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Whether you are a business leader or an individual who is starting a new business venture, you will need a checklist which includes a point that talks about your ability to inspire change or influence others to make a difference like the leaders highlighted in this article. Discover your leadership traits and learn how and when to leverage on them.

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By JACK CHUA editor@leaderonomics.com

THE traditional model of productivity dictates that industries manufacture items for consumers, who use them, and finally, dispose the waste products. As many have now come to realise, this linear "make, use, and dispose" process is unsustainable.

To feed the industrial juggernaut, massive amounts of natural resources must be drawn from forests, oil wells and mines, leading to environmental damage.

Since 1990, 129 million ha of forest have been destroyed, bringing about the extinction of species, soil erosion and climate change.

At the end of line, global consumption produces over two billion tonnes of waste per year, which pollute the land and water. The outcome is taking a heavy toll on our health. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that one in 20 deaths worldwide are attributable to ambient air pollution.

IS THERE A SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVE?

Leaders who are committed to sustainable development have proposed an alternative - the "circular economy". In a circular economy, "waste" is reused or recycled, feeding it back into the system for consumption. A circular economy reduces waste and the need to harvest new resources.

We will explore how some leaders in Asia have taken this powerful idea, and transformed the people around them to become more sustainability-minded.

#1 BE FUTURE-ORIENTED

Sustainability leadership demands that one have a long-term view. It is easy, for example, to ignore the dangers of global warming if we do not feel an immediate threat.

Furthermore, environmental problems take time to solve, and immediate effects may not be apparent. Conventional wisdom goes that what will happen decades from now is hardly of our concern today, so why bother working towards something that is unreachable?

Such was not the line of thinking followed by Dr John Keung from Singapore. Today, the city-state is known for its "green buildings". It is not unusual to spot lush shrubbery and trees growing on the balconies and facades of high rise structures in the island nation.

Keung is credited for bringing about the green wave in Singapore. He is the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Building and Construction Authority (BCA), responsible for the upsurge of this trend.

His work can only be described as visionary. When he proposed the idea back in the early 2000s, he was criticised for "moving too fast" for the building industry to catch up. There were fears that this technology will fail utterly because of the lack of skilled talent in architecture, construction and property development.

Short-sightedness and narrow self-interests are often blamed for the destruction of our environment. The incessant race to produce more and to achieve higher growth often trumps the need to see the bigger picture.

Incorporating lush greenery into the urban landscape was a novelty, and hardly anybody knew how to pull it off. Furthermore, people may not be ready

5 ASIAN LEADERS WHO ARE GOING 'GREEN'

ENTERPRISING TRAITS THAT CAN SAVE THE PLANET



to embrace such a radical idea; "going green" is, after all, not on top of everyone's agenda.

Keung was undaunted. He told his compatriots that they will create the demand where none, at the time, existed. He founded the BCA Academy which provides training to architects and builders on how to construct, operate and maintain green buildings.

He also introduced incentives to help developers turn their buildings green and advocated regulations that required buildings to meet minimum sustainability standards.

Today, more than 13,000 people have been trained by his academy. Astonishingly, the number of environmentally friendly buildings in Singapore has grown tremendously from 17 units in 2005

to 30% of structures in the nation by 2015. Not resting on his laurels, Keung aims to have 80% of structures in Singapore transformed into "green buildings" by 2030.

#2 THINK HOLISTICALLY

Short-sightedness and narrow self-interests are often blamed for the destruction of our environment. The incessant race to produce more and to achieve higher growth often trumps the need to see the bigger picture.

Nevertheless, some companies, like Wipro Ltd manage to come up with a holistic approach - incorporating eco-friendly practices into many aspects of its core business.

Wipro Ltd is known in India for its monumental achievements in Information Technology. Its chairman, the business

tycoon Azim Premji was responsible for inheriting his father's vegetable oil business and pivoting it into the realm of IT in the 1970s.

Today, thanks to the firm's commitment to sustainability, it has made it onto several lists, such as Channel NewsAsia Sustainability Ranking, as well as Nasdaq and Dow Jones's sustainability indices.

Wipro makes holistic decisions about managing waste in the IT sector. Industries and consumers alike often ignore the fact that the growing use of electronic devices expands the production of electronic wastes, or e-waste.

In 2006, Wipro introduced an e-waste clearance service to help customers deal with the problem. Today, its waste management initiative in India has expanded, with 90% of its waste end up being reused or recycled.

Since then, Wipro has been actively engaged in environmentally sustainable practices. The drive towards a sustainable future is deeply ingrained in their organisational charter. The leadership must take actions that are informed by ecological considerations.

For its Indian offices, the company employs renewable energy, which accounts for 22% of total electricity consumption. To tackle global warming, Wipro has cut down more than 730,000 tonnes of its annual carbon emission in 2014. One of the ways it accomplished this was setting up carpooling facilities to reduce fossil fuel consumption, and optimising server use to save power in its offices.

Wipro does not keep the secrets to its success close to its chest. It established the EcoEnergy Division, whose core business is helping companies to explore ways in which they can reduce wastage of energy and resources.

#3 BE AWARE OF OPPORTUNITIES

In the entrepreneurial arena, decisions have to be timely and opportunistic. The same applies to realm of sustainable development. Many enterprises have benefitted greatly by being able to solve environmental problems at a time when it is most needed.

Such is the case with Tan Sri Razali Ismail, chairman of Cypark Resources Bhd. He leads a company devoted to environmental engineering and technology. The company is known for its efforts in improving waste management of urban landfills.

Landfills are a major problem, as contaminated water (leachates), methane gas and other products of degradation can lead to serious health implications. They are also a sight for sore eyes, considerably lowering the value of surrounding property.

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Having served 10 years as Malaysia's representative to the United Nations, Razali was no stranger to environmental issues affecting the globe. He had witnessed the degradation of the environment up close, which gravely affected the livelihoods of poor communities living in heavily-polluted areas.

Passionate to improve the welfare of these communities, he decided to explore ways to merge his environmental passion with his entrepreneurial drive. Gathering expertise in the field of environmental engineering, Cypark began researching and developing methods for better waste disposal.

The Housing and Local Government Ministry embraced Cypark's waste management solutions. Soon, Cypark was responsible for cleaning up more than 20 major landfills from Perlis to Johor.

Having an idea is not enough. One must act on it, and with great determination. Great innovators in the domain of environmental sustainability have a strong obsession towards their projects.



The work of his organisation has now led to great economic improvements, as cleaned areas become more attractive to potential residents and business-owners. Quality of life has also improved with the drop-in pollution.

The story doesn't end there. Cypark has bigger plans for these cleaned landfills. They are filling up the former landfill sites with solar farms to provide surrounding areas with renewable energy - a testament to how "green thinking" can drive growth.

#4 BE OBSESSED WITH WHAT YOU LOVE

Having an idea is not enough. One must act on it, and with great determination. Great innovators in the domain of environmental sustainability have a strong obsession towards their projects.

One man who has truly achieved a lot in this regard is Ken Yeang. Named by The Guardian as one of the 50 people who could save the planet, the Malaysian is well-known for being one of the pioneers of eco-architecture.

He and his company, T. R. Hamzah & Yeang Sdn Bhd, have spearheaded many crucial eco-architecture and eco-masterplan projects throughout the globe. They include the Macau Masterplan, the Solaris Building in Singapore, and the Spire Edge World Trade Centre in India.

Yeang became fascinated with nature when he was studying architecture in Cambridge. He began taking courses in ecology at the university's department of environmental biology, to complete his PhD thesis. He is deeply passionate about combining ecological concerns with building design.

Combining his knowledge in ecology and his expertise in architecture, he became one of the primary movers of the "green building" movement. Inspired by the building traditions of Asian cultures, one of his major ideas is the "Bioclimatic Skyscraper" - a high-rise building designed to be compatible with the natural climate.

His skyscrapers are not merely buildings decorated with vegetation. For each project, Yeang painstakingly researches the flora that grows in a particular region, making sure that the plants give an appearance of a natural habitat for the native fauna.

These plants are incorporated into the building giving them the quality of "living systems" that have similar attributes to that of a natural ecosystem.

He sees this as the future of how cities will be built - with buildings that imitate nature, a concept he calls "eco-mimesis", such as using sunlight as a source of energy. This contrasts with the notion of forcing-fitting nature into the artificial mould

of industrialisation. He often urges his clients to extend the ideas applied in his architecture to other aspects of their business. He wants businesses to practise a sustainability-oriented corporate culture - one that is against wastefulness and contamination of the environment.

With a strong obsession to realising his ideals, he often juggles multiple managerial roles at once, from designing the building to ensuring that project deadlines are met. He also described the constant challenge of what he calls "firefighting".

Often, unexpected problems may spring up and - being the passionate leader that he is - he expends time, energy and resources to fix them quickly and efficiently. However, his passion keeps him going even in his late 60s.

#5 BE PROACTIVE

The fight for a sustainable future need not be led solely by well-funded companies and government agencies. The question is, how far can one ordinary individual get in saving the environment?

For Gurmit Singh, this is a responsibility that every citizen should take. An electrical engineer by profession, Gurmit has been actively fighting for the cause of environmental sustainability as far back in 1985. Despite not being a

business tycoon or politician, Gurmit's campaigns for sustainability had won numerous accolades.

Gurmit did not sit back and wait for governments and corporations to be environmentally conscious. He chose to be proactive. Motivated by passion and a strong sense of responsibility, he devoted his life to solving environmental problems.

In 1985, He founded the Centre for Environment, Technology and Development Malaysia (Cetdem). The non-profit organisation aims to provide research, training, and consultancy on environmental issues.

With humble beginnings, Cetdem started a one-acre organic farm in Sungai Buloh. The farm grew various local vegetables, all without the use of chemical pesticides or fertilisers. It managed to flourish into a profitable small-scale venture that helped propel the concept of organic farming to a larger circle of agriculturalists.

Although Gurmit no longer runs the farm, he and the volunteers are actively spreading the message, providing lessons to those who wish to start their own organic farms.

Throughout the years, Gurmit and his 50-member organisation has spearheaded many initiatives, cutting across various environmental issues, including organic farming, climate change mitigation and sustainable energy. Cetdem has worked closely with international bodies, organisations and local communities, building rapport and awareness about environmental issues.

For the Awareness and Capacity Building Project funded by the UNDP, Cetdem played an important role in researching energy consumption in Malaysian urban households and coming up with strategies to reduce wasteful consumption.

Another project partly funded by UNDP is the Pi-EcoMobility, which raised awareness about energy-efficient use of transportation powered by carbon fuels.

The organisation led by Gurmit has also played an important role in schools, such as with the secondary school energy efficiency action project, educating children to play active parts in conserving energy.

LEADING FOR A BETTER FUTURE

With all the negative impact, environmental issues demand our fullest attention. It is crucial for our society to cultivate sustainability leadership to tackle these problems. Leaders today can learn the key attributes of the individuals who have reformed industries towards ecological sustainability, and perhaps become the next beacons of transformation.



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