



LunchWithSumiko

# 3 guys and a van

Lai Chang Wen, Boxian Tan and Shaun Chong started logistics company Ninja Van in 2014. They share with Executive Editor Sumiko Tan their three rules for a harmonious work life



Eight years ago, Mr Lai Chang Wen (centre) and his school friend Boxian Tan (right) persuaded Mr Shaun Chong (left) to join them in starting Ninja Van. The logistics company now does deliveries in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. Revenues are expected to exceed \$1 billion for this financial year. ST PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM

Some interviews leave you feeling good. The one with the three guys who founded logistics company Ninja Van is one of them. The vibes are warm as they trade jokes and jibes over breakfast earlier this month. Weight gain, who's the smartest (all three were in the Gifted Education Programme in school), memories of their worst arguments – topics are tackled good-naturedly, with each one happy to let the other speak.

In September last year, the company raised US\$578 million (S\$797 million) from investors. It was its biggest fund raising since it started in 2014 and it took the company's valuation to over US\$1 billion, making it yet another start-up to become a "unicorn". But unicorn is not something Lai Chang Wen, Boxian Tan and Shaun Chong crow about, or even want to mention.

"It was a non-event," says Mr Chong, 38, who is chief technology officer, when I raise it. Because you knew it was coming, I ask. "Not that we knew," he says. "There's so much more to do. We celebrate when the time is right."

Mr Lai, 34, who is chief executive officer, adds that "unicorn" is not a word they use in their press releases. "It means nothing," he says with a shrug. "The chase for valuation has led to a lot of unsustainable business practices. You do the right thing, you don't really care what people label you as. Time will tell. Time will show."

to really help us with the tech and so on," says Mr Lai. "Shaun took a lot of convincing. Super long nights in the hawker centre just across the road, in the end till like 5am."

The reason for his reluctance? Facebook. Mr Chong had an offer from the tech giant to set up its engineering department in Singapore.

"At that point in time, I wished I never got that offer," he says. "That was the hardest bit of my life. Do I go to Ninja or do I go for a relatively successful career in Facebook?"

He chose Ninja Van after the two convinced him that "logistics is a huge unsolved problem", he says. Facebook isn't, but the company has grown impressively. Today, it does deliveries in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines.

It handles about 100,000 pick-ups a day and has 71,000 people working for it. Revenues are expected to exceed \$1 billion this financial year. While it is still losing money overall, the Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia markets are profitable.

IT STARTED WITH FASHION  
Of the three, Mr Lai is the most media savvy. As CEO and the one who started it all, he fronts most interviews the company gives, and is confident and eloquent. It's been a long while since all three co-founders sat down together for an interview. "For the past few years, we've been trying to move out of this start-up story," Mr Lai says, perhaps dreading how he has to repeat the company's history to me.



Ninja Van co-founders Shaun Chong, Lai Chang Wen and Boxian Tan still help out with deliveries during peak periods.

Mr Lai continued with Marcella after he graduated and worked as a trader in Barclays for a year. Mr Tan, 34, was a fellow Rafflesian whom he knew from the time they were both 10 and playing badminton at Tao Nan School.

Back in Singapore with an economics degree from University College London and a master's in economics from Cambridge, he was looking for a job and helping Mr Lai at Marcella part-time. "I always wanted to try my own thing," says Mr Tan, who is chief product officer and the reticent one of the trio. "Chang Wen was telling me, 'if you want to start your own business, now is the best time'."

But they soon realised that Marcella wasn't going to go far. Among the problems it faced was getting shirts to customers on time, or even at all. Courier services then were unreliable and not optimised for e-commerce, which was taking off.

By 2014, they had decided that logistics – not fashion – was what they should be focused on. Mr Chong, an Anglo-Chinese School alumni with a computer science degree from the National University of Singapore, was at the time the lead engineer at a tech start-up doing cloud platforms and infrastructure.

He had met Mr Lai two years earlier and helped out a bit at

the concept is that the van can go up the mountain into the forests and deliver happiness. So that's us," says Mr Tan. In some countries, their delivery people have to literally climb mountains. "In the Philippines, there are some areas where there's no road up to deliver, so we load onto cows and then we walk up with them to deliver up the mountains," says Mr Lai. Singapore, urban and compact, accounts for just 5 per cent of their business and is its easiest and most straightforward market.



## WHAT WE ATE

<b>Tiong Bahru Bakery</b> Chip Bee Gardens 43 Jalan Merah Saga #01-74
2latte: \$11.40
1iced latte: \$7.50
1flat white: \$5.70
1iced mocha: \$8
1iced tea tarik: \$7.60
1Just orange: \$7.80
1earl grey lavender tea: \$5.20
2 croissants: \$7.60
2 kouign amann: \$10.60
1green tea croissant: \$6
1almond croissant: \$5.30
<b>Total (with tax): \$97.36</b>

MANAGEMENT STYLES  
The trio set out to make Ninja Van a tech-enabled, hassle-free delivery service for businesses of all sizes. When it started, key competitors included Yamato. Today's competitors include SingPost. On what sets it apart from other delivery providers, they cite how there aren't many others offering the same combination of services in the markets they are in. "It's a differentiator for us, offering a 'one-stop' shop for businesses," says Mr Lai. "We have an early opportunity to really capture the demand for this and provide solutions that have traditionally not been accessible to smaller business owners."

The system it has worked out – which he describes as akin to a "train and bus network" – has allowed it to lower costs and scale up. The business is very manpower-intensive and the biggest challenge has been people. "With tech, there's a certain way to do things. The product has a certain design. But with people, you just have a million iterations of how something could turn out," says Mr Lai. While the company relied more on part-timers in the early years, it has since found it more efficient to build its own fleet of full-time drivers who work solely for Ninja Van. Mr Lai has strong views of the so-called gig economy. "Does this guy depend on us for the majority of his household income, and if he does, then that's not a gig worker to us," he says. "I think a gig worker is someone who works for us one, two hours a day, he has a proper full-time job, this is a supplementary income. But we don't believe that in our business, which thrives on efficiency, that it makes sense to have someone who treats this as a side hustle."

He adds that to get a productive, loyal and efficient workforce, people must be treated with kindness. "Treating people as mere machines, that's not going to be the future."

It is also for this reason that the trio get upset by how their delivery workers are sometimes treated shabbily. It can start from security guards who are mean, to shippers who scold them for being a few minutes late, says Mr Chong. Mr Lai adds: "People are very two-faced. When you see someone you think is the same class as you, you're very polite... someone from a lower class, so rude." But Mr Tan points out how there are nice customers too. "It's the little things, like sometimes they'll leave a packet of drink. That can make a person's day." I ask about their management styles.

## GOLDEN RULES

**Never do anything to unfairly benefit yourself; never do anything to unfairly put down someone else; and everything you do is for the good of the business.**

**You follow those three rules, you're golden, because we may disagree intellectually but you never question the intent of someone else.**



MR LAI CHANG WEN, on the understanding the three co-founders have when working together.

Mr Chong says he leans towards mentorship. "Generally I would play more of like the good guy," he says, but adds that this has had to change as the company grows and clearer processes and targets have to be put in place.

Mr Tan describes himself as "more objective-driven, a bit harder", but says he has had to adapt over the years, too.

Mr Chong chips in: "I would say your style is quite stern." "Objective-driven, yes," replies Mr Tan, sternly.

As for Mr Lai: "I would say there's a very big difference between empathy and sympathy. I try to have a lot of empathy, but I do not have much sympathy in the way I manage people. So I can understand why you're upset, but I may not care."

They have had heated arguments but nothing serious, as each has a clear role.

"I think maybe somewhere in the middle of the business, people start getting a bit antsy, you question each other's motives and so on. And there's always that rough patch in every relationship where you need to get a lot of trust in place," Mr Lai says.

"We always say that there are three rules in working together – never do anything to unfairly benefit yourself; never do anything to unfairly put down someone else; and everything you do is for the good of the business."

"You follow those three rules, you're golden, because we may disagree intellectually, but you never question the intent of someone else, and I think that's key."

The three are married – Mr Lai to a civil servant, Mr Tan to a HR manager and Mr Chong's wife is in the tech sector. Only Mr Tan is a father, to an eight-month-old daughter.

Besides its day-to-day delivery business, the company is working on offering tech solutions to businesses doing e-commerce.

Is a public listing on the cards? Mr Lai says: "We don't really need capital now, and markets are very choppy. So we're taking a wait-and-see approach. We will be ready for an IPO if the window is open, but no real impetus, no rush."

As we wrap up breakfast, I ask them to describe each other in one word.

They're stumped for a while. Mr Lai goes first: Bobo is "effective" and Shaun is "innovative".

Mr Tan says Chang Wen is "visionary" and Shaun is "innovative". Mr Chong describes Chang Wen as "charismatic" and Bobo as "objective".

They laugh, and seem happy enough with each other's assessments.

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## SCAN TO WATCH

Three golden rules for working together: Ninjavan co-founders. <https://str.sg/ninja22>

