



PolyU DBA Alumni Series (Published on April 14, 2022)

Interview with PolyU DBAAA Fellows (Interviewed and written by Dr. Kanie Siu)

Dr. Alex Wong Siu-wah
Chairman & Chief Executive Officer
King's Flair International (Holdings) Limited

From rags to riches.....

I was suggested to interview Alex as my next interviewee in our PolyU DBA Alumni Series. As usual, I'll gather the background information about the interviewee by surfing the net before my interview. I could not find any interview about Alex of his personal story in any newspaper or media except those related to his company King's Flair International (Holdings) Limited, a Hong Kong-listed company that specializes in the design, development, manufacture, and distribution of kitchenware and his donations to various universities and charitable foundations.

'I am quite low profile. I seldom accept an interview. I take this interview because you are working with Plan International Hong Kong,' Alex said. I was perplexed about it though I knew that he is our donor and has been sponsoring 10 children in our sponsorship program since 2011. I am eager to know why he has been supporting our cause during this interview. 'I grew up in a poor family. Same as many poor families in the 60s, my mother obtained some handicraft work, such as hand socks and plastic flowers, from factories for processing at home for earning a living. She also brought along me to handle the rubbish of two buildings on Main Street East in Shau Kei Wan. Because of my poor family situation, I applied for support from Plan International and became one of your sponsored children in Hong Kong in the 60s for two years when I was a primary student. I was living in the H-shape public estate in Chai Wai then and went to your center for getting tens of dollars every month. I was trained to write in English as I had to correspond with my American foster parents.' Alex continued. I understood now why he'd meet me and accept the interview. I would like to ask him more about his sponsorship journey as I did in my previous interviews with the ex-beneficiaries of Plan International Hong Kong since I am the organization's CEO. I didn't but said, 'Could I make another appointment with you to talk about the sponsorship story sometimes later?' Alex agreed to it.

I asked myself, 'With this background, what is Alex's rags-to-riches success story?' I was brought to Alex's office on the day of the interview. I found that there are lots of souvenirs from different banks in his office. It is well understood as his company is a listed company in Hong Kong with revenue that reached HK\$1.3 billion in 2020. 'Did you start your own business after studying?' I asked. 'I loved fixing small electric appliances when I was young. After graduating from Salesian English School in 1973, I studied mechanical engineering at night time in the Hong Kong Polytechnic (the predecessor of PolyU). Rather than working as a white-collar worker as most people preferred at that time, I chose to work in

a factory for electric home appliances after graduating from Polytechnic. I lived close to the factory and worked three shifts instead of one shift in a day. With my good English, engineering background, and hardworking attitude, I was offered opportunities by my employer Mr. Lee to work in various aspects of the factory. I was well recognized by Mr. Lee and was promoted to factory manager just when I was 22 years old,' Alex told me proudly about his career development and that he earned more than HK\$10,000 per month, which was much above average, at that time. 'I had a lot of ideas but I could not apply my concepts to the work. I left the company and moved on to work with a metal hardware manufactory afterward,' Alex continued his story to me. Working with this manufacturing company for a while, Alex bought the company with his savings when his employer decided to migrate overseas. As such, Alex became his boss and put his destiny under his control started from that moment.

Alex established King's Flair in 1984 and commenced his household business. Since then, his business is growing bigger and bigger from mainly a kitchenware exporter to an original design manufacturer. It is also expanding to the retail markets in Asia with its own brand. Geographically, it expanded its markets from the US and Europe to worldwide covering Asia and Mainland China as well. It regards itself as one-stop kitchenware and household product solutions to internationally-renowned brands, providing one-stop solutions from product design, development, and manufacturing, to marketing, distribution, and retailing.



'I emphasize innovation and creativity. Without these, a company will easily be kicked out of the market soon,' Alex shared with me about his business management philosophy. That explains why the company has been spending 8% of its revenue on R&D. In fact, there are 31 members in his design and research team in Hong Kong. Most of them have a bachelor's degree, some with master's degree, and 4 are Ph.D. who have about 5 to 9 years of research experience in new technology like Nanotechnology. 'I am agile to environmental changes. With the debut of nanotechnology, we immediately explore the technology in our household products, such as air and water filtering. Our subsidiary, Nanoshields Technology, will be one of the first to move into the Advanced Manufacturing Centre in Tseung Kwan O to further explore the technology in our products,' Alex continued.

I was keen to learn how he has been managing his company and asked him to tell me more. 'I believe in my intuition in making decisions and doing business. When a donkey almost thirsts to death, it will immediately rush towards the well in front of it and drink the water. It will not spend time thinking about if it should do so. There is no time to think when you are fighting in a battle,' Alex said confidently about his belief. I can read from the mind

of this businessman that running a business is like fighting in a battle and the business world is like a battlefield. I googled the meaning of the word 'intuition'. 'Intuition' means 'having the ability to understand or know something without any direct evidence of the reasoning process' and 'intuitive thinking' means going with one's first instinct and reaching a decision quickly based on automatic cognitive processes. With his rich experience in the kitchenware and household business, Alex can, therefore, use his first instinct to reach a decision quickly. Responsiveness to the market is another key success factor of his business, apart from continuous innovation, as emphasized by Alex.

'In addition, King's Flair has been investing a lot in nurturing young talent. I am seen as stupid as I have been spending 8 to 10 years training an all-around staff in the company. Apart from skills in handling the operations, we also train them with soft skills such as AQ(adversity quotient), CQ (Creative Quotient), DQ(Digital Quotient), EQ (Emotional Quotient) and HQ(Human Quotient)...etc.,' Alex showed his pride instead when he told me about his talent management experience. He continued, 'These trained staffs are important to the company as they will be assigned to work in the 20 key assembly plants to ensure smooth operations with supplies from over 200 outsourced manufacturing plants. We are adopting virtual manufacturing in which a process is handled in each plant. This is quite an innovative idea that I invented in my operation years ago.' This light-asset operation enables King's Flair a higher profit margin that is comparable to about double of its competitors. 'With the well-trained staff, the virtual manufacturing operation becomes effective and efficient. Virtual manufacturing becomes our competitive advantage in the industry,' Alex showed his sense of superiority when he talked about his innovative idea.

It explained why Alex chose '*An exploratory study of the critical capabilities of virtual manufacturing and their organizational performance implications*' as the topic of his thesis in his PolyU DBA course which he completed in 2019. Alex aimed at identifying the critical capabilities of firms that adopt virtual manufacturing and understanding their organizational performance implications. Four critical capabilities, namely technological capability, marketing capability, dynamic capability, and relationship capability are statistically associated with the four organizational performance measures, which include personnel performance, corporate social performance, relationship performance, and marketing performance, at different levels of significance. Relationship capability is the most prominent among the four critical capabilities in the case of virtual manufacturing. This study contributes academically and in real practice. 'I will turn my thesis into a book and helps other manufacturers to attain superior organizational performance,' said Alex who showed me his thesis with 4 inches thick.

Relationship capability is strongly emphasized by Alex in dealing with his clients. He said, 'It is important to make friends and build mutual trust with your clients, my working partners. They have to share your brand value and your vision of excelling in technology. We stress on quality and performance of our products. We emphasize value for money and would not prefer dealing with clients who only focus on low prices.'

'How about your staff management?' I continued to drill into his business management philosophy. 'I use both carrots and sticks in managing my staff. I will not hesitate to scold

them when they have done wrong. One has to admit his mistake and shoulder his responsibility to rectify it,' Alex said seriously and then illustrated it with a recent case that happened in his company. I wonder if this will scare the staff away. Alex looked at me and lowered the volume of his voice, 'Some staff has been working with me for more than 10 years and a few 20. I sell my concepts to them. I am transparent and will share with them the promising future of the company. They will be updated on the company's development, our new technology, our innovative design, and our revenue and profit. I will show my commitment to the staff. Their hard work pays off. A fixed amount of the company earning's will be distributed to them every year. One can get 16 to 18 months' salary as a bonus.' As mentioned above, Alex uses his intuition to make decisions and believes that he always makes the right decisions. He does not agree to seek common ground while reserving differences. He said, 'One could come to challenge my decision if they could prove that they are right. Otherwise, just follow mine.'

Since he is the ex-beneficiary of my organization in the 60s, I wonder if he is thinking about retirement and would hand power to his daughter, Gigi, who is the COO of the company at the moment. 'I would not treat it as a family business and that's why the company has gone public. Any competent staff can be my successor. My successor must show his/her passion, loyalty, and integrity. There are now 6 candidates. They are competent in different areas, namely, R&D, sales and marketing, operational management, innovation...etc.' Alex told me about his succession plan.

King's Flair is now a public listed company. I asked if it was a smooth process for the company to go public. 'I had the idea of listing my company on the Hong Kong Stock Market before I retire. However, I experienced ringing in the ears when I was working in China in 2012. As such, I would like to materialize my ambition earlier. However, virtual manufacturing is a new concept at the time and it was not familiar to the Stock Exchange of Hong Kong. Because of this new kind of operation, it took more than the normal duration for King's Flair to be listed. A public announcement about our intention to be listed was asked to be made to check if the market reacted with a negative impact afterward. Contrarily, our business revenue grew 70% that year with profit reaching about HK\$100 million. Finally, King's Flair was listed in 2015,' Alex's face was shining when he told me about this glorious story. During the conversation, I have not heard Alex complaining about his tinnitus. I believed it is annoying to have the ears drumming all the time. Yet, this strong man will never show his suffering in front of anyone.

I queried how Alex, with an engineering background, became a strategist, a marketer, and a salesperson apart from being a creator. Alex responded, 'I read a lot of books and will put the theories into practice. I was inspired by my mother, who is illiterate. She had been continuously learning by asking me to read the news to her when I was small.' Now, he spends about 4 hours a day reading. Also affected by the strong character of his mother, Alex will not bow to reality easily. That's why he stressed several times to me during the interview that he had not accepted any bribes during his work, though accepting rebates was popular among the purchasing agents in the old days. In addition, he would not feel upset when his new product failed but would continue his new product development as he understands clearly that continuous innovation is the key to his success.

He feels proud of his innovative products and showed one to me, ‘You can play around with this thermos cup. The water will not come out if the mug suddenly slips from your hand when you are drinking as the lid was specially designed with a leak-proof function.’ He was demonstrating his cup to me and felt very satisfied with his innovative design.



‘Is equipping knowledge the reason why you studied the DBA at PolyU?’ I asked as Alex has been awarded a University Fellow of the University Council by PolyU in 2017 and an Honorary Doctor of Business from the Swinburne University of Technology in Australia in December 2018. ‘You are right. By pursuing a higher degree, I could equip myself with more advanced knowledge, which could help me develop further my company. I cannot purely apply my past experiences to meet the challenges and obstacles encountered in my business today and in the future. In addition, the new knowledge enables me to communicate well with the young generation who have higher academic backgrounds. What’s more, most of my family members have attained higher degrees at renowned universities,’ Alex replied. To excel in life seems to be something that Alex always strives for.



Apart from donating to Plan International Hong Kong and other NGOs, King’s Flair has been taking a holistic approach to supporting our young people’s development. The King’s Flair Group Scholarship for Outstanding PolyU Student-Athletes aims to encourage the youth to accomplish teamwork and become a better version of themselves. It also contributed to the local charitable projects and workshops conducted by the Junior Chamber International HK which facilitates development opportunities for young people to reach their full potential and become worthy leaders in society. Lately, King’s Flair also offered financial support to the Hong Kong Polytechnic University’s COVID-19 Student Support Fund and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology’s COVID-19 Student Hardship Relief Fund to express their concerns for the youth during the difficult

days. ‘Why has King’s Flair been donating to various organizations?’ I asked. ‘I believe that a successful business should meet the needs of the market as well as society, be people-oriented, and care for the environment,’ Alex replied. As such, not only does his company invest a lot in education and shows its continuous commitment to charitable works, but also ensures that its products and materials used are environmental-friendly.

As he has been offering lots of support to the young people, I asked how he sees the young generation nowadays and what advice would he give to them. ‘Many young people seem do not know the instincts that they possess. They have to discover them and use their strengths well. Nowadays, social media has been offering us a lot of information. Yet, our young generation has to develop their perspective and distinguish what is right and wrong. In addition, they should be brave to try and not be afraid to fail,’ Alex said sincerely.



After I finished all my questions to Alex, he brought me along to walk through different departments in his office. Though he showed me his straightforward behavior and autocratic leadership style during the interview, he is found a very friendly boss. He greeted his staff while they were working attentively in their work. He showed his concerns to the staff who was ill and the staff who will be going out for a work trip soon. While I was walking from one department to another, I saw a plaque hanging on the wall.

It said, ‘speak truthfully, act truthfully; united by responsibility, a united goal; shared success, and rewards.’ That has summarized what he told me about his staff management style. He walks his talk.

‘How should I describe Alex?’ I tried to summarize his personality when I was having my lunch after the interview. Alex is direct and highly confident in himself. He always strives for excellence in his life. He is an entrepreneur who truly believes in innovation and creativity and is never set back by any failure. As a boss, he is quite autocratic as he believes in his instinct. Yet, he is a fair and friendly boss. Though I have not asked much about his family, I feel that he loves his mother very much. He showed me his tenderness when he described how his mother worked hard to earn a living for his family, and when he talked about the impact of his mother on him during the interview. He showed his gratification when he told me that his mother is proud of his achievement.

I have not asked why he named his company King’s Flair. According to the dictionary, ‘flair’ means an instinctive aptitude for doing something well or stylishness and originality. The name exactly expresses what Alex told me about his determination. He would like King’s Flair to become the best of the best in the kitchenware and household industry through innovation and creativity. How about the ‘King’? After reading Alex’s story, you will know who the ‘King’ is in King’s Flair.