

What Does It Take To Get Rich?

By Charles Lowenhaupt

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In my experience, getting rich takes vision, hard work, and good luck. Wealth inheritors have the luck, but they often lack the vision and hard work. So preserving wealth is a whole different matter from creating it.

I have been very fortunate to have known wealth creators, either directly or through their descendants. One of the most impressive I ever met was a Japanese industrialist who I had the privilege of meeting as a teenager.

He is still alive today and almost one hundred years old, and his life is instructive about what is possible.

Born With Nothing

He was born on an island just opening to the world in a village without electricity or running water. He lived through Japan becoming the second mightiest military power in the world and fought in her army during World War II.

He survived the most complete desolation and humiliation the world has ever seen. Yet, shortly afterward, he built a business that grew as Japan became the second most powerful economy in the world. It is remarkable enough that one person could live through such an era.

Shortly after the war ended, he bought a small plastics manufacturing company and by the 1960's, he was supplying plastic casings to some of the manufacturers we Americans had barely heard of – Sony, Sharp, Panasonic and National.

His company grew with them and as a family company opening manufacturing plants near theirs in Japan, then in Malaysia and finally in China. He and his son built an important company with manufacturing, suppliers, and customers from around the world. By 1975, he and his wife had become world travelers as he conducted business everywhere he visited.

Real Vision

That man had a vision beyond the Empire and beyond anything his parents could have imagined. It was a vision of community and helping people. He explained that a business must be run in good times and bad. It should not be sold or closed because “we have a duty to our employees to ensure their employment.”

In 1990, he took me to see his factory an hour outside Shanghai. It was a modern factory employing many laborers in a village without other industry. I asked him whether, as a young man, he could ever have imagined opening a factory in a village like this in China.

He confided to me then what he said he had never told his family or anyone else. He had been part of the forces occupying China during the war and had been stationed in this very village. At the time, he resolved that someday he would give back to the village from which he and the Japanese had taken so much. He is a man with a vision of a global community.

He is the man I call my Japanese father because as a teenager in 1964, the year of the Tokyo Olympics I lived with his family as an exchange student. He showed me around Japan and never talked of the war. He was willing to let me see any of Japan other than Hiroshima.

His life is a reminder that with a great vision, you can get rich, retain your humanity and give back to community.

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