

Prologue

I have three sons. All three were born in the United States and are more proficient in English than Korean. At home I speak Korean, but my sons converse in English. Having everyday conversations with my sons isn't a problem, but it isn't enough for them to thoroughly comprehend their parents' language.

My children are amazed to see my books displayed in bookshops whenever they visit South Korea. I was worried that my children – who longed to be the first people to read my books – were ultimately unable to fully comprehend them. But one day I got news that an English edition of this book was in the pipeline, and I was ecstatic. People think that this book contains stories about me, and about the business of an entrepreneur who has achieved the American dream. But the truth is: this isn't a book about my business. It is a collection of essays that illustrate, through entrepreneurial experience, how one person has realised desires that many people have.

I grew up in the East, and worked in the West after becoming an adult. I was a poor immigrant who became a person that travels the world for business. Since then, I have met countless successful people around the world, but there is no difference between East and West in how people realise their dreams. I still think that the methods for realising and managing our desires are simpler, and come from smaller places, than we think. My business has expanded several times over since this book was first published in Korean, but I still live according to the same methods and attitudes.

I hope this book will be of help, however little, to my children, and to young people in the West, in realising their dreams as they delve into the ideas with which a young immigrant – who spoke no English, and had no academic degrees or capital – built his life. I conclude with the hope that you will remember me as a thought engineer who skilfully applied the secrets of his own thinking to realise his dreams, rather than as a successful entrepreneur.

Part 1

Success Is a Product of Habit

If a wealthy person knows what poverty is, they know the beginning and end of wealth. And if they understand Pablo Picasso's words 'I'd like to live as a poor man with lots of money', they will never be ruined. I deeply respect the experience that my failures have gifted me. And I am proud of making an impressive comeback after the age of forty because of the lessons I gained from my failures. There is nothing to boast about if I hadn't failed. This is because I don't know when I will fail. There is therefore absolutely no reason to be ashamed of our failures. We should rather worry about not failing. If we draw lessons from failures, any failure can help us succeed.



1

The World's Largest Bento Box Company

The words 'The World's Largest Bento Box Company' are inscribed in large font on a black board pasted to a window east of our office. But if you look a little closer, 'Here' appears in small font at the top, and 'Was Launched Too' at the bottom. At first it seems as if only 'The World's Largest Bento Box Company' is written there, but when both the small and large texts are read together, they suggest that we have become the world's largest bento box company, and that this is where other businesses will be conceived too. Having started out with a bento box business, our company has been expanding into the food distribution and food manufacturing sectors as well as growing as a general food company.

Words have power the moment they become sound and emerge from our lips. The first chapter in the Gospel of John illustrates this principle well. Words are power. Sound gives form and meaning to words through language, so words have power the moment they are conveyed to someone or when they reach our ears. This power refers to a real, physical power. Words course through a person's thoughts before they appear to us. And when they are visible as written words, their power is demonstrated whenever we read them.

The best way to amplify the power of words is always to write them down. People who believe in the power of written words turn every desire into a symbol and carry it around with them, calling it a talisman. The superstitious

element of talismans is exaggerated, but there is no significant difference between a talisman and the words ‘Get into SNU’¹ inscribed above a desk.

I am someone who believes in the power of words. I believe that the power of words that are spoken once doesn’t dissipate until they are forgotten. To constantly endow words with power and ensure this power doesn’t dissipate, I handwrite words within a frame and then display them, or I construct suitable images and turn them into a poster. This is the first thing I do to actualise a new personal goal or a new company goal. I have achieved innumerable goals by always doing this.

This was also what I did when we purchased our current office building. Early one morning – days after we had viewed the building for sale, and before we had financed the purchase – I stopped by surreptitiously, took a picture, added the words ‘Our Future Office Building’, enlarged them, and put it on display. We are now working at lovely desks in that stylish building, some of us wearing ties. It is inconceivable that only a few years ago our employees were working six to a desk in a warehouse building. Without taking out any loans, we bought the newest building we could find. It’s surrounded by sturdy fences and comes with a lake, a vegetable field of a few thousand square feet, a garden that could fit an upmarket coffee shop, the most luxurious office furniture and desks, an abundance of cabinets, and a warehouse that can load sixty cargo containers. This all started with a picture taken surreptitiously one morning.

The product of my experience is that I can achieve anything by constructing an environment that constantly stimulates my thinking. Some time ago, I created a long email password: 300storesweeklysales1milliondollars. The reason was that after starting this business, I aspired to achieve weekly sales



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1 Translator’s note: SNU is Seoul National University. It is one of the most prestigious universities in South Korea.



of \$1 million from three hundred stores. By repeating these words multiple times a day, every day, I was influenced by their power.

As a result, I never forgot what our company goals were. However, I changed my password in 2012. I had achieved those goals and was ready to set new ones. My new goals were three thousand stores and annual sales of \$1 billion. Shortly after setting these goals, I received requests to open hundreds of stores in Colorado, California, Washington, Oregon and Alaska, and there was a queue of requests to open stores in most of America's prominent supermarkets. If these requests continue, our annual sales could surpass \$1 billion. I might need to retain a long password for just a few more years to reach our goals of three thousand stores and annual sales of \$1 billion. Our company, which achieved annual sales of \$5 million in 2013 thanks to a lengthy password, is now expecting not tenfold but several hundredfold growth.

I have always liked farming. When someone asks what I do in the company, I tell them I set goals, put them on posters or in frames, and then display them. When they ask what I *really* do, I tell them I farm and drive the tractor around the company's back garden. Although the CEO's work is unseen, our company has been anticipating several hundredfold growth during the past few years. If people ask me the secret to this, I tell them about the trivial methods that help me focus constantly on my goals by engraving them on my mind through repetition. And then I always feel that they just plainly don't believe me, because they invariably think there must be other secret methods. It's exasperating how often I must repeat this to those who haven't experienced how great the power of visible goals can be.

2

How to Realise Good Dreams

Would you believe me if I told you that an egg was worth \$100 million?

6 November 2009 was the day before my meeting with Charles Woods at the Kroger Co.'s headquarters in Ohio.

When I woke up, I vividly recalled the dream I had had the night before. I was stretching out my stiff back after working vigorously on a farm when three hunting men approached from afar. 'What are they doing on someone else's farm without permission?' I wondered, and I asked if they were having fun, but they said they weren't having much fun and shrugged their shoulders. However, behind them came a fox whose neck was chained. The fox, which was clearly chasing after the hunters, looked terrified.

They entrusted the fox to me and then went on their way. As I warily embraced the fierce-looking fox, its wounds – the cause of which was unknown to me – healed. The fox's face became slightly distorted because of the new scars. All the while, it folded its front legs obediently and remained in my embrace. It was wonderful to embrace a wild animal so freely, and it was pitiable too, so I was still embracing it gently when I woke up.

My meeting with Charles concluded half with expectation and half with apprehension. Charles is the manager of the deli division at Kroger, which owns more than two thousand five hundred stores. He wanted to select four companies to manage more than eight hundred bento box stores in supermarkets across the entire United States. These bento box stores



were currently being run by eighteen companies. While deciding which four companies to select, he met with us to learn more about the size and structure of our company.

If we were selected out of the eighteen companies as one of the final four, we could feast on a twenty-five percent market share in America. Conversely, if we were eliminated, we could lose seventy percent of our sales. I thought we were better than any competitor in the southern United States, or in the whole country. But the nature of our business meant that there were plenty of variables, and I couldn't feel entirely confident unless Charles completely ruled out any form of pressure or misinformation.

'Yes. Crisis is opportunity,' I thought. I was mulling over how to resolve this problem after returning from the meeting when I recalled my dream from the night before. I then designed a project for our company to seize this opportunity and take another leap forward. I christened this project 'Operation Capture Red Fox'. The reason was that I interpreted the fox entrusted to me by the hunters in the dream as their bento box business.

First I sat at my desk and searched the Internet for pictures. I found a picture of four men with a small wooden box before them, posing as if they were about to swing the poles they held in their hands; next I found a suitable picture of a fox. Using CorelDRAW, I combined the two pictures into a passably nice image that resembled a film poster. I titled it 'Operation Capture Red Fox' and added the words 'Cincinnati Film Festival 2010 Best Picture Award', complete with laurel leaves around the words. Since it was a film, I started off in the lower part of the poster with Jim Kim as director, and I randomly wrote other roles next to our employees' names, so it was undoubtedly a film poster.

I printed the poster and pasted it onto every door in the office. Then I started to do what I have always done whenever I want to be sure of succeeding at something. As I had done this exactly four times in my life,

and had succeeded remarkably on all four occasions, I had no doubt that I would succeed stunningly on this fifth occasion.

What I did was to repeat my goals a hundred times a day, for a hundred days. My goals were clear and specific: three hundred stores across the United States, and annual sales of \$50 million with weekly sales of \$1 million. I also included the goal of operating more than fifty premium stores already being operated by Kroger. We had barely got our hands on just one of those stores, but was anything impossible?

On 22 February it was a hundred days since I started repeating these three goals. It was the 102nd day since I had started, to be exact: I had skipped two days. Meanwhile, what had transpired? On the ninety-sixth day, a company that had treated us coldly when we had called them during the early days of our business contacted us; and on the same day, a company in Atlanta, Georgia, which hadn't scheduled a meeting with us despite our knocking on their door for the past three years, reached out to us. And, finally, on the 104th day, we heard directly from Kroger's vice-president.

This was the process by which vice-president Jeff Burt contacted us. One day, we heard that Kroger's CEO David Dillon would be visiting a store in Houston, Texas, with sixteen regional presidents and key executives. We had a store there. Our employees and I acted swiftly. We first searched the Internet for the names and pictures of Kroger executives and produced pamphlets to introduce our company; then we set up a food-tasting booth at the front of our store and waited for them to pass by.

As soon as the CEO and regional presidents arrived, our employees verified their physical descriptions by phone, and then steadfastly introduced the company and handed out pamphlets to every one of them. Some regional presidents recognised that our products were superior and showed a keen interest. One of them was Bruce Lucia, president of the Atlanta office, which we had been badgering for the past three years. But the vice-president of the company's deli division, Burt, didn't show up in the end. If we had got hold

