

Timeless lessons in the age of coronavirus



CURTIS S CHIN

MORE than 15 years have passed since my first trip to Dhaka—a corporate assignment that would also take me on to Sylhet.

And I would return again in my role on the board of directors of the Asian Development Bank. My next trip, planned pre-coronavirus pandemic, would have been in support of the Asian University for Women in Chittagong.

That and other trips, however, were not to be—at least not in the near-term.

This spring, I was en route from Southeast Asia—where I am based with the Milken Institute—onward to Mississippi and then New York City for memorial services for Harold Burson, the late founder of the public relations firm Burson-Marsteller. It was with Burson's firm, now named BCW Global, that I first travelled to Bangladesh.

Over 30 years, Burson had become a longtime friend and mentor and been rightly described by PRWeek magazine as "the [20th] century's most influential PR figure." When he passed away from complications from a fall, Burson at 98-years-old had seen over the course of his lifetime the start and end of a world war and a polio epidemic.

What wisdom might Burson have shared today with Bangladesh's leaders as well as elsewhere in our globalised world in this unfolding age of the novel coronavirus? Through the decades, Burson and the firm he led would be involved in many of the crises, from pandemics to corporate disasters and blunders, as well as triumphs that would help define the practice of crisis management and crisis preparedness.

It was under Burson that my own international career would begin in the 1990s, taking me to Tokyo, Beijing and Hong Kong and back to New York after September 11, 2001.

In the United States, in the early 2000s, I became part of the US team at Burson-Marsteller that worked with the Hong Kong Economic & Trade Office as it worked to communicate Hong Kong's efforts to battle the deadly spread

of SARS, or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome—a disease linked to the SARS coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2.

According to the World Health Organization, SARS appeared in November 2002 in southern China's Guangdong province, just across the border from Hong Kong.

The first confirmed case of SARS in Hong Kong was in March 2003, and the city would go on to bear the disproportionate brunt of the deaths and economic impact outside of Mainland China.

By June 2003, some 1,750 cases of the virus had been identified in Hong Kong, with nearly 300 people dying of the disease.

By the time the SARS epidemic had ended in July 2003, Mainland China would account for some 5,327, or 66 percent of all reported 8,096 cases, and 349, or 45 percent, of all 774 deaths attributed to the virus, according to the WHO. Hong Kong, then a city of some 6.8 million, would alone account for another 21.7 percent of cases and 299, or 38.6 percent, of all deaths.

Lessons learned during those difficult times have now aided Hong Kong, and also Singapore and Taiwan, in their efforts to face the ongoing pandemic of SARS-CoV-2.

That time, nearly two decades ago, also came back to me as I transited in Tokyo this February and reflected on what I might say or write in remembrance of Harold Burson.

As Covid-19 continues to take its toll on all too many of our elders, let us not forget the wisdom of people like Harold.

Five points I had learned from Burson's example and that I shared at Burson's memorial service at Lincoln Center in New York still very much apply today.

Burson might have passed away, but his timeless wisdom holds true today not just for Bangladesh but for all countries, businesses and individuals as we battle the direct and indirect consequences of the ongoing pandemic.

Be kind
With much of the world's population in some form of "staying at home" or "working from home," tensions driven by close proximity for days on end are likely to raise tempers and the chances for conflict. Certainly be mindful, but

let us also remember the power of kindness.

He might have been a pioneering CEO at a firm with thousands of employees, but Burson made time to offer up a kind word, a hand-written note of thanks or an encouraging email.

"Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible," the Dalai Lama is famously said to have shared. And Burson would no doubt have agreed,



PHOTO: BURSON-MARSTELLER VIA FLICKR

Harold Burson with a row of Silver Anvil awards in the New York offices of Burson-Marsteller, the PR firm he helped found, in 1978.

even in these most difficult of times.

Be humble
Corporate titans and presidents—most famously, that other great communicator, Ronald Reagan—took to Burson. Every leader develops his or her style. And for Burson, leadership also meant a steely humbleness.

Think Yoda, more than General Douglas MacArthur. And that is something also that leaders today, including in China where the coronavirus first emerged, might also

take to heart. Past success in battling this latest coronavirus is certainly no predictor of future outcomes, and leaders will want to not declare "mission accomplished" too soon.

Be accountable
In building a global business, Burson was no stranger to success or failure. He knew though that accountability is not a punishment or simply about water under the bridge. Through

Rogers, could well have been attributed to Harold. "It takes a lifetime to build a good reputation, but you can lose it in a minute."

That is echoed in legendary investor Warren Buffett's oft-quoted statement, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'd do things differently."

In one minute or five, reputation—like trust—can be lost quickly. And trust, Harold taught me, like a good reputation must be earned over time. And that is true for nations too.

Ongoing doubts over the accuracy of Covid-19 case data from China is due in no small part to longstanding doubts about the accuracy over Chinese economic reports.

Tell the truth
So, how to earn trust in the age of coronavirus? The solution, Burson might have said, could well be quite simple. That is, tell the truth. And more than that, allow others to tell and report the truth.

Those words of wisdom ring particularly true at a time when China has thrown out American reporters from the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and imposed new restrictions on free speech in Hong Kong.

This past February 15th, Burson would have celebrated his 99th birthday. Imagine. Burson was already 64 when I first started working with him way back in 1986, underscoring how each of us too can impact a life at any age.

And as I think about it more, Burson's story is not fully over. He will live on to 100 and beyond through his ideas, his values and through all of us—whether family, friend, client or colleague—if each of us embrace his decency, his humanity, his wisdom.

Be kind. Be humble. Be accountable. Earn trust. Tell the truth.

Those might sound like old-fashion words of wisdom from a century past. The first few months of 2020 and an unfolding pandemic however, tell us they are 20th century lessons that must not be forgotten in the 21st in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

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Time to put workers first



RMG NOTES

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

THE past two decades have seen the onward march of the corporate social responsibility agenda in the global apparel industry.

"People are our most important asset," brands will tell us at any given opportunity. Every brand—even the laggards—go to great lengths in their annual sustainability reports to speak about the importance of their business partners (suppliers) and how much they value the workers who make their clothing.

We can all argue as much as we like about which brands have been telling the truth on these issues, and which ones have simply been saying these things for PR.

What is certain, however, is that now is the time that these words and promises are being put to the test right across the globe. It's time for brands to match their rhetoric with actions.

One of the main outcomes of the coronavirus crisis is that it is the most vulnerable that have been hit the hardest. Some estimates suggest that nearly half of the global workforce in

the informal sector, totalling 1.6 billion workers, could be in imminent danger of having their livelihoods destroyed. Millions of these people work in the garment sector where margins are very low and where many businesses are often just a couple of cancelled orders away from going out of business.

The world has made great strides in lifting tens of millions of people out of poverty in the past few decades but all of this work risks being undone in just a few chaotic months as vulnerable workers face losing their jobs, a roof over their heads and access to essential healthcare.

We cannot stand idly by and allow this to happen.

In Bangladesh, I can already see the warning signs. Our country has a huge dependence on the RMG industry and many tens of thousands of garment workers are already temporarily laid off and face losing their jobs. Without any other work to fall back on and limited—or no—savings, these workers face destitution.

The important thing to note here is that we simply do not yet understand the scale of the devastation in our industry and its impact on garment workers. Around the world, governments have stepped in during these unprecedented times to provide payments to workers who have been



PHOTO COURTESY: MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

temporarily laid off due lockdowns. For garment workers in Bangladesh, these payments have provided a lifeline, but it is only a temporary one.

The big question on everybody's lips is, what next? What happens when our government has no more money left to give, for that day will come soon; even national governments can go bankrupt.

This is the big worry for me. When we have a clearer picture of what is going on in our industry, when the dust has settled by the end of this summer, how many workers will have no work? How many workers will be facing destitution? Will it be thousands? Tens

of thousands? Hundreds of thousands?

Will it be more? Such a thought is difficult to contemplate at the present time.

I talked about brands right at the start of this article. We cannot expect them to be our saviours but, given all their talk about the importance of people in recent years, they should surely be going to every length possible to reduce overall impacts on vulnerable supply chain workers at the present time.

I have discussed these issues tirelessly over recent months, but the messages cannot be spelled out often

enough. All factories need cashflow and brands should be supporting them with this by paying their invoices in good time. This helps the workers the brands say they care so much about. It also helps if brands pay—in full—for all cancelled and work-in-progress orders. There will be damage to factories by coronavirus, there is no question of that. But brands can play a vital part in reducing this damage, and subsequent impact on workers.

Now is the time when the social responsibly which brands have talked about can come to the fore. We know what a successful business model fast fashion is. But can fast fashion also be a force for the collective good? Popular fashion has lifted many millions out of poverty in clothing supply chains.

But the question is, will the global fashion industry be able to keep them there when this crisis has passed? Big brands need to think very carefully about their next steps. They need to do the right thing and stick by suppliers. What they do in the next three months could have a huge influence on the direction our industry takes over the next decade.

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QUOTABLE Quote

NELSON MANDELA
(1918-2013)
President of South Africa.

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Sweeping story
- 5 Return to base
- 10 Annoying fellow
- 12 Make amends
- 13 Assessed
- 14 River crossings
- 15 "Exodus" hero
- 16 Major landing site
- 18 Hotel suite feature
- 20 Salon stuff
- 21 Epps of "House"
- 23 Take advantage of
- 24 Church leader
- 26 Western natives
- 28 Commotion
- 29 Song for one

DOWN

- 1 Scarecrow fill
- 2 In the know
- 3 "Understand?"
- 4 Verb for you
- 5 Roosevelt's successor
- 6 Resting on
- 7 Deviate from
- 8 Strip
- 9 Mortar's mate
- 11 "A Mind to Murder" author
- 17 Pitching stat
- 19 Jazz style
- 22 Decided, as a case
- 24 Roofing gunk
- 25 Facing the audience
- 27 Youngster
- 28 Leave
- 30 Singer Yoko
- 33 Grand, for one
- 34 High points
- 35 Decade parts
- 37 Hightail it
- 38 Early carmaker
- 42 Shirt protector

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

I	D	L	E	S	S	H	O	O	T
D	E	A	L	T	H	I	N	G	E
E	A	R	L	I	R	I	S	E	R
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T	E	P	I	D		Y	E	A	H
A	B	S				N	E	A	R
L	A	T	E	C	H	A	R	G	E
P	L	A	N	E	C	H	E	C	K
S	E	N	D	S		H	O	S	T

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

YOU GOT A LETTER? FROM MY GIRL BACK HOME WHY DOESN'T SHE JUST EMAIL? SHE CAN'T PUT PERFUME ON IT

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

COME ON GUNS! LET'S GO! I'M TIRED OF GETTING STUCK IN THE BACK SEAT! BUT IT'S SAFER FOR YOU TO RIDE BACK THERE, ZOE. I DON'T HAVE A PROBLEM WITH RIDING BACK HERE... I'M JUST TIRED OF GETTING STUCK! HEY YOU FOUND MY GUM!