

Flushed with powerful testimonials from past clients, David Lim's business website greets like a drama stage. A stage showcasing a critically acclaimed performance that receives loud standing ovations each time it plays. From, "Never had there been another more impactful programme that has left me so charged-up and inspired!" to "Many were speechless and lost in introspection; others were searching for words to express a sudden surge of self-belief"; these are samples of applause bestowed by those touched by lessons from David and his motivation team. And these clients are no negligible individuals for they come from the big leagues of PricewaterhouseCoopers and Ministry of Manpower, amongst many others.

David wears many hats, an indication of the phenomenal discipline he has mastered over many years of trying times and giant feats. Currently, David, 42, is a corporate motivator, and an entrepreneur, though he is better known to the public as the leader of

# WHAT'S BEYOND THE PEAK FOR DAVID LIM?

## Conquering Business Challenges

---

David Lim's rich encounters with adversities and victories are timeless inspirations, but how can these intangible elements be infused into a sustainable business model? With a flair for hard-nosed discipline, this entrepreneur-cum-mountaineer knows that impossible is nothing. *By Hidayah Hassan*

the 1st Singapore Everest Expedition in 1998. David is a certified practitioner in neuro-semantic and neuro-linguistics programming, which are basically psychology instruments essential in the areas of leadership and team dynamics. His company, Everest Motivation Pte. Ltd. has four primary areas of business which cover corporate programmes, motivational speaking, self-leadership workshops and executive coaching. Even though it was only corporatised in 2004, David has been conducting motivational speaking sessions since 1999. The company currently has six associates and support staff.

Motivational training, an umbrella term that covers executive coaching, leadership building, self-motivation, and what have you, is a booming business throughout the world. The International Coach Federation (ICF), a non-profit organisation which promotes and develops accredited coaching practices, has a Singapore branch which lists 27 coaching organisations in our country. This figure does not include outfits that are not registered with the ICF. However this number is a good indication of the rising number of professionals in this industry, compared to the paltry amount in 2002, where only 4 coaches were listed with ICF Singapore.

Popular notions are quick to downplay the significant impacts of motivational training, no thanks to the scores of self-motivation books assaulting our senses at bookstores. Glib cheerleading titles ranging from "Empower yourself, you can!" to "Lead yourself and you can lead others!" are enough to deter skeptics from picking

any of these books up, much less braving judging eyes and walking over to the payment counter with it. Cynicism aside, society, especially the corporate crowd, is slowly opening up to the marvels of this practice, and people are soliciting experts to evoke positive thinking into their lifestyles.

"Energy flow is very important, you may have the best high content conference for your company but people are sitting there for hours, and you get what we call, 'death by Powerpoint.' So someone like me can come in there and change the energy flow so that they can actually recharge their batteries. I package the same kind of message that you need to hear but in a different format. I'm not talking about sugarcoating the pill, I'm talking about giving meals in an

alternative way," David explains, with that unwavering sparkle in his eyes. In person, David cuts a carefree figure, offers unrestrained opinions and his sheer intelligence is conveyed casually by his articulate responses. He makes it so carelessly easy to forget that he is a partially disabled individual who battled the Grim Reaper nine years ago, survived, and now, he is determined to change other lives with his experiences and expertise.

David's illustrious climbing career, which started long before his coaching company, is a path many are familiar with. Being Singapore's first professional mountaineer, he led our country's first Mount. Everest Expedition in 1998, a landmark occasion which saw two team members, Khoo Swee Chiow and Edwin





Siew, reaching the summit successfully. The team's heroic venture faced a swift change of sentiments when shortly after the return from the Himalayas, David was struck with a rare nerve disorder, Guillain-Barre Syndrome. It left him permanently disabled in his right leg, but that was not good enough a reason for him to cease climbing. Just a year after his recovery, David conquered the highest peak in the Americas, Aconcagua. David has indignantly not stopped climbing ever since. His insatiable appetite for challenges, sacrifices and heart wrenching bravado is chronicled in his two inspiring books, "Mountain to Climb: The Quest for Everest and Beyond" (1999) and "David Lim – Against Giants" (2003). Vivid anecdotes and astounding clarity in both books make readers wonder about the inner turmoil and pain David experienced while navigating through those bittersweet memories that teetered between hope and despair. Read his stories and there is little doubt why David deserves the authority to motivate others and holds great clout in the areas of leadership.

Trained as a lawyer at Cambridge University (UK), David came back to Singapore after his studies and spent close to a decade in the media and publishing industry. He was part of the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) team which developed asiaone.com, an online information portal. Confessing to failing his law exams miserably, David concludes, "I loved the law, as an academic subject. I think I probably didn't have it in me to be a practicing lawyer. When I came to Singapore that was even so true here. By that time so

//

It was a dark period where I hung in balance between life and death; between hope and despair, barely able to breathe, speak, swallow or move a muscle." David wrote in his book, "Mountain to Climb: The Quest for Everest and Beyond", on his struggle against Guillain-Barre Syndrome.

//



many lawyers were not renewing their practicing certificates and I didn't think Singapore needed more lawyers."

With no hint of regret for his futile law studies, David's extremely keen focus on his coaching business leads him to raise the bar on coaching, in a bid to make his business and services as sustainable as possible. David discusses his business model, strategies and philosophies with the editor of THE EXECUTIVE.

### ~THE EXECUTIVE CHAT~

#### WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO ENTER THE MOTIVATION BUSINESS?

The definition of motivation is the emotion that precedes action. You know that if certain action happens you will get certain result. It all starts with motivation.

In 2001, I met Stef du Plessis, who

changed the direction in my life. Stef is a South African professional speaker, and very well regarded as a leadership expert. After he heard me speak, he came to find me and he thought that my materials were world class and he asked me what I was doing about it. Until then I hadn't taken my work seriously enough. It was very organised on an ad hoc basis. He really helped to turn me to professionalising my entire business.

#### HOW DO YOU MOTIVATE OTHERS?

You may want to engage them emotionally, to rattle their cages to make them realise that what they are doing are again not leading them anywhere and they need to seriously think about changing. So the focus has really got to hit them in the head and in the heart. This means you've got to use emotions to shift what they are thinking presently

to a more productive thinking. You have to emotionally engage them in a way that they will want to do more of what they are already doing to make them more successful.

WHAT WERE YOUR FEARS BEFORE EMBARKING ON YOUR ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY?

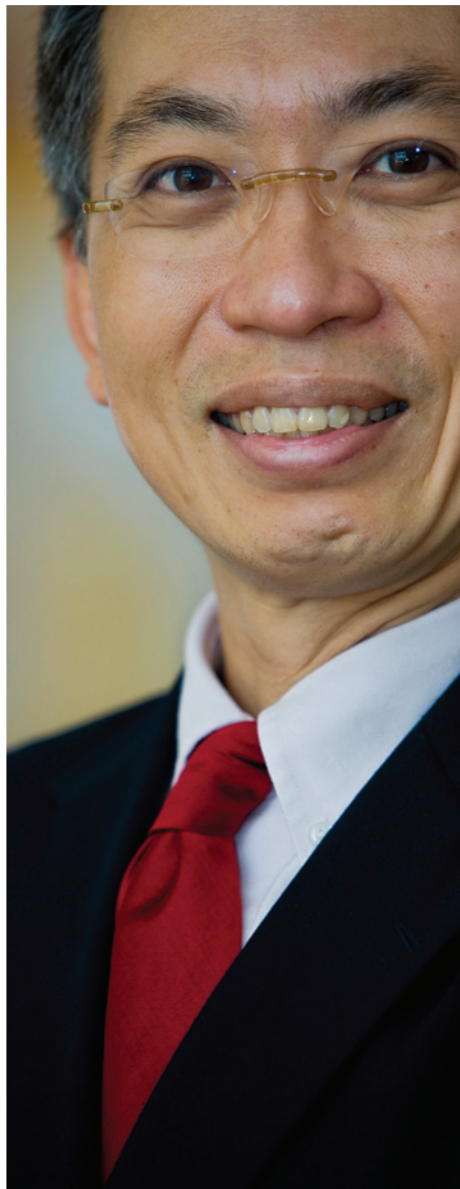
I think 2 things, one, sustainability and differentiation. When I first started out, I was doing ad hoc speaking. I thought the people in Singapore would be interested to hear this story for a couple of years and that would be it. The first one, sustainability; the problem of being a motivation speaker is that you are in a practice, if anything happens to you, that's it! Your ability to generate revenue and income stops there.

The sustainability of your ability to speak is to be able to make a difference to corporate audiences that helps the (company's) bottom line. That's what makes every single professional motivation speaker different from the others. If everybody wants to be the next good speaker, people will hire more speakers and the whole industry becomes more sustainable.

YOU MENTION DIFFERENTIATION, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR COMPETITIVE EDGE?

One way I differentiate myself is that I tell a timeless time story of how I led a bunch of people from a flat tropical island to climb the highest mountain in the world, which often gets a good laugh and attention; everybody loves the story. Very few people have had such an incredible reversal of fortune immediately afterwards, like me, 6

months in hospital, completely paralysed. Everybody loves the comeback story. I guess there is one thing that makes us different, is that we offer clients a process, if they are interested, what we call true sustainable team development. We get more contracts to do longer term organisational development or we complement a 36-month team development programme.



WHAT WERE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES YOU ENCOUNTERED IN BUILDING THE BUSINESS?

I think the most challenging business moment was beginning to scale up the business. The best thing is when I'm telling the client "I won't be there on that day because I'm going to be in Hong Kong but my team will deliver the programme", they look at you and say "That's ok." And you say "Yes!" You know that's the beginning of creating sustainable processing systems.

Sometimes you get excited about some possibilities; you spend weeks, months, on and off running down a particular direction. After a while you realise that it isn't really aligned or congruent with what you're pursuing, where your company wants to go. So you drop that course of action.

MOTIVATING OTHERS IS A CONSUMING (MENTALLY AND EMOTIONALLY) PURSUIT. WHAT GIVES YOU THE DRIVE TO COACH OTHERS?

It's the satisfaction of being able to transfer both our corporate wisdom together with our tools, and the particular outcome of clients which really makes a difference in their lives, especially their personal lives. For my books, sometimes I give them away, sometimes the clients re-purchase, sometimes I never see who exactly gets the books. But after 4 years you get a phone call and somebody wants you to do a programme for the company. And you get comments like, "Oh my boss read your book and now he wants you to do this programme."

### WHAT WAS YOUR STARTUP COST AND CURRENT REVENUE LIKE?

Startup cost was actually fairly minimal. Seven years ago I was working from my home, I created my home office. I can't reveal the exact figure but I would say our turnover is between half a million to a million dollars. Still a very modest setup. But I do think that what we do is unique in this region.

### WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON ENTREPRENEURS LIKE THERESA CHEW, NANZ CHONG, AND OTHERS, EXPLORING MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKING?

All I can say is, it often depends on what the client wants and what the client needs. If the client wants edutainment, there's a certain kind of speaker for that. If the client wants high context business-related stuff, he needs a different kind of speaker. So I can say ultimately the market will decide whether what they are getting is making a difference to them. I haven't heard Ms.Chew or Ms.Chong speak, so I can't judge the quality of their messages or delivery.

### WHAT MAKES A GOOD ENTREPRENEUR?

I think they need to have a refreshing idea, which needs to be executed well and they need to be good at doing that. Think about it, entrepreneurship is about ideas. But how do you turn the ideas into reality? Sometimes people have great ideas but they have no idea

how to execute them. That's when collaboration works, that's why teams working together need to work well. That's why certain people with grand ideas need to work in a team. We grow on our strengths, we don't grow by working on our weaknesses.



### HAVE YOU IDENTIFIED SOME OF YOUR STRENGTHS?

I think I'm very good at accessing, developing and promoting ideas and concepts. I think I have strengths in marketing, public relations and handling the media. I don't have great strengths in creating very complex or detailed business plans. 20 percent of experts who speak are interested and involved in

developing business beyond themselves. The other 80 percent are very happy keeping their business all about just themselves and that's fine too.

//

The most successful people aren't those who want 100 percent of everything, the most successful people will make use of 100 percent of everything that they've got.

//

- David Lim

### ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND LEADERSHIP COME HAND IN HAND, THOUGH THEY INVOLVE DIFFERENT SETS OF TRAITS. WHAT THEN MAKES A GOOD LEADER?

First of all, attitude, because skills come later. It's much harder to train attitude, that's one thing I've learnt. And I think there are two parts of leadership, one is self-leadership and one is team leadership where you have to lead the team of people. It starts with self-leadership, if you can't lead yourself, you can't lead the others. One of the great definitions of leadership is, leadership is about having a strong personal vision and getting people to follow.

You find a lot of people have, like my business, a small consulting office. This requires a big form of delegation. Delegation requires trust. So delegation is very low on directive communications and low on supportive actions.

### DESCRIBE YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE.

I'm an outcomes-based leader. I will say, this is the outcome I want to achieve, I





will leave it up to you to how you want to do this. I'll check in every now and then. They have to go and make a fool of themselves and I have to come and just tell them, "You screwed up, you made a mistake here, what caused the mistake?" The idea is to give the people hope along with the vision that the company has is very exciting and they are part of that journey.

#### HOW DO YOU CREDIT GOOD EMPLOYEES?

I ask them what is important to them. So for some it is time, for some, it is money. So you've got to fit the right reward to the right employee. Otherwise you are not going to motivate them to do more than the stuff they are doing. Some people want more time off, so giving

extra unrecorded leave as a reward may be a bigger carrot for them instead.

#### AND HOW ABOUT THOSE WHO DON'T PERFORM?

Very often, we co-create goals for staff. You don't set the goals, you work with them to see what's the realistic timeframe for the goals that they want to achieve. If they don't reach that particular goal, then the writing is on the wall, that they obviously haven't done enough for certain things. I think there should definitely be some OB markers. There are certain things that I call "sackable" offences, especially to do with integrity, if this person presents a threat to the company, then the person has to go.

#### WHAT DO YOU TREASURE MOST ABOUT DOING BUSINESS?

Infinite possibilities. You're not strictly bound by a senior manager, you are the senior manager. And ultimately it's also the understanding that although it takes up most of our waking hours, it's just the means to achieve something else. I don't believe in work-life balance. So really, my views are contrary to the Health Promotion Board because I don't believe in working from 9am to 5pm. If you want to achieve greatness, you can't achieve greatness from a 9am-to-5pm work style.

#### WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN SINGAPORE?

I think you can teach entrepreneurship but I don't know whether it can be learned. You must have the fire in the belly. You must have some concept, products, service that is going to help people. Second thing is the execution, most people have the fire in the belly but the execution is not so strong. You may fail after one or two years. Maybe they didn't differentiate sufficiently. So one thing I learnt from my personal failure in my professional law exams is you're got to be passionate about what you are doing.


#### WHAT IS THE NEXT MILESTONE FOR YOU?

My next milestone is to create a level of sustainability for my business. My personal goal is to get my business up and to find its sustainability so that I can leave for a month, when everything is going well, revenue is coming in, so I can go to the mountains to get energised

and motivated. I have done a couple dozen of shorter expeditions where you can tuck in a lot of climbing with friends, or sometimes solo. My expeditions are often those where I can push some adventure limits in the Southeast Asian context. This helps me focus on something other than just business. It will be so boring if there's nothing else to focus on except business.

This year is very exciting (for the company), we are moving into licensing and we've got some new human-change tools now. I want this company to be more sustainable in the sense that they don't have to depend on me so much. Also in the pipeline for the company this year is some additional strategic alliances with India and the Middle East representatives.

### WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL FAVOURITE PHILOSOPHY?

The most successful people aren't those who want 100 percent of everything, the most successful people will make use of 100 percent of everything that they've got. The leg doesn't work (referring to his disability). One of my friends has no hands and no feet; he's a father of three kids, he's a writer, has a small time business, very successful in many ways. He lost both hands and both feet in this tragic accident about 8 years ago. Successful people make use of 100 percent of everything that they've got. Most of us don't do that. We don't leverage off our assets. Assets can be so many things, it can be our network of friends, family, old school mates. We are all work in progress. Leaders are work in progress as well. They are just a little ahead of the curve. 



**NAME:** DAVID LIM

**AGE:** 42

**COMPANY:** EVEREST MOTIVATION PTE. LTD

#### CLIENTS INCLUDE:

ERA Singapore  
INSEAD Business School  
Citibank  
Nokia  
Hewlett-Packard Operations  
Great Eastern Life  
MINDEF  
Pfizer  
Sun Microsystems

#### EXECUTIVE ROLES:

Founder and Chief Motivation Officer, Everest Motivation Pte. Ltd.  
President-Elect ( 2007-2008) Asia Professional Speakers