

Our Leadership Development Learning Curve

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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.