

# 3 REASONS WHY THE BEST LEADERS ARE LEARNERS

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ONE year ago, at a youth camp, a student who had been put in charge of his group confided in me that leading his team members wasn't going as well as he had thought it would. "I'm just not cut out to be a leader," he said, as he related to me what he thought a leader should have, which he didn't: humour, confidence, wisdom and courage.

My reply to him, as one still understanding the ropes of what it truly means to lead was, "all these can be learnt, if you put your heart to it".

It is said that there are approximately 50,000 books on leadership that are published annually – and this number may well be a conservative estimate – but if there is one indication that there is no final "destination" in this journey of becoming a leader, it is the countless number of resources that teach us how to better develop our awareness and management of ourselves and others.

Leadership is a relational endeavour; one cannot claim to be a leader without being able to inspire an action or a reaction in others. And because relationships are complex, one can only lead to the extent that he or she learns.

On the surface, it is painfully obvious that learning is imperative for any human enterprise – but I'd argue that in the long

run, learning qualifies you to lead more than anything else (beyond promotions, positions, placement and power).

Here are three reasons why:

## 1 LEARNING EQUALISES THE YEARS

How often have you heard the Chinese adage (often spoken by the elderly to the young), "I eat more salt than you eat rice"?

What is it about being "older" that makes one a wiser and better decision-maker? I'm convinced that the difference is not a matter of "years", but a matter of "experience".

We learn from our experiences, and our past outcomes that resulted in both positive and negative actions inform us as we negotiate between present choices.

But if experiences make us wiser, how do we attain more "experience"? Is "experience" purely a byproduct of the passing years, or can we, in the words of Sir Isaac Newton, see further into the future "by standing on the shoulders of giants"?

When we capitalise on the learnings and lessons of others and apply them in our lives, we are able to short-circuit the common bind of "years equals to experience" and accelerate our growth without wasting the time others have wasted.

Great leaders often ask themselves, "How can I avoid making the same mistakes, or how can I replicate others' successes and take them further?"

## 2 LEARNING KEEPS YOU HUMBLE

Learning and humility feed off each other. On the other hand, the antithesis of humility, which is pride, has the sinister ability to deceive anyone into believing that he or she has "arrived", that there is no need to adapt or change further, because he or she is superior and above reproach.

In contrast, great leaders are often the most humble people who are secure in themselves and do not see the need to put others down to elevate themselves.

John F. Kennedy once said "Leadership and learning are

indispensable to each other".

Interestingly, most US Presidents were avid readers who invested much of their time in learning, despite their busy schedules.

It is said that Theodore Roosevelt read two books a day, while Abraham Lincoln, who had only one year of formal education, attributed his successful political career to his habit of reading.

A strong learning posture allows you to see from different perspectives, live in the experiences of others, and most importantly, empathise with other points-of-view.

It is only when a person is an avid learner that he or she is continually challenged in his or her current views, and thus able to grow in convictions. It is only when a cup is empty, that it can be filled.

Maintaining humility allows us to be intellectually curious – and curiosity always precedes discovery and creativity.

## 3 LEARNING ENABLES YOU TO GIVE

Somewhere during my college years, an epiphany occurred to me: How much can I learn and grow, if I were to dedicate all my transit and waiting moments to learning something new?

In my frustration of waiting and chasing for buses to get to college, I found a treasure chest.

I had realised that an average Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley resident would spend approximately 10 to 15 hours per week travelling, either by inching through heavy traffic or waiting at bus stops and light rail transit (LRT) stations, and what a waste of time it would be if all that time was given to staring into space or letting one's thoughts run

idle.

I then made a concrete decision to listen to podcasts, audio books (when I would be driving) or to read (when I was waiting for the bus or LRT), in order to redeem that precious time.

I have since listened to over 700 hours of podcasts on topics related to public speaking, leadership, faith and personal development.

My greatest learning moments are no longer in the classroom, but in my car, when I am alone and can learn something new.

During the course of the last two years, as a teacher in a high-needs school and a church leader, these moments of learning and reflection allowed me to pass on what I learnt to my students and congregation.

Those opportunities gave me great pleasure, as I was communicating to others what I had learnt and internalised for myself. I never felt "burnt out" because the stream of learning was always flowing.

Leadership may have many faces, but all leaders have the same outstretched hand of giving. And we can only give from what we have learnt. The good news is that leadership can be learnt – if we put our hearts to it.

■ Abel Cheah is associate manager in the Talent Acquisition team at Teach For Malaysia. He believes that leadership is something that is nurtured and cultivated. If you are interested in listening to podcasts, he highly recommends Umano (an app that narrates articles). He believes that the best leaders are great lovers of learning. You can get in touch with him at editor@leaderonomics.com



## DIODE CAMPS

Ever wondered what makes a superhero a leader? Are you one of them? Find out the answer to these questions in the upcoming DIODE\* Camps. The uniquely designed DIODE Camps are camps like no other! Discover your leadership potential through these engaging, power-packed and fun-filled camps.

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### DATES:

- Dec 1–6, 2014 | Dec 15–20, 2014 [Youth Leadership Camps: 14–16 years old]
- Dec 3–6, 2014 | Dec 17–20, 2014 [Twins Leadership Camps: 12–13 years old]
- Dec 8–13, 2014 [School Leavers Camp: 17–19 years old]

### VENUE:

- Starfresh AgroPark, Seremban [Youth Leadership Camps & Twins Leadership Camps]
- SUFES Campsite, Tapah [School Leavers Camp]

\*DIODE = Discovering Ingenuity, Opening Doors for Ixcellence

"My experience in DIODE Camp was truly amazing. I learned to speak out more and to be more confident with myself. I am always so worried about what is going to happen to my life because I am a shy person. However, through DIODE Camps, I have changed a lot. I can't wait to make friends when I go outside." – Han Rusan, 14 years old, Youth Leadership Camp camper 2013