

WHAT SEVEN WEEKS OF QUARANTINE HAS TAUGHT ME

It has been two months already since I am staying at home due to the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) that has been imposed in my country. At the onset of this, after rendering a few work-from-home hours for my corporate function, I practically wasted the rest of my week binged watching series and movies on Netflix and browsing my social media channels for updates, which I've eventually regretted by the end of the first week. I am not sure if this has been the case for others in my country and in other countries who are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. But I think everyone can resonate with the fact that because the news was so sudden, no one is spared with its devastating effects. Around the world, everyone was surprised, from the government, business establishments and the people. This is the same for my case at the beginning as I had to cancel scheduled gatherings and flights intended for vacation, advocacy and coordination activities for the social ventures I have started.

Fast forward to seven (7) weeks after, I'm glad that I got over the stage of "losing sense of direction" on the first week and immediately got my game back at the beginning of the second week. If I was not able to overcome that stage, then one of the social ventures I have started, AtoANI BioPack¹ would not have become part of an Incubation Program after emerging as one of the top placers for an Innovation Competition tackling plastic waste. I would not have been able to experience being a panelist of a webinar organized by a regional community of women changemakers in Asia, discussing about Community Initiatives for COVID-19. I would not have been able to think about mobilizing

¹ *Taking on a New Venture with AtoANI BioPack*. (2020). Retrieved May 18, 2020, from <https://www.atoani.com/post/taking-on-a-new-venture-with-atoani-biopack>

the other social venture I have started, AtoANI², to help families who were affected by COVID-19 by donating the remaining vegetables and root crops in our farm that are due for harvesting. I would not have been able to dedicate a time as well volunteering for a cause that advocates for Mental Health through webinars and virtual coffee chats. I would have not been able to explore teaching and creating content about topics that I am passionate about such as Strategy, Business, Sustainability and Innovation. Most of all, if I was not able to overcome the “losing sense of direction” stage during the first week of quarantine, I would not have been able to fire up the passion and commitment of the people who are with me in my social venture journey. As a leader, it is so refreshing to see that the people part of your team is proactively acting on their ideas about the venture, taking ownership of their roles and getting involved as much as they can, which was not the case seven weeks ago.

Had the quarantine not happened, I would have continued with my daily 9-to-5 grind and put off my passion projects (e.g. social ventures, advocacy, volunteering) in the back seat. The quarantine has thought me to pause momentarily, ignite my de-prioritized passion and reflect on myself as an individual and as a leader. The seven lessons outlined on Peter Drucker’s “Managing Oneself”³ has been a good reference for the self-reflection process that I have undergone week-on-week for seven weeks which I will expound on the succeeding paragraphs.

² *AtoANI: An Advocate of Sustainable Farming Practice*. (2019). Retrieved May 18, 2020, from <https://www.atoani.com/post/an-advocate-of-organic-and-sustainable-farming-practice>

³ Drucker, Peter F. *Managing Oneself*. *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 77, no. 2, 1999, p. 64. Accessed 18 May 2020

Week 1: What are my strengths?

What the week-long Netflix binge watching taught me was the urge to do something productive and impactful. After doing it repeatedly for over a week, series after series, movies after movies, the same activity repeated; it has eventually led to boredom and tiring out. Hence, I woke up one day saying, "This has got to end!". "Even if I can't go out, there has to be something I can do that is meaningful". And then began my self-reflection process of identifying what I am good at and what I am passionate about that I have de-prioritized. I know that I am passionate and good at creating innovative solutions to problems and this is what I will continuously improve to help me in becoming a better leader. The process I have gone through paid off as it led me to pitch a solution that addresses the issue on plastic and agro-industrial waste. This enabled one of my social ventures, AtoANI BioPack, to earn one of the Top 5 spots in the recently concluded nationwide Plastic SmartCities Innovation Competition⁴.

Week 2: How do I work?

Though I have been collaborating remotely in a part-time basis with the team behind the social ventures I have started, my current corporate function still holds a traditional office set-up with agreed work schedules pre-quarantine period. Now, triggered by the pandemic, I was suddenly exposed to a new kind of work set-up in my corporate function working on Strategy and Innovation, whereby all meetings and collaborations will have to be done online. And I must admit, I am loving it. I find the set-up effective for me as I was able to dedicate more time to my ventures and advocacies due to the time saved

⁴ *Plastic SmartCities Innovation Competition*. (2019). Retrieved May 18, 2020, from <https://philippines.makesense.org/plastic-smartcities/>

from travel to work which usually average three to four hours daily considering the traffic situation. I get to have more work done with less time since there are less distractions.

I was able to identify as well how I work and collaborate best. I find joy working when the environment is not predictable. It gets me to think about creative ways on how I can solve the problems at hand. Hence, in the future, when I finally decide to fully dedicate my time in leading my social ventures, I would make sure that the employees' who are part of these ventures are being provided the environment where they work best as I would like to experience myself. I don't want to pressure them to fit into a norm that must be strictly followed to achieve uniformity. Rather, they should be provided with the flexibility to discover how and in what kind of collaborative environment they work best.

Week 3: What are my values?

The quarantine has also allowed me to identify my deep-seated values which I am unaware of. My goals might have changed as time progresses. I might have developed and discovered new strengths along the way. But I realized that my values haven't. They have served as an anchor to the decisions and goals I have made for the past years.

I value integrity, perseverance and stewardship. Integrity has driven me to take the truthful and sincere way of doing and deciding on something in every aspect of my life even though the route might be unpopular, long and hard. Perseverance has driven me to: (1) take chances in scholarships to earn an undergraduate degree, (2) relocate myself in a place I have never been before to gain experience being employed in a multinational company, (3) sleep for less than seven hours a day to be able to earn my master's degree while working full-time and (4) balance managing my social ventures during my free time

while I perform my corporate role in a company as an employee. Stewardship has driven me to do volunteering and advocacy activities, give back to the community through my social ventures and give back to my family by supporting them.

As evident as it is now, change will always be there. There will always be a lot of uncertainties. Oftentimes, when you need to decide on something, all the data that you need would not always be available. This can be true both in the case of relationships and business. However, even with limited information at hand, I know that if the set of values that I hold on to is deeply rooted, it will help me in thinking critically about the decisions I will make in the future, as a leader and as a person.

Week 4: Where do I belong?

Before the quarantine, I was busy with my usual 9-to-5 job, and I was putting my social ventures and passion projects on the side, mostly during weekends. During that time, I couldn't see that there are patterns with regards to the activities that I find the most joy doing despite spending the wee hours of the night actively working on it and waking up early in the morning just to finish what I'm doing. With so much time to spare during quarantine, I was able to dedicate ample amount of time for these ventures, volunteer programs and passion projects that I have put on the back seat before. This is because, every time I attempt to act on any of it, the reality of having an obligation and having to report to the office sets in. I believe I am made for a work set-up that would allow for some sense of flexibility since I am a results-driven kind of person. Hence, the faster I do something, the better. Basis of performance for me should never be about the number of hours someone spent doing the task at hand. Rather, it should be based on the quality of the work and the magnitude of impact it creates.

Both from a personal and leadership perspective, I find joy in doing something that innovatively creates a positive impact to the community through solutions that support sustainability. I find joy in helping others more than myself. I find joy in having to share to others what I have learned and to develop those who are part of my team.

Week 5: What should I contribute?

After identifying where I really belonged based on my strengths, my passion, my work set-up preferences and most especially my deep-seated values, the most logical thing to do next is to think about how I can maximize using these to be able to contribute something meaningful. It took me a while to recognize this before the quarantine since I am still tied-up with my regular 9-to-5 job. However, the past four weeks have been really enlightening. My answer to the question “What should I contribute?”, came rather automatic during this stage since as I have been fired up since Week 1 of this self-discovery process.

I know that I wanted to contribute and create an impact by making this world a better place to live, through starting social ventures that are sustainable and inclusive, which solves the most pressing problems in agriculture, waste management and climate-change. And this is the reason why AtoANI which advocates for sustainable climate-change adaptive agriculture and AtoANI BioPack which creates biodegradable packaging from agro-industrial waste were born.

Week 6: How should I take responsibility for relationships?

For any area, may it be in business or personal life, success or failure will always depend on the people who are a part of it. That is why it is important to manage our relationships with people and take responsibility for it.

Continuing on my plan of creating an impact through my social ventures, I would definitely see to it that as much as I should keep the business successful and sustainable, I should also keep the people who are a part of it happy and proud to be part of these ventures. No doubt people will always be the most important part of any organization. Hence, I'll make sure that they are given the opportunity to maximize use of their strengths, to take ownership for their roles and to allow for their ideas to be heard. I have started doing this with my social ventures, and I must say that more than anything else, this is where I found the greatest joy. I will for sure continue doing this in my existing and future ventures. It just feels good to be able to empower someone to reach their full potential, fire up their passion and help them in finding their purpose.

Week 7: What will I do with the 2nd half of my life?

With the six-week self-discovery process I have gone through, I felt that identifying what I will do with the 2nd half of my life became clearer to me. Before, I was just living my life day-in and day-out without a sense of purpose.

Now, I am excited more than ever to: (1) continue with the social ventures I have started, (2) work my way in making these ventures sustainable, (3) be able to dedicate myself full-time for these ventures in the future and (4) be able to share my experiences and learnings to others through teaching and consultancy. And to balance this, I will make

sure that I always have the time to be present for the family and travel once in while to enjoy what life has to offer and discover the world.

Upon saying these goals, the inner fear within me is slowly stepping in. Especially during these uncertain times, I know that hindrances will surely come along the way. They are inevitable. But as compared before, I am now more willing to take on the challenge. I will and should keep the fire burning to achieve these goals. Because I am not only doing this for myself. I am also doing this for the people who are currently part of and will be part of my social ventures. People who are committed to work on creating a positive impact to the community and the environment through sustainable solutions.

To recap, my quarantine experience has been very productive so far after going through the seven weeks self-discovery process. As of the time of writing this essay, our municipality is already at the 9th week of the quarantine albeit a new name and new set of rules under the Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ) which will run until end of May. This led me to think that, perhaps, the quarantine and this situation we are experiencing right now is one way to test us in knowing ourselves better. All too often, we get blinded with a lot of worldly distractions and the rat race that we forget what it means to really live. And because we have all the time in our hands right now, we are given the chance to experience living in the moment, whether we like it or not.

I truly believe that, before we can even manage other people in an organization or in the ventures we have started, we need to know our real selves first. Reflecting by staying still is as important as doing something. Which reminds me of my favorite quote from the movie Karate Kid which says, "Being still and doing nothing are two very different things." In fact, as leaders, we may need to stay still to be able to identify the right course

of action to take. Because strategy and execution go hand in hand. One would not be as effective without any of the other. As Morris Chang would say, “Without strategy, execution is aimless. Without execution, strategy is useless”⁵.

Having said this, I’m glad I got over my “binge-watching, doing nothing and aimlessly doing something” stage on the first week. I’m glad I didn’t waste another seven weeks of my time for some meaningless activities. I’m glad I achieved some significant tangible milestone in my passion projects, advocacies and social ventures. I’m glad that for the last seven weeks that I have been in quarantine, I have learned seven important lessons about managing myself and being an effective leader.

From now on, I will continue to improve myself to become the leader I envision myself to be. A leader which can adapt to these changing and uncertain times. A leader that can think critically in different situations no matter how difficult the situation and how limited the available information may be. And most of all, a leader that can effectively lead and take care of its people the way they want to be led and cared for.

Word Count: 2659

⁵ *Execution Without Strategy is Aimless*. Retrieved May 18, 2020, from <https://albu-strategymanagement.com/2018/11/execution-without-strategy-is-aimless/>