



**ACCOUNTING GURU: President Benigno Aquino III (right) greets SGV founder Washington Sycip, who celebrated his 90th birthday at the Makati Shangri-La hotel last Thursday. □ (Photo by Jay Morales)**

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu once said, “The way to do is to be.”

As I interpret it, what Lao Tzu meant simply is that for something to be accomplished.

We would have to make it happen.

And this is what inspired me, 65 years ago, to start a one-man accounting firm shortly after the liberation of Manila when World War II ended.

I had big dreams but I was also realistic enough to acknowledge that I had to take it one step at a time.

I had spent a great part of the war in India as a cryptographer, breaking codes of intercepted Japanese communications.

My doctoral studies in Columbia University had been unceremoniously interrupted but I knew that I had to make myself useful.

Decoding enemy messages in the middle of nowhere may not sound attractive to most but it gave me a perspective on how, in time, the world will become smaller through communication links.

My experience there taught me that what would be considered remote will eventually be connected to the mainstream.

Players in different industries will come from large, emerging and small economies; this makes it essential to speak a common financial language.

On the day Japan surrendered, code messages stopped and our unit was sent back to New York.

I was excited to return to the Philippines to see my father who had been released from Muntinlupa Prison.

Despite the war and its physical devastation, the country ranked second to Japan in terms of education and human resources.

This boded well, indeed.

It was with this optimism of a 25-year-old that I envisioned what was to become SGV & Co.

I saw a Filipino professional services firm that would, at first, help in the reconstruction of businesses damaged by war.

It would be a firm run by Filipinos at a time when American and British firms dominated the field.

In March 1946, I opened W. SyCip & Co. with a desk in my brother's law office in the Trade & Commerce Building in Binondo, one of the few structures that survived the fighting in the city.

Thus began the first step of a journey fraught with many challenges, much learning and significant contributions to society at large.

In 1946, I was concurrently the senior partner, receptionist, messenger and janitor.

My people philosophy then was simple: hire the best and brightest and assure them that the firm will be a “meritocracy” for all the staff.

This was combined with a retention philosophy that also sounded just as simple: provide the best training possible.

The formula worked well and soon enough, we not only needed more desks but required a new building to house us.

Then, on our fifth year, we opened our first branch in Cebu.

Eventually, the quality of SGV professionals will be replicated around Asia when the SGV Group was formed and became the first truly regional Asian firm.

My partners and I were always forward looking.

In the early 1980s, for example, we were the first to have a practice called contract services under our consulting group.

This was the precursor of what is now popularly known as outsourcing and which has become a major Philippine industry that will employ over 700,000 Filipinos by the end of 2011.

The largest outsourcing company which we started will, in fact, have 25,000 people by the end of the year and many of its alumni are now with other outsourcing firms.

## **Lifetime learning**

Lifelong learning is a value that has been ingrained in SGV's corporate culture.

Besides the training one receives on the job, it was the first professional services firm to institutionalize its training program.

In addition, as early as the 1950s, staff members were already being sent abroad as scholars to the best graduate schools.

Since the Asian Institute of Management was established in the late 1960s, generations of SGV professionals have graduated from the school.

## **SGV value**

Continuous knowledge breeds excellence — another SGV value.

In a sense, SGV had been global even before the term became fashionable.

Its standards have always been set against international benchmarks.

While I no longer have any involvement whatsoever in running the firm, I understand that the current leadership continues to invest in learning tools, information technology and other resources for the firm to remain relevant to the public.

While training and excellence have been hallmarks of SGV, there is one overarching value that I believe differentiates SGV and that is integrity.

For a professional services firm, it is reputation that matters.

From Day 1, it is instilled in every professional that integrity should be built into one's actions, work, decisions and relationships.

It is a weighty challenge for anyone, particularly in our society, but it can be done.

To borrow another Chinese proverb, "A clear conscience never fears midnight knocking."

Values such as excellence and integrity are intangible assets that define a person or company.

Breathing such values into life is nothing less than hard work.

SGV was built on this — that work cannot wait because market forces are so dynamic and that any inaction can cause impediments even to the progress of the nation.

In fact, it has been my enduring belief that success can only be significant if it redounds on the advancement of other individuals, a community or even the country.

Well into the 20th year of SGV, we established the SGV Foundation to address the social responsibility projects of the firm.

Later, I would help organize the Philippine Business for Social Progress.

These two entities continue to be engaged in activities that give back to society and to aid in uplifting the bottom groups.

And since my retirement from SGV in 1996, I have focused my energies on pressing social needs like improvements in public education, microfinance, entrepreneurship and public health.

In the second part of this article, I will share my thoughts about these advocacies and how every Filipino can contribute to these causes.

For now, allow me to leave you with this thought:

“It is not the knowing that is difficult, but the doing.”

***(Note: This appeared in the June 27, 2011 issue of BusinessWorld.)***