

Rotman Alumni on the Move

by Carol Sevitt

Dominique Au-Yeung — the king of blinds

With “blind” ambition and “shady” surroundings, Dominique Au-Yeung could only work one place — Hunter Douglas — one of the world’s leading manufacturers of high-end custom window coverings and a major manufacturer of architectural products. It took Au-Yeung, MBA ’92, only seven years to move from controller in the firm’s Canadian operation in 1987 to president of Hunter Douglas Canada in 1994.

One of the company’s claims to fame is its development of the modern metal venetian blind about 60 years ago. Headquartered in The Netherlands, the firm comprises 136 companies with 57 manufacturing and 79 assembly plants and marketing organizations in more than 80 countries. Worldwide, the company employs 13,500 people, with approximately 600 in Canada.

Originally from Hong Kong, Au-Yeung emigrated to Ottawa at 17 and moved to Toronto after completing his BA at Carleton University. He worked for Coca Cola Canada, Airwick Canada (where he became controller at age 25), and Reckitt & Colman Canada before joining Hunter Douglas.

Au-Yeung has maintained a passion for learning throughout his career. In order to upgrade his financial skills, he completed his CGA in 1988, and two years later enrolled in the EMBA program at the Rotman School. It was a hectic time in his life: “My wife Debbie was studying for her CMA and holding down a demanding job. I was putting in about 40 hours at school and 50 to 60 hours at work, and we had a 10-month-old daughter,” he explains. “For two years we had to compete for study time. We learned excellent time management skills and also built a really strong relationship. It really strengthened our marriage,” he adds. Au-Yeung and Debbie now have three children — Kristin, Melanie, and Simon.

But his studies did not end with his Rotman MBA — two years ago Au-Yeung took the Advanced Management Program at Harvard Business School. The program brings together senior executives from all over the world. Since many of the participants in the group were CEOs of multi-billion-dollar companies, Au-Yeung felt very privileged to be interacting with them. Although there were differences in levels of seniority, he says there were many similarities among members of the group. “I believe we all had two things in common,” he explains. “The first is that we were all very nice people; I think to be a good leader you have to have a big heart. The second is that none of us would back away from a problem — at the end of the day, we were all willing to make the tough choices.”

Au-Yeung not only believes in lifelong learning for himself, but he also promotes it within his company by encouraging employees to expand their skills and knowledge. “We really focus on helping employees tap into their potential by taking



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courses and attending in-house training sessions,” he says. He has even taught in-house courses himself: One such course was Edward De Bono’s “Six Thinking Hats” designed to help employees become more creative thinkers. Another was the “Balanced Scorecard” management system (based on the book *Balanced Scorecard* by Robert Kaplan and David Norton). Au-Yeung strongly believes in the book’s main message — that people must look beyond financial performance in order to judge a company. Also important are customer satisfaction; processes (e.g., quality management and speed of delivery), and learning and growth. “When I went to Harvard in 1997, I met Robert Kaplan and he was quite impressed that I actually use his book. I’m staying in touch with him and he has been a good mentor.”

Au-Yeung prides himself on his collaborative leadership style. He appreciates participation and prefers not to impose solutions. “I like to ask a lot of questions to make people think,” he reveals.

He has a simple philosophy formula for business success:

1. Have a vision — see the big picture.
2. Have clearly stated expectations. Translate your vision into action through setting goals and evaluating performance against these goals.
3. Cultivate and maintain excellent relationships among employees and with the outside world.
4. Celebrate!

Au-Yeung believes that celebrations are a crucial part of building and maintaining positive morale. At Hunter Douglas Canada he held barbecues to launch long weekends, bowling parties, and new employee breakfasts. He also made a point of celebrating good performance by the company. “Fortunately, we have celebrated a lot because our performance has been very good,” he says.

Au-Yeung has just received another promotion and recently moved to San Jose, California to manage the Northern California Division of Hunter Douglas. Moving his family to California and starting another job will pose a new “window of opportunity” for Au-Yeung, but with his time-management skills, big heart, and love of learning, he’ll be king of California shades in no time!