

Pay It Forward: "Energy and Time are Your Greatest Commodities"

By Tasha Norman | May 23, 2022 at 11:51 AM

Christopher Okada, CEO and founder of Okada & Co. in New York, NY.

Christopher ("Chris") Okada is CEO of Okada & Co., a multifaceted commercial real estate development, management and brokerage firm based in New York City. Since 2002, Okada has focused on tenant representation of small and medium-sized companies, as well as the sales and leasing of middle-market buildings across Manhattan.



Chris Okada, CEO of Okada & Company. Courtesy photo

What has been the biggest challenge in your particular role and how have you overcome those obstacles?

The biggest challenge in my role as founder and owner of a company is making decisions and living with the fact that I was wrong at times. This could be hiring someone unfit, the direction which I wanted to take the company, making decisions without having all of the information, or simply following my gut and it being wrong. When another opportunity comes up with the same problem

or similar features, and I need to make a decision, there's a "what if I'm wrong again" second-guessing that comes with the decision-making process. I've overcome these obstacles by giving myself a little more time to make a decision, gathering more information, consulting with others, and believing that the outcome will turn out positive.

What about your current role/position at the company are you most happy with?

When I was 19 years old, I was asked by my college girlfriend what I wanted to do with my life. I said, "I'd like to start my own company and own a building in Manhattan." She thought that was a ridiculous answer for some reason. Fast forward 6 years, I founded Okada & Company, LLC. This was one of the best decisions I've ever made. I am the captain of my ship and all the good and bad that comes with it. Our company isn't very large (i.e. 10-11 people), but I love making money with my team. The most rewarding thing so far was being right. One day it may not be right for me to continue to run or own the company, but over the last 16 years, it's been great.

What is the best piece of advice you have received that has helped you succeed in your industry? Also, do you have any advice specifically for the next generation?

The best piece of advice I ever received was not advice, but instruction. I worked summers on Long Island as a financial advisor sales trainee. Essentially, my job was to cold call investors from around the country and try to convince them to invest with the company I was with. From 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM I called High Net Worth Individuals – in the morning I called London and at night I'd be calling California. I wasn't necessarily the best cold caller, but I learned that through repetition, and reaching out to thousands of people in a week, I could bring in business. It was a game and this learned skill I brought with me into real estate. Not being afraid to ask for business and doing it over and over is what allowed me to become who I am today.

The next generation of deal makers in CRE should 100% still hit the phones every single day, however, also implement a social media, email, and networking campaign to go with it. Energy and time are your greatest commodities, and use them to make contact with tens of thousands of people.

Would you advise any younger person to begin a career in CRE?

Absolutely – while this can be a demanding and often complex career, it's an incredibly rewarding one. I would advise any young person looking to begin a career in CRE to look for a mentor who has already established themselves and be their shadow. Follow them around, pick their brain, ask questions – learn everything you can about the landscape and the ins and outs of CRE. I was fortunate enough to have my father as my mentor. He immigrated to the United States from Japan in 1967 and worked odd jobs before becoming a commercial real estate agent. He constantly pursued unique opportunities and worked hard to become one of the most sought-after brokers in NYC, so I was lucky enough to have a mentor who I could learn from each day.

Please share with us a surprising component of your unique journey.

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The best lesson I've learned that has played a unique part in my overall journey is the understanding that every deal counts. At the height of the pandemic, when the office market was at an all-time low, it was extremely important to entertain any and all inquiries and maintain relationships with current clients. I took every call and meeting possible, encouraging my team to do the same – reasoning that every deal, no matter how big or small, counts. I believe that mentality helped lead us through the past two years, and ultimately, to where we are today.

Now that the office market is picking up again, not only are we doing more deals, but we're exploring new tools that we think will be instrumental in the future, such as cryptocurrency and NFTs. While it's still an evolving trendscape, it's one that Okada & Company is continuously learning about so that we can be thought leaders and experts in an area that could soon become the future of CRE.

In your opinion, what takeaways did we learn from the COVID-19 crisis?

Embracing the changing nature of office is necessary. Even before the pandemic, office space was constantly evolving. Today, as more companies shift to hybrid strategies, the purpose of the office has changed. We are seeing demand for smaller footprints and flexible floorplans that can accommodate the changing number of employees who are onsite at any given time. Companies are seeking collaborative spaces and social environments where workers can get together, but also stay safe — so health and wellbeing remain a key priority too. While there may be fewer employees on a day-to-day basis, there is greater utilization of today's office space.

What three words or phrases would you use to describe your work mindset?

I am definitely known for these 3 phrases, which are all over my social media:

1. Always Be Closing – Self-explanatory.
2. Every Deal Counts – As mentioned before, \$1 becomes \$100 becomes \$1000 becomes \$10,000 becomes \$1M becomes \$10M, etc.
3. Betting Big on NYC – When everyone is against NYC and says NYC is dead, we are doing the opposite and are buying office buildings and apartment buildings at steep discounts.