

## Sons who took over the business, and succeeded

WITH a handshake from his father, Dr Robert Yap inherited his old man's transport business when he was in his 20s.

"I was joking when I told him that I'll take over the family business if he retires and let me do things my way," said Dr Yap, who turned 60 last year.

But his father, Mr Yap Chwee Hock, took his comment seriously and left his eldest son the family business in 1977.

After more than 30 years under Dr Yap's leadership, YCH Group has grown to become a leading supply chain and logistics firm in the Asia-Pacific region. It serves customers including Dell, Samsung, ExxonMobil and Unilever.

The second of nine siblings recounted his succession story at the launch of the Business Families Institute, or BFI@SMU, on Wednesday. The institute aims to help family-run businesses do better through shared experiences and resources.

His sister, Ms Catherine Yap, looks after the finances while operations are managed by one of his brothers, Mr Roger Yap.

Dr Yap has five children of his own and hopes that one of them will be interested in taking over the family enterprise.

"I want to give my children the freedom to do what they want, but deep in my heart I wish that my family members and children will be running the business," said the silver-haired yet youthful Dr Yap.

He likened the unwillingness to let go of the family business to F&N's sale of Asia Pacific Breweries, which makes Tiger Beer.

He said: "I felt the heartache when we sold off the national brand (Tiger Beer). It's like when you grow something and it's still competitive, you wouldn't want to sell it, right?"

Dr Yap hopes that BFI@SMU can offer business families advice so that they need not sell their enterprises because of the lack of a succession plan.

Another panellist was Dr Stephen Riady, executive chairman of Overseas United Enterprise.

He is the second son of Indonesian tycoon Mochtar Riady, who built a family empire which now develops hotels, resorts, malls and residential projects.

Taking a leaf out of his father's book, Dr Riady is putting his son through the same regimen he went through by working from the bottom up.

"Future generations of successors must learn to cope with the emotional challenges and develop a fighting spirit.

"A sales job is never easy. People will criticise you and say you are lousy.

"But you will get used to it and won't complain as easily when you join the family business," said Dr Riady to the 350-strong crowd at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

Another lesson he learnt from his father was to never leave any family members behind.

"Although my sisters are not directly involved in the family business... I will let them learn the ropes and seek opportunities within the company," he said.

Dr Riady added that he does not want his siblings to be "just a worker" after helping out in the family enterprise for 30 to 40 years.

He has since helped one of his younger sisters and her family start a coconut plantation business in Indonesia.

**RACHEL SCULLY**