



Don't be afraid to make mistakes

► This week SunBiz gets the thoughts and views of Kumon Malaysia general manager Yosuke Sugawa

SUCCESS: THE INSIGHT STORY

How has your life experiences made you the leader you are today?

I believe no one can instantly become a respected leader. It takes time to nurture one. Thus, I attribute my success through the many years of experience that I've had, as well as the numerous challenges I face, as all of that have transformed me to what I am today - a leader with sound judgement.

In addition to that, I learnt a lot from my peers and through countless hours of reading. "Learning never stops", and I hold dear to this motto, encouraging myself to seize opportunities that may come my way to be better at what I do.

It is memorable for me, having led a small team of seven when I started, learning the ropes while guiding my team. Today, I lead a team of 60 in Kumon Malaysia and we are still growing.

It is also very rewarding to be given the opportunity to witness the growth of each individual within the team, as these are the things that we will not be able to attain through theoretical learning.

What inspired you to further your passion in the education sector?

I started off as a field consultant in Kumon Japan back in 2001. It was then that I had the opportunity to work very closely with Kumon instructors. I was privileged to observe how students benefit from Kumon's tried-and-tested Self Learning Method.

Founder Toru Kumon's Self Learning Method aims to maximise a child's potential by allowing each individual to learn at his or her own pace at the "just right" level. The effectiveness of this method has further fuelled my passion in this education sector and I am committed to being a part of this humbling initiative to help more children attain their fullest potential.

How do you think the industry you are in will evolve in the future?

In this digital age, it is interesting to see how most tasks are replaceable through Artificial Intelligence (AI). However, I believe the human touch from teachers and instructors would be irreplaceable, as they need to work closely with both parents and students to identify and maximise the different potential each child possesses.

Thus, I am confident that Kumon

will remain relevant despite the changing times as it takes good observation, strategic planning and constant feedback from our instructors to ensure a Kumon child is on the right path.

What advice can you offer to those planning to join the education industry?

Firstly, we must understand the importance of education and the role it plays in our future generation.

Secondly, observation. Each child is different, there's no one lesson plan that fits all. Thus, observation is key to understanding each child's potential and we start from there. And the process continues.

Lastly, communication. Positive communication is a small but significant step to keeping a child motivated paving way for them to gain confidence so that they can learn in a more effective manner. In addition, constant communication with parents would also help to ensure a holistic environment both within the classroom and at home.

What do you want to accomplish in the next five years?

On the business front, I am pleased to see how Kumon is making an impact on children's education in Malaysia. I want to bring that positivity to the whole of Malaysia and raise the level of knowledge to the next generation. Thus, we at Kumon Malaysia are working tirelessly to see the establishment of 30 or more Kumon centres over the next three years. With this expansion plan in mind, I hope to also further grow our network of franchise and staff.

On the personal side, I hope to visit more states in Malaysia together with my family. I would love to understand the diverse, rich culture of Malaysians and, of course, the food.

Best piece of advice you received on your career.

The Master said, "They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it."

A senior staff shared these words of wisdom by Confucius with me when I faced difficulty learning the ropes in my early years. The quote was meant to encourage me to always be hungry for knowledge and to find excitement in every new task. This also complemented my life motto to

observe the people around me and learn from my peers along the way.

How do you stay abreast of issues affecting your industry?

I encourage our instructors to build a strong relationship with parents and school teachers. I believe that the key to staying abreast on issues affecting the students we teach or even the industry, can be identified first hand through our key stakeholders - the Kumon instructors.

Peer-to-peer learning is equally important. As we now have more than 200 Kumon centres in Malaysia, I believe it is only effective to have small group discussions among our instructors to share learnings and observations they have gained separately. This ensures that we stay abreast on

issues and at all levels. We also have the National Instructors Summit where Kumon instructors come together to learn and share experiences and this platform facilitates knowledge exchange as well.

Off the top of your mind, who would be your favourite thought leader and why?

Steve Jobs. As one of the most respected leaders out there, I am truly impressed with his leadership and how he steered Apple to where it is today.

It is no easy feat leading a large corporation like Apple Inc, especially having to find the balance between the expectations of customers and the needs of employees.

As I continue to lead Kumon Malaysia to achieve greater milestones, Steve shall remain my role model as he truly reinvented the Apple brand, its products as well as the industry.

What has been your biggest challenge? What did you learn from it?

One of the biggest challenges was to have my family move around with me away from our home in Japan. It was not easy getting familiar with new cultures, making new friends, and there is only limited amount of information you can get from reference books. Though I must say, we have been very fortunate to have helpful friends and colleagues which also made it easier for me to adapt to the different teams I serve here in Malaysia.

What attributes do you typically look for when hiring fresh talent for the company?

While we require different skill sets for various departments, I am always on the look out for talents that are able to bring a different perspective to the table. While passion is equally important, it is also important to possess the desire and ability to think out of the box.

As a company that runs on a franchise operation, we are very different from other players in the industry.

At Kumon, we work closely with our franchisees and take into consideration each franchisee's path to ensure that they are on the right track for further growth and business success.

What are the top three factors you would attribute your success to?

"Don't be afraid to make mistakes". There's a saying that goes, "I did not fail but just found 100 ways that wouldn't work." This is something I live by and hope that the younger talent out there will understand. One of the keys to success is allowing yourself to make mistakes because it is only through mistakes that we will be able to do better.

"Be yourself". Rather than adapt to be what you may perceive as an ideal employee, no one wants to work with someone who isn't genuine. Be yourself and contribute to the best of your ability and be a team player.

"Listen, listen, and listen". Hearing is a physical ability, while listening is a skill. Listening allows us to understand and fully comprehend a task, an opportunity or even a problem. At Kumon Malaysia, I take pride that our senior management listens carefully to our instructors and facilitators to hear first-hand on matters on-ground within classrooms. This is one of the key factors that has driven our success as Malaysia's largest after-school enrichment centres.

Having worked in various countries alongside diverse teams across Asia, how has this affected your leadership style?

It is indeed a privilege to work alongside some of the finest talent across Asia. Bringing with me the Japanese work culture that I was accustomed to, it is indeed eye opening to adapt to the diverse cultures in the markets I have served so far - Singapore and Malaysia.

I believe my leadership style remains relevant despite the different markets but it is important for me to understand some of the common practices each team are used to. I, for one, am a firm believer of not changing a strategy that works. Thus, I'm glad to have been able to work with different teams who are passionate and able to accept my leadership style, driving the company further.

Most importantly, working with various teams across Asia has further reaffirmed the notion that no matter where we go or who we work with, and the position that we hold - it is important to respect each other, especially in terms of culture and practices. Through this, we will then be able to agree to work more effectively to achieve our goals.

November trade surplus falls to RM7.6b as export growth moderates

PUTRAJAYA: Malaysia's trade surplus declined 24% year on year to RM7.6 billion in November 2018 as export growth moderated to 1.6% while imports expanded 5%, according to the Statistics Department.

Exports and imports stood at RM84.8 billion and RM77.2 billion, respectively.

Total trade, which was valued at RM162 billion, increased 3.2% from a year ago.

Export growth was due to higher exports to Taiwan (+RM1.1 billion), Vietnam (+RM938.5 million), Hong Kong (+RM876.8 million), Singapore (+RM872.2 million) and China (+RM435.3 million).

The main products that contributed to the expansion in exports were refined petroleum products (+RM2.2 billion), liquefied natural gas (LNG) (+RM953 million) and crude petroleum (+RM430.4 million).

However, a decline was recorded for palm oil and palm oil-based products (-RM1.3 billion), electrical & electronic products (-RM528.2 million), timber and timber-based products (-RM146.8 million), and natural rubber (-RM8.5 million).

Chief statistician Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Uzir Mahidin said re-exports were valued at RM15.9 billion registering an increase of 24.5%

and accounted for 18.7% of total exports. Domestic exports declined 2.6% to RM68.9 billion.

Meanwhile, higher imports were mainly attributed to consumption goods (+RM59 million) and capital goods (+RM39.6 million). However, imports of intermediate goods declined RM137.5 million.

MIDF Research said amid higher base effects and continuous signs of easing key global indicators, it

foresees export growth moderating further to 3.6% this year versus an estimated 7.3% for 2018.

For the first 11 months of 2018, export growth averaged 7% year on year. The research house said the moderating pace is consistent with global commodity prices, expectation of a slight slowdown in overall business performance on top of the uncertainty over the Sino-US trade conflict.