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REAPING RESULTS OF BREEDING LEADERS: REFLECTIONS IN RETROSPECT

By Tharindu Ameresekere

While critical reviews and solo interviews are much of the norm in modern business publications, the BMD facilitates a dialogue between two management thinkers from the leading MBA provider in Sri Lanka, PIM (Postgraduate Institute of Management).

While one is a PIM veteran with over 15 years of service at PIM and a knowledge creator in leadership thinking and believes in being a lifelong Learner who can be further described as an international conference speaker, sought-after corporate trainer, veteran strategy consultant, prolific author and an acclaimed academic, the other is a fresh face to the PIM cadre having honed his skills in the diverse fields of digital disruption, finance, and communication skills.

The BMD facilitated a dialogue between Professor Ajantha Dharmasiri (Director, PIM) and Tharindu Ameresekere (Senior Lecturer at PIM), reflecting on the journey of PIM under the visionary leadership of Professor Dharmasiri and the vital leadership lessons.

Tharindu: Professor, they say all good things must come to an end. As your term as Director of PIM comes to a close, what do you recollect as your experience?

Prof. Ajantha: Tharindu, my association with PIM spans over 20 years, as a student, visiting faculty, core faculty, senior lecturer, professor and now the director and the chairman of the board of management. I got the surprised challenge as an Acting Director, at a time where I had not even applied for it. I decided to be an “active” director. Titles mean nothing unless those on whom it is bestowed decides to act with purpose. After six months of proving my performance and my commitment, I was appointed as director of this prestigious institution which I consider to be a privilege and an honor. In fact, it was being the youngest director of the largest postgraduate institute in Sri Lanka.

I had a clear shift with regards to approaching people. I said “no more an Individual Super Star” at the helm but a “galaxy of Super Stars” in harmonious action. It was a team orientation in

My team and I enjoyed the fortune of not just having this plan on paper but also putting into action mindful of how to maximize the benefits of this plan for our students and the wider management. I firmly believe that execution brings excellent results. It challenges us to move beyond multi-coloured, spiral bound strategy documents to dedicated action with key deliverables in mind.

focus. I told my team, “my success is our success, my failure is our failure”. They responded whole-heartedly.

Tharindu: Why is it important for an academic institution to have a strategic plan? One might identify an institution is there to continue to teach and that is its business and purpose. But you implemented what is taught to this institution?

Prof. Ajantha: Yes, Tharindu. We must practice what we preach. PIM’s approach has always been strategic. Strategy formulation and implementation is the sure way forward in achieving sustained results. PIM’s forward path is shaped by its current strategic plan.

It was a time of intense competition as higher education institutions and MBA providers were sprouting. While there is a plethora of reasonably high quality, MBA and other master’s programmes offered, PIM had to Reinvent, Reinforce and Redefine its role in the country as the Nation’s School of

Business, as PIM was traditionally known. With the NIBM and NSBM in vibrant action, we needed to do something differently. We elevate ourselves as the “Nation’s Management Mentor”. we collectively built a strategy for PIM. A renewed focus, where among a sea of people chasing to have an MBA, we would produce those who can be an MBA. I coined the new moto. “Do not do an MBA; be brilliant as an MBA”. The significant shift from “doing” to “being” was of high strategic importance.

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MBA should prepare the candidates in becoming entrepreneurs, setting up SMEs in fostering innovation and partnerships in offering best-cost solutions. It gave me a sense of satisfaction, as the MBA we offer has the scenario of making one out of five of its recipient’s entrepreneurs. In fact, we want to make this ratio doubled through the initiatives of PIM Genesis, our Business Incubation Centre.

I have been enriching my mind with contemporary thoughts on MBAs and postgraduate studies on Management, to explore new vistas in a true strategic sense. Recent comments by Elon Musk of Tesla fame, on MBAs lacking creativity also is a clarion call for regular review and continuous improvement.

Tharindu: If you could describe your strategic approach that led to significant success. I am sure you have much more to share.

Prof. Ajantha: Yes, of course. It began with the PIM’s Vision, Mission and values followed by goals and objectives and key performance



Tharindu Ameresekere, Senior Lecturer, PIM with PIM Director Professor Ajantha Dharmasiri

indicators for the said period. Furthermore, all stakeholders considered in the buildup of this strategic plan and we continue to monitor the environmental changes in the education sectors, local and global economies to ensure that we are aligned with the macro environmental forces. This way we ensure the graduates we produce are those who can make a difference in the world out there and contribute more to the Sri Lankan economy. If not, we will be just a teaching center, but Tharindu, if we are to be the nation's management mentor, we need to proceed with a plan.

I was instrumental in collectively developing our vision which is to become a centre for management excellence in South Asia. Our mission goes as follows: "We ignite human imagination by developing leaders with global presence and local pulse. In this endeavour, we pursue innovative teaching, cutting-edge research, enriching partnerships, inspiring sustainability and exemplary governance." We

at PIM practice three key values, vis-a-vis Passion (Enthusiasm and eagerness towards results in showing professionalism), Integrity (Acting in an ethical manner with the best interest of the institution in mind) and Mindfulness (Paying attention to purpose and actions in doing things with self-awareness). As I envisaged, our "Edifice of Excellence" consists of five pillars, vis-a-vis Teaching, Research, Partnerships, Sustainability and Governance.

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Tharindu – I have personally observed you are very team oriented with a flair of

relentless positivism. Why is this vital for a leader of an organisation?

Prof. Ajantha – Tharindu, this is very much in line with my life purpose. It goes as follows:

I choose to be a radiator and a reflector of positive energy by way of exploring and sharing growth-fostering knowledge with humankind.

This is because I have a genuine desire to utilize all the gifts that I have received from nature and nurture, unleashing the creativity in me with global reach and local touch.

Whilst doing so, I consistently maintain a balance between ongoing learning development, leadership growth and relationship richness.

I consider myself as a "climate creator" where my community enjoy what they do in exerting themselves towards excellence. This goes very much in line with research related to Organizational Behaviour where it was found that happy people become far more productive. I was inspired

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by a veteran CEO who said, I look after my people and they look after my business.

Instead of treating my people as staff, subordinates, direct reports, or followers, I consider them as empowered leaders. That is what made possible for me to travel overseas frequently in building study groups over six overseas destinations. I never bothered to call PIM on an hourly basis to check what is going on. For me, that is clearly micro-management. We cannot grow without proper delegation. I am so glad to reap the rich harvest of such leader-breeding.

I recall with refreshing memories how we as a PIM community embarked on two overseas study tours. First to Kasetsart University in Thailand. Second to Gajah Mada University in Indonesia (with a stay in Singapore on the way back). These include all levels of employees from the director to the drives, showing our solidarity. Each one was supposed to submit a write-up as to how the experience and

observations helped them to do at least one new thing to improve PIM. The response was very positive.

Tharindu: In your leadership journey as Director of PIM, I am sure, COVID19 posed a critical challenge. How do you look back as to how you responded?

Prof. Ajantha: Tharindu, I reflected on what I have heard about change as the only permanent thing in the world. It was very true with the change caused by COVID19, in inviting us for a continuous combat. Much has been said about the rapid spread of COVID19 which has become almost like the third world war. Nature has struck back. It has not spared any caste, creed or country, with cruel implications associated. It was a clarion call for the learning community of PIM to collaborate in the name of humanity. I had to rise to the occasion as the leader of PIM in stressing the mature adult response that must be demonstrated in taking care of oneself and others with sound

hygienic practices. I collectively arranged a range of contributions at national and institutional levels with diverse involvements of the learning community.

I guided the faculty members who involved with PIM Genesis, our business incubator to provide advice for the affected Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SME), for their survival and success. There is a dire need to offer such guidance as the SMEs contribute to over 52 percent to the Sri Lankan economy. With the involvement of PIM alumni in financial and other relevant sectors, this has become very demanding and highly appreciable.

In terms of intellectual contribution, I persuaded my faculty colleagues to develop a study framework in his/her respective specialization, with emphasis of key managerial challenges in the post-COVID-19 era. They are currently working with an assigned student or a pair of students with a solid literature review and a sound theoretical underpinning. Among the doctoral

students, deliberations on post-COVID-19 with a deep dive into Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) to understand the new normal. This has become a vital part of a series of virtual discussions started during the lock-down last year.

I lead a team of four faculty-authors to convert a set of selected case studies of final year MBA students into a collection of compressed cases, representing local and regional realities. As a continuation of it, plans are underway to deploy research students to explore cases of transformation from survival to success amidst COVID -19. I am guiding my colleagues in the PIM Research Centre, for the presenting and publishing of such cases as a PIM case study collection.

I realized that despite a planetary pandemic, the resilience and reviewal had to be collectively managed. It was a case of adjusting to new normal in responding to

VUCA 1.0 (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) with VUCA 2.0 (Vison, Understanding, Confidence and Agility). I felt the need to be responsive as a responsible social entity by way of leading a committed community in ensuring their contribution to the country.

By being responsive, we managed to continue all our scheduled programs without any delay. Converting the classroom into a virtual space, despite initial challenges, has resulted in cost-effective and flexible learning options. With regards to our overseas study groups, I managed to persuade the Board of Management to approve a fee reduction, duly passing a component of our cost savings to the students, because of the online deliveries sans airfare and accommodation involving overseas traveling by the resource personnel.

It was a case of a conscious shift from being “a sage on the stage” to a “guide on the side”. Instead of physical sessions, all learning involvements were converted to on-line. With a proven online learning management system (LMS), named Prajna (Wisdom in Sanskrit language), it was an easy transfer (<https://prajna.pim.sjp.ac.lk/>). We also used a locally developed platform with the collaboration of a communication provider, Mobitel and “M-learning.” It has been found to be very useful. The way students positively responded to getting involved in sessions using Zoom webinars and lecture recordings have been encouraging. I managed to ensure the conduct of programmes within the original timelines without any delay.

As the first response to the island-wide lockdown, we decided to convert all sit-down exams planned for the end of the term to be "take home" exams. With the guidance



PIM Director addressing an MBA inauguration

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provided by the faculty, it was a very satisfactory performance with due adherence to plagiarism avoidance requirements (through the similarity index monitored by "Turn-it-in" software).

I facilitated an online brainstorming session with my Information Communication Technology (ICT) team and the core faculty with regards to selecting the most appropriate technology solution to conduct sessions, with cost-effectiveness in mind. We narrowed down to Microsoft Teams and Zoom and owing to the less-complex nature and more -flexible features, we started using Zoom in a vibrant manner. For each online session, we assigned a host to work with the relevant resource person to ensure smooth and smart delivery.

To make the life of the learning partners comfortable, we shared the Zoom link through Prajna, our learning portal. I suggested my ICT team to ensure the availability

of the recorded version of each session for subsequent viewing by the participants. It was very well received by our learning partners as some of them had confusing schedules for working from home, in preventing them from logging to our sessions on time.

I managed to convince some faculty members who were not so tech-savvy to appreciate the need to change, with some handholding by my ICT team members. I saw how they responded, though reluctantly, realizing the necessity and urgency to change in adapting to the on-line delivery. Working from home was essential to ensure the continuity of planned programs. A rapid assessment of the technical requirement leading to providing higher capacity internet connections was done in fulfilling the voids.

As Eckhart Tolle expressed in his bestseller, *A New Earth*, "when faced with a radical crisis, when the old way of being in

the world, of interacting with each other and with the realm of nature doesn't work anymore, when survival is threatened by seemingly insurmountable problems, an individual life-form, or a species, will either die or become extinct or rise above the limitations of its condition through an evolutionary leap." I felt that it was an invitation to awake to our life's purpose. I encouraged the PIM community to use the extra free time during the lock-down to ponder on their purpose. The next step is to pursue the purpose with passion. The swift shift from face-to-face sessions to online sessions was an opportunity to adapt to new normal as a survival need.

In attending to all the above, I collectively ensured a cost-effective way of conducting sessions especially for overseas study groups. The positive response from the learning community was overwhelming. I collectively explored the

opportunity of up-skilling of the faculty in making them confident with online and hybrid teaching. I am so pleased that the required flexibility to face any possible lockdown in the future has been already built.

Tharindu: They say, proof of the pudding is in the eating. They also say, what gets measured, gets managed. Professor, what are the vital numbers that shows the rich harvest of your hard work:

Prof. Ajantha: Yes, Tharindu. It has not been just a pie in the sky with mere talking. Walking the talk with collectively delivering value was done. Let me share some figures relevant for past six and half years, in line with the five pillars of our edifice of excellence:

Teaching Excellence:

- 90% increase in students
- Vibrancy of 6 overseas study groups (UAE, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Bangladesh, Bahrain)
- Introduction of five new programmes (MBA in Taxation, MBA in Customs, Executive MBA, MPA in E-Government, MPA in Education Management)

Research Excellence:

- Sri Lankan Journal of Management (SLJM), flagship publication of PIM, becoming the first Sri Lankan research journal to be hosted

by EBSCO (one of the top three research databases in the world)

- Producing of 10 PhDs with research rigour
- Initiation of PIM's annual research conference (PIMARC)

Partnership Excellence:

- Doctoral partnership with University of New South Wales (UNSW), Australia paving the way for 10 PhD scholarships for PIM MBAs so far
- Initiation of over 12 short-term international management programs in association with leading universities in Australia, Germany, Hong-Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Netherlands, and Thailand.
- Vibrancy of over 100 Executive Development Programs (EDPs) tailored for corporate sector.

Sustainability Excellence:

- 200 % increase in surplus
- Over US\$ 900,000 revenue from overseas study groups
- 100 % paper-less learning environment with PIM's Prajna Learning Portal

Governance Excellence:

- Continuation of self-finance status with zero dependence on treasury for both capital and recurrent expenditure

- 100 % compliance with PIM's ordinance guidelines with proper conduct of Board of Management, Board of Study, and sub-committees such as Audit and Management Committee (AMC) and Finance and Remuneration Committee (FMC)
- 100 % compliance with Government Audit Regulations

There are many more numbers I can share, but I thought the above will be the key highlights, as a robust collective performance.

Tharindu: I think we have covered a wide variety of aspects with interesting insights. What is your final message for emerging leaders?

Prof. Ajantha: Leadership is more a cross than a crown. It involves serving others. I firmly believe in servant leadership, with the motto: "those who serve deserve leadership". Do not just get carried away by looking at the perks associated with a leadership position. What is more required is practicing of values in producing value. One should not get tempted to go for perks, overlooking principles. You should be holistic, humane, and humble. Having enormous powers but exert them only when necessary requires much maturity. It is life-long journey of a mindset, skill set and toolset in action. You realize that life is worth living with leading and learning hand in hand. ^{BMD}