



# JARGON FREE

WHAT MY FATHER TAUGHT ME  
ABOUT LEADERSHIP

VIDUSHA NATHAVITHARANA

# JARGON FREE

## LEADERSHIP

**What I learnt from my Appachchi about  
Leadership...**

**A HIGH5 PUBLICATION**

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# FOREWORD

“The Hirdaramani Group was looking to revitalize its operations by freeing up the minds of its employees to think beyond their comfort zone. It was during the search for the ideal candidate for this purpose that I was first introduced to Vidusha.

Having been freed from the bondage of school to run wild and learn from nature and interactions with a wide spectrum of society in my formative years, I recognized in him a kindred soul where education had not interfered with his learning or creativity.

This book is written as a tribute to his father, a man who overcame almost unsurmountable challenges to educate himself and serve our university system in a way that influenced and benefited most who came into contact with him.

The author draws many lessons from his humility, his unflappable nature, a sense of right and wrong that was based on his conscience and a willingness to stand by his charges. These attributes feature in his revolutionary training programs where he speaks about servant leadership which requires leaders to be responsible for the growth and well-being of their employees.

The need of the hour is for corporate leaders and those in public office to lovingly cooperate to share the depleting resources of the planet rather than compete

fiercely to exploit, profit and destroy what is left. Jargon Free Leadership is a great read for those who aspire to leadership positions, inspirational parenting or simply being decent human beings.

Mr. and Mrs. Nathavitharana can be proud of the man Vidusha is and I am privileged to call him a friend.”

**—TONY NADARAJA**

# DEDICATED TO APPACHCHI ON HIS 75TH BIRTHDAY...

Inspired by a presentation titled 'Everyday Leadership'  
by Drew Dudley on TEDX ([www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com))

# WHAT MY PARENTS TAUGHT

## **That my Masters' couldn't**

15 years I simply procrastinated and waited for the 'opportune' moment to start my Masters. First came a demanding career, then kids, finally a business which I founded - all of which I made a convenient (and in my mind extremely potent) excuse not to start my Masters. However, the fact that I never did my Masters nagged me incessantly. It invaded my dreams, disturbed my inner sanity and at last, made me absolutely annoyed with myself.

Then, without any second thoughts of how I was going to finance myself, or find the time or whether indeed it was all worth it, I enrolled myself to a Masters in Leading Innovation and Change - knowing that my ego will not allow me to stop half way through. Three subjects I loved: Leadership, Innovation and Change Management seemed the perfect choice for me, and I embarked upon the journey with the zeal of a missionary and the passion of a new found love!

The Masters was grueling. It sapped every ounce of energy and focus I had to simply complete it. I was rustic - without formal education for nearly 15 years: and

the professors were merciless in their criticisms. To make matters worse, it was all online - demanding a level of commitment and discipline far greater than going for lectures. I loved it - and learnt a hell of a lot from it.

Once it was all done, I sat back and reflected on what I had learnt. There seemed a void: a question still unanswered. At the same time, along came my **father's** 70th birthday: for which I wanted to plan a gala 'do': inviting his old friends, family, and above all, to have a stage for him to play his beloved drums (he is a self-taught percussionist who plays almost any drum under the sun apart from the drum set!) with some of Sri **Lanka's** best drummers. Talking to my mom about the prep work made me realize that much of what he and my mom had taught me throughout my life was that missing component that the theory books did not seem to give me. Hence started the seedling to write this book, and take a fresh look at a hacked topic.

What most of us tend to do is to blow leadership out of proportion, and make it something '**Herculean**'. This rather glorified approach to leadership misses to capture the essence of leadership, and in fact, the very simple nature of it. Theories, tons of biographies and even more voluminous management articles about the subject sometimes misses the simplest of principles which leadership is all about: and the fact that ALL of us can be, and ought to be leaders in our own right. We '**aspire**'

towards leadership without ever considering that a simple thought, a simple deed, a simple gesture is sometimes all you need to profoundly change a person: inspire them: change their life for the better over night! These simple moments of truth is what makes leaders: not the grandiose achievements we tend to glorify in every day media.

Theories talk about all types of leaders. Theories talk about the need to be 'situational' in your style of leadership. Think about it - can you honestly take stock of a situation, assess it, then change you innate personality around the situation so as to ensure you display leadership? In theory, perfect - practically virtually impossible. And ask yourself, if you ARE to change according to the situation, what happens to principals, values and yourself? Are you expected to be a chameleon: are you to be Machiavellian?

Then of course, we have the whole issue of role models for leadership. Thanks to the popular media and social media '**blowing up**' often undeserving people into positions of stardom those whom we try to emulate often are unwholesome. They may be rich, famous, successfully and often awesomely charismatic: but do they really uphold values: and do they add to humanity: or do they take away from it?

The fundamental problem is that we never look at those who make profound impact on people on a daily basis. These are heroes no one talks about. Nor do they care for the limelight, and simply wither in obscurity. With

all the technology we have, and access to information, we still sensationalize the wrong people: and thereby spread the wrong values, the wrong ideals, the wrong behaviors. Sad, isn't it?

I think it is time to rejoice true heroes from whom we learn values of humanity as much as leadership. Leadership is meaningless without values, without integrity, without humanity. My dad was, and still is, one of biggest inspirations: and without exaggeration, the simplest man you will meet. There was much he taught me in his own unassuming way, and this book is a reflection of some simple yet profound lessons I learnt from him (and try hard to put into practice!)

# PROLOGUE: THE CRUX OF THE MATTER... 'MY GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT AND JOY IS YOU'

I am blessed. I have great parents. Throughout my life, with all its white water thrills and spills, the only constant I have had are my parents. They stood there, through thick and thin, and I was always assured that no matter what happened, I would always be loved, and that I would always be their son.

The one thing I realized growing up was that I was the center of their Universe. There was no denying that I would get a hiding worth remembering if I got in to too much mischief but there was no denying that I was all that mattered. Sure, they had lives of their own - each in their own right - but nothing mattered more than my success, my joy and my future. Nothing.

Making sacrifices came naturally to them - in fact they never considered it a sacrifice in the first place. They did it with love, knowing that my need was greater than theirs (even when it was not the case). Why did they do all this? Not only was it that I was their son, they did because they understood one simple thing about parenting: it is not about YOU - it is about THE KIDS!

This one simple paradigm makes a profound difference in how we make decisions, how we look at our roles and how we appreciate Leadership. Look at all the glossy magazines with CEO's faces as the cover and you will appreciate the fact that Leadership has become person centric, rather than organizational and team centric. Egos drive leaders, pride drives leaders, achievement drives leaders, a sense of legacy drives leaders: but how many leaders are driven by a sense of doing a greater good, and service to the people they lead. This ONE paradigm shift makes the fundamental shift I think is lacking in leadership material. It is heartening to see material on Servant Leadership taking a mainstream in management material, but still, we seem to think of leadership as a position, title or an accolade rather than a responsibility we carry like parenting.

Parents want the best for their children (at least mine did) and my success defined their happiness. My mother almost always talks about my achievements more so than I ever would, and anyone else would. This is not to brag, but to simply share her sheer joy with my accomplishments. I remember one of my mom's former bosses telling me that 'she would not talk much: but when she did, it was almost always about you!'

How many of us take joy in the accomplishments of those who work under our tutelage? How many of us want them to be better than us? To achieve that much more than us?

This is the crux of it - leadership is not about YOU - it is about THEM. Until you get it, you never really become a leader!

# WHY DO YOU SMOKE? BECAUSE I DO.

My dad was a near chain smoker. He would smoke a pack a day every day. He started the day with one, and ended the day with one.

All through my growing years I saw him smoke, and saw my mom trying her best to get him to give it up. I hated to see him smoking: and I detested the stench. I ganged up with my mom and started a barrage of arguments against my dad and his 'filthy' habit! I never smoked during my schooling - and my dad was certain that I would never start either. Having 'hung out' with many friends who were smoking from the age of 15 he was certain that nothing would move me to smoke.

Then, just like that, I started. It was a tough time for me, and I was an undergraduate in London, and on an impulse, for some weird reason, I took my first puff - and it became an addiction that I still have not been able to kick.

Imagine my Dad's face when he saw me 'lighting one up' (he and I are pretty close, and there was no reason for me to hide it!). He watched me inhale as if life itself depended on it, and exhale with the same sense of satisfaction and joy I have seen on so many occasions on his face. He lit up one too: and after we had both finished, he casually asked me 'why did you start putha? I did not know exactly what

to say. I beat around the bush for a while and knowing that my dad is not one for idle chit chat, I just quipped, 'Why Appachchi, you smoke too right?'

He gave me a disappointed look, and asked me 'So, you smoke because I do is it? I smiled;

'No Appachchi, I just got into it, no real reason - apart from probably that I was rather lonely out there!'

'Give it up' he said 'it's not good for you.'

That got me going. I argued with him with the same ferocity I argued with him as a child, and asked him why he smoked if he knew it was not good for him. He never argues - and this time was no exception. He simply sat there, looked at me, and nodded to every word I said.

Then, just like that, he quit.

I was simply stunned. He smoked from the time he was 16 years old - and just like that - he stopped. I asked him why he never told me. My mom told me; 'because you started - he was certain you would not - but you did, and he feels that he is responsible. He told me that you cannot ask of you what he would not do himself - and wants to show that quitting is not as hard as people make it to be'

I have still not quit: but whenever he sees me lighting a cigarette he raises his eyebrows: and looks directly at me: not with anger but with sadness: and if I quit, it will be more out of respect and love for him rather than anything else!

Anyone with kids will understand that we as children have a higher likelihood of picking up the bad habits of

our parents than the good ones. Amazingly, we somehow oscillate towards bad behavior rather than the good, and make use of the excuse of pointing at our parents when we get into trouble doing the same thing!

Amazingly enough, leadership positions in organizations are no better. We are watched by our 'subordinates' and they will certainly make use of our bad behavior a convenient excuse for them to resort to the same. More often than not the temptation is to do what I happily do with my daughter ever so often: to say 'because I am your dad and I am bigger.' The same kind of sentiment that we have at work. There seems to be two rule books: one for so called leaders - and the other for the 'minions' under them.

The result? No one takes you seriously, and the very behaviour you espouse you don't want in the company is the very behaviour you have. Take tardiness or a lack of passion or poor performance and ask yourself, what are the 'bosses' like, and chances are this is the behavior they have.

Bottom-line, there is no substitute for leading by example. No amount of fancy placards and posters about company values is ever going to replace seeing your bosses behave the way you want them to behave. At least, you must be big enough to change your behaviour when you know that it is what is making the others behave that way.

# ‘DON’T TALK ILL OF HIM SIR... I WAS BAD AT MATH MYSELF!’

My dad was part of the University of Jayewardenepura for 37 long years: one of the longest serving non Academic Staff members of the institution of all time. He served under over a two dozen Vice Chancellors as their Confidential Secretary. As such, I was rather ‘venerated’ in College, as most of my teachers who were graduates knew my father very well, and they had the deepest respect and regard for him. Known to one and all simply as ‘Nilame’ you would notice him a mile away as he was always clad in his signature white trousers, white long sleeved shirts with cuffs, and mirror shining black shoes!

I went to S. Thomas’ in grade 5, after being selected in the entrance exam College held for 5th graders. Appachchi came in only for the first day of school, and then avoided the school like the plague! Either he never saw a reason to come: or simply felt it was best to keep away: either way, he never came for any parents’ teachers’ day, until one fine day my mom fell terribly sick and he HAD to come! So, there he was, impeccably dressed in pristine white, walking down the road, and stopping for that brief moment in time before he actually stepped in the hallowed grounds. He and I had a quick chat before

we went in, and I strategized as to what to do because my marks were - sad - to say the least. I still remember a 36 for Math and a 40 for science. Two subjects that I abhorred and the subjects detested me right back! I wanted to get these two subjects out of the way first: because I wanted my dad to go home with some relatively good news (thanks to Buddhism, for which I had topped the class with a 96!) So that hopefully he would forget about the crap marks for the two beleaguered subjects!

Mr. Kariyawasam's (my Math master) face was of sheer delight! FINALLY, my dad was here: and he would finally lambaste me in front of my dad (and hopefully get a good old fashioned 'whooping' when I hit home!) Mr. Kariyawasam's torrid torrent went on for nearly 10 minutes. He ranted, he spit out how unashamedly unconcerned I was with my grades. He appealed to my dad to 'put him right' and make sure I understood what it meant to have a good education. It went on and on: and all the other parents looked at my Dad, some of them completely empathized with him, while others simply sympathized with his plight! He stood there, and listened. Not once did he intervene or interject. But, having known him all my life, I knew he was hurt. There is a certain bond between a father and his son: which is seldom spoken in words: but it is unmistakably there: man to man. I saw that pride being shattered to a thousand pieces. But still, he stood there stoically, and listened.

Once Mr. Kariyawasam finished, my dad said in his usual quiet self 'it's not his fault: I was bad in Math too!' Mr. Kariyawasam was in too much shock to reply, and after looking at him for nearly two minutes, my dad dutifully shook his hand, and left. I was too shocked to say anything too.

Dad made his way to the Science Master Mr. Dayananda, and before he could utter a single word; spouted out 'I told Mr. Kariyawasam too, it is not Vidusha's fault - I was really weak in Math and Science in school myself.' Mr. Dayananda was dumbfounded too - and once again, after two minutes of silence, my dad shook his hand too, and merrily went around the rest of the teachers.

On the way out, one of my batch-mates came running behind me, and after asking to speak to me 'in private' inquired how much I paid for the 'geezer' who pretended to be my dad. It was not uncommon for us to resort to such dire mischief with the hope of saving ourselves a hiding, but, try as I might, he did not believe that this was indeed my very own dad! The next day, the entire class was bubbling with conversations about the episode, and my dad became an instant 'hit'!

I went home, jubilant! I was spared: better still, now my teachers could not 'touch me!' After all, if the inaptitude for Math and Science DOES run in the gene pool, what on earth was 'poor me' supposed to do about it? When we came home, my mom asked me how things went, and my

dad in his usual non-committal manner said 'it was ok hon' and let it be at that. Of course, I got an earful about the low marks: and I think so did he! He let the entire episode slip until the weekend.

Over the weekend, Appachchi sat with me after breakfast. He asked me whether I really found the subjects hard: or whether the low marks were the result of being bone lazy to study and commit to higher grades. Knowing full well that there was no way around my dad except the truth I told him I hated the subjects, and had no plans to do either for my A/Ls. As such, I told him that I saw no reason to put the effort to get good grades for them.

What my dad told me had a profound impact on me. He told me that there was a deep seated pride a father has in his son - and that it did not come about because of any other reason, but by virtue of you being his son. However, there was also the expectation that you will do your best - a kind of honour bound code almost. Something that was simply expected because I was his son. 'It doesn't matter what the result is: as long as you can look me in the eye and tell me that you gave it all you have!'

That was it. I never got any mark below 50 after that day. Ever. What my mom could never do after years of nagging and berating me, my dad accomplished in one simple conversation.

I learnt a few hugely valuable lessons that day - though I must admit practicing them proves harder than I ever expected.

Firstly, never let anyone down in public. Everyone (even an idiot like me) has pride. A leader should never destroy that pride in an individual has in himself/herself, and let him/her lose faith and confidence in himself/herself. If you expect more from an individual, and offer that faith and confidence people almost always rise up to the occasion.

Secondly, it is important to say that it is 'not good enough': and ensure the level of expectation is set right. It's not easy to have these conversations, but leaders are expected to have the 'tough chats' when required. Timing is important. So is the tone you set. There is a huge difference between an angry rant and a thoughtful yet stern conversation.

Thirdly, it is important to give the 'power' to the person concerned, not put your own standard or expectation on the person. We are all differently gifted, and will have very different approaches that we will take towards achieving an objective. Giving the person the space to perform is imperative as a leader. Shoving it down the throat rarely gives lasting results: it is best you enable someone to decide and act by themselves. After all is said and done, sustained motivation always comes only from within.

# ‘MY LEGS ARE SKINNY. I’D BETTER WEAR LONG TROUSERS’

My dad’s era is something that I could never quite fathom. The social structure was so different that I must admit I could never quite picture it in my mind. Appachchi was born in Deraniyagala - a quaint town in the middle of nowhere, going nowhere. It’s a beautiful little place, with mountains all around, a lovely river flowing right across it, and a chilled out, laid back pace of life that I have grown to love.

My dad had (and still has) rather skinny legs...The only way he could ‘hide them’ was to wear long trousers. There was a catch though!

Back then, you wore trousers only if you could speak English - imagine that! Very few people actually wore trousers at all - it was something reserved to revered professions such as teachers, doctors, civil servants (who could speak English) and lawyers. If you could not speak English you wore a sarong - or a pair of shorts. It was important for my dad to learn English - and the only way to learn ‘proper’ English was to come to Colombo. Not having any relatives in the ‘big city’ he had no place to ‘bunk out’ at. It is also important to consider the fact that he was the first (and still the only family member) to come

to Colombo. It must have been a huge step: and a massive challenge.

He studied English in the (famous - or infamous: based on your definition of it) night school at Stafford. He slept with a family relative who was a priest in the Kirulapona temple. A meagre existence was made out of teaching what he was taught at night school to other kids from the area (Appachchi still acknowledges that what he taught may not have been of good quality: but that he did try his best to ensure the kids were taught right!) and also by a little pocket money he got from his elder brother who was a civil servant working in Anuradhapura at the time.

He lived this way for nearly 4 years: until he technically mastered the language. To this day, his English is technically far superior to mine (though probably not as colourful). What truly inspired me was not the fact that he went through tremendous hardships to get himself educated: but the fact that he did with a smile, a gait, and to this day, never consider it 'a harrowing experience'. This level of equanimity and balance is amazing to see, and truly inspires. Many years later, I decided to go to the UK for my higher studies. My parents could not afford the full fee, and I was adamant that I gave it a shot. I ended up working all night, and going to campus all day, sleeping all of Saturday and studying all of Sunday. I had less than 4 hours of sleep a day on average for two and a half years!

The only thing that motivated me was knowing that dad had it much worse.

Too many people try to talk people into finding their way. Actions always speak louder than words, and seeing someone work hard, work diligently, work towards perfection, working passionately, working with a smile on their face, working with conviction has a natural rub on effect. You don't really need a fiery speech: the beautifully scripted marketing campaign: only if you have leaders who by their daily work and every day results show the way: and inspire others to follow in their footsteps. Knowing it can be done and that someone before you had done it too, gives all the encouragement one needs to boldly follow in their footsteps!

# ‘IF YOU TAP AGAIN, I WILL NOT COME’

Almost everyone who has ever worked with Appachchi tells me that he is one of the most amicable and easy going people they had come across. This is only partly true. Appachchi certainly is gregarious, fun to be with, and hellishly patient: but there is also a certain fine line that you cannot cross with him. The difference is that he will not yell, shout and bring the roof down to get a point made: he does it almost sublimely, but oh boy, does he not make his point!

As leaders we often have a tough time getting our point across: and driving home the point that there are certain things - especially those relating to organizational values and ethics - that one does not parlay with or compromise. More often than not getting others to get this is tough going, and we resort to shouting, arguing and a whole lot of unpleasantness trying to get our ‘subordinates’ to ensure they actually follow through on the basic principles and processes set.

One incident struck a chord with me when I was only 7 years old: and even though I have never seen my dad ‘lose it’ this episode taught me that he could not be ‘messed with’ either. As a leader, it is important to find the balance between being loved and being taken seriously: and this

episode illustrated it better than anything else in my entire life. I have yet to master this - but I must claim I try hard!

Ammi and Appachchi was to go for a function: of rather significant importance. They did not have a car at the time - and they were to be picked up by a few dear friends who graciously offered to give them a ride both ways. It was an early start for the day: and they were to leave around six in the morning.

My dad has a routine he follows - and takes a little time in the bathroom. He is not one to rush - but in his defense - he never gets late either! Ammi went in first (there was only one toilet/bathroom) and whilst she was draping the saree, Appachchi went to take a shave and a shower. At about five twenty he was still in the toilet, and Ammi came and tapped, asking my dad to 'hurry up.' Appachchi told her not to worry, and that he will be ready with at least 5 minutes to spare. Two minutes later, my mom tapped again! Once more, Appachchi quietly told her that she need not worry. After a further five minutes, Ammi was at it again - and this time Appachchi told her 'if you tap again, I will not come' - still in his usual, calm tone. Ammi made the horrible mistake of tapping for the fourth time!

Appachchi came out of the bathroom, got into a sarong and started reading the paper. Ammi was livid, but no amount of cajoling, yelling or threatening got my dad out of his seat. Ammi had to go without him. And upon her return, Appachchi had made her a cup of tea, and asked

her very casually, 'so how was it honey?' Ammi started all over again, nearly in tears. He simply gave her a hug, and said 'I did tell you I will not come if you tap again.'

My mother is everything to Appachchi - between me and Ammi I have always known that she came first. Knowing this, I had shivers down my spine: because I knew if this was the stance he will take with her - I stood no chance what so ever. The amazing thing is that he never loses his cool - but he does not yield either: the combination is brilliantly potent. Too many times we as leaders try to be one or the other: we try to either win their hearts or drive the fear of Moses in to them: my dad showed me that you do not have to choose!

# ‘WE HAVE BEEN ROBBED, I WANT YOU TO COME HOME IMMEDIATELY’

Ammi stayed at home for about 5 years after I was born since both Ammi and Appachchi decided it best not to leave me in the hands of a nanny until I was a little older. She and I had some of the best times of my childhood in the rather large garden we had back then, running around, laughing and playing all sorts of little games. There was never a dull moment.

Our old house was a rather big one and was over a 100 years old. Old houses often had rather simple designs and were rather open. It was quite common back then to leave doors and windows open - and being burgled was something that never crossed our minds. Having lived there most of all of my mom's life, safety was never doubted: till one day we were robbed. We were at home, Ammi and me, and were playing in the 'meda midula' (the center courtyard) and when we came for lunch Ammi noticed that something was amiss. She went around the rooms and to her absolute horror, we were cleaned out. All her ancestral jewelry (including her rings Appachchi gave for the wedding - which she generally takes off when she plays with me, the neckless Appachchi put on her at the wedding, as well as the one that Achchi had given her

which was three generations old. All of her savings - which she generally kept at home back then, along with whatever else that was of any worth. We never heard anything and just like that, we had nothing left.

Understandably, my mom was distraught. She could not believe it. She ran to the post office, with me straddling along (we did not have a telephone at home at the time) and gave my Dad a call. She urged him to come home immediately, but he refused. Ammi was not amused: but waited until he came, having gone to the police station to lodge an entry.

When he came Ammi started to tell him the horrendous story. Appachchi stopped her short, and asked her to make him a cup of tea - and that he would come after a shower, and then, for her to tell her story. Having had a shower, he came in and sat in his favourite chair, sipped his plain tea, and listened to my mom without once interrupting her. Once she was done he asked her;

'Did they take our clothes?'

You can understand my mother's bewilderment: the answer obviously was no. 'Did he take our food?'

Once again the answer was no.

'Ah! Then it is ok - isn't it - we have our food - and our clothes both! Let's have dinner!'

My mother was not sure how to react - and followed Appachchi to the dinner table and had her meal in silence.

After dinner I saw Appachchi give Ammi a long embrace, and a kiss (on her forehead) and tell her that all

that mattered was that we were safe, and that we were not harmed in any way. All else did not matter.

Sometimes, things happen. There is precious little point in losing it once it happens. Sometimes, no matter how well you may prepare, it all goes horribly wrong. The last thing you want is for those who are in leadership positions to lose sight of the more important things, and simply fall apart. It is in times of crisis that leadership is most wanted. The last thing you want to see in your leaders is despair. Bad enough we are going through a hopeless situation: no point in adding to it.

My Dad's calmness had an amazing effect on my Mom, and specially me: who was quite scared at that point. I did not understand the magnitude of what happened, but Ammi's reactions told me that it was something horrible: after Appachchi came in, I thought it was nothing too bad as he was not ruffled. Ammi too took it in her stride afterwards and together made plans to ensure that they left nothing to be robbed afterwards. They ensured anything of value was either at the Bank or in a safety deposit box: and also made sure the house was secured in all possible ways. They also advised me about taking all required precautions.

We make the horrible mistake of going on witch hunts when something goes wrong. We point fingers, blame each other, and worst of all, blow it out of proportion. Leadership requires you to take stock, be calm and

collected when everyone else is losing their marbles, and above all, to ensure you learn from mistakes and move beyond that situation. The ability to simply get on with it is as important as keeping your head. (Cool?)

# ‘I THINK I SHOULD DO MY DEGREE, OTHERWISE PUTHA MIGHT THINK ME AN IDIOT’

During my Dad’s era, having your AL’s was all there was to it: and passing ALs assured a person of a ‘respectable’ job. Only those who were truly academically bent took on a degree, and it was rare. Appachchi started working straight after his ALs and has been ever since.

When I joined S. Thomas’s Appachchi was the confidential secretary to the Vice Chancellor - a post he held for nearly 36 years, serving nearly two dozen Vice Chancellors. It was a position that was unique in the University service, and a chance job he got due to the Venerable Sumangala, the Vice Chancellor long years back who could not have a female as his secretary (for obvious reasons - that he was a monk !)

A year or so in to my tenure at S. Thomas’ Appachchi spoke in confidence with Ammi. This a story that came out only when I became a dad for the first time - Ammi decided to share it with me, to talk to me about being an example. Appachchi was acutely aware that he was not ‘qualified’ and Ammi spoke to him about it ever since they started going out. He never gave it a second thought and

was perfectly comfortable to be who he was: until I grew up - and started schooling at S. Thomas'. Appachchi was acutely aware that I will be one of the poorer kids in the school. He ached over the fact that he was not qualified either. Having mulled over it for some time, he decided that he was going to get himself a degree - something my mother supported wholeheartedly.

He was 40+ - imagine taking on a degree - part time - with night time lectures, whilst having a full time job and a family! For 4 years he struggled, sweated, read, spent hours in the library, took notes assiduously and ended up with a second class upper. Once he graduated, he told Ammi - now Putha can't make me an excuse not to study. 4 years, just to ensure he set the example, rather than demand it of me. I was too young to understand what he was pouring over books for - but it made a very powerful impression on me: something that inspired me to start my Masters at 35 - online: because if Appachchi could, then so could I!

Leaders need to set the pace. They must lead the way. They must inspire: not by words, but by deeds. By sacrifice. By sweat. By blood. What inspired me the most was the fact that he never once wined. Never once complained. Never once showed annoyance. Never once said a word out of frustration. He simply put his head down - and did it. We who aspire for leadership positions need to be able to take it, like men. Take it, because we need to know that is what is expected of us.

# ‘INVEST IN PEOPLE, NOT IN THINGS’

We generally look at investments in everything else - other than the people who work with us. Having a fire in the factory is a far more disastrous thing than key employees leaving. A cash flow is a bigger problem than lack of leadership. Financing a project takes a lot more discussion than what we can do to build the competencies of people who work for us. More money is spent on entertainment than on training. More effort is putting into keeping the garden being properly manicured than the wellbeing of the employee population.

People are, when all is said and done, the ONLY competitive advantage an organization has. All of the R&D, innovations, change and profits come THROUGH people. However, people are generally taken for granted far more than other assets in the business!

That I should invest in people, and not in things was a lesson my dad drummed into me from a very early age. Not in so many words - but through so many things he made me part of, and showed in his own inimitable way.

How the hell do you invest in people? It was a question that plagued me all the time - until I started working in HR. Having been taught HR formally, and groomed to take on a senior position in an organization that took HR

seriously, I was privy to some cutting edge HR practices. However, what Appachchi took on as 'investing in people' took HR to a whole new level: at a time where HR was called 'personnel management' and the word 'talent management' was not even coined.

To him (probably because of some socialist roots, and my mom's socialist influences!) people mattered - not because of anything else except for the fact that they were people. The sanctity and pride of a human being was sanctified: was above all else: and not comparable to anything else - nor compromised for anything else. No, this did not mean that he put up with nonsense nor did he compromise on the rules, regulations or the sanctity of the institution he served (and was famous for having taken some really tough calls on occasions that warranted it).

What he meant was that people needed to be treated like people - not things. A simple thing - but as with all simple things - tough to implement.

A few stories come to mind which illustrates it best - and is something I try and remind myself when I am faced with the tough choices in HR. Let me share two.

I wanted a pair of Levis Jeans. I was 15, and I was the only one in my class that still did not have a pair of jeans - and oh boy didn't I feel left out. I was specific: I wanted a pair of Levis and they were not cheap! I cajoled my mom the best I could - but she kept telling no and one day,

in absolute exasperation, she told me to 'ask Appachchi. 'Asking for 'fancy things' from Appachchi was not easy: actually, make that nearly impossible (unless Ammi talks to him quietly - and she made it abundantly clear that was not going to happen for a pair of 'jeans'). So I braved it. Went to him and asked for it. Told him it was the only thing I wanted for the whole year. My dad listened. Nodded. Got dressed and told me to 'come let's go'. I was THRILLED! I got dressed in a jiffy and followed my father. My heart was racing: FINALLY - that pair of jeans!!!

We stopped at Kirulapona... Jeans were in Colpetty! What was going on? Did he know of a place that I didn't know of? We started walking off from the main road to what seemed like a slum area. Ha? Levis in the slums? I was utterly confused. But I walked beside him silently: the pair of jeans still invading my innermost thoughts!

He walked across the shanty and came to a dingy house no bigger than one of our rooms at home. It was cramped, smelly because of the canal that bordered it - but it was neat, and clean. There were two mattresses, piles of books on the floor all neatly stacked, and nothing else. In this 'house' were two young boys about 20 years old. They got up as soon as they saw my dad, offered warm greetings and invited him in addressing him as 'sir' and I instinctively knew they were students from his campus. He had a quick chit chat, had a cup of plain tea they prepared for him using someone else's

kitchen and left, handing a small envelope to them. I knew it was money.

Then he asked me 'How much is a pair of Levis Jeans?'

I can't remember how much it was that I quoted (this happened over 25 years ago!) - And he raised his eyebrows... 'That much ha?' he said - in sheer astonishment. 'That will buy those kids a month's worth of food' he said - and looked at me and asked 'do you still want a pair of jeans?' I was in no mood for a lecture on socialism or responsibility - I wanted that pair of jeans - so I said in one breath 'YES!' He looked disappointed, but went to Liberty Plaza and bought me my first pair of Jeans. He came back home, and told me, I wish you spent that money to fund those kids - rather than these jeans - but that's okay - one day - remember to value people and not things...I wasn't listening - and he knew it. But...I still remembered.

The second story came to light through a Professor I went to meet to get some help and advice as a precursor to starting out on my PhD. I went to meet him at his office and waited patiently to be called in. He called me in at the EXACT time appointed and I must say, I was impressed - this was Sri Lanka after all!

He looked at me intently - and asked me - 'you are Nilame's son?' Almost in disbelief I told him I was. He told me to sit down and said 'you need to know who your father is. And then, told me this story.

'I was a young undergraduate. My father had died, and my mother brought me and my siblings up alone. We didn't have a house - and wanted the then Vice Chancellor to help me gain an audience with President Premadasa to ask him to offer us a house under the Gam Udava scheme. Your father listened to me, typed a letter out in five minutes, took me to the Vice Chancellor immediately and told my story on my behalf and got the letter signed and gave it to me with the name of the secretary to the President. He also told me to call him if there was any issue. I went, saw the President and Amma got a house!' What he did may have been such a small thing - but the way he did it made me feel so special - and also, enabled me to give my mother a house. That is your father - he ALWAYS treated any person that came through his doors with the same level of courtesy he showed the Vice Chancellor.' I wasn't quite sure how to react. I mumbled something and came out - promising myself not to do the PhD with him because I knew the levels of expectation of me was too much to handle - and anything I digress on becomes a tarnishing of my father's name!

What became apparent to me whenever I met people who interacted with my father was that all who interacted with him appreciated the fact that he was out to help - genuinely.

It was with no expectations. Nothing ever wanted in return. Just genuinely helping, in whatever way he can.

He never made much money. Never really accomplished much in the form of 'material things': but one thing was clear, I reaped many many benefits from it - by pure virtue of association. Wherever I went I was helped in abundance by the countless people he had helped. They all ask me whether I am his son - and when they know I am, I am treated as royalty.

Invest in people... I now understand what he meant!

# ‘ALL THINGS CHANGE, BUT SOME THINGS SHOULDN’T’

Teaching is considered a vocation, to my dad it was a call of duty. He taught, not only his students but also anyone who came into contact with him. He will never quite instruct but he taught nonetheless. Mostly in a manner that allowed you to be who you are, and still uphold that which my father was trying to teach.

Values are the only true legacy that lives on. When we prepare successors this is the one thing we forget many a time. We teach people in an instructional manner, and often fail to teach the most valuable of lessons. In most organizations CEO transitions mean radically different value sets coming in. Change is not a bad thing at all, but I have often thought that values being rooted in something more long lasting and permanent is always a good thing. What is the legacy of an organisation that does not stay true to its founding values?

Creating succession is never easy. We can't control many things: and often children never follow in their parent's footsteps - and should they? However, it IS nice to see certain things carried forward, remembered, and stayed true to: because they were wholesome, because they were good: because they were right.

Change is inevitable. Change is a must. But...

When Appachchi came to Colombo he only had his school uniforms with him. White long trousers and short sleeved white shirts and a black pair of shoes. When he started working, he promised to send some money home - to fund his two unmarried sisters (who remained unmarried to look after their aging parents - and remain unmarried to date) and his aging parents. He decided to send 20% of his salary home: something he told my mom about as the only 'condition' for marriage - that he continues to fund them as long as they live (something my mother wholly supported and embraced, and something they both do to this date 44 years later!). So, when he got his first salary, he merely bought long sleeved white shirts, and kept his trousers and continued to have this as his 'uniform' throughout his career.

I asked him many years afterwards why he never bought any coloured clothes - and he told me 'because I never wanted to forget how I started'... When I started on my own, I started wearing white shirts - to remember this lesson (and my jeans to remember him taking me to the slums on the way to buy my first pair of jeans).

Two lessons I learnt that I try hard to pass on to my kids: firstly, stay rooted: secondly, don't just jump on to the next biggest fad. We live in an age of fashion and rapid change and we all need to adapt, change and progress. However, to merely 'change like the wind' is never a good

idea nor is it okay to do things just to 'fit in'. We need to each have our own identity and our unique sense of being: without it - who are we really?

Passing the mantle is a sacred thing and I think it is important to be able to live up to it. Sure, we must each be our own person: but, I genuinely think there is something deeply honourable in staying true to one's traditions - especially if they are rooted in humility and humanity. All the success in the world can never amount to anything if we lose our sense of integrity.

# ‘ONE HAMMERING, A LESSON FOR A LIFETIME’

My dad has never shouted at me, never berated me and never dictated terms to me: but... he did ‘hammer me’ once: and that was enough!

It happened when I was about 7 or 8 years old. I was schooling at St. Johns College Nugegoda at the time. St. John’s is still famous for their boxers and this love of fisticuffs started rather young in the playground. As in all schools, there were a few bullies and my ‘marmite sandwiches’ would almost always get ‘robbed’: worse still, after being ‘shoved around’ for a more dramatic effect!

Having being told ‘never to fight’ by both my mother and my father, I could never retaliate, and not being able to take this on a daily basis, I told my mother of this. My mother in return, brought it to my father’s attention. He called me in and told me ‘tell him once, tell him twice, tell him thrice: if he still doesn’t listen, I guess its okay to shove him back! It’s your sandwich: how you protect what is yours is up to you!’ (Or something to that effect!)

I was thrilled... It was payback time...

On the next day, I waited for it to happen again with eager anticipation. He asked for the sandwiches: I said no. He shoved me. I told him to stop. He shoved me again and held me by the scruff of my collar. I told him

to stop. He pinned me down. I told him to stop: actually, I dared him to stop. He didn't and then I let nearly three months of pent up anger unleash on him. I let him have it - right royally. A small group of students gathered around us - and the seniors came and broke the fight up and took both of us to the primary school head master. It was quite common for sympathy to be with the kid who got bruised the most (rather than finding out who was 'wrong'). Needless to say, I was told off - but I didn't care - I had god on my side (yep - dad WAS god when I was young - his word WAS as good as god's word). I told the head master that my father sanctioned the leathering - and that he was bullying me for nearly three months - and my headmaster wouldn't believe me. When my mother came to pick me up, he 'complained' to her about the 'thug' I was becoming and my mother did not know what to do with herself. She chided me: and I insisted that it was Appachchi who told me to hit him. My mother was embarrassed beyond belief - and finally told me to 'stop lying.' I lost it. My own mother - not believing me. I had it. I slammed my books on the ground. I told the head master and my mother to stuff it: and that I was not coming back to school - and stormed off from school. My mother profusely apologized to the master, picked up my bag, and followed me almost in tears.

When my father came home this matter was raised. Appachchi broke a small stick from the guava tree we had

in the garden, and thrashed me. I was absolutely shocked. What had I done wrong? I went to sleep sobbing. My mom never intervened - but I heard much much later that she had threatened to 'leave' if I was 'touched' ever again...

The next day, once I had come back from school he sat me down, and told me why I was 'hammered'. You NEVER disrespect your mother - is that understood. You can argue: but you NEVER raise your voice at her. You can disagree but you NEVER shout at her. You can dislike her - but you will NEVER get angry with her and belittle her in public.

He also told me 'if you can shout at me, the same way you shouted at Ammi, then I will respect you: otherwise you are just a bully - because you know Ammi will never treat you bad. Always remember - if you only take a certain tone with those who can never do it in return you will always be just a bully - and I will not have a bully in my house'

'Is that understood?' Oh! Absolutely crystal clear!

As a teen I rebelled. Ammi was 'authority' and I was most certainly 'anti authority': and I would fight with her mercilessly. However, whenever my voice went beyond a certain decibel point, my father would glance at me, and I would buckle down. I would not want 'god's wrath on me' again!

I learnt that my dad may be cool and calm - and absolutely liberal - but there were lines you could NOT cross. This 'fear' instilled at a rather young age honestly ensured I 'kept away' from 'certain mischief' - because I

knew if Appachchi told me not to do it, and I did it, I will possibly be thrown out of the house: and chances are, if he did, he will never take me back (and I also knew no matter what Ammi said, she will always 'take me back'). This was an important lesson: to know the parameters and know that there ARE lines one could not cross - it was one that stuck with me for the rest of my life.

Often, in leadership positions, it is important to set the tone and the parameters. Sometimes, there needs to be the tough calls being made. It is painful - but it is necessary. The idea is not to simply punish and set authority based parameters but to be absolutely clear that there are things that are not okay - and that there will be no exceptions. This enables the entire organisation to charter a course and steer it: rather than having mixed signals which are all too common today.

We have often debated whether corporal punishment was required. My father never gets involved in these discussions - but my mother has always been vociferous in her argument against any form of physical punishment - and my wife nods her head in vigorous agreement. However, I do know, looking back at it that it was needed: and I could have been a horribly misbehaved young adult if not for that 'little incident'.

# 'YOUR ROOM, IS INSIDE MY HOUSE !'

My mother started working for Bodyline when I was a young teen and I had no idea about the garment industry at the time. Bodyline was a class apart - and when they started, they were one of a kind in Sri Lanka (and possibly in the world). Who ever heard about a factory that was 'air-conditioned'! At a time when even most offices were not having an AC, to have an entire factory being air-conditioned was something we were all in awe of!

Bodyline manufactured bras exclusively for Triumph then (they have multiple customers now). My mother (and all of the executive staff) were given Triumph calendars: and given my mom was a rather conservative kind, she 'hid' this from me - and kept it tucked away in her cupboard.

My room was a 'typical' boys room - messy and untidy (by my mothers' standards - though in my defense I honestly think it was much better than most of my friend's rooms!) I would rearrange this often - mostly to make room for the books I would amass, as well as my growing collection of speakers and cassette tapes. Ammi would chide me often about how my room reminded her of a crow's nest - and reprimand me for not 'tidying up.'

I would often 'borrow' my father's pristine white shirts (I could wear his clothes from the time I was 15 !) and

since he never told not to, I would happily take from his 'collection' (he looked after his clothes so well that he still has shirts he wore when he got married - looking as new as when he bought it!) Rummaging through his clothes one day I came across the Triumph calendars Ammi had kept away from my prying eyes! Oh my - wasn't this a prize! 24 glossy pictures of ladies in bras - I couldn't believe my eyes!!! I stole them took them to my room, and plastered them all over my room!!!

Ammi came home and threw a right royal fit. She was livid. WHAT will the aunts say? I never knew you were such a 'pervert': my mother chanted away - but I wasn't at all perturbed. This was mine - and when my friends came home, and relayed the news, I was, for the first time in my life, the most popular boy in class! I wasn't going to have this stardom taken away because of a mother who had puritan values. She hounded me for over two weeks to take them down. I wouldn't hear of it.

As always with these things, it went to the Supreme Court...

My father came home that day, had his dinner, sat on his easy chair and lit up a cigarette with his plain tea by his side. He called me in. I knew this was the decisive battle. A battle which will decide the balance of power at home. My father ALWAYS gave me the opportunity to tell 'my side' before making any judgement call - and I was ready with my arguments from a week ago - as I knew it will go to

him at some point. I had started debating the same year, and I lined up my arguments carefully, prepping with logic, reason and above all, my father's pet subject - politics (which he studied for his Bachelors and I was studying for my A/Ls!)...

'Ammi tells me you have inappropriate pictures on your wall - and that your room is always untidy' Appachchi started, inviting my arguments.

'It's like This Appachchi' I opened, giving my mother a quick, confident and challenging look. 'It's my room - and I genuinely think Ammi has no say in it.'

'Let me explain' I continued as my father didn't stop me. 'Let me explain through politics. A state, given its geographic demarcations, holds sovereignty. No one can challenge this sovereignty - and if any one does, internally or externally, the state has the right to defend its sovereignty, by any means necessary. This is all I did. My room is my room. Its sovereignty is with me. My mother intruded upon it: and I defended it. That's all' I concluded, swelling with pride - as I knew my argument was water tight!

'I am impressed.' My father said, beaming up at me through a cloud of smoke from his second cigarette! 'You are absolutely right. Absolutely right!'

I did a silent victory dance. Vidusha 1 Ammi 0: I was going to remember this for a long long time - and Ammi was well and truly out of my hair for good!!

Then came the but...

'But remember son, your room is inside MY house...  
So, do as Ammi tells you'

Gosh... I still remember the hopeless deflated sense of pride I sensed when I heard that: and from the corner of my eye, my mother looking down trying to hide her devilish smile!

That was it. Down came the posters, and I cleaned up my room... I eaves dropped on my parents that night whilst cleaning my room. Appachchi tried to tell Ammi privately to 'let him have a few of them up - after all, he will not be a teenager for long' but Ammi would hear nothing of it. 'It's not nice Natha' she told in her usual tone of righteousness... 'You shouldn't have naked pictures'... 'But they are not naked Mal - and you DID bring them home' Appachchi tried to appeal to logic. 'Two wrongs don't make a right' and Appachchi knew he was beaten. She never brought calendars home afterwards: and there were no pictures of anyone scantily dressed up on my walls. The closest I got was a poster of Madonna in a pair of shorts!

Later on when I became a Manager, and had to be in charge of HR, this incident became a very strong lesson. Set the tone. Set the parameters. Get the logic straight: and ensure you can defend the decision not by the use of authority but by purely having a stronger case. My father never used his power over me - he merely showed me the

flaw in my argument and told me what the 'official line' was and why it existed.

Often when we had 'tussles' between departments and overall strategy, or individual interests over company policy, I would use this as an example to illustrate why it was important to understand the jurisdiction - and why it is imperative not to overstep it. Whether we agree with company policy or not is irrelevant: as long as it IS policy we are duty bound to uphold it. If not, it is always our choice whether or not to stay within the organisation's fold.

# ‘I HAVE CANCER, DON’T I LOOK LIKE A TIGER ?’

My father was very close to his family - still is. Both his elder brothers died of cancer, the eldest one when he was relatively young.

When they found out it was cancer, he was taken to the cancer hospital, and chemotherapy was ordered immediately given that the doctors said it had spread through his lungs quite rapidly. Loku Appachchi had ‘markings’ across his chest - which was to identify the areas for the ray treatment. Dad and his second brother went to see him, and Loku Appachchi started poking fun - and started telling them that he looked like a wild tiger with stripes across his chest - and all three of them started sharing yarns and laughing with such gay abandon that the doctors threw my dad and his brother out of the hospital! They later went in meekly and apologized - and my Loku Appachchi asked the doctor quite innocently ‘Why doctor - you and I both know I am going to die - if they don’t laugh now, are they to laugh at my funeral?’ The doctor was not amused - but all three brothers had a good laugh about it every time they met right up until his death.

Then my second uncle got cancer. He refused to be treated. It had spread too much - and the doctors said the ‘chances were slim’. The two brothers met frequently right

up until his death: sharing stories, laughing, talking late into the night, and of course, unseen by us, sharing a tear or two too.

Then my father's prostrate gave trouble - and he thought it was cancer. He called me, told me he thinks he has cancer - and in the same breath told me 'now don't you start to be sentimental about this. I want you to come with me to the hospital - and if it is cancer, come visit me more often, and share stories - and let me go in peace. Crying won't make me better so, don't even think about it. Just let me go in peace'

Thankfully it wasn't cancer: but, he was very clear about what was expected. Cherish life when you are alive. Be there. Spend time together. It's too late when you are dead. What you do at the funeral is irrelevant: it is how you spent time together when you were alive that matters.

We as leaders often forget to cherish and appreciate our teams when they are with us - and often resort to talk about 'how good they were' when they leave the organization: or try to persuade them to stay back when they tender their resignations. If they were that good, why not ensure they are truly valued and given no reason to leave: why wait?

There is no point in lovely eulogies if your parents died wishing you spent more time with them: there is no point if your employees leave thinking they were not valued...

# ‘IF YOU COME BACK YOU WILL HAVE A DEGREE, IF YOU STAY IN LONDON YOU WILL BE A MAN !’

I went to London to do my Bachelors - fulfilling a lifelong ambition to study abroad. My parents pretty much scraped all they had and gave it to me to pay for the first two semesters and also for my living expenses. I ‘bunked out’ with one of my aunts who graciously helped me settle in: and then, I found my own accommodation - and my cousins went out of their way to ensure I had all I needed. I remember fondly how they bought me my CD player - to keep me company - and shared their CDs with me. Roshan and Nalin (my cousins) would visit me often, and ensure I was ‘okay’.

But it was tough. I got mugged - lost almost all my money - and I started working all night to ensure I could fund myself, and ensure I didn’t ask my parents for any money. I had to do everything by myself and it wasn’t easy. I struggled. I faltered. I had to study, cook, clean, wash my own clothes, iron and study like hell - all whilst working nights in a petrol garage. The money was almost never enough - and I had to cut corners. After six months I really had had enough...

I had enough grades to go to Law School in Colombo - and we had to wait for two years to get in anyway because of delays due to strikes, the war and also, pure neglect! I wanted to come back home and go to university here - it would have been so much easier. My mom did warn me - but I did not listen to her - and finally I was convinced she was right. I wanted to bail out. Why should I suffer in vain?

I wrote to Appachchi. Explained the situation and sought his permission to come home. I was sure he will be happy to have me back home.

I waited for his reply impatiently... When it came, the letter had three lines...

'I don't need to advise you: you are old enough to make your own decisions. Remember though... If you come back, you will probably have a degree: if you stay back in London you will become a man' Love Appachchi.

I was shocked. And angry. How dare he? Damn easy for him to say - I was the one who had to suffer! But my pride was hurt. I couldn't go back without 'losing face'. So, I stuck it out for two and a half years.

I worked hard. Learnt to manage my finances. Learnt to multi task. Learnt to endure hardships and 'stick it out'. I learnt to be resilient. I learnt to weather the storms and remain stoic in the face of adversities. Like he predicted - I finally learnt responsibility. Those two and a half years taught me more than anything else in my entire adult life. This was my rite of passage.

I won't lie. I hated it most of the time. The hours were long. The days were lonely. The exams grueling. But above all - not having enough money meant I was constantly counting my pennies - budgeting and re budgeting all the time. I worked like a dog. I slept all but 3-4 hours every week day. I didn't have enough money to buy text books - but I found places where I could buy them second hand, ensuring I had enough money to spare. I found cheaper alternatives to almost everything including clothes, food and even lodging. I learnt to manage with what I have. All these life lessons held me in good stead when I started a family of my own. Without this 'induction' I don't think I would have been able to do all the things I ended up doing in my adult life.

Many times we shy away from putting our teams 'through the paces'. We make it easy for them, thinking we are doing them a favour: when in fact we are actually doing them the greatest injustice, crippling them of their ability to brave adversities. The fortitude that they need to have is almost always never instilled as they never have to truly face up to them alone: and leadership is sadly learnt through these very trials and challenges. And the confidence you gain when you become triumphant through sheer determination never leaves you. This is what sets us apart...

Tough love is required. It's tough on both parties. It's so much easier to take the easy route out. But what kind of

a father will I be if I take the easy way out? What kind of a husband will I be if I take the easy way out? What kind of a man will I be if I take the easy way out?

I am eternally grateful to my father for telling me gently that I needed to 'man up.' He told me a few years ago that it was one of the toughest decisions he had to make about me: and that he mulled over it for many many days - but he always knew I was 'sheltered' in my own right (though I will honestly say I was never spoiled) - and that unless I was able to 'see things through' he thought I will make a habit of 'running away when things got tough.' Hate to admit it - but I think he is right. I didn't have a choice but to see it through. I ended up with a degree by the time I was 21 - and more than that - I had found the inner strength to surmount any challenge that comes my way - a trait I never forgot - and an episode in my life I still draw a lot of inspiration and courage from.

# ‘WHAT IS MINE, IS YOURS !’

Appachchi had an old diary that he kept ‘money for a rainy day’ in. Ten 10 Rupee notes, Ten 20 Rupee notes, five 50 Rupee notes, five 100 rupee notes, 2 five hundred rupee notes and 1 thousand rupee note.

I found this quite by chance... I only got 10 rupees as pocket money back then. Hardly enough for a fish bun and a packet of milk. Whenever the ‘boys’ went to the tuck shop I would almost never have enough money to go with them. Often they would go after practices for a ‘Kottu’ feed, and I would never go knowing I did not have any money to pool. I felt left out - and then I found this hidden stash - this treasure.

I took (actually stole) 10 rupees first. I was petrified I will be ‘hammered’ again - but I so badly wanted that Jumbo Hot Dog - so I stole it none the less. I waited for a day or two to see if my theft will be identified but was pleasantly surprised that no one asked me about it, and that the ‘stolen note’ was actually replaced in the same place in the old diary. Hurrah I thought - Appachchi would have thought it was Ammi who took it!

I took a 20 note next. No one asked anything. Then I took a 50, then a 100, then finally, braved to take a 500!

Then my father called me into his study. I knew I was caught out - and my heart was pounding for the entire neighborhood to hear!

'Are you okay son' he asked. I told him I was.

'Are you in any sort of trouble' he asked. I told him I wasn't. I was waiting for it. That slap.

'What is mine is yours - you know this right?' I stared at him. 'If you need money, ask me and take it, but don't steal.'

'What on earth do you want 500 for?' I told him I wanted nothing in particular. 'If you don't need anything in particular, can I have it back please?' I gave him the 500, and the 100 I had as I had not used it - and he put it neatly back in the old diary.

'You know where it is now - so, take it when you actually need it - that's what it is there for!' He told me, with a twinkle in his eye.

I didn't know what to tell him - or how to react. I just walked away, relieved. Needless to say I never stole again...

Sometimes we all do unwanted things. Wrong things. Unethical things. Immoral things. A leader has the ability to either make you a 'criminal' or teach you the wrong of your ways and ensure you are never disregarded. I honestly felt so relieved. Yes, I did steal - but I wasn't really a thief. Appachchi was able to make that distinction. From the tone of voice he spoke, I knew that if I ever do it again, the

conversation will be very different - but, I was thankful and grateful I was never made into being anything more than a 'mischievous' boy.

We need to discern when to do what. There are never clear lines here. No real demarcations. But, leaders do need to know when to reprimand and when to let it go - but on both occasions we must never destroy a person's sense of worth and their dignity.

This valuable lesson I learnt that day - and often when I am confronted with people who have done 'wrong' I am reminded of this episode, and I do my best to ensure they are given a 'fair chance' to mend their ways. After all, what good are we as human beings if we are incapable of forgiveness?

## IN RETROSPECT: 'BEHIND EVERY GREAT DAD, IS AN AMAZING MOM'

In almost all my training programs I recite stories about my dad and in one of the talks I did (for the illustrious Peter Almeida's dynamic outfit ENable) I was asked a question I am generally never asked. 'Vidusha' he said 'you talk a lot about your father - what about your mother - have you learnt nothing from her?' I was taken quite by surprise (it takes a lot to take me off guard like that!) and I mumbled something off. A hastily conjured up an answer. But the truth of the matter is that the relationship I have with Ammi is a lot more 'complicated' than that of Appachchi and me. With Appachchi it's always very straight forward: with Ammi there is always a but...

She has always been tougher on me, nagged me incessantly (with damn good reason of course - I was IMPOSSIBLE as a teen) and to this day, has been my toughest critique! So, needless to say, I have countless arguments with her - and it is only when I had children of my own that I really valued Ammi's input, nagging, critiquing and absolute iron fisted disciplining. I have done all I can to truly make amends and show her in every conceivable way that I love her - and for that I am thankful - but I must admit, it saddens me that I could

never right those wrongs committed - nor take away the premature grey hairs I gave her.

She taught me a lot but one thing more than anything else. Leadership is NEVER alone. If you want to lead, someone must back you up. Someone must take the back seat, shy the limelight, be happy to allow you to shine and support you wholeheartedly. Success never comes because of one person's brilliance: it is always a team effort - a partnership. My mother was happy to play second fiddle : but if my dad was successful - if he was able to teach me right - if he was able to stay true to his ideals - it was all because of one simple reason: my mom - his wife!

When it was clear Appachchi couldn't fund everything by himself, rather than telling him to change jobs, Ammi decided to go back to work (much against her will - as she wanted to be a stay home mom). She is the only reason I could go to S. Thomas' and also, later on, to University abroad. She never once flinched from the house work - she woke up at 4.00 a.m., cooked breakfast and lunch for all of us, came back home, swept and cleaned the house and sorted dinner and also ensured she took my work. Thanks to her I never went for 'tuition' classes until the final year of A/Ls. Silently, diligently, unflinchingly, Ammi stood by my dad and ensured that he was able to steer his course: never once having to look behind him to see if everything was in order: it was all sorted out. Most people think my

father never gets angry but I think he does – it's just that my mom ensured 'that side' of him was never shown at home - she made sure the 'beast was kept at bay'.

I honestly don't think my dad could have remained the 'cool' person he was if not for my mom - and what a different childhood I would have had if that was the case!

Every person who aspires to be a leader needs to find that one person (at least) that stands by you no matter what. This is not a blind following, my mom will 'give it' to my dad 'bellyful' - but I never saw it: and because of this, he never lost face with me. Only many many years later would she argue with him in front of me - and that was because I was very much an adult, and a father in my own right: throughout my growing years, I never saw my mom cross paths with my dad.

It is important to have people around you that support you unreservedly. Believe in you absolutely. Support you uncompromisingly. Only then can you truly lead: knowing you are safe, secure and in case of need, backed up to the hilt. Without this confidence one can never embark on a leadership journey courageously: this is the inner strength we all need when we take on leadership roles.

What you 'see' is the leader, but it is the silent shadow that truly leads through their 'followership'.

## POST SCRIPT: 'MY DAD IS NOT PERFECT, BUT HE ALWAYS TRIED'

My dad is not perfect. Like all human beings he was hopelessly flawed. He was somewhat of a chauvinist: his pride (in his own right) was his own - and woe be onto anyone who challenged it. He was unyielding in many ways, he wanted his meals on time and he was a tough person to be with...

But there was one thing I learnt from him. No matter what his flaws were, if anyone close to him went and told him about it, he would listen. He will not agree with you at first but you can be rest assured he thought about it. Ammi told him once that he was a chauvinist and that he never helped around the house. He mulled over it, and just like that one day he started helping out in the kitchen, carrying the bags, serving Ammi first... You almost miss it at first - because he never tells you that he is making this change - nor does he make a big deal out of it - but if he understands what he has done is wrong, he will not SAY sorry, but he will make amends and ensure he SHOWS he is sorry... Actions speak louder than words is something he lived by...

Growing up he was someone I was petrified of. In my teens, he became a mentor. After I got married, he turned into being a best friend and confidant. I would

never talk about issues with him growing up - but now, if ever I am in need, I talk to him as much as I talk to my mom. He is a man of very few words. I often joke at my training programs that I will talk with an audience more words than my dad would have spoken with me in my entire lifetime - and this is not too far from the truth. He rarely says much - but when he does, it's always profound - to the point - and absolutely focused. He doesn't mince his words - nor does he beat around the bush - but he is never hurtful or disrespectful either.

I owe a lot to my parents. My father was my rock: my mom my biggest fan (AND my biggest critique). There is a lot I try and emulate: there is also many things I learnt NOT to do too. My parents never really invested: which meant they had to work much past their retirement age - and being fiercely independent they will never take a 'dole out' (my mother's term) from me either. They failed to really grow in their careers either. We speak about these openly and my father always tells me: you need to learn what to do, and what not to do too - there is little point repeating the same mistakes we made!

But that one trait struck me hard. He will always try. Even at 75, he is learning from his mistakes and trying to better himself. He is teaching himself computing, he is trying his hand at a few investments, he is allowing Ammi to take a lot more calls, and supporting her growth and playing second fiddle rather than leading 'from the front.' He epitomizes the phrase you are never too old to learn.

# ‘WHAT GOOD ARE LEADERS, IF THEY ARE NOT GOOD HUMAN BEINGS?’

Leadership is my pet peeve and helping grow leaders within organisations is my vocation. On countless occasions I challenge participants to think of leadership anew: to ask the fundamental question of what a Leader ought to be in its simplest form.

The world sees leaders in many ways; the most common being a person who ‘guides and inspires a team towards a common purpose’: and therein lies the problem. Humanity is forgotten. As long as we achieve the objective the mantle of leader is yours - provided you are at the helm. So, we unconsciously sanctify people to aspire to be tyrants, megalomaniacs and altogether despicable human beings all in the name of leadership.

Rather than any other word like Captain, President, Chairman, Manager, the word Leader connotes a higher form of being: someone who is a class apart and someone who by the very association with the term demands respect and veneration. Leaders occupy a very special place in our world.

So, should they not be held accountable to a higher standard of humanity than others? Should we not judge

leaders by their human qualities more than anything else? Should we not demand more from those of whom we call leaders?

What good are leaders - if they are not, at the very least, good human beings?

Jargon Free Leadership is a son's narration of lessons he learnt from his father. A trip down memory lane of incidents that offered deep insights : and leadership principles. Rather than 'complicate' leadership into being anything 'Herculian' Jargon Free Leadership aims to discuss leadership as a simple set of principles we can all relate to. What possibly makes Jargon Free unique is in the ability to draw from everyday life's lessons from those closest and dearest to us : parents who become our very first Mentors and Coaches.

Jargon Free Leadership is the authors grateful appreciation of all his father taught : and a promise to try and live by them.



Vidusha is a multidisciplinary professional specializing in HR and Leadership Training. Having started his career in Branding and Marketing he finally moved to HR and headed HR and HRD functions for a local arm of a Fortune 500 company before setting up High5, a boutique training and consulting practice based out of Colombo, Sri Lanka. High5 has run assignments in 9 countries regionally, and works with top tier corporates and NGOs.

Vidusha was also a talk show host, a CIM lecturer, and was also featured at TEDx Colombo in 2017, where he showcased High5's unique approach to developing leaders.

His full bio is available on LinkedIn or High5's website.