THINK BIG
THINK STRATEGICALLY
WHY HR NEEDS TO STAY AHEAD OF THE CURVE
PAGES 6–7

SORRY
seems to be the hardest word—
but one we must all use more!
Pg 03

HAMMERS & NAILS
Strategic leaders and
their expanded toolboxes
Pg 05

BANKER TO CHEF
Strategy shift—at a personal level
Pg 10

YOUTH WISDOM
A young man learns
and redefines “success”
Pg 11

think big
think strategically

Why HR needs to stay ahead of the curve
Pages 6–7

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Pg 03

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their expanded toolboxes
Pg 05

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Strategy shift—at a personal level
Pg 10

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and redefines “success”
Pg 11

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SATURDAY 4 APRIL 2015
THE LACKLUSTRE HAMMER

LAST week, we shared some insights from a recent strategy & study, which looked at how CEOs have evolved over the past century. One of the key points was that the long term strategic plan might be a thing of the past – and that leaders have to be more agile and adaptable in a business environment quite different from 1914. That said, the ability to develop and execute a strategy – though condensated in time – are skills we still need to develop. Studies have indicated that “94% of CEOs have entered a new sector, or considered it, in the past three years” (PwC). In this issue, we look at:

1. How CEOs can take their companies towards rapid growth and diversification?
2. How strategic human resources (HR) partners can work alongside their CEOs to prepare the existing workforce and to attract new talent to fuel the growth?

To start, we look at a strategy some might shy away from. The art of saying “sorry”. Roslan Thiran talks about the power of an apology, the lasting consequences of not offering one, and its impact on business relationships.

So often heard of unamiable individuals, John Baybay underlines the importance of letting go of that “Golden Hammer” and for managers to move from being masters of the functional domain to that of a strategic one.

Sandy Clarke is back, and this time with lessons learnt from CEOs who have grown their businesses while working alongside their HR teams to make it happen. He also shares 10 key points that HR managers of SMES (small and medium enterprises) should know as their businesses grow.

Putting the evolving role of HR under a microscope, Daniel Russell identifies the gaps that need to be addressed when transforming HR to be strategic partners and change agents. In the upskilling of HR professionals, he also stresses the critical starting points.

Then there’s Zoe Rai, former central banker who decided to change his strategy at a very personal level, to embrace quite a different career – it certainly took courage to go from currency to culinary!

Marcus Lim, quite generously, shares the misadventures of his youth and how his single-minded unyielding strategy to success led him to top spot, albeit a lonely one. On a positive note, at age 17, he learnt an important lesson many working adults still struggle with.

From the winning team of RSA x Genovasi Malaysia Awards in the “Encouraging Social Enterprise” category, Mandy Choong talks about design thinking, as well as her aspirations to contribute to a better world.

In Movie Wisdom, Caroline shares the inspiring story of a young woman who struggled with personal loss, sunk to the depths of despair, and then decided one day that she really needed to make a change – and that she did.

Have a fabulous week!

KAREN NEOH
Editor
leaderonomics.com

OPRAH WINFREY - PROOF THAT BIG DREAMERS CAN MAKE IT

By TARA THIAGARAJAN
editor@leaderonomics.com

OPRAH Winfrey is without a doubt, one of the most influential people of our time. Of course, she would not be who she is today if not for her past struggles. People are bound to face failure at least once in their lives. Winfrey is an ambitious, driven individual who continues to not only maintain the name she has made for herself, but also uses her power to give back to society.

She faced many obstacles on her road to achieving her dreams, but was able to overcome them and succeed.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

One of her biggest achievements to this day definitely has to be her world-renowned daytime talk show, The Oprah Winfrey Show, which aired for nearly 25 years.

Although, at the time of its conception, a talk show hosted by an African American woman was almost unheard of. Winfrey’s hard-hitting, attention-grabbing topics brought in millions of viewers every week.

Her determination to succeed despite being a minority on television shows us that she did not let that apparent obstacle stop her from being the best TV journalist she could be.

She continued to follow her passion despite being fired from her previous job as a newscaster for appearing too “different” from her white counterparts on the network.

CONCLUSION

Winfrey never fails to inspire millions of individuals in the world with all the work she has done. It goes to show that as long as you are capable of overcoming your obstacles and continuously working for a cause you believe in, you too can turn your big dreams into reality.

DO NOT STAGNATE

Yes, Winfrey did rise to fame because of her talk show, but that is not all she is known for.

To this day, she continues to work not only as a journalist, producer, and chief executive officer of her own TV network, but also as a philanthropist.

She continues to help young, unfortunate children the world over. One highly notable example of this was when she founded and opened the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa.

She aims to help impoverished, bright young girls by giving them educational opportunities that would otherwise be out of their reach due to their socioeconomic status.

Her continuous involvement in her work after the end of the talk show that defined her career shows that Winfrey has the determination to always dream of bigger and better things.

Now that she has done her part raising awareness of social, political, economic, and medical issues through her shows, she works to help resolve those issues.

The opinions expressed in this career guide are those of the writers or the people they quoted and not necessarily those of Leaderonomics.

If you have any suggestions or feedback on our content, get in touch with the Leaderonomics team at editor@leaderonomics.com

For advertising and advertorials, please contact Pravin Kumar at pravin.kumar@leaderonomics.com or +6011 2377 7850
A few years ago, I witnessed a scary sight. I was walking by the side of a road when a car suddenly cut out from nowhere into the main road, almost killing a motorcyclist. The motorcyclist was amazingly alert and miraculously swerved away. The car stopped and the motorcyclist immediately went over to the driver and started screaming.

The driver was a young woman who was obviously shaken by the whole incident. The motorcyclist was furious and yelled in extreme anger at her and she tried to explain that she really did not see him. Finally, she burst out in tears and exclaimed, “What do you want from me?”

For the first time in about five minutes, there was silence. The motorcyclist was lost for words. I started thinking about a similar situation that occurred to me when a reckless driver almost hit me. I never got to meet him and I only remember yelling inside the car in rage. I wondered if this same question was to the driver and started screaming.

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Would have wanted from the reckless driver? After the situation in front of me change history. Is apologising. No one is trying to douse the flame of anger.

There are huge financial benefits to saying sorry. In 2001, University of Michigan Health System encouraged health workers to report medical mistakes. As part of the programme rollout, doctors had to tell patients and their families about errors made, beginning with a sincere apology followed by explaining in detail how the error occurred and what steps were being taken to remedy the issues.

Instead of getting more lawsuits and legal claims, there was a reduction in the number of compensation claims and lawsuits and a significant reduction in overall legal costs.

Research shows that apologies can result in better outcomes for wrongdoers in a number of legal settings. A further study shows that judges in courtrooms are influenced by offenders who say sorry. A landmark study by the University of Illinois law professors Jennifer Robbennolt and Robert Lawless, showed that in bankruptcy cases, saying sorry often resulted in judges being more lenient.

So what does this mean for you as a leader in your organisation? Look out for part 2: The Apologetic CEO.

By ROSHAN THIRAN
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CEOs and everyone need to learn to apologise

THE MAGICAL APOLOGY

A few years ago, I met up with Marshall Goldsmith, the world’s foremost executive coach, whom I interviewed for our The Leaderonomics Show. One of the sidebar discussions we had was on the power of an apology.

He writes that “I regard apologising as the most magical, healing, restorative gesture human beings can make.” Marshall goes on to suggest that “a person’s refusal to express regret and to apologise” as one of the top 20 transactional flaws in business.

There is a lot of anger in the world. Today from frustrated employees, enraged customers, upset citizens and business leaders with pent-up anger from non-performing organisations.

“Load of anger everywhere, yet no one is apologising. No one is trying to douse the flame of anger.”

Instead, everyone is triggering new flames by being defensive, argumentative and self-absorbed. And this is happening in many businesses today.

THE POWER OF AN APOLOGY

About a decade ago, a large local bank made a mistake on my transaction. I tried to rectify the mistake by phone, but to no avail. I went over to the bank to resolve it, but instead of having a conversation, an argument ensued.

I was livid as I thought it would be simple to clear up the issue. Instead, the people at the bank became defensive and insisted that I had to go through a bureaucratic nightmare for what was simply a mistake made by the bank. And as this ensued, the hostility and anger grew.

After quietly pondering the whole episode, I resolved never to do any banking with it. Till today, I refuse to even entertain any personal banking request with it. Till today, I refuse to even entertain any personal banking request with it. Till today, I refuse to even entertain any personal banking request with it. Till today, I refuse to even entertain any personal banking request with it.

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SERVICE design thinking has become an innovative approach used by companies and organizations to address societal problems. Although the practice of service design is still making its debut, the service industry is hot. The service industry covers almost every aspect of our daily lives, in either tangible or intangible ways, from buying products in shopping malls to taking public transport or studying with an education provider.

DISCOVERING SERVICE DESIGN

So, what does a service designer do? Normally, when a problem or issue arises, for example when patients at the general hospital complain about the long wait for check-ups, the service designer is one of the first to be called up to try and address the problem. The service designer would collaborate with people from other disciplines and carry out research before identifying the factors that are causing the delay, and then going on to design a solution. What they do is to basically connect the end-user (people who are going for the check-ups) and the service provider (the hospital) in more effective ways to make sure everything runs smoothly, and therefore users are provided with a pleasant experience which in turn would help build trust.

In a recent competition organised by Genovasi and the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, my group and I acknowledged the potential of design thinking in shaping society and creating a better future.

Among all the creative entries, our idea was awarded the best prize for the category of encouraging social entrepreneurship. Our team (there are five of us) were second-year students from KBU International College, pursuing our degree for graphic design. It was the very first time we had been introduced to the concept of design thinking. During a workshop at the Genovasi’s headquarters in Petaling Jaya, we were taught how to formulate effective solutions to common problems. We were taught that a solution sometimes does not need to be fancy or complicated, it should be user-centric and practical. We applied what we learnt from the workshop, into the ‘Encouraging Leaderonomics.com’ email editor@leaderonomics.com, saturday 4 April 2015 SOCIAL RANGERS

WHAT SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IS

Understanding Social Entrepreneurship

According to our chosen brief, we recognised that the challenge of this project was to cultivate a network of social entrepreneurs and to also create a system to support and encourage their growth. Before stepping into data research, it was very important for us to get an understanding of social entrepreneurship and what social entrepreneurs do.

To summarise, social entrepreneurs are people who use innovative business techniques to solve societal problems, and who do not normally focus on profit. For example, the Embrace project, founded by Jane Chen has solved the troubling issue of newborns dying of hypothermia in developing countries by creating a low-cost baby incubator called the Embrace Warmer. Another example is the KIPP Knowledge Is Power Programme, founded by Richard Barth that runs on a simple idea: Keep kids longer in school so they can learn more. KIPP provides education services to kids from underserved communities with one goal – to bring everyone to and through higher education level.

Our Strategic Thinking Process

We contacted a few local social entrepreneurs to collect information. We were so privileged to have the chance to speak with the chief executive officer of Leaderonomics, Pandemic and representatives from SOLS 24/7.

Sharing their insights, we witnessed their driving force to contribute to society. These social entrepreneurs are fighting for a change so the world can be a better place.

However, working in non-profit centred companies also brought them difficulties, such as funding issues, manpower difficulties, etc.

But to see their commitment to serve the community, we were inspired even more to work harder to create a system that would support them.

After knowing the entrepreneur’s side of stories, we wanted to listen to the voice of the community. We conducted random interviews and discovered that a huge number of people do not know what social entrepreneurship is.

Moreover, we discovered that Malaysians are constantly busy with their jobs and have no time or inclination for social work. Some even have prejudices on volunteering. The name itself suggests a concept of doing good during the weekend, which seems to alienate people’s worries about their commitment to social activities.

Working adults are apprehensive of over-commitment. They do not want social work to interfere with their daily routines. Therefore, the idea is to contribute only on weekends.

However, nothing starts without clear understanding. Participants are first encouraged to learn by watching videos and reading articles written by professionals on social entrepreneurship.

Next, they are referred to social entrepreneurship activities that are being organised by individuals or groups in their vicinity, and may register to participate.

For every participation and engagement, participants would gain points, which are tallied by the Weekend Heroes Ranking System.

This point system builds up personal portfolio which can later be downloaded in document form and used as supplementary information for job interviews or to secure loans.

Through implementation of this system, we hope to change public perception towards social work, and therefore widen the chances of social enterprises in connecting with underserved communities.

“IT WORKED!”

During the Genovasi competition, our idea was recognised by judges from strong backgrounds, and we were very honoured.

When I was preparing for the presentation of the Weekend Heroes idea, I was not very confident as it seemed too simple: encouraging people by rewarding them, and helping entrepreneurs by connecting them with people.

However after winning the category, my group and I realised that a solution does not need to be fancy or complicated to solve issues.

The evolving economy nowadays has made it possible for service design thinkers to transform the world!
INSIDE an old dilapidated drawer on the roof top floor of an old brownstone in Clinton Hills, Brooklyn New York, you will find an old butter knife, the proverbial “Golden Hammer”, so bent and chipped out of shape that it is easy to surmise that it had a long and useful life.

It was in college when I cross-enrolled at Pratt (which was heaven once you get in, but a nightmare when you got out of its gates). The same goes with Fordham in the Bronx. This was after all New York City in the 90s.

The worn butter knife has been used to open cans, fix bicycles, threaten partners and open doors that had keys locked in. It was simply indispensable.

I remember having to go into a roommate’s room with the butter knife in hand ready to change the channel of an old black and white TV that had one of the dials fallen off, leaving a slot into which the butter knife fits and ready to twist with the slotted peg.

ONE SIZE FITS ALL?

Unfortunately, we sometimes become too attached to the “Golden Hammer” that seems to be the tool for everything.

So goes the adage: “If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail”. It is often said that it was quoted anywhere from Mark Twain, Baruch, Kaplan to Maslow. The behaviour is all too common with the story attached.

“That if you had given a boy a hammer, then you will find that everything he encounters needs pounding.” Kaplan describes the behaviour under the “Law of the Instrument” and to which everybody calls “The Golden Hammer”.

There are a lot of Golden Hammers in the office where masses of mid-managers tend to hold on for dear life. The point is that people and especially managers tend to get attached to tools that have always worked for them.

It could only be described as an over-attachment to something that they always use. The common impression among most maturing managers is that they seem to have a “template approach” to everything.

The same goes for consultants that tend to marry a distinct set of analytical frameworks. It becomes too inbred, thereby limiting their usefulness. They seem to think their tools offer the solution to everything.

TIME TO EXPLORE YOUR TOOLBOX

Much to the peril of the organisation, being stuck on a particular mindset could lead to strategic blind spots that spell their demise.

* Refer to Figure 1

Similarly, managers could also suffer from “doing their jobs really well.” It is here we need to point out that: “Knowing your job is completely different from knowing the business.”

Managers need to move from the functional domain, to the strategic domain. It pays to see the bigger picture, lest you retire to be the master of your cubicle.

MANAGERS NEED TO MOVE FROM THE FUNCTIONAL DOMAIN, TO THE STRATEGIC DOMAIN. IT PAYS TO SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE, LEST YOU RETIRE TO BE THE MASTER OF YOUR CUBICLE.

By JOHN WALTER BAYBAY
editor@leaderonomics.com

The old line that says, “don’t fix it when it ain’t broke”, usually does not apply in business. Competition is always looking for better ways to do things even if they are not broken. The “new way” could be their next breakthrough.

A FINE LINE

The same goes with your career. You do not want to give an impression that you are that old dog that cannot be taught new tricks.

When you’re not scoring points during an interview because you’ve seen as knowing too much to the point of being rigid and unyielding, then you can’t get that new job.

Once your bosses see you as being too comfortable or too good at what you do, then chances are you might get passed over as well. If this sounds like your situation, then I strongly suggest that you find a mentor right now.

A mentor could give you the right perspective from the vantage point of someone who’s in place where you want to be. That perspective can make you see the bigger picture which isn’t often visible from where you stand.

Use this vantage point to map-out and strategise your career. A mentor teaches you more about the business rather than just letting you know how to do a job. It often takes more than what you have to execute a successful strategy. Sometimes it takes more than the tools that you have to make things work.

TOOLBOX+

This is where strategic partnerships come to play. These partnerships could be found from within and outside an industry, and they can also be found at functional levels across divisions and departments within your organisation as cross functional teams (CFT).

A strategic leader recognises a need for a larger perspective to get all the angles of a situation. It often necessitates going beyond the realms of an organisation’s internal resources when greater competition means there is victory.

TAKE A STEP BACK

Surely, a “big picture” perspective can be used to gain an advantage over competition. The annals of warfare and business prove it over and over again. Perspective spells the difference between winning and losing. This applies to your career, your business or even the entire industry and beyond.

Just as much as I still reach for a butter knife when I can’t find the screwdriver, we must learn how to leave the dependence on the “Golden Hammer” behind.

Do not succumb to the “Law of The Instrument”. Find the right tools for the right situations even when they are beyond your usual reach.

Find a mentor. Gain a perspective from others. See the bigger picture and create a strategy for yourself and your business.

It’s a long way from here to Brooklyn but I wouldn’t have gone this far without asking for directions and picking up some tools for the journey.

THE GOLDEN HAMMER

The line that defines the difference between what makes a great manager and an awesome leader is that one knows what needs to get done as opposed to being stuck on “how we usually do it”.

It is here we need to point out that: “Knowing your job is completely different from knowing the business.”

Managers need to move from the functional domain, to the strategic domain. It pays to see the bigger picture, lest you retire to be the master of your cubicle.

A mentor could give you the right perspective from the vantage point of someone who’s in place where you want to be. That perspective can make you see the bigger picture which isn’t often visible from where you stand.

Use this vantage point to map-out and strategise your career. A mentor teaches you more about the business rather than just letting you know how to do a job. It often takes more than what you have to execute a successful strategy. Sometimes it takes more than the tools that you have to make things work.
While businesses across Asia are poised for growth, a key way to fuel the economy is to infuse new skills and talent into the market. Organisations that can better manage human capital will not only better meet the competitive challenge, but also sustain growth, market value, and profitability in the future.

Unfortunately, most HR teams are not up to the task of driving performance, development, workforce planning, analytics, and business insights. Upskilling HR is critical to business sustainability and future growth.

The High impact HR Operating Model 2014 report by Deloitte Consulting shows that companies with high-impact HR are a) 2.5 times more likely to adapt to market changes faster, b) 2.4 times more able to adapt to market changes quickly, c) 2.4 times more likely to beat the competition, d) 2.5 times more likely to better at minimising operating costs (e.g. increased revenue) so that HR is more responsive and efficient.

High-impact HR professionals play a significant role in creating stronger and more capable management teams.
BUSINESS ACROSS BORDERS

AGGRESSIVE GROWTH STRATEGIES AND PEOPLE CONSIDERATIONS

BY SANDY CLARKE
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BUSINESS is all about the bottom-line and if a company wants to maintain healthy profits, it needs to stay relevant and know how to adapt to changing needs. Most important of all, an ambitious business needs to become an ever-present name on the lips of consumers and potential investors. There is only one way to achieve this aim: through growth and expansion.

In my experience, as a journalist who has interviewed CEOs, business start-ups and strategic advisers, business owners who fail in their overall objective to grow fall into one of two categories: they either swing from idea-to-idea (as entrepreneurs do) but never settle long enough to build a solid foundation, or they are so cautious and task-orientated that they fail to see the bigger picture of what their business can become.

Growing a business, even for the most seasoned CEO, can seem like a daunting task. Crossing borders and whole continents presents a CEO, can seem like a daunting task. Crossing borders and whole continents presents such benefit is prolonging the sales life of your products or services when you find new markets to sell them in. Another is, if your business is “plagued by different or even countercyclical fluctuations”. But the question is how does a business expand across borders? It’s all very well talking about the wonders of taking your business into new territory, but as any good CEO will be thinking, “Tell me how it’s done.”

...AND HOW?

...AND HOW?

Forbes.com – a leading business news and financial website – advises that the first step to take is to consider whether a prospective market is big enough to warrant expansion. They advocate thorough research to ensure any potential revenue more than covers the additional expenses that may be incurred through expansion. “Make sure you’ll be able to find people with the required qualifications in the market you are entering, or find a way to send talented individuals there.”

PEOPLE CONSIDERATIONS

CEOs are also made aware that, even though they might stumble upon a fruitful market, they’ll need a workforce in place to maintain company standards and deliver on quality of service as well as business objectives.

If your business intends to source additional staff from the country into which it’s expanding, keep in mind that thanks to increasing competition (particularly in developing markets), employees need not remain “grateful that they have a job”.

Compared with 10 years ago, employees have more of a choice in choosing where to go, especially if they’re considered to be top talent. As an aside, Generation-Y employees are more likely than their predecessors to up and leave a company if it doesn’t fit with their needs. With this in mind, it is vital to offer healthy incentives to prospective employees. Exchange the question “why do you want to work for us?” for a list of reasons why people should choose to work for you.

Do you provide health insurance? A decent superannuation package? Are bonuses available? Allowances? Are you a company that truly values its employees? Do you pay a competitive salary? If we can take a moment to cut through the saccharine rhetoric that usually comes from selling your business, most employees are driven by two desires: to feel comfortable financially, and to know that they are valued and are making a real contribution to the team.

If your employer branding can tick these two boxes, you’ll have a better chance of attracting top talent.

CROSS THE T’S AND DOT THE I’S

Another important step to consider when taking your business across borders is the regulation that are carried by the relevant country. It will be necessary to meet with either a lawyer or a representative from the Department of Trade to find out the requirements, visa issues, capital necessary and tax laws before doing so. According to Forbes, while sorting out the legal necessities can be time consuming, you should “never rule out the global marketplace as you may find that entering emerging markets will offer you a landscape with fewer competitors and a faster growing market sector”.

KNOW THE CULTURE

If you are planning at some point to grow your business beyond its current boundaries, the value of embracing culture and customs wherever you choose to settle can’t be emphasised enough.

A business based in Malaysia looking to set up in Europe will be warmly received if it is perceived to be “local”, which is to say that efforts to align your business with the culture, customs and social norms will greatly improve customer relations. In any business move, be sure to create great impressions with whoever you encounter. Your business reputation will flourish much more if other people are saying good things about it, than if you simply pay for advertising yourself. Therefore, creating a “local” feel for your business, wherever it is, will improve your image and reputation. Furthermore, it will go a long way in ensuring a healthy bottom-line.

BENEFITS OF ORGANISATIONAL GROWTH

There are a number of benefits to developing your business and putting the steps in place to ensure growth and be able to take it into new territory.

One such benefit is prolonging the sales life of your products or services when you find new markets to sell them in. Another is, if your business is “plagued by seasonal changes or demand cycles, you can even out your sales by tapping markets with different or even countercyclical fluctuations”.

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For a list of reasons why people should come and work for you.
There are a number of challenges that come with growth and expansion of a small and medium-sized enterprise (SME). While these can seem like headaches, the business is ready to grow reflects its success thus far and is the next step to realising the potential of what your business is all about.

Keep your eyes on the vision set out at the beginning, but don’t forget the practicalities that will need to be considered by your human resources (HR) team.

**Top 10 Things that HR Managers Need to Know as Their Business Grows**

1. **How strong is your recruitment, retention and employee development plan?**
   - When branching out into new territory, you may need to recruit top talent, and certainly retain the best you have at present.
   - What incentives are there for existing and new employees to be a part of that growth? And what development methods are in place to ensure new staff becomes productive quickly?

2. **How clearly are you able to stand out from the crowd?**
   - Your competitors will have effective means of communicating with target markets. It is vital that your business understands what the competition is saying and how they’re saying it.
   - This isn’t an exercise in mimicry – the point is to stand out from rival firms – but understanding how other companies communicate should leave you in a position where you can communicate better in way that tells people: “You can’t afford to go elsewhere.”

3. **Are your own people buying into the message?**
   - It’s all well and good to have an external message that’s positive – increased awareness of who you are and what you do increases consumer engagement. But in the heady glow of growth, don’t forget the people on the inside. It is imperative that they share the company’s vision, understand why the business is growing, and the value they provide in helping to make it happen.

4. **How ready are you for changes that may come as a result of business growth?**
   - Are there roles within your business currently that might have to be altered, combined or discontinued altogether?
   - It can be wonderful to think of all the benefits that can sprout from expansion, but be aware of any changes that need to happen and how they will impact your business.

5. **The Devil’s in the detail**
   - If your business is crossing borders, make sure there are processes in place to understand legal requirements and regulations.
   - This doesn’t just mean making sure you tick all the right boxes, but also be aware of any benefits or resources your business may be entitled to for setting up shop and contributing to the economy.

6. **Understand diversity**
   - While your business will have employees from different backgrounds and cultures, branching out means that the diversity of your business will expand. With that in mind, it’s essential to understand differences within the workforce and to ensure everyone in the team feels respected.

7. **How will your business develop a ‘local’ feel?**
   - Wherever they are, customers like to feel that the people they engage with are just like them, or at the very least genuinely interested in who they are.
   - What plan will you put in place to make sure employees – and managers – are aware of local habits and customs and are able to embrace them when dealing with customers?

8. **What policies are in place with regard to compensation?**
   - Business growth can be daunting for retained staff, and managers will want to know how new employees can help the company continue the trend of success.
   - Companies are now waking up to the idea that employees aren’t simply paid for their time – it’s important to offer rewards for skill development and organisational performance, emphasising teamwork, collaboration, and responsibility for performance.

9. **Are you in a position to afford employees additional benefits?**
   - Your business is doing well to consider growing its operations, and so it may be worth considering if there are any extra benefits that could be handed out to members of your team.
   - Is there scope for things like flexible working time, paternity leave, extended holidays, and on-site childcare?

10. **The business is growing – are the people growing with it?**
    - Taking your business to the next level is great, but also consider how the company’s growth could shape staff development. If there’s expansion into a foreign country, for example, could HR provide language classes?
    - Are there networking events or seminars that could add to the human capital of employees? If you allow your employees to be a part of the growth, they flourish and, in turn, so does your business.

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By ZOE RAI
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F or most of my life, I built buffers and carved out life from a daily routine and certainly from a permanent job. This was my comfort zone. To discover new worlds, you have to first leave the safety of familiar shores and doing so is seldom an easy decision. Sometimes, it requires not letting that loud voice of discouragement stop you. That voice is none other than one’s own self-doubt. Just as moving along monkey bars, you can only move forward by first letting go of one bar as you grasp another. All of which requires a leap of faith. The magnitude of one’s leap varies depending on what is at stake. The greater the leap, the greater the faith needed. In my case, the leap was phenomenal. For over a decade, I have worked hard at developing my career at Bank Negara. I had an extremely rewarding career. I felt most secure in the kitchen and wondered if that was the real reason. I was aware that making decisions based on situational factors could be regretted once the situation changes. Talking to people also brought mixed results. For every person I spoke to, I would get a polar response. Some were extremely encouraging, while others refused to condone my decision to change careers. Some wanted to see me develop in new areas that I was inclined towards, while others did not want me to lose what I had built. Ultimately, the decision came down to who I was and what I felt was the best for me. As new age-y as it sounds, I needed to find the centre of my being. That centre came from my fondest memories of childhood – growing up in the kitchen, watching and helping my mother. Or rather, I was the human kitchen aid! I specialised in whisking and mixing with the ultimate reward of being able to eat the excess food left on the mixing spoon. I felt most secure in the kitchen and cooking was my way of sharing my love and fondness with those around me. Being a hopeless romantic, I believed that following your heart would be easy. However, it was not. Upon completing my schooling at the Le Cordon Bleu, I managed to gain a six-month placement at Quay, in Sydney, one of the world’s top restaurants for my industrial programme module. I am no stranger to hard work, but I worked harder than I ever did in my life during those few short months. Kitchen life is physically, mentally and emotionally demanding and I entered it at an age where most would opt for less physically demanding roles.

The average shift is about 15 to 16 hours, all of which is spent standing, and if you are able to take a 15 to 30 minute break, it is at 5pm to have your dinner. If you still need to prepare for dinner service, that break is foregone. There was not a single part of my body that was not in pain from utter exhaustion. Do not even mention the cuts, bruises and burns. And I was at least 20 years older than everyone in that kitchen. But years have commodity even when it’s a young man’s game. This is where I used my age to my advantage. Having more maturity allowed me to tap into my inner strength. When it got too tough, I reminded myself to focus and would also recite William Henley’s poem invictus, “It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll. I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.” Regardless of the odds, I have never been happier. I do miss my previous life at the bank, but I am at peace now. Even though it can be complete chaos around me, and stress is everywhere, I still feel a sense of peace. That to me is an indicator that I made the right decision.

Although I have traded the pen for the pan, I brought my experience and what I learned at the central bank to help me deal with new challenges, such as interpersonal skills and communication, time management, striving for excellence and self-motivation, self-confidence, perseverance and mental fortitude. I am constantly in awe and wonder from being able to learn from every second spent in the kitchen, watching people cook, be it in the professional kitchen or at the humble stove of someone’s home. Everyone and every experience is my teacher. Living beyond one’s comfort zone is never easy, but it’s a decision worth making as life ultimately is made up of different experiences and new meanings. The support from close friends and family has also been instrumental in helping me get to where I am now and, to keep going forward. I am able to not only be myself, but also share my innermost feelings with everyone around me no matter where I am with our most basic of needs, food. The unknown now does not seem as scary when I first started on this journey. At the crossroads of my life, I did turn back to take that long abandoned route. Just as Robert Frost took the road not taken, I decided to walk back and start again and it has made all the difference for me.
N the first day of secondary school life, I observed the towering presence of a person who had been entrusted with the highest authority any student could receive – the head prefect.

His voice boomed through the school microphone, requesting all students to gather for the morning assembly.

Almost immediately, the prefects sprung into action to round up the masses, who obediently formed into perfect rows.

As a young Form One student, this activity looked and sounded amazing and I swore to myself, I would be head prefect when the time came.

EYES ON THE GOAL

To achieve my goal, I decided to be the best candidate a teacher could find. In Form One, that meant helping teachers carry books, helping my class monitor control the class, making sure I looked tidy and neat at all times and coming to school early.

I hung around the prefects and spoke to them about their duties, showing interest in every chance I got. All these I did to prepare for the day when they would nominate prefects from the formers. Surely, my name would be mentioned as a candidate.

True enough, my wish came true. I was nominated to be a prefect – one step closer to my dream of becoming head prefect.

From that moment, I felt a surge of authority and power over my friends. I began to use my newly appointed position to get people in line. At 13 years old, that included shouting, giving commands and threatening to report them should they not follow. It worked very well!

As a Form One prefect, it was rare for us to take on the older students in the upper form, but to be a potential head prefect, I needed to control everyone.

For me, I spent four years shouting and telling people off. Little did I know, all I had to do was take a step back and try to communicate better with my friends.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

If I had worked on building strong friendships, I would not have needed to shout at all, since friends who trust each other will readily do what is asked of them.

As I began to understand this, things started turning around. I started build- ing friendships with the lower forms because I figured they had seen the least of my shouting and command- ing self.

Slowly I built up the circle to include students in Form Five – my own peers, the ones I hurt the most.

It was surprising to find out that when I reached out and asked for help, they supported me and helped me despite all the abuse I had hurled at them over the years. And I knew I suc- ceeded in balancing my ego when one of my friends said, “You’re a lot cooler now, you used to be such a pain!”

They would entrust me with duties and projects that no other prefects wanted, but as these increased, my reputation as a fellow student dropped in the eyes of my friends.

“It’s lonely at the top,” some would say. As leaders hit the peak of their career, they say that it becomes lonely. Everybody who comes up to you and does nice things for you is only trying to “curry favour” – either a pardon for their wrongdoing, or to get into your good books. And as you interact, you learn that all the things you say, may it be good or bad stuff, somehow travels faster.

I felt misunderstood but I told myself, these are signs that I am achieving my goal to become the head prefect.

In Form Four, there were very few people who would still speak to me. Whenever possible, people would avoid me because I had offended them.

But I did not mind at all. Until one incident happened; there was a random spot check in my class and a good friend of mine, who was also a prefect, handed me her mobile phone.

THE DEFINING MOMENT

At that time, bringing devices to school was prohibited and knowing that I was a favourite with the teach- ers, she felt that I would surely be excused from the search.

While checking the belongings of everybody else, my mind was racing. Should I turn her in or should I let her go? My prefect mind said nobody gets excused for such crimes, and that she should be turned in. As the future head prefect, I should not allow myself to be biased. At the same time, it would be an outright betrayal of her trust.

After the entire spot check period had passed, I decided to turn her in. I summoned the phone to the teacher-in-charge and confessed everything. I got praised for being a good prefect and for not being biased to friends.

I felt good at that time, but some- thing inside me knew that I had lost another friend. This time, someone I valued highly. She was called in and her phone was confiscated for the entire week. The teachers deducted her marks and warned that her badge would be stripped should she ever be caught again.

STEPPING BACK FOR REFLECTION

This sorry incident began a cycle of reflection of how I had been behaving as a prefect and as a friend.

I finally became the head prefect of my school, but I lost all my friends and everyone’s respect. I still stood at the front of the assembly hall, and gathered students for announcements, but I had no friends to share this burden with.

It was only in Form Five that I realised that shouting and commanding people was not the only way to rise up as a leader. But unfortunately it was too late.

I realised that as humans, we have a tendency to use what we are familiar with to deal with situations.

As for me, I spent four years shout- ing at people thinking that that would get the job done. Little did I know, all I had to do was take a step back, and try to understand and communicate bet- ter with my friends.

I SPENT FOUR YEARS SHOUTING AND TELLING PEOPLE OFF. LITTLE DID I KNOW, ALL I HAD TO DO WAS TAKE A STEP BACK AND TRY TO COMMUNICATE BETTER WITH MY FRIENDS.

LONE RANGER WITH A PURPOSE

The teachers loved my determina- tion and commitment to the school.
BEING ACCOUNTABLE

How easy it is to blame others when things go wrong. To point fingers and run away from responsibilities. However, Strayed teaches us about being brutally honest with ourselves. She acknowledges making some poor choices in life. Surprisingly, when she reflects on those choices that she had made, she does not seem to regret it. Instead, she views it in a different light. “What if all those things I did were the things that got me here,” she asks.

Rather than dwelling in regret or blaming others, she chooses to see her blunders as part of the plan to make her who she is today. The same sentiment flows through Bobbi when she admits that she does not regret her abusive marriage as it resulted in Strayed and her brother, Lief, both of whom she loved deeply. Strayed and Bobbi teach us that everything we have done in the past makes us who we are today. Therefore, challenge how you view your past experiences. Adopt the mindset that all your experiences help shape you. Now, take some time to reflect past experiences you may have labelled as “bad”. If you look hard enough, you would be able to see some good in it.

TAKING CHARGE

“I’ve always been someone’s daughter or mother or wife. I have never gotten to be in the driver’s seat of my own life,” says Bobbi after being diagnosed with lung cancer. This profound statement indicates the single point of regret in Bobbi’s life. Only when she finds out that her days are numbered does she realise that she has never been true to herself.

Oftentimes we do things to please others. We do what society dictates. But who are we living for? When will we stop living to please others and start living to please ourselves? This does not mean shirking our responsibilities but rather recognising that we are our own individual apart from the other roles we hold in life. Strayed decided that she was not going to share the same regrets as her mum. The moment she decided to hike, she just went with it despite having no hiking experience.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Wild shows us that sometimes all we need is a change in mindset in order to live a more fulfilling life. Taking time off for personal reflections is pivotal in staying true to ourselves. During these times of reflection, we must acknowledge our past and learn to savour the joy in our lives. Lastly, setting time aside to develop ourselves as individuals is essential in keeping us both sane and happy.

Caroline Regina is an aspiring psychologist who enjoys movies based on true life stories. Such stories evoke her curiosity to find out more. Being an avid reader, she hopes to get her hands on Strayed’s memoir, Wild: The Journey from Lost to Found. Connect with Caroline at editor@leaderonomics.com

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