



PUT YOUR SPIRITUALITY TO WORK

Conversation Starters for the Workplace

3.27 ONE LEADER CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Just one leader with strong human values, who has the strength and personal character to bring out the very best in others, can make the seemingly “impossible” possible.

IT’S COMMONLY known that today, on this planet, there are 1½ billion people who lack access to safe drinking water, and over 2 billion who lack adequate sanitation facilities. The United Nations “Habitat” agency and the Asian Development Bank are collaborating on a project called “Water for Asian Cities” (WAC) that provides not only the funding for mega-projects to ease the suffering caused by this lack, but also to build the professional skills and human values needed to develop and maintain these facilities over the long term.

Last year we were preparing a presentation to community leaders in India who would be participating in the WAC program, speaking on the role of human values to help deliver the promise of “water for all”. We saw that human values – those noble qualities found in people across all cultures – are powerful, internal motivators for doing our best on behalf of all. They are the spiritual foundation for good character, morality and ethics – and they cultivate an environment of trust, transparency, responsibility, caring, respect, and cooperation.

In our UN presentation, we showed how even just one leader with strong values can make the seemingly “impossible” possible. Ek Sonn Chan, Director of the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority (PPWSA), is an inspiring example of this, particularly when it comes to meeting the daunting challenge of providing access to safe water and sanitation.

When he became the Director of PPWSA in 1993, there had been no maintenance of the system and virtually all documentation of the water infrastructure and customer base had been destroyed. Over 70% of the water produced was “lost” to leakage or illegal taps to the pipes. The PPWSA staff of 500 were under-qualified, underpaid, with low motivation, and working with low efficiency.

To restore and ensure everyone’s right to water, and solve these seemingly insurmountable problems, Ek Sonn Chan began a “changing of culture”. He first tapped into his own personal values: responsibility, service, quality, safety, health, and high integrity. He developed around him a staff of 20 people totally dedicated to his vision and values.

They conducted an accurate survey of their customer base and discovered that only 40% were paying water bills (some never received them). Ek Sonn Chan even went house to house to convince non-paying or low-paying customers, including rich and powerful VIP's, to pay their fair share for water. They installed new water lines, especially to the poor. They repaired old facilities and leaking pipes. They installed water meters. Within 3 years, they were generating enough revenue to cover the costs of operating the system, and they reduced the lost water from 70% to less than 25%.

Many people and organisations around the world applaud such initiatives, but hesitate to step forward to help. They distrust the capability and integrity of the leadership in the more impoverished countries. They are suspicious that funds will be used inefficiently or will end up in private bank accounts.

Ek Sonn Chan and others like him give us a different picture... a view of "water for all" leaders who create a culture of trust and excellence, and then initiate innovative policies and practices. In fact, there is no scarcity of capable, values-driven, innovative leaders in the developing countries.

Many people also may feel it's inevitable that universal access to safe water and sanitation will never be reached. But to quote Mr. N. Vittal, Chief Vigilance Commissioner of India (in charge of anti-corruption measures):

It was Alexis de Toqueville who said that the inevitable becomes intolerable the moment it is perceived to be no more inevitable.

Ek Sonn Chan is a leader who does not see a lack of "water for all" as inevitable – only *intolerable*. He is a leader who has the strength and personal character to bring out the very best in others: staff, customers, community stakeholders alike. He does this by putting into practice values that are fundamental to human existence and found in varying degrees in all societies, cultures, nationalities, classes, and spiritual traditions – values such as honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, inner peace and confidence, caring, compassion, and respect for all.

So, ask yourself: *In what ways do I practice human values and high quality character in my leadership?*

This article is an excerpt from the book, *Put Your Spirituality to Work: Book 3 – Spiritual-Based Leaders*. To download the full book of articles, as well as additional book chapters, articles, workbooks, and research on the subject of "spirituality and human values for leadership and work", visit our website: www.globaldharma.org