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# NEXT STEP

## BREAKING THE NORMS Leadership in education

Gerardo Blanco is an assistant professor of the Department of Leadership in Education, at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Mexican by origin, Blanco has toured several countries and worked with many universities to raise the standards of teaching and education. We had the opportunity to talk to him about leadership, education, and brain drain after his weeklong visit to Bangladesh.

Can you tell us a little about yourself and what you're doing in Dhaka?

I'm here conducting some workshops, mainly for the faculty and administration here at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), about facilitating and dealing with active learning, professional development in research, and incorporating technology into teaching. I've also had several meetings over the past week with faculty members to learn about the work they are doing here, so it has been a very productive week.

Your line of work focuses on leadership in education, and one of the intuitive problems that many people face when it comes to leadership is whether leadership skills are inherent or whether they can be taught to someone who does not necessarily possess the qualities to lead. What are your views on that?

One of the common perceptions is that some people are born to lead while others are meant to follow, and I think that approach makes sense when you take a more hierarchical approach to leadership. That is the traditional approach that we often take: somebody in charge telling others what to do. I think there are other ways of understanding leadership that take a more collective approach and view it as organising others for the common good. That is a learned skill. It's counterintuitive and may go against what we have learned about leadership, but it's what has



worked in my line of work. When you're looking at the education sector, there are a lot of highly talented people, so if you take a top-down approach, it doesn't work very well, whereas a shared leadership or "service" leadership, taking a more humble approach, makes more sense.

Considering the hierarchical nature of Bangladeshis, where the common practice has always been that people in positions of power have the last word and what they say are considered irrefutable, do you think your idea of "shared leadership" can hold?

I think so, yes, because when you think of the culture of giving and following instructions that is present here, if people apply that to each other, ideas and responsibilities can be shared well. My experience here, the first time in Bangladesh, has told me that people here are very open and

respectful, and those are the qualities that are needed for the idea of shared leadership to work.

There are a huge number of students who are getting a BBA degree and they eventually get desk jobs where they aren't getting the full satisfaction of being a working professional. To what extent do you think university administrators and faculty members should try and divert these students to more fulfilling career choices?

This is a problem that exists everywhere, but the disproportionate number of business graduates trend makes sense in a growing economy like Bangladesh's. I found it very surprising to find a university dedicated to the liberal arts, and it will be universities like ULAB changing the norm, by getting students to think critically, question everything and engage in dialogue with people who don't

necessarily hold the same opinion on things. If universities here invest more in the liberal arts, I think the change will be appreciated, and progress can be made.

What are your thoughts on the brain drain evidenced in a rapidly globalising world?

There is a shift now, concerning the "threat" of brain drain. Many of the skills I acquired over the years are a result of the mobility that a globalised world offers. The idea of "brain drain" is being replaced with the idea of "brain exchange", as more people are seeing more of the world, and sharing the new ideas and concepts with people back home. So I do not perceive the idea of "brain drain" to be overly threatening.

If we look at the present political situation in Bangladesh, with the opposition rejecting the last election and launching a violent movement to get the present ruling party to step down, do you think there is a specific point where it becomes necessary for a leader to step down?

In my field, an educator is successful if he or she becomes useless. Over time, the dependency on a leader needs to diminish, as those who are being led becomes self-sufficient. So I think that is a good model to follow regardless of the application, with the variables changed and adapted. I think that approach applies to politics as it does with education.

INTERVIEWED BY SHAER REAZ

## WATER COOLER CHRONICLES

### The curious case of the missing sanity

These stories tend to start with – "It was just another normal day at the office." Not true. You know you saw it coming from a mile away. You saw all the signals of disaster and heard all the alarms go off. But being the confident manly man that you are, you figured you'd wing it. What's a little extra work? It builds character

might be the best multitasker in the world but you don't have the ability of being in two places at the same time. Avoid the drama if you value your life, your dignity and most importantly, your sleep. But of course, you took on more than your brain can deal with anyway. What do you do when all hell breaks?

Do not be rash – punching the wall in anger, or heaven forbid, shouting back at your superiors will not make things better. Do the best that you can, try to keep your calm, talk to a friend and vent if necessary. Remember, everything that can go wrong, will definitely go wrong. This will be the week when work will drop out of nowhere. No matter how many cups of



Before you take on extra work, remember all those hours you need to put into the work you have to finish on a regular day, multiply that with the number of hours of sleep you need to stay sane and divide that by the pay off. Still worth it? Secondly – sharing is not caring. Never work for two bosses. Even if you informed all of them beforehand, nobody likes to think they are being slighted. You

coffee you knock back, you will end up a lost soul with a missing sanity. Only way to avoid this is to not take up the work in the first place. Otherwise, drag yourself through the week and have the words "Never Again" tattooed on your forearm in big, bold letters.

MOYUKH MAHTAB

## a2i celebrates Women's Day



To celebrate International Woman's Day 2015, Access to Information (a2i) of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) with the technical assistance of UNDP and USAID jointly held a program on March 9th. Held at the Korobi Hall of PMO, in this event 29 career-driven female personalities were awarded. In addition to the program, a2i introduced a gender related guideline. The keynote speech was delivered by a2i's local development expert Suporna Roy. Suraiya Begum, Secretary of PMO, attended the event as chief guest.

## Bridging academics and real life

If Human Development Index (HDI) is indeed an accurate indicator of the development of a country's human resources, Bangladesh, although ranked quite low compared to the rest of the world, is among the countries that are slotted for the fastest percentage growth in the coming few years. But at the backdrop of a higher education system that has placed strong emphasis on marketability, graduates are now finding that their skills are not necessarily leading to better jobs in the workforce.

In the developing world, government funding for academic research and development has always been miniscule. In fact, the top students in core academic subjects in the natural sciences have a tendency to go for their higher education and subsequent employment in the developed economies. After all, in countries like Bangladesh where the demand for limited resources is high, education that does not impart skills needed in the workplace hardly bears fruition.

But this lack of appropriate academic research has created a massive hole in the knowledge economy. Many university teachers do not have proper publications in their relevant fields, and possess little up-to-date knowledge on what is going on in the rest of the world. Although public universities – by virtue of having access to the best and brightest talent across the spectrum – do employ teachers who are renowned in their fields of study, the lesser-known private

universities suffer are forced to fill in the gaps by bringing in non-resident Bangladeshis with North American degrees.

However, it is these private institutions that have proved to be an enormous driver of the knowledge ecosystem in Bangladesh. Producing huge numbers of graduates each year, these universities are grooming young graduates in a market-centric approach. They are providing skills to their students that can be marketed for success in the corporate world and beyond.

One important issue postulated by education experts in the country is the absence of appropriate practical experiences. A business major for instance needs to learn how businesses function not just in the classroom but also in the world outside. As such, for future success and marketability they must have hands-on experiences at companies, startups, smaller and medium-sized business ventures such as restaurants, departmental



stores, fashion outlets and similar enterprises. Although three-month long internships are a prerequisite for many Bachelors and Masters programs, students abroad have more exposure to the world outside.

This gap in practice has largely taken place due to the absence of proper university and industry alliance. While leading business schools like the Institute of Business Administration, University of Dhaka do have strong, constructive relationships with the corporate world, it is not on par with the global standards. Research funding, scholarships and academic endeavor must be sponsored by the corporations working locally; and

universities in turn must reciprocate such efforts by creating a space for these companies to take a leading role in producing high quality professionals who can contribute towards the future development of the country. In the long run, initiatives like these will create win-win situations for all parties.

It is widely recognised that inadequacy of talent is not something which characterises Bangladesh. After all, even with decades of political rancor, generations of mass immigration of educated change-makers, bureaucratic inefficiency and poverty, we have moved forward and invalidated all pessimistic

forecasts. What is currently needed both from the government and the private sector development experts is a comprehensive education system that places adequate emphasis on both academic research and marketability, and in the process, a strong alliance between academics and real-life corporations to facilitate the growth of the nation as a whole.

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