

THE BRIEF

"Chinese are high achievers. They make things happen both here and abroad. Speakers across a range of sectors share the challenges they have overcome on the road to success.

This session celebrates their inspirational stories and highlights the significant contributions they have made in local and international waters".

HIGH FLYING BANANAS – a talk by Jilnaught Wong to the “Bananas NZ Going Global International Conference”, 18 August 2007

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this afternoon.

I have drawn the short straw: Speaking after lunch is a tough ask, and speaking last after three “high flying bananas” is a challenge.

Hence, I am not going to try and capture your attention with the use of the latest visual technology that we have in this state-of-the-art auditorium. Rather, I’ll talk to YOU about how YOU can be a “high flying banana”. If I may, I’ll bring along my experiences, but it’s not my intention to focus on my own achievements.

I shall interpret a “high flying banana” to mean “being a leader or in a leadership position” regardless of the field that you are in. This is where I believe I can make a contribution - from the lessons I have learnt in “walking the leadership talk”.

Regardless whether you are a papaya (yellow on the outside and yellow on the inside), an egg (white on the outside and yellow on the inside), or a banana (yellow on the outside and white on the inside), I believe that we are all given the same opportunities and face the same challenges in whatever we do – “a rising tide lifts all boats” (Kennedy), so I am not sure whether there are banana-specific challenges, constraints or impediments that we have to overcome.

I don’t see us, bananas, being in an inferior position or that we need to jump any special hurdles, at least not today, to be successful. It’s what we do, what we say, and how we behave, not how we look, that matters.

What I’ll talk about is generic, because I believe that we, “bananas”, just like anyone else, can be high achievers, and make valuable contributions to humanity and the communities we live in.

I attribute the “high flying” status to a few simple themes that I’ll talk about. These are: **focus, teamwork, and a culture of respect** – recognising that “civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof” (Kennedy). Inherent in all these are **communications** and the ability to **work with others**.

LEADERSHIP

So, to start, how do I define a leader? I like the simple definition by Andy Grove of Intel:

A leader is someone whom people follow.

Many of you here have been captain of a sports team, a school prefect, a coach of your daughter's netball team, a local authority councillor, and president of a social club or an ethnic society.

These are leadership roles. All you need to do is to extrapolate this to your career, your professional life, and whatever pursuit you have. You will get there if that is what you desire, but you won't if you believe success is simply luck.

Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved (William Jennings Bryan, an American lawyer and speaker).

So what does it take? Recently, Clayton Cosgrove, Labour back-bencher, expressed his passion in politics as follows:

I didn't join the Labour Party to be an MP. I suppose what swung it for me, it's got to burn in your guts and you've got to believe it It's got to actually burn in your guts or you shouldn't be there.

So do you have that will and the flame that is burning inside you that says I want to contribute to my profession, my community, and society, contributions that will make a difference to this world of constant challenge and change?

FOCUS

So where should you begin if you haven't already mapped out your life's plan?

Most of the remarkable breakthroughs in history started with dreams. In 1961 President Kennedy said that the United States would put a man on the moon and this they did before the decade was out. He said:

That challenge is one we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win.

In organisations, the CEO sets a vision for what the organization intends to achieve, which is translated into a mission comprising a short and concise statement of goals and priorities.

In my own life, I decided when I was an undergraduate student at this University that I would be a Professor one day, and I am very lucky to have achieved this at a relatively young age. I aspired to be an inspiring teacher and educator who engages students in interactive dialogue that advances their understanding and use of Accounting and Finance in enterprise and in creating wealth. I aspired to be a

researcher who is recognised for his work internationally, and an academic leader who builds relationships and engages with my profession, business enterprises, and our communities.

In your case, you need to map out a set of intentions or a vision, not in a mystical or spiritual sense but in the sense of outcome and direction.

TEAMWORK

The “high flying banana” needs to build great people.

Organisational success is not from individual effort, but from combining the individual strengths of a team. Working in teams can increase total output or productivity: one cannot move a grand piano, but a team of people can.

Jonathan Ling, CEO of Fletcher Building and someone whom I regard as a “high flying banana”, said after completing the billion dollar acquisition of the US firm Formica that “I was just one of the team players”.

A leader looks only as good as the people below him. Your challenge as a “high flying banana” moves from getting the best out of yourself to getting the best out of your team. Your job is to build great people.

It’s instructive to compare the leadership styles of Brad Butterworth, the successful Alinghi skipper and tactician, with Team New Zealand’s Managing Director Grant Dalton.

Butterworth described Dalton’s leadership style as:

- “a boot-camp tough regime”
- “No man love” to be displayed on the boat
- Autocratic – it’s all about how you’ve got to be tougher than the other teams
- Whereas Alinghi’s approach is to be “smarter, not tougher”.
- Alinghi carried forward the ethos of the late Peter Blake and its former skipper, Russell Coutts, which is an open forum where experienced sailors share their knowledge and the younger members are encouraged to develop.

I would like to think that it’s this latter approach that I use to develop an academic department at this Business School – not autocratic, but an open forum for communication, constructive debate, and mutual support.

However, I do accept that at times, you, as the “high flying banana” have to be decisive. You can consult with your colleagues till the cows come home, but you have to make a judgement call. At times, you’ll need to say: This is the way we’re going.

Hopefully, the “high flying banana’s” vision, experience, skills, and moral compass will help in making the right decision.

CULTURE

The “high flying banana” needs to develop a culture for how the team are expected to behave.

It’s hard to define what a strong culture is, but we generally know one when we see it. I don’t think there is a conscious attempt by organisations to create a certain culture. The culture is typically created unconsciously, based on the values of the leader and his top management or the founders of the organization.

Hewlett-Packard’s culture has become known as “The HP Way”, which is based on (1) respect for others, (2) a sense of community, and (3) plain hard work.

Another is Southwest Airlines, which has two core values: (1) a light-hearted irreverence for bureaucracy, and (2) an emphasis for teamwork. This airline is of the view that its culture is the hardest thing for their competitors to imitate: “You can buy an airplane or a terminal, but you can’t buy the spirit of the people”.

As a leader, you have to match your actions with the kinds of behaviours you want instilled in your organisation. There is no point talking about being courteous when you speak to your staff in a demeaning manner. You’ve got to “walk the talk”.

In summary, culture is about behaviours: integrity, diversity, transparency, collegiality, creativity (Google), etc., behaviours which are part of the organisational DNA.

COMMUNICATIONS

The “high flying banana” must communicate very clearly to the team what it is that he is striving for. Leaders must communicate their vision and get others to believe in it and treat it as their own.

President Ronald Reagan was called “the Great Communicator”. One of his speech writers said that Reagan can read the phone book and make it interesting. The reason is because Reagan used metaphors with which people can identify. In his first budget message, Reagan described a trillion dollars by comparing it to piling dollar bills beside the Empire State Building. Leaders make ideas tangible and real to others, so their people can support them.

The “high flying banana” needs to be a good listener as well, something that is hard to do; it’s much easier to talk than it is to listen, but listen we must.

- Frank Tyger advises: “Be a good listener. Your ears will never get you into trouble”.
- Jack Welch, one of the greatest CEOs in the US and the CEO of General Electric for 20 years, says that “Real communication involves more listening than talking”.
- Nigel Owens, the Welsh rugby referee: "You have two ears and one mouth - use them in proportion".
- Oliver Wendell Holmes: “It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen”.

“X” FACTOR

What I have talked about so far are the things that people can “learn” to become “high flying bananas”: components of leadership are recognisable and learnable. But having the “X” factor makes a huge difference.

If someone were to ask your subordinates to evaluate your leadership abilities, their response to this question would likely *not* be related to your character, integrity, and values. Of course these are important to your success as a leader, but people evaluate your leadership skills based on *what you do* to figure out who you really are. They are looking for that “X” factor.

If the “X” factor does not exist, employees are likely to *obey* rather than *follow* and only *do exactly what they are told to do* and *nothing more*. If the “X” factor doesn’t exist, your success of becoming an effective leader is reduced.

I think Princess Diana had the “X” factor, probably embodied in empathy, whereas Prince Charles doesn’t have it. President John Kennedy had the “X” factor - his intelligence, bravery, and eloquence - whereas President George Bush doesn’t have it.

SOME TIPS

Here are some tips for the things you may wish to consider and practice in attaining the “X” factor to becoming a “high flying banana”:

1. Be confident but not aggressive.
2. Be inquisitive but not naïve.
3. Practice deference, i.e., know when to speak and when not to. Don’t try and contradict the boss in a public forum. If you disagree with his ideas, talk to him in private; don’t embarrass him in front of the audience.
4. Be modest and humble.
 - “Do you wish people to think well of you? Don’t speak well of yourself”.
 - Abraham Lincoln said that “Common looking people are the best in the world: that is the reason the Lord makes so many of them”.
5. Avoid profanity. Sometimes people use the “f” word and/or the “bs” word in an attempt to come across as being the ordinary bloke or as a means of connecting with the audience. I personally find it off-putting.

I don’t like Billy Connolly’s TV show because he uses far too much profanity; nearly every second word is an “f” word, and none is necessary.

At a recent conference I attended, I thought one of the speakers was particularly good until she said: “that’s b***s***”. She didn’t have to say that, but I guess she thought that sort of language made her more acceptable to the audience. I

think it did the opposite, and I think she thought so too for she quickly said “excuse that language”.

6. Avoid flippant remarks which may make you look smart at the time, but which you could live to regret. Here are two examples where leaders have got themselves into trouble (and probably regretted being such a smart Alec):
 - Some years ago, in a New Zealand rape trial, a judge (a man) made the comment that when women say “No”, they mean “Yes”. He said: "If every man stopped the first time a woman said "no", the world would be a much less exciting place to live". I am sure he regrets making this comment.
 - Theresa Gattung, former CEO of Telecom and described by a journalist as “the very down-to-earth Kiwi Sheila”. Her most famous (or I should say “infamous”) blunder was when she said that telcos use confusion as their chief marketing tool and that the confusion helped telcos keep calling prices up. As you know, her biggest failing was to keep her customers happy. She subsequently realised that Telecom has to “re-engage with the hearts and minds of ordinary New Zealanders”.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

What brings us together at this conference is our belief that we, bananas, can succeed in our pursuits and make valuable contributions to our professions and the communities we live in. Success requires focus, teamwork, a culture of respect, good communications, and the ability to work with others.

So, my fellow bananas, the challenge for us is to have the will and the confidence to elevate ourselves way above mediocrity, that we fly high, fly harmoniously, fly humbly, so that we may come to future banana conferences to celebrate the achievements of even more “high flying bananas”.