

# Young Leaders' Forum in Asia: Learning about Leadership, Abundance, and Growth

*Karen Ayas and Philip H. Mirvis*

Leadership is a choice. A spirit of abundance opens up new possibilities. To grow a business, you must grow the humanity of its leaders. These are some of the themes from biannual meetings of the Young Leaders' Forum (YLF) of Unilever Asia Pacific.

In early April 2001, some 25 young leaders, from different backgrounds and functions and based in Unilever country organizations throughout Asia, traveled from the meeting site (a comfortable resort along the South China Sea) to a small, impoverished hamlet near Danang, Vietnam, to visit an orphanage. The tour to the Village of Hope concluded a three-day meeting at which the young leaders had reflected on their personal development, reviewed the state of their businesses, and visited local markets and homes. Together, the participants, along with the authors and other facilitators, had seen how villagers live, cook, clean, and care for themselves and their children, what products they use currently, and what else they might need, want, and afford in the future. During this last day of the meeting, we planned to visit the home of 180 displaced and disabled children, play with them, meet their teachers, and talk about leadership with Van Tan Hoc, founder of the Village of Hope.

## A Moment of Truth

As our troupe entered the village, young children dressed in white shirts and red ribbons greeted us with bouquets of colorful flowers. They ran to pair up with us, show us their lodging and environs, and introduce their friends and teachers. There was a lot of patting, smiling, and pointing—all nonverbal communication because we didn't speak a common language yet had so much to say. We were ushered into an assembly room fronted by a small stage where older children illustrated Vietnamese folklore and traditional dances and led the younger ones in song.

Next we heard from the village leader. Sitting on tiny chairs, we formed circles around Tan Hoc. One young Vietnamese leader offered to translate. We learned how the orphanage had formed after the ravages of war. It grew first through local initiative and then with modest international support. Tan Hoc had been a primary school teacher who had a "big dream" to build the village with few resources but "an abundance of hope." He ran the village as a family. "I am very grateful to the children because they have given so much to me," he said. "It is from them that I learn every day."

And as we asked questions, we all noted his humility. We asked what drove him. "Faith and love," he answered. "I have a dream that keeps me going, where I see each child is happy." When we asked how he could see that, with 180 children to watch over, he explained: "I look in their eyes every day when they come back from school, and those eyes tell me who I should spend time with, to give more hope, and to give more love."



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Young leaders and the children of the Village of Hope

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He also told us that he was reaching out to others to extend this work beyond his village, explaining: “When you are 50 years old, you feel there is not much time left to do something worthwhile; one needs to share all he has.”

With every exchange, our listening intensified. Another translator took over. After an hour, it was the young leaders’ turn to share what they had learned from Tan Hoc and their first glimpse of the village. After a moment of silence to reflect on our lessons, we noticed the children had quietly come back to join us. One by one, the young leaders spoke of their lessons: how passion can make the impossible possible, how one person can change the lives of so many, how one can get so much in return for so little, how giving can be rewarding, and so on.

The pace of the reporting escalated; the secrets of Tan Hoc’s leadership seemed profound yet still elusive. One leader exclaimed in wonder about the unassuming, soft-spoken village leader: “You are not someone special, yet you make such a big difference in the lives of these children.” Then another questioned him: “What would happen to the children if something were to happen to you?” There was a moment of silence. Then we saw his inscrutable face overcome with emotion. He trembled and could not stop his tears. Seven or 70 years old, every person in the room cried with him. This was a moment of truth none of us would forget—a moment that we could characterize as “looking humanity in the face.”

### The Leadership Forum as a Learning Community

This moment of truth would be one of several soul-moving experiences intended to open the hearts and stretch the humanity of Unilever’s young Asian leaders. The village was selected as a venue to help them widen their visions of leadership and calibrate their own developmental journeys. To learn more about the spirit of abundance, they listened to the village founder, a role model whom they would not encounter in their usual professional circles. Thoughts and feelings about the encounter would, in turn, be grist for personal reflection and collective sense making (see the sidebar, “Reflections on a Leader’s Tears”).

The president of the Unilever Asia Pacific region, Tex Gunning, had organized the forum to enable young leaders to “move on to a higher level of consciousness . . . and make it part of your life.” The 25 young leaders meeting in Danang—some in finance, others in production, marketing, or human resource management—had been chosen for their leadership potential. Gunning had asked each of his country chairmen to select up to three young candidates for a leadership development forum that would gather twice a year for a few days and operate as a network and support group. Gunning undertook their personal and professional growth as his mission. Having been a marketing manager in Thailand and business head in Australia earlier in his career, he had worked mostly for and with executives of European descent. His promised legacy as a regional president would be to create a cadre of Asian executives.

In November 2000, shortly after his appointment, he had convened the first YLF in Singapore. There he presented the idea that leadership is a choice. He challenged the participants to take full responsibility for their choice because, in his experience, not everyone is willing to make the sacrifices needed to be a leader. In February 2001, as a follow-up, he invited the group to join the top 200 of his Asian business leaders in a retreat to Sarawak, Malaysia. There they hiked in the rain forest, shared personal histories and visions, and participated in fishbowl discussions with top leaders from their own country and others in Asia. After the retreat, the young leaders spent a week together in training based on Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. The YLF meeting in Danang in April 2001 was their third time together.

What is this leadership forum? In a sociological sense, it creates a *cohort* of young leaders within Unilever across Asia who would otherwise be separated by function and country organization. They read the same books, study the same business situations, and

## Reflections on a Leader's Tears

"We heard a passionate leader talk about the orphanage. We witnessed a moment of truth. We learned that we have to be who we are, that we have to share all we have, and that we have to follow our hearts. The major lesson was to have the courage to lead what you believe in, share your gifts, and lead in abundance.

"This was a turning point. We truly fell into community, we truly felt responsible for reaching out to the orphanage, and suddenly we all felt we belonged to a group and grew very close to each other.

"We saw the founder of the village cry because we cannot be here forever; we will all have to leave this world some day. We realized that it is our responsibility to grow a new generation to carry out our legacy as leaders. Some of us were crying because we, supposedly the young generation of bright leaders, felt so helpless. We hadn't done enough. Compared to this leader who had given his whole life for such a wonderful cause, we fell so short."

—Young leader, Philippines

share common experiences in their periodic meetings and training. They are active, visible participants in strategic meetings and projects heretofore limited to more senior managers. All this has helped to create a strong sense of identity among them as future leaders. They see themselves, and others see them, as a distinct and identifiable group in the company.

Many large companies identify their "high-potential" young people and host programs for their continued development. But most firms groom their future leaders through more individualized curricula and experiences. Furthermore, the elite status of high-potential candidates in these companies is often kept secret, and there is ongoing grading of their individual progress. This often produces an undercurrent of competition among them in their separate drives to get ahead.

By comparison, membership in the YLF is wholly transparent, and the emphasis is on promoting cooperation among peers and their collective improvement. At once, this is a culturally appropriate "Asian" model of personal development and, at the same time, an intentional effort to develop a cadre of recognizably Asian leaders. The personal impact and recognition is notable. "To be told that you are seen to be a high-potential manager is very inspiring. It really set me up to dream of what changes I could create in the company," reports one participant. He adds, "Being introduced as a young leader in the presence of the top executives and senior management team was a definite morale booster. It makes working with them much easier."

In our view, the YLF exemplifies a *learning community*. Personal inquiry, small-group dialogue, and communal reflection continuously broaden the curricula and deepen shared experiences. Participants are expected to reflect on and share deeply from their life histories and personal philosophies and to speak about the current state of their business lives and themselves. In addition, they are expected to teach one another about their respective markets and cultures, about their functions and disciplines, and about current business strategies and results—warts and all.

Other companies are creating their own brand of learning community to develop the talents of their managers and professionals. As an example, programs such as those run by Noel Tichy and his associates put teams of up-and-coming executives into temporary learning systems where they tackle real-time business problems, learn experientially about group processes and project management, and get constant feedback on their teamwork and interaction style. The programs by Peter Senge and his colleagues at the Society for Organizational Learning provide more in-depth exposure to the latest learning technologies and sustain community feeling through dialogues, seminars, and collective reflection. More broadly, the range of learning communities includes peer networks that connect, say, women or people of color in companies and offer coaching, mentoring, and peer support. And myriad "communities of practice" are forming within companies and across them where professionals can share knowledge and often address business needs.

The YLF incorporates elements of each of these kinds of learning communities: it applies the pedagogy and tools of action learning, it uses the principles and practices of community building, and it stresses peer development and networking. Furthermore, the forum has gained the institutionalized identity of an ongoing community of practice. But the strategic intent behind the YLF extends beyond knowledge sharing, networking, and the transfer of learning to practice.

## *The strategic intent behind the YLF extends beyond knowledge sharing, networking, and the transfer of learning to practice.*

Until now, Unilever, like many multinationals, has relied on an expatriate model to develop its next generation of leaders. Typically, high-potential candidates, in this instance mostly English or Dutch, attend university programs and take a series of “foreign” and home office assignments on their way to senior management posts. The process is run by corporate staff who more or less manage the expatriates’ careers. At Unilever, as in other companies, those who get to the top are often similar to their predecessors—a process likened to managerial “cloning.”

The intent of the YLF in the Asia Pacific region is to change the mind-set and makeup of Unilever’s leadership. The pedagogy, for instance, emphasizes emotional intelligence as much as rational thinking and celebrates a more free-spirited style of operating than has been characteristic in the home office. The longer range intent is to fill the country management teams with Asian, rather than European, leadership. On this count, it is also notable that the forum in Asia has many more women in its ranks than the current profile of executives in the region.

There is nothing secretive or subterranean about these aims. At the meeting of current regional leaders in Sarawak, Asian women led a fishbowl discussion of their prospects and roles in the company, witnessed by the leaders attending. The young leaders led a discussion as well; one recalled: “The fishbowl experience—with some of the young leaders at the center and all the board members outside looking in and listening to the dialogue on issues like women in the organization and expatriates—elevated our stature as young leaders and displayed our level of maturity.”

### **Design of the Forum Meetings: Pedagogy and Methods**

The pedagogy of the forum involves a mix of business discussion and experiential learning, cognitive and emotional work, and physical movement and silent reflection. Activities at forum meetings are sequenced to promote individual, small-group, and collective engagement. Gunning, who acts as the host and master of ceremonies, designs the sessions with input from facilitators, including local staff, former Unilever executive Jan Peelen, and the authors.

Although each meeting has an initial design, the agenda is flexible, with space for improvisation and serendipity. Mirvis has worked with Gunning for several years and emphasizes the importance of setting the scene, storytelling, staging, sequencing, and other *performative* aspects, along with the usual *process facilitation*. The program for the YLF meetings in Danang shows the flow of activities (see the sidebars, “Young Leaders’ Forum in Danang” and “Young Asian Leaders Meet Again”).

Embedded in the program, and in the overall YLF agenda, are the following learning experiences.

#### *Self-Assessment and Reflection*

Young leaders complete a variety of self-assessment instruments about their emotional make-up, influence style, Myers-Briggs type, and competencies to grow a business. They also prepare and share their life stories with one another. At forum meetings, they discuss these observations and insights with peers in small groups. “It’s like a surgery of the soul. You begin to see the roots and patterns,” says one young leader about her self-reflection, “and you understand what truly moves you.” Deep, intimate sharing in small groups empowers all to move beyond their comfort zone and opens up the introverts as well. As they find comfort and courage in each other’s stories, the participants confront their own humanity—at its best and worst.

#### *Readings, Cases, and Coursework*

To deepen self-reflection, the participants read and discuss the existential writings of Frankl and Fromm, as well as the spiritual views of M. Scott Peck. Most have participated

## Young Leaders' Forum in Danang

**April 4, 2001—Leadership Is a Choice.** We meet at 5:30 AM on the beach in front of a Danang resort. There are 35 of us, including the facilitators and coaches. After hiking for an hour, we reach Marble Mountain. Another half-hour climb brings us to the top. Here we reflect on the subject, "Leadership Is a Choice." While we eat breakfast, we listen to the story of a monk who climbs around a mountain and realizes that, with every level he has climbed, his view and understanding of the world enlarge.

The descent is a bigger challenge. Half-sliding, half-crawling, we find ourselves at a crevice. Passing through it requires a person at both ends to help. The passage leads to a small chamber, then to a larger one underground. This holy cave, a sanctuary filled with carvings and altars, has served for meditation and prayer for centuries.

For the next hour and a half, we break into groups to reflect on the past six months of the leadership journey. The young leaders share their promises from the first gathering and their accomplishments. We then reflect on learnings and common challenges. As we walk out of the cave toward the adjoining village, we pass through another chamber where some pay their respect to Buddha and others make wishes.

Back at the resort, a Covey exercise, a session on transformational leadership, a lecture on learning styles and effective coaching, and a presentation by the local chairman on the vision and challenges of his company fill the rest of the day. We end at 11:30 PM after an excursion and dinner in the neighboring port, Hoi Ann.

**April 5—Growth Is a Choice.** We start at 5:30 AM with a workout on the beach, followed by breakfast. By 7:30, we are in the bus heading to a local market that we visit to understand the current state of local commerce and consumption and to experience the culture. We smell and taste the foods, hear the talk and music, and get a feel for the place, but at the same time, we imagine how it could look in 10 years. We head to a small village in the midst of rice fields, separate into small groups (with a Vietnamese young leader in each group), and spend an hour at the house of a Vietnamese family to learn about daily living and lifestyles.

Back at the resort, we spend a brief time on visioning. First in small groups, then as a whole group, we reflect on vision 2010 for the company in Asia. After lunch, there is a session on strategy development, followed by a learning history session that highlights the lessons learned in the transformation of a Dutch food company's business—Gunning's previous assignment.\* Discussions continue over a cookout on the beach, which later turns into a beach party.

**April 6—Abundance Is a Choice.** Again, a 5:30 AM wake-up call is followed by a workout and swimming, then breakfast. We leave for the orphanage described at the beginning of the article. Back at the hotel by 4:00 PM, we have time for closure before some of us leave for the airport.

\*See P.H. Mirvis et al. "Learning in Performance: How a Dutch Company Transformed Itself." *Reflections* 2 (Summer 2001): 21–37.

in the Covey "7 Habits" course. Business reading and presentations on strategy, growth, and competitiveness counterbalance the introspection.

At YLF meetings, academic and business experts present concepts and case studies on leadership, best practices in product innovation and marketing, and trends in branding. There are several case studies on growing a business. In addition, the participants regularly report on their home-country markets and present case studies from their own businesses. These are not always best practices, as one young leader notes: "She showed us that 'bad leadership is a crime.' Some leaders in her business could not work together and took the organization in different directions."

### Physical Activity

Every day of the forum, there is time for physical activity in the outdoors—an early morning walk or tai-chi exercises, hiking, boating, or biking. Often this is followed by a more contemplative experience, linking mind and body with the soul. One young leader reflects on his lessons from a strenuous hike: "There was a seven kilometer trek uphill with very little rest or shade, and we had to climb over rocks under the scorching sun. We were organized as functional teams to climb the mountain, and we realized that we were only going to get through this as a team."

### Mentoring

Mentoring by senior figures is an explicit part of the young leaders' development agenda. Mentors include the president, Jan Peelen (Dutch), Felipe Alfonso (professor of



## Young Asian Leaders Meet Again

**November 20–22, 2001.** We are back in Danang, Vietnam. We have a day and a half before the young leaders arrive. We are going through the details of the program design that Gunning has put together. There are five of us including the authors, a veteran board member, and the human resource manager for Asia. As always, the purpose of the tentative schedule is to make sure that the program's intent is clear and that the parts relate to each other. We each have different roles to play; the rest is improvisation. We will change and adapt what is in the program depending on the group and the moment.

We face a greater challenge this time, however. Ten participants who have been part of the forum since the beginning will not be here. Instead, there are 14 new young leaders joining the forum. The company has gone through global restructuring, and some of the young leaders who had been in the forum now work in divisions for which the regional president is no longer responsible. They have been invited to the meeting nevertheless. As a result of the restructuring, Gunning now has additional responsibility for operations in central Asia; hence, there are now new participants from China, Taiwan, and Pakistan.

The program we offer this time has to be equally challenging for the "old" young leaders and the "new" young leaders. The strong community feeling that developed during the past year could be threatened, or there could be a strong divide between old-timers and newcomers that prevents building the forum into a learning community. We are very aware of the challenge as we discuss the specifics of the program. At the end of the first day, we are restless and not confident that the three days ahead will be as effective as the past program. The fact that some former participants are not there makes us question the purpose and the reality of what's truly possible to achieve.

And we are proven wrong. The magic happens again. The shift begins to occur the next morning. In the hour and a half we have before beginning the program, we are able to pull to the whole thing together. There is coherence, clarity, and alignment among us. Meanwhile, as if planned, the wind from last week's typhoon has calmed and it has stopped raining. The sun is shining, and we are about to begin.

A solo walk on the beach sets the tone. All are asked to reflect once again on whether they choose to be top business leaders and on the consequences of that choice. The issue is not simple, and for the majority, it will be very present in the days to follow.

management at the Asian Management Institute and a Filipino), and the authors (Turkish and American). We present our research and experiences in various organizations, facilitate small-group work, and informally coach.

Clearly, our work has had an impact on the young Asian leaders who, perhaps more than their European and American counterparts, are more respectful of elders and their knowledge. For example, one remarked on the presence of Jan Peelen: "What is striking is the fact that he is like a big, deeply rooted tree—old and wise after a long, successful career in the company, but also very passionate about young leaders. Trees can go through storms and lots of hardship when they are deeply rooted and strong. Trees plant the seeds for growth and enable other trees to grow. We were very inspired by him. And the seeds for this forum were planted."

## Service Learning

Service learning is an interesting and vital element of the programs. One example is the visit to the orphanage in Danang. At the regional meeting in Sarawak, an in-depth review of the state of the natural environment in Asia was followed by a clean-up of a refuse-strewn beach. Later, a visit to the indigenous Panan peoples and a hike through their increasingly deforested lands opened hearts and led to an earnest discussion of the cultural and environmental "costs" of economic growth in Asia. This, in turn, informed the debate about Unilever's "vision 2010" in Asia. One participant commented:

We began the event by talking about the global impact of industries on the environment and what humanity has caused. Then we cleaned the beach with 200 other managers. This clearly sent the message that we as individuals can make a difference, and together we are very powerful. We continued the self-reflection process, and the beauty of nature and majesty of the place helped deepen our insights about our roles as leaders and individuals on this earth. To be in the jungles of Borneo helped us feel and see the potential in this region—almost feel and touch the vision. In short, this was a perfect setting to start creating vision 2010 for Asia. We were able to move from discovering self to building a mental picture about

the future with a clear direction of where to go and where to be. You can move toward your vision when you can see it clearly, are passionate about it, and want to share it. And it is extremely powerful when a lot of people share the same picture.

### *Collective Reflection*

Finally, there is periodic cataloguing of experiences and lessons learned by the young leaders and whole-group reflections on the work of the learning community. This was an explicit part of the agenda at the November 2001 meeting.

### **Telling Our Story**

As at the former meetings, the first part of the program in the November 2001 YLF in Danang was dedicated to connecting to self and others. There were solo, group, and plenary sessions, but we mostly worked in small groups (four or five participants). We stayed with our groups for deeper sharing.

Late into the night on the first day, we shared personal life stories. The emphasis was on “what has shaped me as a person and as a leader, and what you need to know about me to understand me better.” We concluded the evening with a discussion on the power of storytelling as a process and what we have learned from the stories we heard. “The more you tell your story, the more you are peeling the onion,” said a previous participant.

To make sense of our collective experiences, reflect, and learn from them, we designed a session as an action-learning effort, with the intent to cocreate a “living” learning history for the young leaders. We told the story of the YLF, inviting newcomers to the forum into the story and developing ownership of it. This built commitment and enhanced the sense of belonging to the community. As the story continues to unfold, everyone will be in the same chapter, regardless of when they entered the story. The intent of the learning history was to look at the key events since the inception of the YLF and codify the significant learnings. Assessing what has happened and reflecting on lessons learned also inform its overall direction and future.

Before the meeting, we asked the “old” participants (those who had been with the forum since the beginning) to reflect on positive and negative experiences in the past year and what they’ve learned. In the session, they each posted their “highs” and “lows” and learnings on a timeline marked by key events. The “new” participants, briefed and guided to assume the role of researchers and learning historians, paired with the “old” and interviewed them. After the old-new pairs walked through the chapters of their history, groups formed to develop the title, theme, and script for one chapter of the story. We then sat in a circle as if around a campfire and told our collective story, chapter by chapter.

The formal part of the November meeting closed with an evening of community reflection. After some time for self (writing in journals, if desired) and sharing key learning points with one partner, the participants sat in a circle marked by torches on the beach. Following a minute in silence with the sounds of the waves in the background, the young leaders shared what they learned.

“With your help, not only I was able to get to know a great number of enlightened souls, but I also discovered myself,” said one young leader. “I think we paved the way to create a humane business community. Living the values we learned from each other together, we can lead the sharing of love in this company.”

Remarked another: “We started this session knowing that it was about business, but somewhere along the way, we forgot about that and instead learned about humanity. It’s all about realizing that you want to make something out of your life and knowing what you want to make out of your life and that you want to touch other people’s lives. When you connect with others here and share amazing experiences and you learn about humanity, you become a better person. That remains with you.” (See also the sidebar “Leadership as a Choice.”)



Visiting the Panan people

© Philip Mirvis



Official opening ceremony,  
Village of Hope

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Gunning concluded the gathering with his reflections: “I have reflected a great deal on my own life and on my struggles in the past. I get great strength to be here and to help you to have a better life than I have had. I’ve seen many of your struggles these past few days. And I’ve also seen your courage. It gives me tremendous energy to see how brave you are and to see your aspirations and ambitions. And it gives me huge hope. I have no doubt that you will get there. Ultimately, I know that if the will is there, you can overcome anything. I see that in you. In a year’s time, so much has happened to you. I am very hopeful and grateful to be confronted with humanity in such a deep and profound way with you.”

## Revisiting the Village of Hope

The follow-up meeting of the forum, originally scheduled for China, returned to Danang to recognize the Village of Hope and the tragic death in an auto accident of one young Vietnamese leader, Harry Nguyen. After the formal part of the meeting, we were to revisit the Village of Hope. This day was planned not by Gunning and the facilitators, but by the young leaders themselves. Many had kept in touch with the children they had spent time with six months earlier. The young Vietnamese leaders had done much more than that:

### Leadership as a Choice

“The first day, as we walked on the beach, we had to reflect once again if we wanted to be top leaders or not. Until then, I hadn’t thought we really needed to make that choice. I also realized this choice means commitment, and that I am making a decision that can affect my future.”—Young leader, Thailand

“When we were asked to identify three words that describe best our mission, my choices were love, inspire, and explore. I came to realize how much these words capture my mission. When you love life, it allows you to do anything you want. When you inspire and explore, you bring excitement to all your relationships. The same applies to business: loving your consumers, inspiring your team, exploring new opportunities. And I am really confident that I can succeed in my mission.”—Young leader, Philippines

“I also had two big revelations. I have noticed that it doesn’t take me as long to answer the leadership question anymore. I know that I can do it and that I want to take the lead. And I know this company is very serious about bringing change and it feels good. On the personal side, I found the courage to look back and say that I made a mistake and dealt with it the best way I could and that it has made me a better person. Having the courage to admit that gave me a very powerful feeling, almost like being liberated. I am a stronger person now.”—Young leader, Indonesia

“The experience we are having right now as we are sitting on this beach is something I have never had. Had I not come here, I would have missed a great opportunity in my life. This is a difficult journey, but I have to be a successful leader, I have to build on my strengths, and I have to leave a legacy.”—Young leader, Pakistan

“I am the youngest of you all. At first, I was afraid to confront myself. But I realize that you cannot escape yourself. I sit here with a strange feeling that I have been reborn with all of you coming into my life. It’s really like I have unlocked part of myself that I didn’t know I had. I used to think that leadership was completely intellectual, brainy stuff. And initially I said yes to the question because of that. But after these few days of connecting with people like you, I know I have to go a long way, because it has so much to do with humanity. In the past, I have been so selfish. I have been so focused on how to make my business plan successful regardless of its consequences, and now I am so ashamed of this. I know it’s all because of the pain I have gone through in my past. To travel on the road less traveled, you have to go through pain, and you have to connect with your true self. When you deeply connect, you will live with not only your own pain but also the pain of others. But this is my choice, I decided to go for it, no matter how painful. And at the end, I know I will have lived true to my beliefs.”—Young leader, Vietnam

“I will always remember that leadership is a choice. My mind-set was that leadership is a task. After this meeting, I have so much power, like a fully charged battery, in my mind and heart to achieve what I want. I can sit in front of anyone in the company. I can challenge anyone, even the president. And I know how to unlock myself. So many don’t have the opportunity to attend meetings like this.”—Young leader, Korea



they took on a community service project to create a better home for all the children and successfully completed an upgrading of the village.

The local subsidiary of Unilever contributed US\$40,000 to the upgrade project, completed at a total cost of US\$120,000. The president of the global group, Niall FitzGerald, donated another US\$50,000; other donations came from subsidiaries across Australia, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

This day was the reopening of the village, a huge celebration with the aim of creating a memorable experience for the children and a memorial for Nguyen. After an official ceremony, a memorial service, and planting trees, we headed out with everyone from the village for a bus ride, stroll in the nearby town, and three-hour boat ride. We ended at a restaurant for a small feast and a crazy party that brought out the child in everyone: dancing between tables and around a huge campfire, singing with the children, and starting a fight with a giant creamy birthday cake for the 180 children.

What was meant to be a memorable experience for the children turned out to be more so for the young leaders. And the lessons learned would not be forgotten. One said: "I've learned that when a young child from the Village of Hope holds your little finger in his fist, you're hooked for life." Said another: "Normally one would think that it's church or whichever religion you embrace that would teach you about humanity or about love and care. I never thought that an organization could care for you. I thought they give you a salary. It's a simple business transaction; you work and get money. Well, after one year, I am proud to say that's not how it works. Ten years from now, we will not just have become business leaders, but we will have had an impact on a lot of other people's lives."

## Commentary

by *Tex Gunning*

Facing humanity has a profound effect on you as a person. We all have an enormous need for humanity. That includes love, recognition, ability to grow, friendship, fun, affection, and so on. Increasingly, we seek and choose our social and business environments with these human factors in mind.

Why is being confronted with your own humanity such a profound, moving experience? And why do we need a "reminder" to feel our own humanity? If this is so human, so innate, why did we lose this capability?

When faced with our own humanity, we become aware of all the love and pain we carry. We reconnect to our souls, and we meet again our true selves. Love, pain, birth, death, and beauty (human and artistic) make us face humanity. When we see authenticity or indigenous peoples, when we connect with nature, observe animals, play with children, and talk to the elderly, we can have such experiences. But how do you make such experiences meaningful? How do you capture those feelings and move on to a higher level of consciousness and make it part of your life? Do you start to feel your own need for love, the need to give love, and the need for a safe and meaningful environment and create a better life for yourself and those around you?

A business should be able to create a community that appeals to innate human needs. An environment that true communities characterize is one in which we find safety, caring, and compassion. In the "humane" organization, people connect more deeply to themselves (and others) and integrate their intellectual and emotional competencies in a very profound way. They can experiment and explore both competencies (as it is safe to do) and, in this exploration, find the opportunity for growth and self-realization. When they relate to others in an explorative and safe environment, people build on each other's talents. The resulting synergies create the "miracle" energies that characterize winning companies and teams.

Reflection is one of the most powerful tools for learning and, therefore, for growth. In the humane organization, because it is safe, people may share feelings and thoughts for compassionate reasons, or may test their intuitive feelings with others. Reflection, both individually and collectively, finds a fertile environment if people truly live in community.



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## Commentary

by Edgar H. Schein

The story of how Tex Gunning has chosen to provide a set of deep learning experiences for his future leaders is a remarkable example of "coercive persuasion" used to benign ends and should remind us all that it is pointless to condemn "manipulation" or even "brainwashing" until we have truly understood just exactly what happened and for what purposes. By coercive persuasion, I mean simply that many efforts to educate or indoctrinate occur in a context in which it is physically, socially, or psychologically difficult to leave. In other words, the education or persuasion is directed at a basically captive audience. When we take groups into remote environments, we are de facto creating such a situation; all institutions engage in this form of education all the time. The learning that occurred in training groups in two- or three-week workshops at Bethel, Maine, fitted this concept, just as well as the formal indoctrination that takes place in a variety of company-sponsored "training" programs. All society is a complex mix of coercion and freedom. Coercion is not in and of itself "bad," just as "manipulation" is not in and of itself "bad." It all depends on who is doing it, for what ends, and how free are the participants to leave the situation (see Schein, 1999). Hence we must always ask the tough questions: (1) coercive persuasion for what ends? and (2) coercive persuasion at what price?

The price one should not be willing to pay is physical, social, or psychological coercion in the sense that if the learner does not want to learn what the teacher is teaching, he or she must be free to leave, to exit the situation. And in order to have the necessary information on whether or not to exit, the learner must have access to valid information about what is being done, why, and what alternatives exist. The question to the future leaders of "do you really want to do this?" and the nonpunitive offer of "leave without penalty if this is not for you," become the crucial elements in making this kind of process "legitimate" and useful.

A final point concerns whether the leadership learning is for the benefit of the corporation, the benefit of the individual, or, as is reality, for the benefit of both. If some young leaders want to build their careers in this corporation and if they have a free and informed choice to do that, more power to them. If some want no part of such an intense and personal program, and, therefore choose to exit, that is good for them and also for the corporation that would not want potential dissidents. Many will not be sure, so future choice points have to be made available, and the program as described clearly has that kind of contingency built into it.

I think readers should study carefully what is being done here and examine their own feelings about it before making any glib judgments as to whether this is admirable or appalling. As I have tried to indicate in my comment, the answer to this question is in the goals of the program and the details of how it works. In any event, this is an absolutely fascinating account of a fascinating program.

## Reference

Schein, E.H. "Empowerment, Coercive Persuasion and Organizational Learning: Do They Connect?" *The Learning Organization* 6 (1999): 163–172.