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By GUNASEELAN KANNAN  
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THERE are many successful family-owned businesses around the world like Wal-Mart, Ford, Reliance Industries, Samsung, Nike, Volkswagen, Tata group, Continental, Bosch, BMW, Porsche, Michelin, Heineken and Levis that continue to fly high despite uncertainties.

Some family-owned businesses have lasted for generations; Takenaka Corp (since 1610), Thomson Reuters (since 1799), Peugeot (since 1810), Hutchison (since 1828). I believe they all succeeded because of clear guidance and leadership which were instilled in the next generation that was taking over the reign.

As a licensed financial adviser, it is my job to advice clients on family office, estate planning and business succession planning. Well, I learnt that advising was much easier than executing when my father passed away last year.

After my father's sudden demise, my brother, Saravanakumar, and I had to immediately take over his newspaper distribution business run under the banner of Kannan News Agency.

This is a small-medium enterprise which has been in operation since 1997 – with less than 10 employees – located in Bandar Kinrara, Puchong.

This business entails a lot of sacrifices and discipline. My father was up by 4am daily and took limited holidays in a year. Not everyone was willing to do this business because it required a lot of hard work.

At present, my brother and I are facing lots of challenges in running this business; from human resources, operations and finances to lower subscriptions and competition from digital news platforms that threaten our very existence.

Nevertheless, nothing has stopped us from continuing the business and this is solely because of all the lessons taught by my late father, Kannan Kandasamy.

### THE FAMILY BUSINESS

As the eldest son in my family, I was involved in the family business since the age of 12.

At the initial stages of this business, my father and I were usually up by 2am, making our way to the newspaper companies to collect our daily supplies.

I would complete distributing the newspapers by 7am, head home to get some sleep before getting ready for my afternoon school session.

My father, on the other hand, would continue his day job as a salesman.

During the weekends, my sister, Mutthamil and I would take turns to sell newspapers at our roadside stall. My mother Thanavathy Ramu held a full-time job and helped whenever she was on leave.

This had been my father's life for almost 20 years as a newspaper distributor. He only enjoyed four days of leave in a year.

His hard work and diligence has enabled the business – which started off with just the two of us – to grow into a small enterprise.

I have certainly whined about waking up at ungodly hours in the past but when I look back, I believe my siblings and I have inherited valuable characteristics from him, and I am going share what I've learnt from him.

### STARTING YOUNG

As the eldest son in the family, my father taught me responsibilities by getting me involved in the business at a very young age. As a young boy, I used to criticise if something went wrong in the business.

"I knew that was not going to work" or "That will never work" were my usual phrases. My father was always quick to point out that if you did not want to volunteer or take the responsibility to

# MY FATHER, MY HERO

## A LEADERSHIP LEGACY THAT WILL LIVE ON



Gunaseelan (left) with his brother Saravanakumar and sister Mutthamil (right) pictured here with their late father, Kannan (second from right).



Gunaseelan (left) checking his distribution list with an employee.

solve a problem, then you have no right to criticise.

That got me thinking. From then, I always thought up solutions for problems before addressing it with my father.

My father instilled the idea of taking responsibilities when we can as his helped us realise our potential and enabled us to become good leaders. Holding responsibilities will show your actual character and you will understand who you really are. Leadership is responsibility, not power.

### TAKING THAT RISK

I learnt from my father that taking risks was crucial in achieving success. I started my first business venture at the age of 18. At that age, most parents would like their children to fully concentrate on their higher education, but not my father.

He encouraged me to venture out and loaned me RM15,000 as capital, with a condition that I should return the money in six months, and I am proud to say that I returned it within three months.

I have failed in many previous business ventures but nothing has stopped me from taking the risk and trying again.

My brother – upon graduating from Universiti Malaysia Sabah – did not join the corporate world but ventured into car-

penry, a tough business to run.

When he spoke to me about it, I followed my father's footsteps and loaned him money to sustain himself as he learned the trades from scratch.

I know that his hard work and sacrifice will definitely bring him success in life. I succeeded because my father trusted in me and encouraged me to take risks and now I am following his footsteps.

### NO DEGREE COMPENSATES LIFE LESSONS

At university, I took a compulsory subject called Organisational Behaviour that gave us some knowledge on leadership, organisational culture and people management. I couldn't help but think how my father had the right knowledge and skills on all the above despite not completing secondary education.

My father had always believed and trusted me. Leadership is all about trust. This trust enabled me to take on leadership roles without any fear. I was the President of the Hindu Society at Universiti Putra Malaysia.

While my peers were busy accumulating good CGPAs, I was busy sharpening my skills on people

management, marketing and public relations through my extra-curricular activities, i.e. programmes carried out through the Hindu Society, while managing my studies.

Coincidentally, my brother was the President of the Hindu Society of his university too. I believe he was following my footsteps while I followed my father's. Today, there are various leadership subjects being taught in a corporate setting but I learnt all these initial lessons from my father and I am sure you did from yours too. Leadership is not about titles; it's about bringing out the best in others. Believe me, "leaders are not born, they are created."

### KNOWLEDGE IS AN ENDLESS STREAM

My grandfather migrated from India in the 1950's and my father was born in Malaysia. With very little formal education, my father was an avid learner. He always reminded us of a famous Tamil proverb, "The known is a drop, the unknown is an ocean".

His minimal education never stopped him from developing himself, be it learning to speak English or learning inventory management system, accounting and so on.

These days, organisations encourage employees to develop themselves by joining the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme. My father had his own CPD.

It was a struggle for me to learn English because I was brought up in a family that uses our mother tongue (Tamil) as means of communication and my formal education was in Malay. I was introduced to the English education system only in my university days.

I hated writing in English and power point presentations were a nightmare, but I remembered my father's earnestness and hunger for new knowledge and I persevered.

Today, I've written many articles in English and they've been published in newspapers and international journals. Like my father, I never stopped learning.

### GIVE MORE TO GET MORE

If you want to receive more, you need to learn how to give more. Even until his final moments, my father was always giving. He is generous man who had always put his family first. Even after marriage, he continued to help his siblings.

His generosity didn't stop with family. He used to give salaries in advance and was always there when his friends or employees needed help. I remember advising him to look into his own welfare before taking care of others. He never heeded.

Surprisingly, I realised that his traits did rub off on me. Today, as I run the family business, I am also helping others including his siblings in whatever way I can. Remember, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care! Generosity is an admirable leadership trait and when done right, it earns your respect and blessings.

### IN CONCLUSION

This is the first year that I will be celebrating Father's Day without my hero. It's a very difficult moment in my life because until this very moment, I still cannot accept the fact that he is gone as I have always envisioned him living longer and witnessing many more milestones in my life.

Our fathers do not need to build Wal-Mart, Ford, Reliance Industries, Samsung, Nike and other MNCs to teach leadership. They have done it all along from the time they held our hands for the first time. Step by step, they have led us towards the right path by being great role models and exemplary leaders.

My hope as a father is to inspire and empower my daughter Shakthisri just the way my father did it for me. My father will always be my hero. Happy Father's Day to all wonderful fathers out there.

"You don't raise heroes,  
you raise sons. And if you  
treat them like sons, they'll turn  
out to be heroes, even if it's just in  
your own eyes"  
— Walter M. Schirra, Sr.

## A HOPEFUL LETTER TO MY THREE CHILDREN

By PETER LAM  
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NOW that I've got your attention, let me start by confessing that I have 3 young adult children (all millennials or Echo Boomers). So, to be honest, they're

not likely very tuned into what dad has to say about "leadership".

That aside, last week I met 19-year old Jay, who's pursuing an accounting degree at a local university. Jay is bright and ambitious and aspires to join one of the *Big Four* upon

graduation.

Upon learning about my past career in the corporate world he boldly asked what tips I could give him to build his leadership skills. Here's the essence of what I told him during our 45-minute chat in the form of a letter.

Dear Jay,

First of all, thank you for asking the question. It's rare for young people to think ahead about what skills are important for them to acquire to prepare them for entering the workforce.

Many just join the workforce and "do their best" or "wait and see what happens".

Your forward thinking and initiative coupled with your boldness to ask and learn put you ahead of probably 95% of your peers.

### PERSONAL MASTERY

Jay, I believe leadership starts with you. I call it personal leadership, leading oneself first and foremost before leading others. People like to follow people who walk the talk, do what they say.

Nobody likes to follow a hypocrite or someone they consider not trustworthy - saying one thing but doing something else. We all know people like that, and we generally stay away from them – even if they happen to be our boss (unless we're veteran "butt-kissing" yes men/women)!

The fact that you're thinking ahead, Jay, shows you are already exhibiting leadership qualities. Leaders have a clear vision and goals. They think ahead and know what they want and what needs to be done. By being clear about goals and objectives, they're able to articulate what their vision is to others – their superiors, team members and peers.

And they probably have some sort of plan on how to achieve those goals and objectives.

This will inspire others to have confidence and even add to the plan because of your clear vision and goals.

The other part about leading yourself Jay, is personal mastery. The foundation of strong leadership is character, and the base of one's character is his or her

virtues. So, my advice is to develop your virtues.

Leadership after all is a skill, a learnable skill. And the foundation of leadership is popularly referred to as character traits or qualities. I prefer to call them virtues. These are things like reliability and dependability (leading to trustworthiness), initiative, fortitude (determination, courage and perseverance) justice (a clear sense of fairness), patience and so on.

A virtue is a good trait, usually implying moral good. You see Jay, you don't want to end up being a violent leader like Hitler or a corrupt or a dishonest/unethical leader (like the past Presidents of Brazil and Korea).

There are examples of this in the corporate world too – remember Enron, Lehman Brothers, Baring Bank UK, the VW emission scandal and even Arthur Andersen to name a few.

### THE FOUNDATION FOR GOOD LEADERSHIP

As I said Jay, character is the foundation of good leadership. To paraphrase Eleanor Roosevelt, character is like a teabag - you have to put it in hot water before you know how strong it really is. That's why parents should not only focus on academic and intellectual development of children but also on their character formation. In the real world, in career, business and life, our character is the bedrock of our success. By having clarity about your values, why and what you stand for, you will know what to do instinctively whatever the situation.

In moments of great uncertainty, crisis or volatility, strength of character will see us through. Think of leaders like Churchill, Gandhi, or Lee Kuan Yew and even Mother Teresa. And corporate leaders and entrepreneurs like Henry Ford, Jack

Welch, Soichiro Honda, Robert Kuok, Steve Jobs, Richard Branson and Jack Ma.

They are all different personalities and have different strengths. But when push came to shove, they stayed calm, maintained their integrity, perseverance and determination and they stayed true to their values, never abusing their wealth, power or fame.

Before I left the corporate world, I was the area manager for South-East Asia for a Hong-Kong based food multinational. The company faced a major crisis in 2011 and Malaysia was especially hard-hit by adverse publicity. We had to undertake a nation-wide product recall and were under scrutiny by the media, health authorities and various other parties.

Amidst all this turmoil, we had to calm our employees, especially the factory staff and assure them that we will get through the crisis without any job losses. After the storm, we were able to galvanise the team to implement a recovery plan to rebuild volume we had lost during those months of crisis. It was a stressful time but we got over the set-back and managed to build sales and volume back to pre-crisis levels within about six months, with no jobs lost.

Another skill you need to cultivate Jay, is to be a team player. Be a leader, but also a team player. That means building relationships, getting along with everyone - neither dominating or trying to over-control but listening to ideas and opinions.

Develop your emotional IQ. On this point, I'm glad you're the Organising Chairperson for the upcoming Inter-Varsity Chess Championships in August. In this voluntary and honorary role, you'll get to practice all the skills above. Keep it up! Remember the non-verbal as well as verbal cues in your communication!

### THE 3 PRACTICAL LEADERSHIP STEPS

At the end of the day, Jay, leadership can't be learnt or taught in one day. You acquire it and develop it as you go along. Make some mistakes and learn from it and begin again, wiser.

Let me leave you with a practical three-step framework to grow your leadership capabilities. First, do a self-awareness check. Identify what are your best virtues or character traits right now? How would you score yourself on each trait or virtue on a scale of 1-10? What two or three other virtues would you like to acquire or develop further?

Next, do a regular self-reflection. Perhaps weekly. How have I done in this area or that this past week? What have I learned about myself? What will I do better in the coming week?

And finally, step three is self-regulation. In the absence of a coach or mentor, ask yourself, on a scale of 1-10, how important is that thing, event, outcome right now, do I need to get stressed up about it?

I hope this helps, Jay. All the best for your big Chess Championships in August!

Sincerely,  
Peter Lam  
P.S. Who knows, maybe my three Gen Y children will be a little inspired to read this someday.

■ *Following a 22-year corporate career with leading MNCs such as Ogilvy & Mather, Unilever and Kraft Foods (now Mondelez), Peter Lam has been coaching business owners, CEOs and C-level executives since 2003. His passion is helping take companies from good to great. To get in touch with Peter, e-mail us at editor@leaderonomics.com*