



RAZAK SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

INTEGRITY. COURAGE. INNOVATION. CHANGE

RSOG INSIGHT

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RSOG conducted internal needs analysis and identified five focus areas for public sector leadership – Strategic, Transformative, Agile and Adaptive, Authenticity, and Executive Presence. RSOG Insight will feature a series of articles that aims to unveil some general ideas of what these focus areas are and what it means to leadership development. This issue begins with Strategic, written by Nurul Nadiah Mohd Azib. Also, in this issue, Hal Mahera Ahmad pours her thoughts on RSOG’s journey in leadership development and Ismail Johari Othman recommends a book that posits “brave” as a leadership archetype.

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The views of the authors are their own and may not represent the official position of RSOG. Get in touch with us via email at corp.comm@rsog.com.my

CRITICAL FUTURE LEADERSHIP SKILL – STRATEGIC

Nurul Nadiah Mohd Azib

“Ultimate excellence lies
 Not in winning
 Every battle
 But in defeating the enemy
 Without ever fighting.
 The highest form of warfare
 Is to attack
 Strategy itself”
 - an excerpt from *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu ¹

Master Sun penned these words 2,500 years ago, but the weight of his message remains. To decode and dismantle an enemy’s strategy is arguably the most powerful way to defeat them. Modern times may not bear witness to bloody battles, but the war between organisations and corporations has emerged. To win this war, one needs to put in place a solid strategy.

An article by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) puts forth the main idea of leading strategically: to ‘think, act, and influence others in ways that promote the enduring success of the organisation’². But strategy is not defined by one specific practice. Thus, there is no one-size-fits-all: the right approach to strategy will differ depending on the current context, culture and structure of the organisation.

Adapting to change is one form of strategy embraced by many. Lego, with its simple brick-toy concept, experienced a period of difficulty during the onslaught of internet and video games³. Their turnaround strategy? To leverage on collaborations with the entertainment industry, such as Star Wars and Batman. This subsequently resulted in movie franchises, new brick-toy concepts, and of course, video games. But they did not stop there. They have also noticed that millennial parents associate Lego with educational values – this toy helps develop our children’s minds through creative play. Lego has restored its position by responding both to outward, digital change, and also to the cultural shifts of our times.

One goal remains clear when being strategic, and that is to think for the long run. It may be said that technology has killed strategy - by creating an environment that forces us to re-consider our strategies from time to time. Nevertheless, strategic leaders need to have vision beyond that of an operational leader. While the latter focuses on short-term targets, a strategic leader ‘must make decisions that position the business for the future, while meeting current demands’. For IBM, positioning themselves to ensure survival meant re-inventing their business model. This required a transformation of their

¹ *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu (Translated by John Minford, 2002) Penguin Classics

² *How to Successfully Move Into a Strategic Leader Role*, Center for Creative Leadership (9 Aug 2016)
<https://www.ccl.org/blog/how-to-successfully-move-into-a-strategic-leader-role-2/>

³ *Lego made 3 changes to become the world’s most powerful toy company*, Business Insider (12 May 2015)
<http://www.businessinsider.com/legos-turnaround-strategy-2015-5/?IR=T&r=MY>

portfolios: from low-growth product lines like memory chips, to high-value offerings such as analytics⁴. Recognising transformation as a constant is a crucial aspect in long-term planning.

Let us now shift our focus to the public sector landscape, where the environment may be more rigid, but also complex. Strategy execution is less cut-throat, and yet the public sector receives bigger pressure to deliver results. One way to ensure results is by actually laying out effective strategies, which ‘must define practical actions (projects) that will produce real results that people will actually use to create worthwhile benefits’⁵. It has been argued that scores of public sector strategies are not actually strategies at all. For instance, ‘ensure fit and healthy citizens’ may sound great, but it does not actually define what you have to do and what the outcomes are: it is a vague aspiration; an end-goal. Rather, it could be rephrased as such: ‘construct public gyms in every Klang Valley district by 2020’. Bear in mind also that there must be compelling evidence to suggest that citizens will use the gyms, and in turn, become fitter. This further emphasises the importance of having clear and validated strategies, and not confusing them with goals.

Exceptions do occur. Although strategy is concerned with long-term success and sustainability, the story of Airbnb contradicts this idea. Airbnb started poorly, only taking off after the founders physically went out to take more attractive photographs of tenant listings. This strategy is work-intensive and not scalable, and yet this exact move gave them the momentum needed to grow bigger. Similarly, Apple did not push to become the first mover in the smartphone market even when they could. They chose to wait. But sacrificing the originator advantage was in fact a blessing in disguise: they came up on top as the innovator instead. By learning from competitors, they have now managed to capture a sizeable market of less tech-savvy but financially-able consumers⁶. Different corporations may have varying stories of success, but what they do have in common is an effective vision. In his book ‘Leading Change’, John Kotter states that a vision is ‘a sensible and appealing picture of the future’. This, in turn, produces strategies, or ‘a logic for how the vision can be achieved’⁷. And, as proven by both Airbnb and Apple, sometimes the right logic is far from conventional.

Perhaps the final important element in creating effective visions and strategies is leadership itself. To be a high-performing corporation, there must be a leadership strategy. Each layer of the organisation must practice a leadership culture while undergoing continuous development in leadership, and not just merely relying on the CEO to take charge⁸. The ability to lead will then allow the influencing process to kick in, thus getting everyone on board with the organisation’s strategy.

Our nation has embarked upon a Blue Ocean Strategy of creating new opportunities and collaborating our way to success. A great number of initiatives have taken the Blue Ocean approach – ranging from public welfare projects to the transformation of the workforce. On the whole, this strategy incorporates all the elements we have discussed: being transformative, collaborative, forward-looking, and effective – with a dash of innovation. With clear directions, visionary foresight and exceptional leadership, this strategy will surely remain as an indispensable force in delivering our society and organisations to greater heights.

⁴ IBM’s Transformation--From Survival To Success, Forbes (7 Jul 2010) <https://www.forbes.com/2010/07/07/ibm-transformation-lessons-leadership-managing-change.html#48c5eb283afb>

⁵ Why most public sector strategies aren't actually strategies at all, The Guardian (8 Apr 2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2014/apr/08/public-sector-strategies-vague-aspirations>

⁶ The 5 Best Business Strategies I’ve Ever Seen, Cascade/ExecuteStrategy.net (28 Nov 2016) <https://www.executestrategy.net/blog/the-5-best-business-strategies-ive-ever-seen/>

⁷ Leading Change, John P. Kotter (1996) Harvard Business Review Press

⁸ It’s Not The CEO, It’s The Leadership Strategy That Matters, Forbes (30 Jul 2012) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2012/07/30/its-not-the-ceo-its-the-leadership-strategy-that-matters/#7af7734f6db8>

Our Leadership Development Learning Curve

Hal Mahera Ahmad

When leadership is not a skill but a subject matter that you must learn as part of the core function in your day to day job, your daily effort in building and shaping your mind towards the subject will make you feel like embracing it and immersing yourself in it. No doubt the concepts and theories are aplenty, and you can never have enough time to confuse yourself, since finding the answers is like being trapped in a maze - you found your clue, but it opens another mystery.

This is perhaps, the beauty of Razak School of Government's (RSOG) existence. Our business is built based on creating wonderful opportunities within the leadership learning and development industry, eventually allowing us to meet people of different walks of life. Initially, the setting up of this school was primarily dedicated to grooming public sector leaders and playing a significant role in nation building. This journey has exposed us to learning from and engaging with bright minds. In fact, sometimes we must be quick to identify leaders to speak at our knowledge sharing platforms. Bringing them in is a given task, meeting them is the golden opportunity.

Being involved in a herculean task for the nation is both challenging and exciting. Our style of work within the RSOG Family unit varies from one to another. There are times you need to take a break, to allow yourself to engage in a different environment, to Skype or Zoom with experts or programme designers from different continents and finally return to the task at hand, redesigning content that is palatable to Malaysian flavours. It is only natural to engage in numerous disagreements and debates and allow our thoughts to travel deeply into new places through readings and absorbing intellectual discussions, with the aim to deliver the best for the nation. It is amazing how you can pick up something new just by reading a book from cover to cover or by listening to 3 minute-inspirational videos, watching documentaries and even focusing on short radio interviews. For most of the time, we consume all this information and we try as much as possible to innovate ways and stretch our targets. We have now formed a better understanding about prestigious leadership institutions around the world, bringing home a taste of Oxbridge, Ivy Leagues, and distinguished learning institutions onto Malaysian shores so that Malaysian leaders can become more well read and well-travelled.

On one occasion, during one of our regular but rather intense discussion with some scholarly individuals, we silently observed the way they carried themselves. The observation mainly evolved around the choice of words they used, the jokes they shared and the way they asked questions. They are the experts in their field- the crafters of language turning a brainstorming session into a beautiful symphony of ideas flowing from one person to another. An interesting observation voiced by one of them regarding the fading reading culture among the leaders today was "we must not only become the consumers of our knowledge, but also to construct our own based on readings and experiences". Such beautiful construction of language is to be admired, because those words reflect your wisdom.

These are among the inspiration that does not come so easily. We constantly remind each other to open our minds yet remain critical and creative in doing things. As learning providers, learning must no longer be a requirement but something that we can perform almost effortlessly in this institution.

After many years of observing and working together with our partners, we saw the need to become the originator of our programmes. Hence, the decision to undertake the process in a structured manner. In this journey of self-exploration, we discovered some of these important lessons.

When learning takes place, a trainer or teacher must carry out their own research about the subject and the learner. It is very often today that most companies or organisations are sacrificing this part, even though the most important one, after all, is trying to find out the learners needs before the session. It should not be skipped at all. In fact, the information that is gathered during this process will contribute to the preparation such as learning preferences. We believe in performing diagnostic meetings by using the ORID¹ questioning technique (adapted from the Art of Conversation). The diagnostic meeting is important because it can guide a trainer to design suitable content and select appropriate activities for the learners. In the process to develop the teaching material, a learner can identify whether the topic is going to be skill-based or knowledge-based, and this information can be collected during the meeting. Fact-finding is of utmost importance, in that it becomes the winning way to create customised programmes for our clients. This then leads us to be originators to our leadership solutions.

Knowing something as basic as the VARK questionnaire-which is available free on their website- to find out an individual's learning style, can be a very important indicator to a trainer or content designers. In general, there are four types, which are: Visual, Aural, Read/Write or Kinesthetics. In real life, if one performs this assessment for a potential learner, they might be able to assess the learners needs, their preferences and prepare teaching materials that can be directly tailored to them. This will undeniably enhance the learning experience for the individuals.

The principles of learning comprise of three components, such as motivation, product and process models. These should be viewed in a package that contributes to each other. This also relates to the definition of a reflective practitioner, which should be among the top qualities in a good trainer. We are often reminded of one memorable quote from Caleb Gattegno². He says, "Teachers must learn to shut up and get out of the way from learning". We discovered that this is particularly true in the class where trainers need to reduce T.T.T or Teaching Talking Time. This is also something that we have had to unlearn even after years of experience in the training industry. At times, students might learn better from their peers as well. Whether in conducting sessions, developing teaching materials and managing training, one must be able to create a conducive learning environment by looking more towards trainers or facili-trainers rather than teaching. Experience does not make you a pro, but always looking for things to improve on a smaller scale each day matters for personal development. Even small things do carry weight, such as the introduction activity to the class. Rather than doing a typical ice breaking by introducing our name, we can put extra effort by creatively thinking of how you want to be remembered among your learners. Sometimes, minimal effort can go a long way. The trainers who were groomed at our institution learned to understand that as a trainer, one needs to be versatile enough to explore many activities that might suit different learning styles and learning pace. We even ventured into non-conventional ways of learning through facilitation and doodling as part of extracting information and images for learning consumption and to keep our mind open about creating learning games. That, again, comes with the expectation that you must be prepared for many possibilities in creating a positive

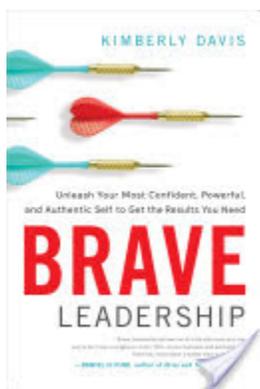
¹ ORID is a strategic questioning method that gets you to the decision which covers four types of questions (Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, Decisional) which is taken from the book 'The Art of Focused Conversation' by Brian Stanfield.

² Caleb Gattegno is the author of 'The Silent Way' 1963 which tell the unconventional way of teaching arithmetics where learners discovers for themselves.

environment for learning. In RSOG where Integrity, Courage, Innovation and Change is our philosophy, we are trained to do things differently to be part of a memorable history in our future.

We do hope that our story might resonate with you, so that you may have a better appreciation of our role and existence.

Book Recommendation – Brave Leadership: Unleash Your Most Confident, Powerful, and Authentic Self to Get the Results You Need by *Kimberly Davis*



Ismail Johari Othman

Anecdotes where potential talent decline leadership roles because of their reluctance to lead people are becoming more pronounced of late. Some of the more common lines to rescind the offered roles are “...I think I can do the job but the people part, that is tough...” and “...I wish I can focus on the task, the people aspect is really taking a lot of my time...”. Based on these instances, what is it that makes leading people more difficult today compared to before? Leadership books have become a common sight in bookstores, serving as an opportunity to assist leaders and potential leaders, especially ones who seem averse to the idea of leading people and teams. Of late, books relating to social psychology to explain or give insights to these phenomena are flooding the market and one of them is *Brave Leadership* by Kimberly Davis.

Organised in four parts, the first focuses on the general idea about bravery and how it relates to the present world. Unlike before, when life was perhaps less sophisticated, today’s context requires commitment at the highest possible level. Such intensity can potentially cause anxiety, stress, vulnerability, scepticism, and insecurity, amongst others. These are generally referred to as emotions. Apart from emotions, coexisting in the system is logic. Having emotions and logic work together is crucial. Imagine what would happen if a three-ton elephant (emotions) disagrees with the elephant rider (logic) as far as directions are concerned?

A leader, to the author, is someone people “want” to follow, not “have” to follow. To “want” is gut instinct, it’s a desire, and it is the elephant as illustrated by the earlier metaphor. One cannot fake want – at least not in entirety nor in a prolonged duration. Want is the centre of commitment, loyalty, engagement, satisfaction, passion, and joy. Unfortunately, such want is observed to be missing in many workplaces. Even worse, many may have noticed it, but no one does anything about it and sadly, it has become an elephant in the room. How does one deal with such a situation? Is there a tried-and-tested formula that can be utilised? Are there any 10 magic steps to follow? Certainly, there are no short cuts or magic potion as far as brave leadership is concerned. Brave is being in one’s most confident, powerful and authentic self. Similar to being on-stage, the audience (the people who follow) make judgements on whether the actor (people who

lead) are brave or not. Apparently, the harder part of realising this ‘want’ is authenticity, where leaders are judged in terms of their ingenuity, trustworthiness, reliability, and believability.

The subsequent part of the book identifies common barriers to “brave”. On top of the list is one’s personal history and life experiences. Whilst the past may offer some wisdom, in order to be a brave leader, it is critical to recognise that history and experience do not determine what is possible for one self. There are still opportunities for self-improvement, provided one embraces self-awareness of individual strengths and weaknesses. The second barrier is self-perception, as one often sees what one wants to see to prove that one is right, termed as confirmation bias. A brave leader makes a difference in this by taking the initiative to understand why someone is doing what they are doing, even if it may not seem to make sense at all, initially. In pursuing such efforts to explore new possibilities and understanding others better, one could be exposed to vulnerability. Being in a state of vulnerability causes discomfort, thus it is natural that human beings avoid this state of discomfort. If one wants to be a brave leader, one must understand how vulnerability affects oneself and find ways to navigate this vulnerability constructively. The other barrier is lack of presence (being present). While it is rarely intentional, being absent at crucial occurrences somehow are identified as an unconscious survival mechanism. The downside to lack of being present as a leader is that, if one is not present with those they lead, their followers’ wants might stand at risk of being unnoticed.

While the second section outlined the barriers, the third outlines areas that leaders should enhance in becoming brave. This includes focusing attention to the people they lead, having clear goals, and taking up consistent actions to accomplish them. Ideally, brave leaders focus on things that are bigger than their job responsibilities. They look at the impact that they want the people they lead to feel and have. Brave leaders deal with what is real and not what they think it should be. To that effect, they can connect meaningfully, which then allows them to present their real selves to their audience – the essence of authenticity.

The book ends with a strong emphasis on the importance of self-awareness and sense of responsibility. It recommends getting acquainted with other brave leaders as one of the potential ways to help in cultivating brave leadership in oneself. The author also asserts that it is fine to take baby steps in embracing brave leadership, as the saying goes: Rome was not built in a day. Exercising regularly, eating healthily, ensuring a good nights sleep, and taking occasional breaks can also help – after all brave leaders are also human. As profoundly quoted by a prominent novelist many years back “*there are no new truths, but only truths that have not been recognised by those who have perceived them without noticing*”. Yes, this book is offering nothing new, except some truths that could have gone unnoticed all these while. Thus, the book is recommended to only those who truly “want” to be brave.

Brave Leadership: Unleash Your Most Confident, Powerful, and Authentic Self to Get the Results You Need is published by Greenleaf Book Group Press and can be purchased from leading bookstores at RM125.

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