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No Brains, No Heart, No Guts?



*A leader makes good things happen that on their own would not happen, said Prof. **LIM Siong Guan** at the [12th stars Switzerland symposium 2019](#). Throughout his long and distinguished career including various leadership roles such as Head of the Singapore Civil Service or as Group President of GIC, Siong Guan has proven time and again that to be a leader requires more than knowledge, good intentions or great ideas. In this stars insights, he therefore offers his views of what it takes to give yourself the best chances of succeeding no matter the future.*

I graduated from university in 1969. That was such a different world from today where things move so fast, the future appears more unpredictable and uncertain than ever, and life is a continuous push to stay ahead.

Nevertheless, it is an illusion to think that today is more difficult than the past – it is simply different. Life moves on with all its ebbs and flows, and the key to happiness and success lies with those who are able to live with the ambiguous, and the unexpected, and the uncomfortable, and continuous change.

Decades ago, things changed but slowly, and organisations could make strategic plans with considerable confidence that the plans would still be relevant by the time they are accomplished.

Then the world became less certain: We moved to scenario-based planning where we envisaged the future to likely turn out along the lines of two or three or four different but plausible scenarios, though we could never be sure which of the scenarios would be the most likely. Thus organisations then worked out strategic plans which would make the most sense no matter which scenario turned out to be closest to the real future.

In moving from a single anticipated future to having to address several different possible scenarios, we moved from dealing with a future that is known to a future that is knowable. But today technology is moving very fast, and geopolitics is turning out to be probably the biggest uncertainty of all. We are having to deal with a future which is much more complex than the past, and largely unknowable, so we have to think of how to create the best chances of success for ourselves for such a future.

I believe the way now to think of the future should not start with guessing the future but with assessing what would give us the best chances of success no matter the kind of future that turns out. Such a perspective would be relevant both to organisations, as well as our personal lives.

Professor Rosabeth M. Kanter of the Harvard Business School was recently quoted as saying that financial results are a “lagging indicator” of a company’s health. “They tell you what you’ve just done. They don’t predict the future. Culture is a leading indicator. Culture predicts the future,” she said.

She added, “culture...(is) more important in some ways than strategy. If you’re not thinking about building your culture for survivability and sustainability, then you’re not leading.” Professor Kanter could just as relevantly have spoken the same words about countries, where the equivalent of financial results would be figures like GDP and unemployment rates.

Culture comprises the values which are lived out in thought and action. Culture and a strategic vision that inspires rather than intimidates are what binds the organisation and the nation together. It is a common set of beliefs as to what can best assure success today and survival tomorrow.

The right culture helps everyone in the organisation respond to the ever-changing environment in a way which is consistent with the objectives of the organisation. Bringing about change in organisations is difficult enough as it is; but trying to bring about change when there is no common set of beliefs as to what creates success will simply bring about contention, confusion, and chaos.

This approach of deciding what are the values that can best assure continuing success, applies to our lives as individuals just as it applies to companies, organisations and nations. It does not depend on predicting the future but instead makes us think what are the qualities that will give us the best chances of succeeding no matter the future.

Let me offer you my views of what could be such qualities that offer you the best chances of success for your futures. I summarise it by saying, make sure you have Brains, Heart and Guts to survive and succeed.

First, brains. I asked my granddaughter whether we all have brain or brains. She said, “Brains – a left brain and a right brain.” According to the left-brain, right-brain dominance theory, the right side of the brain is best at expressive and creative tasks. The left side of the brain is considered to be adept at tasks that involve logic, language, and analytical thinking.

Later research has shown that the brain is not nearly as dichotomous as once thought. The left-brain/right-brain theory is a myth. Thus research has shown that abilities in

subjects such as math are strongest when both halves of the brain work together. The point simply is, make sure you use your whole brain, rather than worry about intuition vs. logic, creativity vs. analysis, and so on.

Thus I move on to my second point: heart. To have heart is to have empathy, sensitivity, awareness of others, care for your neighbours, and willingness to serve and to always strive to do what is good and right. It is mindfulness in daily living.

I see it as a matter for concern that, far too often, schools and universities do not teach their students how to succeed in life. They are concentrated on delivering knowledge, skills and competencies – the work of the brains – and pay too little attention to qualities like integrity, honour and trustworthiness – the matters of character and the heart.

For me, “leadership” has only one definition: To make good things happen that on their own would not happen. As you go out into the world, seek to be leaders, to make good things happen that would not happen if you were not there. Never forget that you have the moral responsibility to do good for the people around you and for society and for your homeland.

To win speaks to your skills and knowledge. To win with honour speaks to your character.

Finally, guts. Maya Angelou was an American poet, singer, writer, and civil rights activist who died in 2014 at the age of 86. That is a lot of years to gain experience and wisdom. She said, “Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can't practise any other virtue consistently. You can practise any virtue erratically, but nothing consistently without courage.”

As a leader, you have to make things happen that on their own would not happen. If you do not make things happen, you could be an excellent manager, but would not be a leader.

A leader, by definition, brings in the new and brings about change. This requires more than knowledge; it needs confidence and conviction. This requires more than good intentions; it needs willingness to act and to seek the broader good. This requires more than great ideas; it needs tenacity and determination. To be a leader, to put it bluntly, you need guts.

Seek to be the best you can be – anything less will be less than fair to yourself and to your capacity to contribute to the well-being of your family and society and the people around you. Build a reputation for hard work, integrity, trustworthiness, reliability and selflessness.

I am reminded of a story about a martial arts student who kneeled before the master sensei to receive his black belt. It was after many years of hard training.

“Before giving you the belt, you must pass one more test,” the sensei said.

“I am ready,” the student said, thinking it would be just one final lesson.

“What is the true meaning of the black belt?” the sensei asked.

“The end of my journey,” the student said. “A good reward for all my hard work.”

The sensei waited for more. Clearly, he was not satisfied. Finally, the sensei spoke. “You are not ready for the black belt. Return in one year.”

A year later, the student knelt again in front of the sensei. “What is the true meaning of the black belt?” the sensei asked.

“A symbol of distinction and the highest achievement in our art,” the student replied.

The sensei said nothing for many minutes. Clearly, he was not satisfied. Finally, he spoke. “You are still not ready for the black belt. Return in one year.”

A year later, the student knelt once again in front of the sensei. And again the sensei asked: “What is the true meaning of the black belt?”

“The black belt represents the beginning – the start of a never-ending journey of discipline, hard work and the pursuit of an ever-higher standard,” the student said.

“Yes. You are now ready to receive the black belt and begin your work.”

As we can see, the black belt is not the highest point. The black belt is what allows us to go on to the next point.

You may say, “This is terrible. It never ends. We have to think and try and do and think and try and do, and it goes on and on...”

My answer: “This is why we need to believe in what we do. We need to believe it is worth doing. We need to believe we are doing something useful. We need to find the work interesting and challenging. We need to have fun along the way. We need to be unhappy with ourselves if we have not done our best. We need to be learning new things. We need to find we are getting better day by day. Otherwise life will be a big burden and work will be deadly.”

Excellence is a never-ending journey. It is our attitude that will make the journey either fun or boring.

Enjoy today. Tomorrow brings you new possibilities and more work.

Create the future with your brains, your heart and your guts. You owe it to yourself and to society.



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