

7 Lessons for the 21st Century

A Keynote Address to Today's Students as Managers of Tomorrow

I appreciate the opportunity to deliver this keynote address to you as students of a formally organized institution of learning and as managers of tomorrow.

Though I may have graduated from a higher institution of learning several years ago. I have not stopped being a student - a student in the institution of life, the industry, and on the journey of leading an impactful life. I am still aware of the realities of being a student; your aspirations and sometimes uncertainties about what the future holds as the world is today.

It with the awareness of these aspirations and uncertainties, and an understanding that to live a life of impact is a shared human value that I have chosen to share realizations from my journey in the industry and the world at large as lessons. Lessons that can help you take advantage of this phase of your lives in preparing to lead a life of impact. Not only as professionals or entrepreneurs, but also as managers of your life and the responsibilities life would bring your way.

My Story

I decided early in life I wouldn't just make a living for myself. I wanted to make a difference. This made it difficult for me to stick to a discipline. My choice of discipline was always dependent on the discipline of the heroes in the stories of impact I came across. At a time, I wanted to become a Lawyer, then a Doctor, and at another time, a Computer Scientist, which I later settled for on being enlightened that computational thinking was not the end in itself but a means to a variety of ends. A means that can be applied across multiple fields.

I was trapped by the dogma that everyone needs to choose a discipline to stick with. However, this was contrary to the lives of many characters I admire, who I felt had led impactful lives. From childhood Sunday school classes, my favourite biblical character had been David; the shepherd, poet, warrior, and musician, who later became the King of Israel. The news of Bill Gate's buying a 16th-century notebook for more than \$30 million had made me know Leonardo da Vinci; an artist, mathematician, inventor, anatomist and cartographer. My love for Apple devices had also made me read of the visionary behind them, Steve Jobs, the college drop-out who blended insights from engineering, the arts, and the humanities for the development of user-friendly devices that have come to shape our daily lives.

Graduating from a prestigious institution of technology as one of the best students in my class, I was armed with the ambition and a high level of confidence to put a dent in the universe. For this reason, I decided to take a career path which would allow me to fully express myself, explore, and live an impactful life without the boundaries of a discipline and geography. Hence, the decision to embark on the journey to impact as an entrepreneur.

Though I am still on this journey, I must admit it has demanded much more than I could have ever imagined. I have come to realize that my computer science degree and graduating from a prestigious institution which I held in high esteem are not enough. I have come to need much more. More than what a discipline can offer and can be taught in the classrooms of an institution.

I have also come to realize that the journey to lifelong impact can be made smoother by making the right decisions as early as possible in your life. It is not too early to start as a Student. In fact, it might be the best time to start if you have not started.

Shared are 7 Lessons for today's Students as Managers in the 21st Century.

1. **Identity. Don't let your Discipline Define or Limit You.**

It is true that you may have worked so hard to earn a seat in your class, and there is a high tendency you want to be identified by your course of study. Just like I wanted everyone to know I was a budding Computer Scientist, you may want to be called a medical Doctor, an Engineer, or an Artist. There is nothing wrong with these identities by discipline. However, don't let your discipline define who you are. Our identities become expectations on how we and others expect us to approach problems. A carpenter tends to see every challenge as a hammer and nail problem. A Doctor may be expected to always provide a medical perspective to a challenge that has no medical inclination. Building identities around disciplines many times limit the abilities of the individual.

Your discipline is best viewed as a platform. A platform which takes that discipline as a positional advantage for acquiring and connecting knowledge across domains. A platform that makes your discipline your core but from which others knowledge areas can be accessed. Your discipline should not be a room that confines you, rather, a window from which you view the world as an observer like Peter Drucker did¹.

One of the best decisions you can make in your life is to believe in yourself for who you are and be confident enough to be yourself. Though it is good to have role models as I had in Steve Jobs. The world does not need another Steve Jobs, it needs you for who you are. This is why diversity is now being embraced in the workplace more than ever. We all have a unique story that provides a unique perspective. Be authentic and carve your own niche. Your identity starts with who you are and would be shaped by the contributions to your community and the human race as your career closes down.

2. Curiosity. Be Curious but Remain Humble as you Acquire Knowledge.

Your effectiveness at observing the world and taking in other areas of knowledge outside of your core discipline is dependent on the depth of your curiosity. Take interest in other subject matters and always be ready to learn. Courses on communication, marketing, or psychology may seem trivial to you today. However, they provide you skillsets that can make you stand out from your colleagues.

Many students see their course as superior to others and hesitate to take elective courses outside their faculty. This is only reflective of a narrow worldview. When an opportunity arises to take classes outside your faculty, embrace it as an opportunity to broaden your mind. It is one of the classes organized by the faculty of management science that I discovered Peter Drucker. Discovering was just the start, the curiosity to understand management by objective drove me into reading more of his works. Getting to know Drucker's works while on campus remains one of the best rewards of my curiosity.

Curiosity is being genuinely interested in a subject, and is propelled by asking the right questions. The more answers you can provide, the better you come to know and understand the world around you. With this comes fulfilment. However, coming with this may also be an inflated ego. Knowledge can puff up. Unfortunately, pride is the end of learning and he who stops learning dies. Therefore, it is in your best interest to stay humble and keep learning.

You may begin to wonder where then is the place of focus? Focus is on result. Some are fortunate early enough to know the result they desire while others may need to figure it out

along the journey. From putting a computer on every desk or palm, ending polio in Africa, to supporting families for improved livelihoods. No matter how granular or lofty the desired result is, it is almost impossible to predict the path to it. Therefore, be open and curious. You may focus on your result, but be flexible with your approach. Your curiosity to learn new things reflects that flexibility.

3. Relationships. Birds of Different Feathers can Flock Together.

There is sometimes a desire amongst student with extraordinary abilities to detach from others. But man is a social being and no man is an island of knowledge. Therefore, it is pertinent you relate well with others. With the advent of several online universities, the fact that a higher institution such as yours provides a unique community of minds beneficial to the development of a student is valid argument for its relevance in the 21st century, Find your place in this community and thrive.

However, as a student, there is a high tendency to limit your relationships to only students in your class, departments or faculty, and sometimes your housing unit. These are common grounds that naturally bring together people on campus. However, what this does is to create an “echo chamber of like-minded friends and self-confirming news feed”². With the understanding that the perspectives of those we relate with rubs on us, you must make a deliberate attempt to extend your relationship beyond the people you have natural common grounds with. Not necessarily as best of friends, establishing a communication line which facilitates the sharing of ideas is a good start. There is a popular saying that your network is your net worth and the more diverse your network is, the wealthier you are.

Therefore, build relationships with people from different walks of life. Even when you don't agree with them, understanding the worldview of others goes a long way in effectively leading and living well with others. I understand that classes are organized and faculties are laid out in structure that can make it difficult to relate with people outside of these boundaries. It is your responsibility to be intentional about your relationships and the network you build. Peter Drucker's ability to draw lessons from business executives, public administrators, and clergymen he knew as he did in *The Effective Executive* remains one of what made his writing engaging and accessible to a broader audience. The more diverse your relationships, the wider the pool of perspectives you can always draw from.

4. Connections. “Everything Connects to Everything Else”.

Taking one’s disciple as platform, remaining curious, and drawing from a pool of diverse perspectives brings together knowledge areas that seem unrelated to each other. Though there is no doubt that there is a joy that accompanies learnings, the writer of the biblical book of *Proverbs* is right in the saying that too much knowledge wearies the mind. Maybe not always, but, it may bring one ask: “of what use are all these?”

In Steve Jobs’ Stanford commencement speech³ delivered in 2005, he shared how his curiosity had driven him to several classes that were unrelated while on campus. He made it known that learning experiences are like dots. You cannot connect them looking forward but can only connect them looking backward. His interest in calligraphy would later help in developing the font for the Apple Macintosh, one of the earliest computers with a Graphical User Interface.

Success is a journey rather than a destination. The journey to impact would bring your way several opportunities to apply yourself in areas which you cannot predict to plan out. Take every opportunity to learn as building the capacity to succeed on this journey. A lot of what you learn may seem unrelated at the moment, but they would connect on your path to success.

5. Humanity. Keep Humanity at the Centre of your Pursuits.

The emphasis on STEM, especially in Africa, influenced my decision to study at a higher institution of technology. This is from the wrong assumption that technology can solve all of Africa’s problems. We think, if only we were as technologically advanced as the West, we would do better for ourselves as a continent. This has led several students into intellectual pursuits in STEM disciplines. Unfortunately, many of these pursuits have stayed within the walls of academics, finding it difficult to become solutions for the industry and the society at large.

I have come to understand that for anyone to make a significant impact in our society, humanity must be the focal point of his/her work no matter how technical it is. This demands an understanding of the humanities. Successful individuals are not necessarily the most technically adept of their colleagues, but they are the ones who dared to create solutions with humans at the centre of their endeavours – connecting or empowering people . Steve Jobs

was certainly not the best programmer or designer but he chose to develop devices that in the best ways possible connected people to their devices and others.

Peter Drucker stood out because his understanding was not only limited to the workings of economies, industries and organizations. He understood human behaviour and made it the centre of his work. This understanding makes the difference for anyone who desires to make an impact.

6. Geniuses. Don't be Threatened by Them, You can be One.

On campus as in life, you come across people with superhuman abilities. They just seem to have a grasp of all subjects and possess an endless set of abilities. It is not unusual for you to compare yourself to them (sometimes unconsciously) and be threatened or feel inadequate on realizing you don't match up to them in terms of abilities. My advice is for you to take a deep breath and relax.

Rather than be threatened by them, the best you can do is to learn from them. Relate with them to understand how they have come by what seems to be a natural advantage. Being curious, always learning, and connecting knowledge with humans at the centre when applied consistently over time unleashes your own genius too, unlocking your natural abilities to do what seems exclusive to these super-humans.

However, being a genius is not enough. A genius makes impact, not by his abilities but, by his/her contributions. Their superb abilities are best put to use when they can connect their knowledge across diverse fields and apply it for the development of relevant human-centred solutions. In my journey as an entrepreneur, I have come to realize that the entrepreneurs and teams who make the most impact are not necessarily the most brilliant, but those that are ready to put in the required hard work. This likewise applies to Geniuses.

7. Respect. You may begin to Know more, but always Respect your Teachers.

Being able to learn voraciously as geniuses do and the optimism of still having your future ahead of you no doubt comes with their own joys. Be careful that you are not trapped into believing your own legend of being superior to your lectures who tend to come to you as "specialists" in their field.

These specialists due to the years of dedication and research to a field may not know of the latest trends in Artificial Intelligence or may not have seen an episode of the *Game of Thrones*. They contribute to their field of knowledge. They may be experts in a domain of knowledge that seems too narrow to you, remember that they serve as custodians of knowledge in those domains, which is essential to the overall sustainability of the human race.

Therefore, take every opportunity to draw from the depth of knowledge of all domain experts you come across as a student. One of the unique advantages of being a student is that you are not under the pressure to start contributing to a body of knowledge, it is in your best interest to stand on the shoulder of these giants to take a long view that you can connect together to decide where you can make your own impact.

Conclusion

These shared lessons are best for building the capacity to succeed in any endeavour of your choosing. However, to lead a life of positive impact, capacity is not enough. These lessons are towards personal capacity building and remain only activities no matter how lofty in intentions they may be. Most importantly of all, you need to Contribute. The men of the renaissance despite their well-roundedness and an understanding that cut across domains are best remembered for their works. Their contribution. So, also would be required of anyone who desires to lead a life of positive impact. This is best laid out in the classic, *The Effective Executive* by Peter Drucker. In it is the question: “What Can I Contribute?”⁴. “Effective executives focus on outward contribution”, he wrote.

On the long-term, your contribution is the best expression of yourself, not your ability to speak as a well-rounded lady or gentleman. Never at a time as this been more challenging than in this era of an avalanche of content to consume, not questioning the status quo, and the threat of our irrelevance in a future of artificial intelligence. Reflecting deeper, you realize that it is also an era to make unique contributions as never done before. Only that more courage would be needed.

Build capacity and have the courage to contribute, then, you are ready to lead an impactful life which is the hallmark of all success.

I sincerely wish you the best.

References

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