

Firm foundations

Top surveyor turned legislator Tony Tse's success is built on self-belief, writes **May Chan Rhodes**



HIGH-FLYERS

For some people, their career is not so much shaped by chasing up the corporate ladder as by developing their passion, abilities and knowledge. This, says Tony Tse, is how he has risen to a position of trust in both the public and private sector.

Tse, the legislator for the Architectural, Surveying and Planning constituency, has spent more than 38 years in the surveying industry, since graduating from Polytechnic University.

He spent 12 years in the Crown Land and Survey Office (CL&SO), now the Lands Department, where he became its deputy head as a senior estate surveyor. He later moved on to the private sector, where he held various senior positions.

Surprisingly, Tse says the most memorable moment of his career was when he failed the professional qualifying exam while working as an apprentice with the CL&SO. "I still remember how I broke out in a cold sweat when I discovered that I had failed the test," he says. "It was more than a mere exam – it was about whether I could qualify as a professional surveyor."

"I asked myself again and again why I failed as I studied hard and did all the preparation. I was lost in my thoughts until a senior surveyor in the office asked me a question: 'Do you believe that you are already a surveyor?' It is not the exam that makes you a surveyor. It is your abilities and your professional knowledge that make you who you are."

Such a belief helped Tse to focus on his job when he was working with the government department, where he received solid training in how to handle transactions in the use and management of lands.

Tse moved into the private sector in 1989, when a series of political events led people to question what would happen to Hong Kong's free market policies after the handover. The flexibility the private sector offered in light of potential structural changes in government prompted him to make the move.

"Working in the public sector is like being part of a big administrative body. It is about maintaining the stability of the system so that it will not be affected by any change in personnel. However, it is very difficult and often not rewarding to push through innovations."

"The private sector is completely different. Apart from being compliant with the laws and regulations, there are no guidelines for you to follow. You have to think on your feet and make business judgments. For the same plot of land, you can make or lose money because of your judgment. It is very exciting and demanding."

In the following years, Tse worked at senior management level for several leading developers, including Hongkong Land and Henderson Land. While working alongside some of the city's most famous entrepreneurs, he was struck by how they could dissect an issue from multiple perspectives before making decisions.

He also realised there was a fine line between the thought processes of a decision maker and a professional adviser. The latter would list pros and cons based on their professional knowledge, but the former makes decisions that best serve a purpose and manages risks as they come.

This motivated Tse to get involved in community services, from the Town Planning Board and Lands and Building Advisory Committee, to the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, the Vocational Training Council and the Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors.

"As a professional surveyor in a senior management position, it is so easy to be trapped in your own world because you rub shoulders with people of a similar level of knowledge all the time," he says. "Being with people outside my own profession challenged me to see the same issues through their eyes, and to communicate my idea in a way that is relevant and easy to understand for the general public."

Tse says there is a need for the surveying profession to have a larger say in policy making, urban development and housing matters. He is currently lobbying the government to set up a statutory body that monitors the quality of consultants and contractors involved in building works.

There is little transparency, he says, in the costs, quality, record and reputation of such workers, which put tenants and property owners in a vulnerable position, as they comply with the mandatory building inspection scheme.

"It is my wish to establish a platform for our profession to share its knowledge and experience with the public and with the policy makers in order to make a difference," he says.

"As long as we believe what we do is important and meaningful, we should keep going. It's a long battle and no one knows if we can make it happen, but at least we have a chance to succeed if we try."

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