

# Think Positively and Be Prepared!

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"Don't you agree that Hong Kong is facing difficult times?" It is typical of Stephen Lau that he begins his interview with a question of his own. He is something of an expert on these difficulties; after all he is the Chairman of Tax Services, Ernst & Young, one of the most respected of international accounting firms. He is also the Honorary Vice-President of HKUSU Business Association, and we are fortunate to have these important links with him. We met to find out more about the man and his views.

Although Mr Lau's career today is a success story, things have not always been easy. He had a harsh upbringing and has faced many ups and downs in his life. But he has not fallen into the well of despair. Educated in Hong Kong and UK, his experiences have taught him humility: he believes that adversity can happen anywhere, at anytime, to anyone. The only solution is to think positively and be prepared.

We began our discussion with China's miraculous economic performance and entry to the WTO. Many Hong Kongers have been dazzled by what seems like an endless flow of business opportunities; but Mr Lau has concerns. His international perspective and long experience show him that Hong Kong people may be less competitive than the Mainlanders, particularly in terms of language ability, cultural and political knowledge, and work experience. Mr Lau cautioned that, while economic turmoil is damaging to society, the lack of relevant skills is also detrimental to an individual's future.

So what can be done in such competitive employment circumstances? As a professional and prestigious employer, what advice can Mr Lau give the readers of Dialogue?

"Firstly, do well academically. Academic excellence is always the first thing an employer looks for."

"Secondly, be sure to excel in extra-curricular activities." Extra-curricular participation can happen in many forms, but Stephen Lau is particularly enthusiastic about sport. Perhaps this is because he is a brilliant table tennis player himself: he won several national championships in his student days in the UK. "Sports can help develop team spirit and determination: essential work attitudes that employers look for."

"Thirdly, develop top-rate interpersonal skills. To get things done effectively, we have to co-operate and collaborate with other people. This is not always easy, but practice makes it easier; you have to start somewhere." Join various activities and you will have more opportunities to interact with different kinds of people. At an international university like HKU, you should also take advantage of the international students: they have different



backgrounds, a different way of looking at things. Be comfortable in their presence, and practise your language skills!

"Fourthly, train up your leadership skills." Merely being a member of a club or association doesn't say anything about your level of ability. But holding an office or position of responsibility can demonstrate your organizational and leadership skills.

Mr Lau also told us that what employers search for are (i) a candidate's knowledge of the industry; and (ii) what candidates expect of themselves in their chosen career. In his view, these can reveal how a job applicant sets his or her own standards. "Do some research on your potential employer's place in the market. How many competitors are there? Who and what kind of people are they? With adequate preparation, you will be able to understand your own position better. Know how to better yourself, then be prepared and set yourself a goal!"

A goal is very important, he believes. "There will be many difficulties throughout each person's life," he smiled gently. "A clear goal reminds us not to give up easily. We will forget about the hardship when we focus on goal attainment." A goal is not merely an imaginary thing; Mr Lau encourages students to develop concrete and realistic action plans.

But our time with him is running out; it is seven o'clock already and the ever-busy Stephen Lau is expected at another meeting. But he still made the most of our last few minutes to share his views and personal advice. It is no surprise to discover that he is a mentor to students at CityU, and is in great demand as guest speaker at various universities' employment talks.

His enthusiasm and commitment to guiding young people is obvious for anyone to see. But how, we asked, does he find the time?

"I find the time because it's so worthwhile," he answered without a moment's hesitation. "Young people need guidance. Helping them is a kind of contribution to society. You cannot just take from life: you should also give. This is something which Hong Kong people understand very well." And with that, our time was over. But we still remember his warm and stimulating manner, and his good advice to "Think positively and be prepared!"

