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Mr Binary

By Seelen Sakran

MEET educationist extraordinaire, Joseph Adaikalam. From making home tuition a profitable venture, he embarked on a grand plan to establish what may have been the country's earliest business and information technology college, Binary Business School.

Driven by a passion to succeed, despite facing difficulties, Joseph can now reminisce about the hardships he had to endure in order to be where he is now.

Having entered the education industry in 1984, at a time when this sector was known as commercially unviable, the 45-year-old maintained his optimistic outlook. In fact, he established the Oxford Corporate Training Centre (Oxford) during that year. His roster of customers included the likes of Shell Malaysia Bhd, former Bank Bumiputra Bhd and Caltex Oil Malaysia Ltd.

He derived 70% of his revenue from this business, which subsequently evolved to become what is now known as Binary College (Binary).

Today, as the principal of Binary, Joseph continually seeks innovation in his undertakings. Currently head of a college upon which he has spent more than RM14 million on infrastructure alone, Joseph has a story to tell about how he brought Binary to this level.

So where shall we begin? 'From the start, of course,' quips Joseph, who has completed his Masters of Business Administration with Scotland's University of Edinburgh via distance learning and is currently pursuing his Doctor of Philosophy, both in the field of Educational Management.

'Coming from a conservative Indian background, my family, especially my father, wanted me to work in a job that offered security and reasonable pay,' Joseph explains. 'After my Form Five, my father found me a temporary job as an apprentice with Harrisons & Crossfield (now Golden Hope Plantations Bhd), thinking that I would continue to build a successful career over there - but little did he know I had other plans in mind,' he adds.

Joseph's father, Adaikalam Lourdesamy, who is now in his mid 70s, was then a chief clerk with Harrisons. His mother, Rosalind Anthonia Mary, was a housewife, and has passed away. Joseph is the eldest of four boys in the family.

With his father's blessings, he left his unfulfilling job as a lab technician and enrolled at the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants, a professional management accountancy body. 'While life was not a struggle, when we were growing up, we were always told to be independent, so to supplement my income, I started giving tuition,' he says.

Unknown to Joseph at that time, this early tutoring experience may have laid the foundation for his future in the education industry. With the experience gained from giving tuition, and upon completion of his studies, he wanted to open a corporate training centre.

As fate would have it, he did not manage to obtain the capital backing from the banks. 'I only wanted a loan of RM20,000. They said I had no track record, and worse, that I was too young. Moreover, the field I wanted to use the money in was considered high risk,' recalls Joseph.

Joseph overcame his problem by going back to the drawing board, and providing home tuition. The recession of 1983 also helped him, as there were many unemployed graduates willing to go the extra mile to give

tuition.

`In the beginning, I was giving tuition myself, but I later thought I should do what I do best, namely managing people. I placed an advertisement in the paper wanting home tutors and the response was good,' he says.

While Joseph's stable of home tutors were doing well, some parents wanted Joseph's personal attention. `I used to have the gift of the gab, and this enhanced my teaching skills. In any case, I agreed, but for a premium. I used to charge between RM400 and RM500 per student for a group of four or five students. It was good money, I would say,' he explains.

In fact, it was this premium revenue that helped Joseph save RM50,000 in four years, RM30,000 more than what he had wanted to borrow from the banks. With newfound confidence, he founded Oxford. The rest, as they say, is history.

Things were initially going smoothly, until 1988, by which time a lot more corporate trainers had entered the market. The reason, according to Joseph, was because of low entry barriers such as small capital outlays.

`I had to think of the next level in this arena, which was to secure licences from the Ministry of Education to provide diploma and advanced diploma programmes in academia. I realised private education was slowly creeping in as another alternative, so, I logged onto the opportunity for good measure,' smiles Joseph.

However, the name Oxford had to go because of copyright laws, and along came Binary. `I thought it was a suitable name, taking into account the business and computing elements of the programmes I was offering,' he adds.

At the same time, in order to build a good brand name, Joseph quickly started forging partnerships with British universities and professional institutions of higher learning, such as the Institute of Cost Management Accountants.

In 1989, Joseph established a 50% to 100% scholarship fund to help out needy students. He also started a government-approved Malay version of a computer diploma programme.

While these undertakings proved successful, the speed of Binary's expansion caught up with it. `My students wanted to pursue a degree, and there was no way they could do it with the existing educational system,' explains Joseph. `When I approached our local public universities, they said they would not have anything to do with private colleges in the country,' he adds. He then travelled to Indonesia, where he met with success to offer approved degree programmes.

Perhaps this is why Datuk Kenneth Hng, a close friend of five years, believes Joseph is a good person at heart. `He is one who is thoughtful and always ready to help, whenever the occasion arises,' says Hng.

In 1998, the Education Ministry put the National Accreditation Board (NAB) into place, a body to vet academic programmes offered by private colleges in the country. With its newfound status as a provider of local degree programmes, Binary then had to live up to NAB's stringent requirements. Today, Binary stands tall among the many private colleges that provide quality and affordable education at a state-of-the-art facility, one that includes multi-million computer laboratories.

However, Joseph is not resting on his laurels. His intention is to further improve Binary via enhancing staff development and collaborating on research initiatives with foreign universities in the United Kingdom and Australia.

Though Joseph's typical day lasts from 9am till about 9pm, he still finds time for a light football game with his sons or gardening with his wife, whom he married in 1982. They have one girl and two boys. He also

spends about three hours a week holed up in his music room to release tension, where he listens to New Age music.

`He is not entirely interested in profits,' states Datuk Dr T Marimuthu, a friend of Joseph for over 10 years. `He has established numerous scholarships for financially underprivileged students,' he says. He goes on to describe Joseph as an astute, no-nonsense businessman who has successfully built a college from scratch, and is still surviving the competition.

From all accounts, Joseph has grit and determination, continuing his journey in education through rain or shine. No wonder Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's former Prime Minister, endearingly refers to him as Mr Binary.

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