for them, and having them spit out your food if it was bad. The mix of joy and pain that made family such a bittersweet experience.

I would catch glimpses of this sense of home, but I could never seem to sustain it. Even after enjoying my friends' company at this unit for a few years, I eventually decided to rent out the whole unit. I moved to a rental nearer to the city centre.

If you come to my rented apartment, you might be shocked. I had a roof over my head, but I didn't have the elements that made the house a home.

You would see a TV sitting on the floor. Most of my clothes are hung on the clothesline, and the remainder is folded neatly on the couch, ready to be packed into the next suitcase. Since half of my time was spent living out of a suitcase, getting onto flights, and hashing out the next deal, there didn't seem to be much point to leaving many permanent structures at this house. There was little in my personal life to tie me down. I built for the future and neglected my present needs for love, belonging and relationship. Writing this, it feels dumb, stupid, and . . . amateurish.

Then out of nowhere, it happened. One night in a restaurant, I met someone else. I will call her Miss X. The way the light caught her hair, the way she smiled, the way her voice seemed to resonate within me. I knew immediately that she lit up what I believed was dead in my heart. I never thought Heaven would allow my heart to flutter again.

It was indescribable. The Chinese language has a phrase called 闪电, where it describes the moment two eyes meet, and a sudden spark of connection flashes between them.

That's what I felt. But somehow, I didn't go all the way to court her. When I first saw her, I was seated with my friends. Seeing her at the bar, despite feeling the stirring and tugging of my heartstrings, I dampened them, telling myself that there was no point. She was probably married or with an excellent boyfriend. Besides, I could never be the boyfriend she deserved. Later, when I finally plucked up the courage to speak to her, she responded positively. We exchanged numbers. For a few weeks, everything went smoothly. However, in a moment of hastiness, there was a misunderstanding. I lost her. There is still a stab of pain whenever I remember her. If only I could turn back time . . .

Now, I still blame myself for being a coward in affairs of the heart. I'm afraid of being hurt. You probably didn't expect that from a CEO of a multinational company. But I confess I am still fearful of getting hurt. A strong, assertive way in business did not seem to map that easily to one's personal relationships.

I could only be the tough Mr. Hyde in business. Deep inside, I was and still am the soft Dr. Jekyll.

Somehow, I hoped the impression of aggression from Mr. Hyde would hide the tenderness in Dr. Jekyll that could be exploited in the cutthroat world of business. Like Dr. Jekyll, I loved deeply too. But when people got closer to me, like my

ex-girlfriend, and began to see me outside of the strong business personality I portrayed, I got scared. I pushed them away before they had a chance to call me out for my flaws.

I know this tendency, and I admit it's a character flaw. No one is perfect, but we make the best of the little we have.

All relationships carry a certain degree of risk. Therapists call it "relational risk". There are no sure-wins, nor are there easy formulas to follow. No matter how hard you try, you can never guarantee the outcomes. Because relationships involve at least two parties. Like a dance, both sides need to sashay, sway, and understand each other's rhythms before knowing how to proceed. The demands it places on both parties is hard.

Like a well-experienced businessman, I calculated my odds, and chose not to take the risk with Miss X. It was a decision that did not pay off. In business, I don't want to regret. But now in love, I feel remorseful.

Deep down, we have a hole in our hearts that can only be filled with love. All of us hold this yearning. Some of us fulfil the yearning in different ways, whether it be negatively coping through addictive behaviours, or positively choosing to love someone else, despite the potential pain they can cause us.

Again, I am reminded of Dan Fogelberg's *Believe in Me*.

*Too many hearts have been broken  
Failing to trust what they feel  
But trust isn't something that's spoken  
And love's never wrong when it's real*

*If I could only do one thing  
Then, I would try to write and sing  
A song that ends your questioning  
And makes you believe in me  
And makes you believe in me  
Oh, you can believe in me*

I had failed to trust what I felt, and did not pursue my love with everything I had. Over time, the sincerity of my love was cast in doubt. She knew that I loved her, but she must have also guessed that the life I led would never give her peace of mind.

So as the years passed, I learnt to dull the edges of my desire for love, and subdue them to serve the Mac-Nels business. In doing so I gained the time, space, and energy to focus on growing the business.

But what did I lose? I lost a part of me that made me human, which made me whole. Years ago, I made a choice that I didn't want to have a lover. That I didn't have the capacity nor the capability to love. That choice shaped the missed opportunities in love. But time cannot be reversed.

Choices can always be dissected looking backwards, but they can only be lived forwards.

I can only forge onwards.

自強不息

*Never Rest on Your Laurels.*

## Chapter 5

# I Do it My Way

*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*

*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*

—Frank Sinatra, *My Way*

Here's a question:

How hard is it to fill up an Excel sheet?

Three years into my time as CEO, I sent out an email asking my team to fill up an Excel spreadsheet with the routes and the current rates they were charging before sending it back to me. It was an exercise to help me to understand the profitability of certain routes, and whether there was a need to adjust them.

What I got back irked me. Some staff replied in the body of the email. Some offices returned incomplete spreadsheets, even though I had given them examples of how to complete it. Others didn't even bother to reply.

It was clear that the twenty-eight-year-old me still struggled to be respected in the company, though my title read "CEO". I knew that I did not command the same level of respect that my father did. Some of them had seen me as a twelve-year-old, running around in my father's office.

In their minds, I was still that child, running about the office, not knowing better, making a fuss. Can't they see that I was doing the hard work? I even created the excel sheet template for them. All they needed was to fill in the cells.

Who were the children now?

Now it was hard for them to accept that I was "ordering" them around. This resistance was something I had to work with.

I confess. I was hot-headed back then. My emails were curt and abrasive. All I wanted to do was to get them to do the work the way I wanted it.

This was not to say I was unreasonable. I just wanted things to be done right and done well. During COVID-19, there were many problems across the supply chain. Some ports started facing issues with getting wooden pallets. These ports started loading cartons without "palletising" them. They would load tens and

hundreds of cartons without placing them on pallets, and when we received them, we would go through the painstaking process of unloading them by hand. We could not use the forklifts because they were too delicate and the forklift might pierce the cardboard boxes. Many cartons were deemed not to be seaworthy.

This was unacceptable.

I insisted that the agents palletised the cartons, or we would need to charge them an added cost per pallet. One agent was not happy and promptly messaged my father. My father replied to the agent, “Why do you message me? Don’t you know I’ve retired?” He forwarded that message to me. What could I do? There were standards to be met, regardless of the agent’s personal relationship with my father.

My father trusted me with the business, and I had to be the one taking responsibility for the decisions I made. Would that agent have dared to send containers like these to my father? I think not.

In making these decisions, I had to navigate the cultural nuances of different nationalities, and also my father’s personal relationship with these agents. I made compromises when I could, but when it was too disruptive, I put my foot down and insisted that it had to be done my way.

Most people thought I was brash and impulsive from the emails I sent. Those could be blunt and crude at times. But this was a veneer that masked the fact that I cared. A lot. I had a brand promise that I wanted our staff and offices to uphold. I wanted to reliably ship cargo, even when there were times that Mac-Nels would lose money on those routes.

Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, has very exacting standards too. When he received emails from angry customers, he would

forward the email to the executive in charge of the area, with a simple question mark attached. I'm not saying that because Big Tech bosses do it, I could do it too. But it shows that we were alike in what we want to see in the business, and how fast we want to see it. Cut to the point, and don't let people second guess you.

I was passionate about this business, and I could not hide it. Sometimes that passion came out through those emails. Whilst I acknowledge that there are times where one should be nice, being nice can sometimes be at the expense of revealing your hand to your competitors, allowing them to take advantage of you.

As I matured as a businessman, I learnt that I could not please everyone. Here, balance was the key. I had to find solutions that all parties could accept. Solutions where I came out on top. I had to do things my own way.

## **Decisions, decisions, difficult decisions**

Sometimes, I needed to make decisions that my father wouldn't. In earlier chapters I mentioned our office in Port Klang. They were a Mac-Nels subsidiary, but had branched out into different businesses over the years. Services like renting out warehouse space and logistics became part of their business. They chose not to focus on the LCL service. Whilst it was something that they still provided, it was no longer their main focus.

Whenever I told the managers there to focus more on the LCL business, they would deflect. There were always excuses. They were busy. There was no available capacity. Sometimes, they would not even reply. And when they did, they provided an unreasonable rate.

Message received.

This frustrated me. The general manager of the Port Klang office was closer to my father. In the past, my father was okay with them branching out to provide other services. As long as the business was not losing money, he was generally fine with anything they did.

But I was not. I wanted Port Klang to focus on the LCL service. I wanted to get things done my way, but “his people” simply would not follow. They would share the feedback to my father, who would then speak about these issues with me.

It was tricky to navigate. They bypassed my authority as the named CEO of the business, and went to the previous CEO of the business to plead their case. I had to respect my father’s opinion, but also retain my own judgement on the issue. Associates were also coming with complaints about how Port Klang and some of the other offices in Malaysia were not being easy to work with. What worried me was that these complaints were not confined to only one office, but included almost all of the offices in Malaysia.

For five years, I tried to be understanding. I accepted the hemming and hawing, and the distractions that came from doing other adjacent logistics businesses in Port Klang.

Finally in 2024, I stopped sending shipments through them and found another agent.

Make no mistake, this was no rash, emotional act. A lot of thought went into my final decision. I could understand where the Port Klang office was coming from. They needed to protect their own rice bowl with the growing competition in the port. Expanding the suite of what they provided was a logical next step. From a pure-play NVOCC, they now evolved into an integrated logistics solution provider. There was nothing wrong with that if

they were a standalone office. But they were part of a wider Mac-Nels network, and there was the bigger picture to consider.

I needed to provide our partners an assurance that we would be getting more cargo going through Port Klang to consolidate into more boxes. Our office in Port Klang was not aggressively searching for more customers. I needed someone who could do that for me. Yet even when I thought of changing my agent in Port Klang in early 2023, I was nervous.

Discussing this with my senior managers brought little clarity. Most dissuaded me, warning me about how this would look in the industry. Only one of them told me to do what was best for the company, and lent her support to implementing this difficult decision.

Doing this would seem like a direct affront to my father's old guard. It would be akin to telling them, "You're not good enough and that's why we have to search for someone else." It wasn't to say that they were bad, but that our journeys were different. We had diverged. Forcing a convergence would cause more pain to both. I had to find someone else who could help us along our journey of growing the NVOCC business. Cut. Move on.

I know. You don't have to tell me what this looks like.

*Brutal.*

The Port Klang office had "Mac-Nels" in its name, but we were cutting them off. They had chosen not to follow my vision for Mac-Nels. I had to do what I did to realign our business proposition in Port Klang, so that potential customers would be confident to consolidate more cargo with us. Cut, and move on.

Sometimes, even after I make the decision to cut, I still don't get what I want. Sometimes it is not enough to make one difficult decision. I must get my hands even dirtier, fight even harder, to get what I want. It's exhausting. Sometimes I want to give up. But I

am inspired by golfer Anthony Kim's story. He battled back from injury and addiction to win a tournament fourteen years after he first left the sport. After his win, he had a message for all those who struggle:

*Don't f\*\*\*\*\* quit.*

I won't. No matter how hard it gets. You might be impressed with how international Mac-Nels is, with offices spread across multiple gateway cities in Asia and the Middle East. But the truth is that having these far-flung offices with various shareholders means I have very little control over what each office chooses to do.

## **The struggles of the second generation**

What's more difficult is that no one takes me seriously, despite setting up offices like Dubai successfully, some still do not acknowledge my efforts. In their minds, I was lucky—I was lucky to have a father who set up Mac-Nels, lucky to have been given such a position. To them there was nothing I did to earn my position, beyond being born my father's son.

Nothing I did could ever earn their respect. Naysayers would look at the success of the Dubai office I set up and say, "With the platform Nick was given by his father, how could he possibly fail?" When I failed, they would gloat. They might look at the closing of the U.S. office and say, "See? Even despite the platform his father gave him, he still failed."

I've run Mac-Nels for twenty years. Mac-Nels still stands, in proud defiance to all the naysayers who expected me to run it into the ground. Mac-Nels still remains as a well-respected name in the industry. Every statistic out there dooms second-generation businesses to failure. Some statistics found that only about 30%

of family businesses make it to the second generation. Around 12-15% of family businesses survive into the third generation. Just 3-5% of family businesses continue to operate into the fourth generation and beyond.

But of course even this is not enough. When they see me, they see my father. His long shadow still plagues me, even though I am the captain now. My competitors use my status as a second-generation owner to discredit me. When they speak to potential customers, and customers tell them that they are considering Mac-Nels, my competitors will say that there's nothing great about Mac-Nels. "He's just using his father's success," they shoot back at customers that talk about how well Mac-Nels has done.

Of course this hurts. You're damned if you do, damned if you don't. It's the curse of the second-generation. Your success never belongs to you.

But deep down, despite the painful criticisms from my industry peers, I know I will keep fighting. I will fight to be the best of the second-generation owners. It's not to clear my name. It's to fight for the Mac-Nels family. My Mac-Nels family, painstakingly built over these twenty years.

I know I can do it. During COVID-19, the shipping industry was hit hard. But despite the lockdowns and the slowdown in global demand, I navigated the storm. I won't take all the credit for it. But it was not an unfamiliar experience. After all, in 2008, with the Global Financial Crisis, I had already steered the company through a storm once. COVID-19 was different, but after doing business for twenty years, you learn that doing business can be like surfing waves in an ocean. Sometimes the big waves come and your heart trembles. You're not sure if you can ever crest it, let alone survive it.

But at the end of the day, to crest these storms, I've learnt to trust. To trust myself, and to trust my team.

Trust my chosen family.

情同手足

*United as Hands and Feet*

## Chapter 6

# My Family

On 1 March 1848, former British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston said in a speech in the House of Commons:

*We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.*

An often used paraphrase is “There are no permanent friends, only permanent interests”. Similarly in my business, it’s hard to tell who is a real friend. Initially, they might seem to be great friends, but it’s only later that I discover that they have cosied up to me because they would like to do business with me. I don’t have many people I can trust to believe in me and stick with me

through thick and thin, and who were willing to do the hard work of starting and running an office, even when it did not seem initially profitable. After all, who would want to do the grunt work of running an office where there was no promise of riches?

My father faced similar problems, trying to get people he could trust to run his offices or start new offices in different countries. My father preferred to open new affiliate offices for loyal and trusted staff to run. He would give them an ownership stake in these affiliate offices. Because they had an ownership stake in these new offices, these staff members would see a similar alignment in economic interests. They were no longer salaried workers. They were business partners. If they did not work hard, they would earn less money. It was a sure-fire way to motivate people to work hard.

He also saw this as a way for them to grow in their skills and to retain them. As the Chinese saying goes, “一山不容二虎”. It’s loosely translated as “one mountain cannot have two tigers”. As staff grew in stature and maturity, they saw their way up being blocked by the CEO of the business. They knew they would never displace the CEO, but they were still eager to grow. Rather than risk losing them to a competitor’s business, my father preferred to open an affiliate office that they could run under his tutelage. They would learn how to build a business from the ground up. It was a win-win situation.

This meant that the business could sometimes be spread across different cultures and contexts, each with its own particular way of doing things. The Mac-Nels business could therefore be unwieldy, becoming a ship that was hard to shift to new courses. This also put me off opening new affiliate offices for staff to run. I preferred to have decision-making control over the entire business. I would rather do business with a local partner who

understood the market than send someone who was doing well at one of our offices to conquer a new market.

I also did not have the staff to spare. I needed everyone I trusted at the Singapore office, working for me, rather than an adjacent business. As of today, I've not sent any of my current staff from one office to set up a new office somewhere else.

Seeing how difficult my father's old guard could sometimes be to work with, I chose to work with people I knew. That's why in my early years, I approached my secondary school friends and asked them to work with me. I promised them that this would reap rewards, even though it initially seemed like little was happening. One of the first sales representatives that I brought in was my secondary school friend, Andy. I convinced Andy that it would be worth his while if he came to work with me.

Within a year of joining Mac-Nels, Andy's life underwent big transitions. He got married, and was expecting his first child. Andy needed to spend more time supporting his new family. He was also worried about not having enough time to grow sales. As a sales representative, he had to find leads, set up meetings, cold-call potential clients, and then guide the client to a closed deal. All this work was left on his shoulders.

One night, he asked me out for a drink. He confided that he didn't feel that the sales manager my father hired was willing to hire more employees to generate more leads.

I looked at him as steadily as I could, and said, "Trust me." In many ways, I was also reassuring myself that things would work out.

Deep down, I did not know what I could do to help. That night, I struggled. I knew that re-positioning a business was going to be difficult. But to drag my friends down the same route seemed cruel.

I valued family. The worst thing to do was to drag my friend's family down a wretched path of financial insecurity. I did all I could to knock on every door I knew, passing Andy all the leads I had. Sometimes it almost seemed like it was not us against the world, but us against the Mac-Nels of old. Early on, I sat with him when he first started meeting potential clients. I wanted him to know that I was a kindred spirit, there to help, even if all I could do was to show my face.

Clients took it seriously. After all, it's not often that you see the CEO sitting in an opening discovery meeting with a client. Slowly, the tides turned, and he started winning more business for us.

Today, he has a happy family, a car, and a nice home. I've fulfilled my promise to him.

Over the years, I've brought other close friends into the business. Chin Hoo was the second of the trio that joined me. He was struggling with his career when I first spoke to him. But I knew that he was someone that could be trusted, if someone was willing to believe in him. Over the years I have seen him deliver, over and over again, even when no one thought he would.

The last of the trio to join me was Chu Hong. In 2008, Chin Hoo approached him and asked if he would work with us. Chu Hong readily agreed and started doing sales for us. But he eventually wanted to learn other aspects of the shipping business, beyond sales, and decided to move to a larger Japanese company in 2012.

In 2018, I had to allow our previous General Manager to have an early retirement. I needed a trustworthy friend who could step up, so that I could create my own management team. Once again, I asked Chin Hoo to get Chu Hong on board. Chu Hong was persuaded by the thought of a more all-encompassing role

with Mac-Nels, covering more of the exports and operations. He had grown tired of the sales role he was doing with the Japanese company. He did take some risk in giving up the brand name of a big Japanese company to work with me. But he heard how difficult it was for me to run the business. He could see how his skills could help us. He took the plunge, and since then, he has become a trusted aide. I eventually promoted him to the role of General Manager, to show the confidence I had in him to run our business.

Some might argue that I am being unfair by stuffing the office with my friends from secondary school. But let us make no mistake. If they could not prove their worth, they would not be answering to me. They would be answering to our associates and partners, who would inevitably complain to my father, if they were not doing their jobs well. The only reason they have continued in their roles is because they have kept their promise. Not to me, but to themselves—to do their best, whatever it takes.

## **The promise to myself**

But what about the promise to myself?

When I was thirty-five, I set myself the goal to be the best amongst the second-generation NVOCC bosses.

Being the best meant that I was the businessman that others looked up to in the industry. I want people coming up to me, telling me they respect what I have built and how I built it. Over the past decade, my vision has been about uniting our different offices, to work towards the same goal: growing our cargo volumes. Not every office is aligned to this goal. Some think that there are other ways of making money, and have diversified into other businesses.

But they do not see what I've seen from my travels. Big players in the FCL industry, and even the shipping lines, have started to come for the LCL business. But because they do not have the network of agents we have built over the years, it becomes hard for them to profitably move the small, irregular shipments that have urgent deadlines. By consistently consolidating these small shipments from different agents, and reliably serving those routes, we can carve out a profitable space for ourselves. But this would need a bigger cultural shift.

This culture shift was moving the team to regain its appetite for winning again. It was about becoming more of a lean, mean, competitive team that wanted to win more customers. If you've worked before in a high-performing team, you would know what this feels like. It's like a well-gelled football team. Each team member knows what they are doing. They are aggressively taking the ball forward, and they want to win. They are not sitting back waiting for competitors to come. They are taking the initiative.

During my first few years, it was hard to motivate the older Mac-Nels staff to be more aggressive in how we were growing our number of customers. After all, we were well-known in the industry and most customers already knew of our brand in the market. The prevailing thought was: if they wanted to move cargo, they would come to us. We did not need to go to them.

This attitude was borne of the roaring eighties, where Singapore was a major transshipment hub. As a consolidator then, Mac-Nels was at the right place at the right time. Yes, we worked hard to get as much cargo as possible. But we were also helped by an insatiable demand for LCL services. Now, two factors had severely cut out Singapore as a transshipment hub. Firstly, East Asia became a more mature hub for offshoring, and more direct shipping services emerged. Rather than stopping over in

Singapore, manufacturing hubs like Thailand had grown enough volume to ship directly to their end customers. With this trend to offshore manufacturing, between 2014 and 2015, there was a decline of 8.7% in transshipment traffic. This was a trend that was set to grow with the increasing geopolitical instability, pushing more manufacturers to explore “friendshoring”. Secondly, ports in Johor, Malaysia, were now effectively competing and gaining a share of the business. From 2018 to 2022, container traffic in Singapore hardly budged. With not as much cargo coming through Singapore, we had to go where the cargo was going.

That was why I focused on new offices in South Korea, Australia, Dubai, and Vietnam’s central and northern regions. These were ports where there were existing volumes that we could tap into. I saw these new offices, together with the ones that my father had set up, as one big Mac-Nels family. United we stand, divided we fall. Even when we found the cargo, some were laid back in how we matched the prices of competitors. They adopted the attitude of “if you want to do business with us, don’t complain about the price”. This hubris borne of past success was dangerous. There were times when I felt like Xiang Yu<sup>8</sup> in the battle of Gaixia.

After a drawn out battle, Xiang Yu was surrounded by Liu Bang’s troops. On the other side lay the Wu River. Rather than returning to his homeland, Xiang Yu chose to fight one last stand on the Wu River. In that last stand, he killed hundreds of soldiers, and suffered numerous wounds, before he eventually decided to end his own life by cutting his own throat.

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<sup>8</sup> *A prominent military leader and warlord during the late Qin Dynasty and early Han Dynasty in ancient China. Upon his death, his rival Liu Bang would establish the Han Dynasty.*

Like Xiang Yu facing battles on all fronts, on one hand, there were the increasingly competitive market conditions. On the other hand, there were the mindsets of my own staff that I had to fight. I was embattled on all sides. There were times when I felt hopelessly alone. My only option was to stay and fight, whilst looking for allies who would fight with me.

Pushing the company to accept tighter profit margins or even losses on some shipments was a major mindset shift. It was a cruel recognition that the past era of fat profits borne from opaque shipping prices was over. Customers could now directly go to the websites of shipping lines, get an instant quote, and then ask, “Why are you charging us so much more? What exactly am I paying for?” If I didn’t push us to be sharper, Mac-Nels would be dead. No doubt about it.

This desire to win required faster communication and getting quotes through to our customers. As much as possible, I rewarded the staff when they showed ownership and quick thinking. I highlighted the times this happened and praised it for happening.

As an example, a relatively new colleague showed the ownership to think on her feet when a competitor undercut us in quoting a rate. She immediately matched and lowered our quote, while making sure we still made a profit on the deal. I brought this up during our next meeting, so that people could learn from her example. Such quick thinking and flexibility is what I value in my employees.

Needless to say, it did not take her long to earn a promotion. A few years later, she was promoted.

I do not need flashy performances or extraordinarily smart insights from my staff. I just need them to put their heart into the work. To be honest and diligent. To do their best. To show a good

attitude. Was that so much to ask for? I knew that I had my own failings as a boss. A year ago, one staff member told me how hurt she was by one of my actions. I immediately called her and tried to clarify things, but she did not pick it up. I later messaged her with an apology, sharing how I had not appreciated her enough for the work she did. I really appreciate those that stick by me, because I know how rare that is.

The consolidation business is not an easy business. There are hundreds of elements that could go wrong. A shipment could get delayed at the customs due to some vague regulatory criteria that was not met. In recent times, wars and conflicts along shipping routes have resulted in cargoes being diverted through other sea lanes. Our staff have to be on call very often to deal with these, as they deal in different time zones. There is simply little time for rest.

To do this, we had to be aligned internally. Even though I could not control what other offices were doing, at least I had control over the Singapore office.

One element was ensuring that our working environment fostered a culture of openness so that staff could quickly discuss issues with each other. In 2018, when we moved offices from Tanjong Pagar to Cecil Street, I had the chance to implement a new floor plan. I insisted that the office be based on an open floor plan where everyone could see each other. Previously, departments were split across the four floors of the Tanjong Pagar shophouse, but now everyone was on the same floor, and could mingle and freely interact with one another.

It even came down to designing the interiors of the office. Inspired by Japanese design philosophy, I told our contractors to install wood-panelled doors rather than the glass doors that normally greeted most people at the front of other offices. At a

touch of a button, the wood panels would slide open, similar to what you would find in a Japanese home.

Some might ask why I go to so much trouble. The big idea is that when you have an environment that fosters a sense of openness, people begin to trust each other more.

Go to the pantry, and you would see the bricks in the wall, rather than it being plastered over. I insisted that our interior designer do this to bring across a more modern look to our office. Sure, we were in shipping, not exactly the sexiest industry. But I could make it a place where staff were proud to work.

I wanted to create a sense of pride and identity working for Mac-Nels. More than just that, I wanted to add more colour to our company, in an industry that could seem staid and boring. I got tailors to customise blazers for the staff, and designed collar pins with the Mac-Nels logo that they could pin onto their blazers. Today, I know that not many of my staff wear these blazers because of how hot Singapore is (even with air-conditioning), but it was part of my many attempts to raise the attractiveness of working within a seemingly old-fashioned industry.

Getting talent into this industry is a problem. When young people graduate and think about where to work, their first thought usually isn't to work in shipping. The compensation is not as high compared to industries like technology or finance. Shipping sounds boring, dull, and unsexy with the voluminous papers floating on your desk.

I also focused on improving our branding and profile as a company. If you go into our meeting room, the walls have parts that are like the corrugated metal of a container box. I wanted this to be a persistent reminder to our colleagues and clients about

the containers that lay at the heart of our business. Sure, it seemed like a humble chunk of metal. But it was fulfilling the daily needs of people, from what they wore to what they ate.

Another thing I did to cement our reputation was giving yearly tokens of appreciation to our customers. This was to show our gratitude for their business, and also to remind them to continue doing business with us. It started with stationery boxes shaped like a container. In 2024, it was a calendar filled with drawings of Disney characters from children living in an orphanage. Some say this is “greenwashing”, and that I’m jumping on the trend of ESG<sup>9</sup>. I really don’t think so. For me, donating to these kids is the simplest thing I can do for them. None of them deserved the hardship they find themselves in. The least we could do is to help in our own small ways.

You might be reading this for tactics to implement in your own company. But every company is different, and what worked for us may not work for you. What’s more important is to realise that in business, there are no quick fixes.

Yes, I’m not the most modern CEO with a suite of management techniques from business school. During COVID-19, unlike other companies, we did not have daily meetings over Zoom or Teams. We mostly did phone calls over WhatsApp as it was much more convenient. It was also something that older colleagues were more used to—they might not feel as comfortable appearing on video. Today, we don’t have fancy Slack channels. Nor do we really have work-from-home days. But what I’ve tried to create is that feeling of family, kinship, and camaraderie.

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<sup>9</sup> *Environmental, Social, and Governance—a framework used to evaluate how a business manages its impact on the world beyond conventional financial metrics.*

Despite having offices around the world, Mac-Nels is still a family-owned business run by the family and privately funded.

Young people, even if they study shipping, may choose to go into a multinational company, rather than one that is run by family. The chief concern is often that family-run companies don't seem to pay as well as MNCs. Employees sometimes have the misconception that family-run businesses are not as modern, and that there is not as much incentive for the management to outperform since they are all part of the same family.

But the beauty of working at a place like Mac-Nels is that it appeals to those who want to see a direct impact of the work they do. Yes, you could go to a global company with its headquarters in California. But you would quickly realise that your ideas take forever to implement. In smaller companies like us, the ideas you have are either rejected or implemented. Ideas (and you) are not kept in limbo for a long time.

Others complain that in such family businesses, there is the tendency for “toxic cultures” to arise. Mac-Nels is not immune to this. There are many reasons for toxic cultures. The cliché is when you “pay peanuts”, you “get monkeys”. Some staff might bring their discontentment from being paid poorly to the workplace. But if you look at places like charities, people are paid much less than the industry rates. They still exhibit high levels of motivation.

In the past at Mac-Nels, there have been colleagues that have been guilty of complaining about the procedures in the work, doing the bare minimum, treating customers in a roughshod manner, and managers have had to take some of these cases to me. If managers choose to let someone go, they just need to explain to me why. I usually do not veto their decision, unless there is an error in their judgement. Ultimately, I know that asking poor performers to leave will make it more conducive for fresh blood entering the industry.

Still, it is sad to see young talent not joining this industry, because shipping is an industry that has endured. It has existed for centuries. It still exists because, despite the advancements in airfreight, moving large volumes is still only viable using ships. For centuries, exchange of ideas and trade happened through ships, and the people aboard these ships. These were the adventurers who dared to sail aboard a ship to regions unknown, with little certainty that they would return alive.

These were the explorers that founded countries throughout the world, including Singapore. We owe much of our advancement as a human race to the adventurers that came aboard these ships.

Now, in the modern world, there may be few new places to explore. But in our own little way as a cargo consolidator, we were facilitating the advancement of dreams all over the world. Send a car from Shenzhen to Jakarta, and you delight a family with a new moving home. At the other end, you ensured that the factory worker who had built that car could continue supporting his family.

We were not just facilitating dreams. We were enabling livelihoods and survival.

Here in Singapore, survival is not something many think about, especially with our advanced development. Travelling abroad often brought me up close with people who were struggling and needed that chance for a breakthrough. This is why I choose to work with the smaller man over the bigger one. Because I always, always believe that the person who has something to prove will do infinitely better than someone who has “made it”. Back to the wall, desperate, and needing to fight to survive, that person is going to win most of the time.

That’s why I hate it when people have the misconception that things are easy for me because I have taken over my father’s

business. It's not. It's agony, every day. Till today, after twenty years of being CEO, I still have to prove that I am good enough to take the business forward. I am not someone who has made it. I am someone with something to prove.

Mind you. I was not thinking about this "higher purpose" all the time, but it sometimes came to mind when I wondered about how I could attract more of the next generation into the business. What else could I do? I could only try my best to retain those who were already with us, and hope they attracted others into the business.

I tried small gestures, like spending more quality time with my staff. Sometimes, I would invite staff over to my home and cook a meal for them. I would try an Italian recipe I had learnt online, trying to replicate the food I had in Italy. And no, my cooking was not that bad. It was decent—at least the staff said they wanted to try it again. Starting in 2024, I would take these managers to a restaurant and treat them to lunch monthly. I would share with them what I learnt from my trips abroad. But before you think it was always about boring work, I also took time to hear about what happened in their lives.

This was different from what my father did. In the past, my father's entry into the office would be treated with respect; there was a sense of gravitas around him. Staff were afraid to speak to him, because he was an exacting and detail-oriented boss. Anything they said would be mercilessly scrutinised. I have tried my best to lift this intimidating pall from the office, encouraging my staff to talk to me and one another.

But one thing I've kept from my father's time is our insistence on serving our customers well. Mac-Nels is built on two elements of trust: customer trust, and network trust.

Customer trust means your customers trust you will get their shipments to their destinations on time. That is the bare minimum.

Beyond that, I would make an effort to have regular interactions and touchpoints with our customers. Every year, I would curate a gift for them. This takes money, time, and effort. But it's worth it because I see our customers as more than cash cows to generate money. I see them as people, doing business to make the world better. They are relationships that we cherish.

Network trust means that your network of agents trust you, the NVOCC, to be able to send them a regular volume of cargo that will fill up the containers. That's why during the COVID-19 period, even though we had to subsidise some of the cargoes that were coming from China into Singapore, we still did it. Doing this assured our agents that we would keep our word to receive and send cargo to them, even when we were not operating our containers at full loads.

This eventually paid off when there was an uptick in shipping volumes, and agents stuck with us. Some of these decisions cannot be easily justified. After all, why would I willingly lose money on shipping less-than-full containers?

In this industry, I was probably one of the few NVOCCs that were willing to lose in the short run to win in the long term. For us, being a family-owned company gives us the flexibility to make decisions for the longer-term. We stand with agents when they stand by us, through storms. We make sure it's worth their while.

It's only together that we can go further. Trite, but true.

In the early months of 2024, we were discussing how a competitor was undercharging clients, and causing us to lose valuable business from other agents. My import manager came

to my table at the front of the office to discuss her plan on how to tackle this particular competitor.

Sitting beside her, I took my wooden pencil and scribbled some notes on the rates she was presenting to me. She asked in Mandarin,

*How are you going to make money if you charge that?*

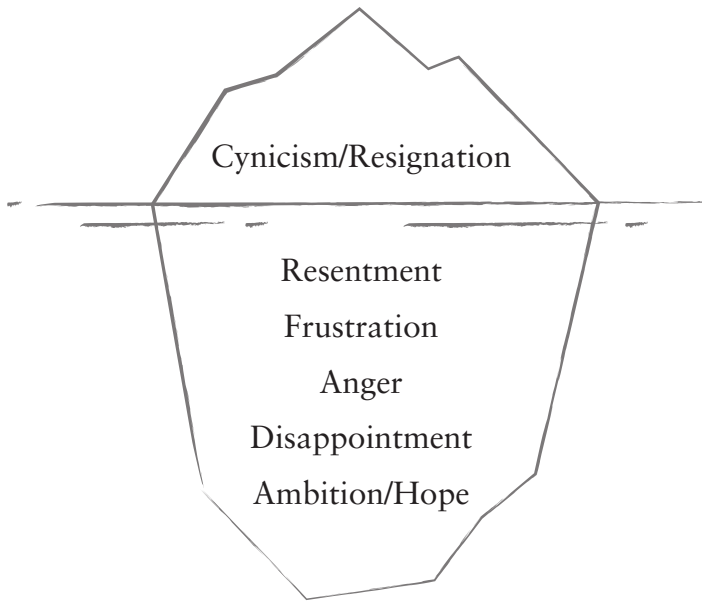
I groaned and rested my head on the table. She was right. A price war would be a bloody battle with little to gain.

But later that evening, it felt like there had been a silver lining, even though we lost that deal. This import manager, who had been with me for twenty years, was still pushing back. Even after twenty years of working with us! Over the years, I had seen how some senior executives had stopped fighting, content to draw their pay check, and go home. Rather than being hopeful that they could improve things, they had become cynical of the changes that were being made.

If we tracked the emotional stacks, we would see that most people start off with ambition and hope. You come into a job, wanting to make the most of it. But over the years, as the disappointments from on-job challenges fester, they graduate into frustration, resentment, and eventually cynicism. Cynicism is the emotion that comes when you believe that nothing you do will ever improve things. You may have felt that at some point in your lives.

You are doing something your manager has asked you to do, but deep down, you know that it's a bad idea. You are pleasing the manager, but you're not pleasing yourself.

This manager was different. She still believed that by putting the business case to me, she could persuade me to change my mind and improve profits. Hopefully, this was because the openness in our office had created a strong sense of psychological safety.



*Emotional Stacks*

I never knew this concept of psychological safety until a writer mentioned it to me. Apparently, Google was running an experiment on what played a role in the best-performing teams. Google regularly ran experiments on management techniques, with one particularly (bad) experiment in 2002 when they tried eliminating all their managers in an attempt to try a completely flat hierarchy.

In 2012, they started Project Aristotle, trying to determine what was the secret sauce in the best teams. They found that the most important factor was psychological safety. In a 2018 article explaining their findings, Natasha Tamiru, a Google employee, defined psychological safety as being about risk-taking

and being comfortable with vulnerability. People who don't feel psychologically safe worry that taking risks will mean they're seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive. Psychological safety means feeling confident about admitting mistakes, asking questions, or "offering new ideas". My staff still dared to share ideas, despite the risk of me rejecting those ideas.

As things stand, it has been a radical shift from the days when my father managed the company. Things tended to be more serious then, with little fun, jokes or games. But when I go to the office today, the mood in the company has lifted. I see colleagues poking fun at each other. During our 2024 conference in Bangkok, when I saw some of our younger colleagues laughing whilst intensely playing beer pong with the other associates, I grinned to myself. They were finally seeing the fun in the fight.

When you're fighting in the trenches for a long time, it can be difficult to raise your head and remember that there has been significant progress in the fight.

I recalled the days when I started adding little smiley emojis at the end of my emails, to present a friendlier tone. Initially, employees found it hard to understand. Why would a CEO add smileys to his emails and messages? Or how would you react when your CEO suddenly gives you a CD filled with songs he had recorded? Would you awkwardly say thank you, and bye?

These were efforts to show up as a person with a life outside of the shipping business, and to encourage our staff to pursue their dreams, however outlandish they seemed. I didn't want my staff to just see me as this far-off boss. I wanted them to see me as someone who could be goofy at times, who would hum a tune in the office, but who ultimately still kept fighting for the business.

The Japanese have a saying, “七転び八起き” (nanakorobi yaoki). It translates to “fall seven, rise eight”. It is a beautiful

expression of never giving up, no matter how many times one fails. Who else can be such an example of perseverance to their staff, other than their boss?

I'm not sure if it has paid off. But it delights me to see staff doing their best for the business, for each other, even though they might not be the best-paid in the industry, and things may not always turn out well. The aforementioned import manager was still suggesting ideas, even though years of working left her tired and jaded. She was still hopeful, even though she had seen how our company had changed over the twenty-three years she had been there. Some employees had been with us from the early 2000s, when they saw me leading them through the ups and downs of the business. It had been a massive turnaround operation. They had every reason to layer their hope with cynicism. They had good reason to think, *What's the point of working so hard? I will just work enough and go home.*

But they didn't.

Small initiatives, like taking Polaroids at our karaoke sessions and organising movie nights, were finally panning out. It was improving the camaraderie and sense of family in the office. People wanted to fight together to improve the business. This was touching.

In many ways, Mac-Nels is the family I never had. I failed as a romantic. I do not have children. Yet seeing these staff grow from strength to strength, reminds me daily of what we are fighting for.

Yes, the business matters.

But ultimately, it's the relationships that endure.

Five years ago, when our Financial Controller was due to get her Long Service Award, I asked her what she wanted. Most opted for cash. But she asked for a watch. She told me it was because the cash would eventually be used and would disappear,

but the watch would endure as a physical memento of her time at Mac-Nels.

I was struck by her genuine sincerity about remembering her time in the company. She cared enough about her time in Mac-Nels that she would rather have a physical memory than cash that would disappear once spent. I was glad that Mac-Nels meant something more to her than a cash machine, where she would put in her time and it would spit out the money.

Work was no longer something transactional, but something worth keeping hold of.

The following day, I brought her to a watch shop to choose what she wanted. I knew it was awkward for her, because no staff would point at something and tell a boss:

*Can I have that?*

It would be too rude.

I immediately asked what colour and model she liked. She was shocked when I bought it. Part of the shock was around the price. Being a (good) Financial Controller, she had to make sure that these Long Service Award gifts were within the budget.

But I insisted. I knew she liked it.

For those who had been with me for a long time, I kept tabs on what they liked. What they hated. What they enjoyed eating, what movies they enjoyed, what songs they loved.

Even when I care for someone, I do not share that openly with them. Revealing that tenderness within me might lead staff to drop their standards, thinking that I would be kind, regardless of their performance. I had to keep on the mask of toughness so that people knew that I was not to be trifled with.

Seeing the surprise on her face, I know our relationship has deepened, because this care becomes an unsaid understanding.

My staff know that no matter what happens, I care for them,  
and will have their back.

And I know that whatever happens, they will have mine.

先做人后做事

先立德后立业

*Be a Good Man First, Then Be a Good Businessman.*

## Chapter 7

# Life is Like a Consolidated Box

*Who told you to send cargo to me?*

I hastily replied to Nishad, the sales manager who was managing Waterlink's office in Dubai.

He had just emailed me about an issue that arose in one of the shipments going through Singapore. One of my staff hadn't given him a satisfactory answer, and he copied me in the email thread.

Scared, he quickly asked his senior director for help. His senior director's response?

*Don't worry. That's Nick for you.*

He couldn't believe what he heard.

Who was this Nick at the other end of the email? How could he be this curt over email? But later when Nishad went home that night, he laughed for a long time and sighed.

He finally understood. It wasn't that I just wanted to be nasty for the sake of it. Rather, I was direct, and asked him a genuine question. No one had forced him to send cargo to us here in Singapore. It was his decision.

Why was he complaining now, when he was the one who had chosen us under no coercion? That night, he decided that I was the kind of person he wanted to work with—someone who was direct, straightforward, and strong. I also admired him for his qualities.

Unfortunately, he wasn't the first man we picked to lead the Dubai office. That went to the wrong man.

In 2010, when I finally closed that first office in Dubai, I realised one of my directors had picked the wrong person. I felt badly disappointed by the first general manager. He had mismanaged the business. I cut him, closed the business, and vowed that I would do better the next time.

It sounds easy for me to move on, but it was not. The Middle East was growing in cargo volume with the rising wealth of the nations there. For months, I agonised over whether I should close the office. I could lose the cargo volumes there, or harm the Mac-Nels reputation by keeping it open.

Volume versus reputation. Both were important to me. I went with my gut. Volume was something that we could build up in a few years. But if Mac-Nels damaged its reputation, rebuilding that would take decades. In particular, we could not afford to lose our reputation for good customer service. In bigger shipping lines, you might get automated replies from chatbots that eventually direct you to an agent. But with us, we had people using their personal WhatsApp to reply to customers, trying their best to solve the customer's problems. Our staff would sometimes work on weekends, replying emails and messages, just to push through cargo that was stuck in ports.

Whilst Mac-Nels had grown larger over the years, there was an active effort to ensure that we were not lax with our customer service standards. We could forgive many things, but being lackadaisical in our approach with customers was the breaking point that could get a staff member terminated. One employee recently replied to a customer's call with a poor tone. She was quickly taken aside and told in no uncertain terms that if she carried on that way, she would be let go.

Yes, it does come down to things as small as one's tone of voice. That's why when I eventually chose a new partner to manage the Dubai office, I told my partners in Dubai that I wanted someone who was:

1. Young
2. Aggressive and hungry for success
3. From Kerala

Whilst these sounded like random traits, I knew that these were the characteristics of people who tended to be the most successful in the shipping business in the Indian and Middle Eastern markets. The young Indians from Kerala that entered the shipping business tended to be extremely sharp. They had an intuitive sense for the trade, and were extremely driven to do well.

When I hired Nishad, I told my partners to hire him under Waterlink, our franchisee in Pakistan, rather than directly. I wanted to see how he would cope under pressure. I also wanted to observe how he could grow a business without piggybacking onto the success of a more well-known brand name like Mac-Nels. He worked for one year in the consolidation department with only two people (him and his assistant).

After a year, he proved his mettle. In 2014, when we eventually hired him to restart the Dubai office, he even told us

that he would work with us for a lower pay. He wanted to prove his worth rather than just taking the salary.

Since then, we have done phenomenally well in our Dubai office. We were now looking forward to making greater strides in the Middle East. We were now going to open three offices in Saudi Arabia in December 2024, and Nishad was tasked to ensure its success.

## **Being the master of ceremonies**

We were going to announce the opening of these three new Saudi Arabian offices during the 2024 annual Mac-Nels conference in Bangkok. But the announcement would only happen on the second day of the three-day affair. Day one was reserved for the annual Mac-Nels Board of Directors meeting.

On the first day of our conference, I walked into the room at 8:45 a.m. to do a last check. Everything seemed in order. The table was nicely laid out in a three-sided rectangle, with our associates from the eight different countries seated next to each other. The slides were working, and the sound for the new branding video was clear.

I sensed the excitement in the room. Across the different offices, people were greeting each other, tapping each other's shoulders, and reacquainting themselves.

The annual Mac-Nels conference was an event everyone looked forward to. It was not just because we paid for all the meals. Rather, it was a good chance for everyone to celebrate the successes of the past year. But from time to time, we would also commiserate with each other over the state of the industry.

The consolidation business had been difficult in 2024. The price of shipping containers had been falling, and it was a bloodbath amongst our competitors.

The consol business had been becoming tougher every year. There were too many players in the field, including some who think that undercutting the market is a good idea. It isn't.

My partner in Korea, C.K. Choi, joked that in the past, being able to speak English was all that was needed to make money. These days, I find myself speaking all sorts of languages, and still struggling to keep ahead of the field.

It was a mad race to the bottom, with every competitor trying to offer lower prices. Some were even losing money on every shipment. But the moment they raised their prices, customers hopped elsewhere.

Businesses who shipped with us were getting more price-sensitive amidst the global softening of demand. Rising inflation meant that end-customers were holding off purchases, and this resulted in less cargo being bought and being shipped. I wanted ideas on how our other offices were doing.

I took a deep breath and kicked off the Board of Directors meeting. We started with the Singapore office, our headquarters. Each office shared the volume of cargo that they had shipped, what had gone well, what hadn't, as well as their strategy moving forward.

Sitting there, I was still amazed. I had seen these presentations many times over the years, since formally taking over in 2005. Here we were, from twelve different nations, sharing how we were competing in the market. We were from completely different cultures and contexts, brought together by a common desire to support each other.

Some offices had expanded to offer a bigger suite of logistics services, including warehousing, trucking and air freight. Others were trying to improve demand by generating more awareness of the Mac-Nels brand through social media. For example, in the

Philippines, they asked influencers to share about Mac-Nels, and created content such as “A day in the office of Mac-Nels”.

We might have been small compared to the biggest players in the market, so we needed to band together in this difficult time. Many people often ask me what drives me in this business. Part of it was the pure competitive streak within me that *had* to win. What most people don’t know is that I am always interested in the success of the smaller guys. The ones who might end up being eaten by the bigger players in the market.

Nishad, the man I picked to head the Dubai office, was one example. Choosing Nishad wasn’t the easiest decision. There were more straightforward hires in the market who had more experience. At the time he started the Dubai office, he was in his early thirties. I wasn’t sure if he had it in him to go the distance, but I knew that his backs-to-the-wall, burn-the-bridges-behind-you approach was something I resonated with. In him, I saw a reflection of myself.

If you looked into his eyes, you would see the fire of a man with something to prove. A furious drive that came from being rejected one too many times for being different. But he still got up each morning to fight and keep fighting.

This is the man on the street whom I will back.

Some people wonder why our NVOCC business has lasted fifty years, when many other bigger ones have been driven bankrupt by the ever-changing tides of this ruthless industry. It’s because I prefer to trust the underdog. In the jobs we hire for, there are usually two types of CVs. There is the one who is the classic achiever. They are the ones you would see with awards, and many co-curricular activities during their time at school. They would have scored well in their exams. Those are the ones that I’m not very sure about.

On the other hand, there are those who come with rough edges. Who don't seem as polished. Who don't come from the top universities. But they have a different way of thinking. At interviews, you see them come alive when you challenge them with a difficult question. They give you pragmatic answers on what they will do, rather than fancy management theories.

Some say I pick those who are willing to accept less because I am not keen on matching what the market pays. But for me, a higher salary is dangerously addictive. When someone asks for more, it can sometimes reveal a sense of entitlement. They may think "I deserve this because I've scored well in school", which is no indicator of work performance. Also, as the adage goes, past performance does not guarantee future results.

I believe those who accept a lesser salary at the start are willing to prove themselves. You see the fight in their eyes. These are the ones who take things in their stride and make things work, without complaining.

There's another reason why I tend to look for those who may not have historically achieved well in school. Life in school is easy. It's structured, and if you know how to play the game, you would quickly know how to do well. In school, practising the same problem sets many times would quickly yield you a good result.

Life at work is different. It's complex and wicked. I recently read about "wicked problems". It refers to problems that are nigh impossible to solve. Requirements and circumstances are always changing, and there is no single solution to a problem. Take consolidating cargo in a container and getting them on time to customers. There are no shortcuts or hacks to solve these problems. Here's a recent problem our executive solved.

A customer asked us to ship materials from Vietnam to show at a conference in Italy. It was Friday. The conference started on

Monday. The container had gotten to Italy, but the port would not clear the items. The agent at the Italian port was not replying to your call or emails. You have no way of making the shipment faster. You call the port, but no one answers. Let's pause. What would you do?

One needs to think on their feet. One needs to be extremely adept at tearing apart old mental models and creating new ones. That executive got another agent in Italy to go down to the port and paid him extra just to get him down to the port on a Saturday. This solution came from discarding the old mental model of needing to make a buck off every customer and replacing it with one that would deliver the ultimate outcome—getting the customer what they needed, on time.

## **Small things make big things**

Over the years, in our industry, I've come to see that it comes down to this in the consolidation business:

*Open the route, fill it first, move it fast.*

To get anywhere in this business, you need volume. Volume is hard to find with eighty to ninety percent of cargo volume from China being dominated by a few big players. It's why we have had to open more routes, even when we may not be entirely sure about the volumes that would go through those routes. But opening a new route that's not usually offered means that we can offer something different to our customers.

To grow the volume of cargo flowing through our business, we've focused on building a diversified customer base that consists of freight forwarders that consolidate their cargo with us, and the smaller direct customers that require shipping. Some discard direct customers, because the cargo can sometimes be tiny

compared to the usual volumes of other forwarders. They argue that earning \$100 from ten smaller customers takes more effort than earning \$1000 from a single big customer. But for me, I encouraged my staff to extend the same quality of service to the small and big customers.

The future of small business is not something to be trifled with. In many parts of the world, there is an increasing pushback against big, global brands that may be fast and efficient, but may lack the soul and care that small businesses show towards their customers. One only needs to look at the rise of the smaller, direct shipping services to see what can happen when larger NVOCCs like us take our eye off customer service. When you have a thousand customers, you may not treat one customer as well as the other. But when you only have fifty customers, you have to take more care, because losing one customer could mean losing a major source of revenue.

That's why there are times when Mac-Nels will extend credit terms to smaller businesses needing our services. It's not because of any well-thought-out decision matrix. Nor does it make great business sense. Nor does it always increase our profits. But we know that behind these businesses are mouths to feed, and if they cannot get their cargo to their destination ports, they can't sell their goods. This results in a vicious cycle.

But getting more cargo also means that I've had to sometimes be the pushy salesman that's constantly knocking on doors. The first time I did this was as a twenty-five-year-old, newly minted CEO. I met all our agents in China, and told them to continue "supporting" us. You will hear this often in meetings.

*We ask for your support. Can you continue supporting us?*

In 2005, China was the global hub for manufacturing. It was the world's factory. Plenty of cargo was coming out of its ports.

One of my regrets is that I didn't manage to set up an office there. I can give you many reasons why the office never came to pass.

I could point out that the agents there were smart, and they didn't want to have joint venture partners because they knew they could do the whole thing themselves. Why share the pie, when you could have the whole pie yourself? I could point out that without a local partner whom local authorities would trust, China would be hard to conquer. I could point out many other reasons, but it is what it is. Setting up an office in China is not on the cards for now.

Who knows? Maybe in the future it will happen.

No one should come into this business thinking that this side of the logistics business is a sexy business, as shown in the documentaries about Amazon's warehouses, with their robotic arms picking and dropping packages onto a revolving line. It's not like this in the NVOCC business. It's filled with paperwork, with software that's slow and buggy. It requires manually keying in information into different systems and portals.

What keeps me going?

I've never thought of it before writing this book.

Now that I reflect on my twenty years heading Mac-Nels, I've come to see that it is the relationships that keep me in it. It is these relationships, built bit by bit, day by day, that keep you in the fight.

I've lost a lot over the years.

Romantic partners and other potential ones have come and gone, and even when close family members fall ill, I've not had the time to be by their side. Business partners that I once called friends are no more.

The life I lead may look sexy on the outside, but it is very discomfoting on the inside. Sure, you may look at the trips to

exotic ports as a perk of this business. But do it long enough, spend enough time in airport lounges, hotels, taxis, meeting strangers, hoping they give you some business, desperately praying you would make back the \$900 you've spent on the three day trip to Dubai, and you begin to feel really, really, tired.

Some days you just want to stop, call in sick, not come in for work. Some days, you lie in bed, and sleep never comes. Your mind keeps whirling, thinking about how to meet payroll, get more cargo, and become the best. When I do manage to sleep, it comes in dribs and drabs. Nightmares plague me many nights.

Sometimes you want to give up.

But if you're not there, who's there?

That's why we need days like our annual conference to remind us what we do, and more importantly, who we do this for. When I saw everyone enjoying themselves on the final night of the conference, singing, dancing, running around the hall with their hands on each other's shoulders, I smiled.

For a long time in my life, since starting at the Mac-Nels warehouse as a sixteen-year-old, it was about my duty to my father. But as I slowly got the hang of things, I saw that in this business, building a box was always about first building the relationship. Before you build the box, you build the relationship.

You're asking businesses to ship thousands of dollars of goods with you, with you on the other side of the world. Why should they choose you?

They won't trust the fancy website you've put up for them. Heck, they won't even care that you've been in business for fifty years. If they are looking for quick wins, they will simply go with the cheapest option.

But I've slowly come to see that competing on price is short-term. Make no mistake, our key focus has been to be price-

competitive. That's why we've persisted with the strategy of losing on the twenty-footer, to eventually win on the forty-footer. We are happy to make little to no money on smaller volumes, but we hope that eventually translates into a bigger win on the forty-footers. But to win in the longer-term, we also need to continue nurturing the relationships we have with customers.

Forming a quality relationship is long-term. Productive relationships only come when you really care about them, more than you care about the money.

For example, you, as the customer, could always chop and change the company consolidating your goods depending on the price the forwarder offers. But for the sake of a few thousand dollars, you could lose contact with the staff that understands your cargo, puts through the paperwork faster, resulting in a fuss-free process. Every time we change something, there is bound to be friction.

Similarly, think of how you find a handyman to fix your lights. You could Google "cheapest handyman" to get a better price. But you would have no idea about the reliability of the person. You could ask your previous handyman, who may be more expensive, but you've established a working relationship with him over the years. You know his working style. Are the dollars saved worth the time and effort taken to invest in another working relationship?

Some say yes, others say no. There's no right or wrong answer. It's just a different approach. But my bet is that in a digital world, the differentiator no longer becomes what is seen, like the prices listed on your website. It becomes what is unseen and intangible, like the relationships. One needs to focus on nurturing

relationships with partners and clients in a way that surprises and delights them.

At the end of the day, people who last in this business stay because they see this as more than a business. They value it for the relationships they have formed. That night at the Mac-Nels conference, I saw how touched Cem, our Turkish partner, was when we sang him a birthday song in front of the 150 others.

Yes, we remembered his birthday.

What was more important was that we still treasure him, even though six weeks earlier, his manager had stopped shipping some cargo to us because of a miscommunication. It was easy to be angry and to throw a tantrum.

Yes, the cargo matters.

The person behind the cargo matters more.

That's why these relationships have persisted over the years. Because whilst technology allows you to video-call anyone from any corner of the world, I prefer to strengthen that personal touch through an in-person meeting. That's why I've still insisted on making personal calls to ports like Aarhus, Barcelona, so that I can genuinely converse with these agents. There's just something special in these in-person meetings that one cannot replace with a Zoom call. You might gently pat the person's arm at a joke he's shared. You might observe how he breaks eye contact when he talks about the volume he has, indicating something suspicious. You're able to form a richer impression based on that three-dimensional interaction.

Christian Thomsen, the current Business Development Manager at Holship, our agent in Denmark, once shared this story of how he first knew of Mac-Nels, even though he was a fourteen hour flight away:

*When I was nineteen years old, I already heard of Mac-Nels. They were famous in the industry, and even in Denmark, I had studied them.*

*I was so excited when I answered the call and heard Mr. Er from Mac-Nels speaking. He wanted to speak to my boss.*

*I hurriedly transferred the call. But at that time, we had a pre-existing agent and Mac-Nels didn't manage to be our agent.*

*A few years later, our agent in Singapore was not performing well. Immediately, I recommended the switch to Mac-Nels.*

*I'm happy to say that we've continued on that partnership since then.*

Yes, my father didn't manage to travel there when he was still leading Mac-Nels. But after Christian gave us that piece of business, I made it a point to personally call on him and to thank him for his support.

He has been an invitee to our conference ever since.

Some ask how we preserve the legacy of Mac-Nels, as we look forward to our fiftieth year.

It's through the small things, which eventually make the big things. Small things like spending time together, eating together, and being in the same space as them.

The partners that my father worked with became some of my best friends. For example, I will always remember my first trip with Boonchai, from our Thai office. We had arranged to go to Barcelona. I booked the hotel.

When we checked into the hotel, the hotel room was tiny. There was a single bed, a tiny aisle to walk through. That was it.

Boonchai looked at me and laughed.

*Am I supposed to sleep with you on the same bed?*

We immediately went out into the streets and looked for another hotel.

We still had to get rid of the one on our hands. We trawled the streets, trying to look for an unsuspecting tourist to sell the bed to. I was taking my salesmanship skills to the next level.

We finally found one. Talking quickly to him, I sold him on the bed with the beautiful scenery. I told him there were chirping birds and a great view of the city's landscape. But when we took him to the room, he shook his head, and walked out.

I looked at Boonchai, shook my head, and walked out too.

We never made back our money on that bed. But we made an unforgettable memory on that trip.

The people in these associate offices have become close friends. We have travelled together, slept on the same bed together (no hanky panky though, please get your head out of the gutter), and spent an incredible amount of time together.

Some of them are more than friends. They have become family. Their family has also become my family. Some of them are preparing to step down. When I look at them today, they are bringing their children into their business.

In February 2024, I went on my first trip with one of their sons, teaching him everything I knew. I didn't want him to be discouraged like how I first was when I came into this business. I saw myself in him.

He was strong and fit, with his shirt unbuttoned at the top to show some of his well-chiselled chest from the countless workouts he had done. He would confidently share his opinions

with people twice his age. I wasn't focused on his chest though. I was more focused on how things had come full circle. Twenty years ago, I was like him too. Stubborn like a donkey, strong like an ox, and feeling ever ready to conquer the world.

I knew how unattractive this industry could be to young people who could work in the sexier worlds of tech and media. Talent is precious in this industry. When you find one, you have to make sure you do everything you can to keep it.

It's small things like this—gently showing someone new the ropes, being patient when someone is learning, pushing them when you know they are capable of much more, pulling them close when they have had a hard time. These matter to me.

I've had my critics. Some of my closest colleagues have said I've changed. They say I've changed to bring more of my personality into the business. They point out the singing at conferences, making my music video, and even writing a memoir, as signs that perhaps my ego is getting bigger. They also say that I now seem to care less about their emotions in our day-to-day business conversations.

Frankly, I don't know if I've changed. And maybe I never will know. I just know that sustaining Mac-Nels is tough as hell. I lose my cool. I get angry.

I become human.

Sometimes people forget that I was a man who came into the business with nothing more than a polytechnic diploma. There was no degree, no business school MBA, and definitely no fancy strategies to take the business forward.

Just heart. Lots of it.

These are not excuses for why I make mistakes. But I hope people can understand that CEOs are human too. They lose their temper and make errors of judgement. But because of their position,

these mistakes affect more people. It doesn't mean they go to bed guilt free and in peace. My mistakes torment me.

I'm not perfect, and I'm unapologetic for that.

I'm misunderstood, and this book is an attempt to set the record straight.

This business I'm in, of consolidating cargo for a box, is a good metaphor for life, and the relationships we have in it.

You never know what you're going to get as cargo. You never know when you're going to get enough. You just have to keep putting together the small things, and hope it forms something big enough to ship.

But sometimes, regardless of whether the box is full or not, you just ship it.

Like my business relationships, I never know how they will pan out. I give my all to my partners, and even their children. I give my all to stewarding my father's precious business.

You gain some, and you lose many others. You have your critics, and people who hate you. You have competitors who are coming at your throat everyday.

Twenty years after becoming the CEO, there are days when I still feel like that kid at the playground. Sitting by the side, quietly observing everyone around, and wondering which face I should put on to get me the result I want.

It's the same in Mac-Nels. In different situations, I observe the context and what is happening. When I've formed a view on what I need, I put on the best face for the occasion. When Mac-Nels needs to get more cargo, I put on a sharp-looking suit to impress potential agents. When staff don't meet my standards, I scold them. When I feel that our agents need to relax after a long conference, I sing a good song. These inevitably lead to misunderstandings. People find it difficult to truly understand who I am, because I seem to

be so many things all at once. It's hard to place me. Just when people think they've gotten to truly know me, I reveal another side, surprising them. I'm hard to catch.

That's part of the allure.

I never want to be caught. I would rather people be chasing my coattails, rather than having to chase the coattails of others.

That night at the Mac-Nels conference, singing in front of the delegates, I knew there were some people in the crowd who still thought,

*Who does this guy think he is?*

*Who is he to have a video of him on the face of his corporate website?*

*Who is he to put me through his singing?*

But nevertheless I still sang, belting out the tune with all my heart. I serenaded select members of the audience, holding their gaze as I sang into their hearts.

There will always be doubters. Haters. Jealous people. There will also be failures, mistakes, and decisions I make that cost people their livelihoods.

There will be people I have hurt along the way.

At the start of this book, you might have asked,

*Who is Nick?*

I don't think that's your real question. Your real question is,

*Who do you think you are?*

I am Nick. Love me or hate me, take me or leave me, this is who I am.

This is what I stand for. This is what I've built.

You might see ego, pride, arrogance, and yes, I confess I have all of those things.

At the end of the day, I also hope you can look beneath that. Because you might just find for yourself a willingness to accept and embrace yourself as you are. And most importantly, regardless of the outcomes and what people think about you, I hope you find the courage to give and bring all of yourself—the good, the bad, and the ugly, in all that you do.

For I believe that our lives are not judged by how much we have left when we die, but how much we gave.

*We are not judged by how much we have left,  
but how much we gave.*

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W H O D O Y O U  
T H I N K  
Y O U A R E ?

*I get it.*

**Not many would willingly listen to a CEO in his mid-twenties.**

They think I'm a 富二代 (wealthy second-generation).

They think I'm someone who's just been lucky to have been born into a family where his father worked hard to build a business.

Even though they don't say this, I can see it. When I share an idea, or tell them to do something, I can see them thinking,

*who do you think you are?*

---

Elevated to CEO of his father's international shipping business in his mid-twenties, it is easy to think that Nick has lived a charmed life.

In this book, Nick invites you into his life, to experience what it takes to be a successful successor of a family business.

This is the story of a man desperate to get out from under the shadow of his father. The story of a man determined not to be thought of as a 富二代, but be known as the best second-generation leader in his industry.

This is the story of dedication, family and sacrifice.