

Leaderonomics – developing talent and leadership

Background

Leaderonomics is a social enterprise dedicated to the pursuit of talent and development of youth leadership. The founder and CEO for Leaderonomics is Mr Roshnan Thiran, who has 12 years of industrial experience with GE in US, Europe and Asia in Media, Aviation, Financial Services, Consulting and as a Global Talent Director for Johnson & Johnson. By his late twenties, he was already the CFO and Executive Director of GE Engine Services Malaysia (GEESM), managing multi million dollar business transactions. Having been exposed to the education and working culture abroad, the dynamic and innovative leader saw the gaps.

In August 2006, Mr Roshnan Thiran and a group of former leaders of multinational companies came together with the idea of helping the younger generation develop their potential. These leaders wanted to give back to society by sharing their experience in climbing the corporate ladder.

Leaderonomics started with a small set-up with no real full-time staff and faced some initial hurdles. However, they persevered, as they believed that leadership values and training should start at a young age. Their effort and hard work gained the attention of an investor who shares a similar passion in developing youth leaders. Leaderonomic's investor, now the parent company – The Star Group – saw the need at that time and decided to invest in their company. Leaderonomics finally attained their initial funding for the start up of their office, which is now located in Phileo Damansara. The Star Group also allowed Leaderonomics to use the facilities in their office building for youth related programmes.

The company experienced losses over the last four years. However, they managed to report a positive cash flow through their sound leadership skills. They now have 13 full time employees.

The Social Enterprise

Leaderonomics is a training and consultancy company whose core business is to provide leadership training and consultancy to corporate companies. Among its clients are Malaysia's leading corporate giants such as Malayan Banking Berhad and Telekom Malaysia Berhad.

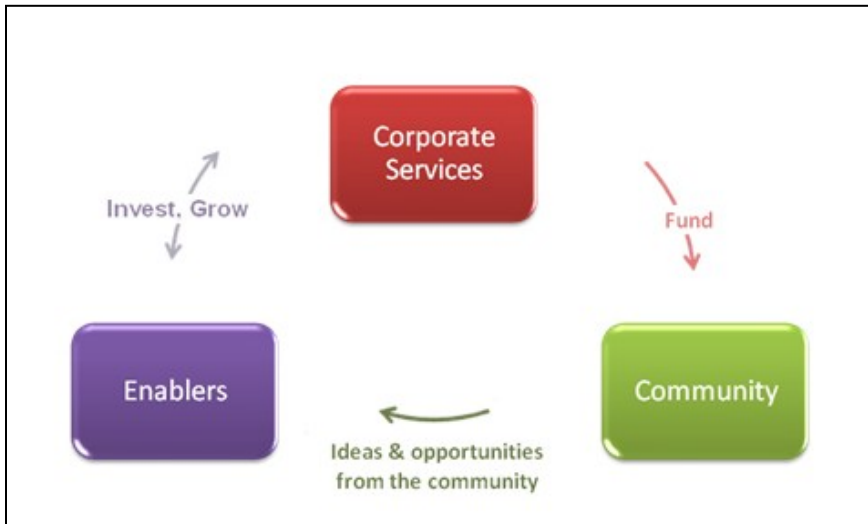
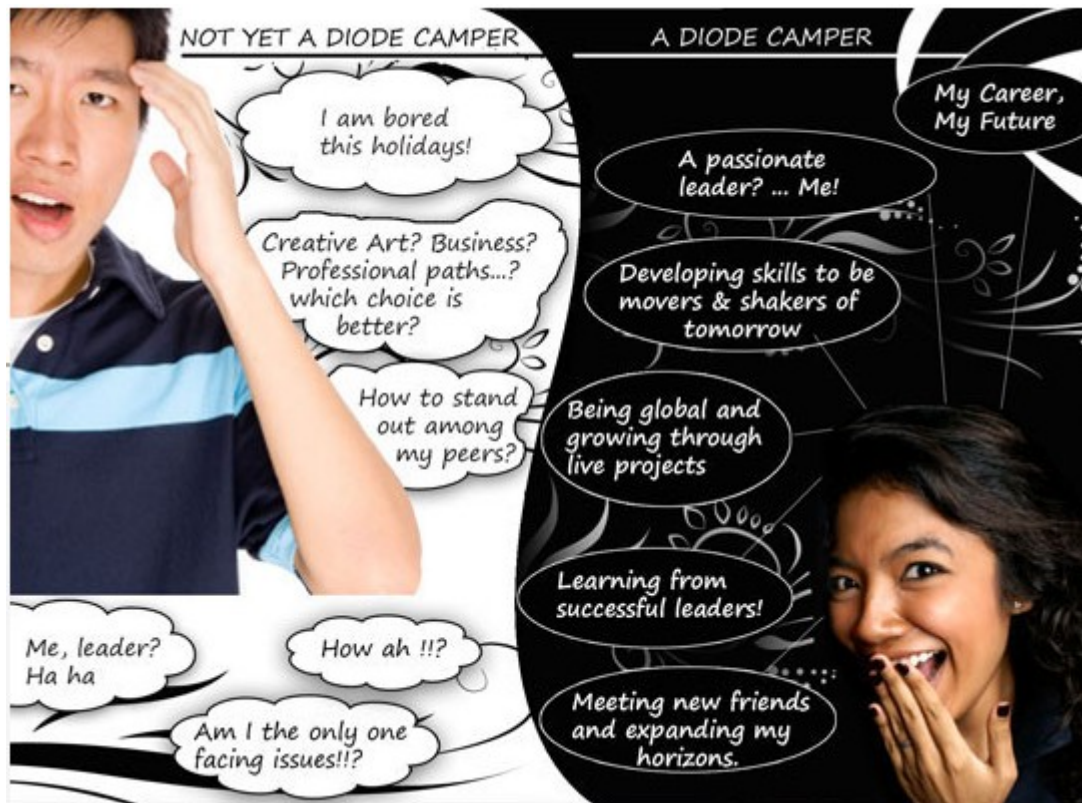


Figure 1: *The business cycle of Leaderonomics*

Leaderonomics generates its revenue through its corporate services and provides learning and development programmes to corporate clients. The revenue is used to sustain the company as well as generate cash flow for the company to continue to invest in youth development projects. In the corporate training module and design, Leaderonomics not only focuses on developing business acumen but also engages corporate companies in sponsoring youth programmes and developing leadership qualities among youth. Under its Corporate Responsibility project, companies are exposed to youth community projects and the importance of helping youth develop and realise their potential.

The funds generated are reinvested in to developing and acquiring good training materials for the company. Since its establishment, Leaderonomics has been conducting youth camps annually during the school break. The objective of the camp is to expose youth to leadership training. There are several camps that target different age groups.

The DIODE (Driving It Out, Doing the Extreme) programme is open to two age groups – from 14 to 17 years of age and 18 to 21 years of age. This camp focuses on issues that youngsters face as they grow into young adults, including having to make difficult choices. DIODE helps them to see their own potential and build up their skills in the decision making process. The camps also give them some insight into leadership skills and teamwork. In the camp, youth from different backgrounds are brought together and encouraged to share their feelings and experiences.



Apart from DIODE, Leaderonomics is also working to help the school leavers, university students and young working adults chart their career paths through careernomics. Youth are being guided on how to make correct decisions in their career path and trained to be more marketable. Leaderonomics also strives to touch every age group, calling it the “cradle to grave” programme. It plans to engage in youth programmes from as early as pre-school level to primary school level, teenagers, growing adults, adults as well as the retirees.

At the school level, Leaderonomics will engage the youth through DIODE camps. Leaderonomics’ activities do not just end with the camps. It aims to build a long-term relationship with the youth. Through the post camp alumni, past participants can meet and share their experiences. They can even come back as return campers and helpers. They are encouraged to participate in Leaderonomics activities.

Leaderonomics aims to make youth feel the importance of their existence by ensuring their ideas and suggestions are valued. These youth can spend their time usefully and as such, help to reduce social problems among youngsters. At the adult level, Leaderonomics is involved in careernomics and corporate training. Through corporate training, individuals are encouraged to give back to the society. Many corporate leaders return to Leaderonomics to share their success stories with the youth. Among the retirees, Leaderonomics will invite suitable candidates to share their success stories with the young participants.

All youth activities conducted by Leaderonomics are usually published in major newspapers as well as the company's website. Youth are invited to participate and join in the camps, which charge fees ranging from MYR600.00 to MYR800.00. "We do not want youths to treat the camp like a free holiday, we only want people who are really interested in making the change," stressed Hui Ming.

However, that does not mean the poor will be sidelined. Leaderonomics will sponsor participants who come from financially challenged families and cannot afford to pay the fees. They can write in to Leaderonomics, which will sponsor those who meet its selection criteria and show a strong will to change. Underprivileged children are also not left out. Kids from shelter homes and orphanages also receive sponsorship for the camp. Leaderonomics has a good relationship with many shelter homes and orphanages, including Shelter and Rumah Hope. The homes will nominate youngsters with potential to join in the camps. Each camp can accommodate up to a maximum of 100 campers and, ideally, Leaderonomics would ideally like to sponsor half its participants.

At the camps, the activities include personality assessments, learning workshops, presentation and communication skills, confidence building, debates and cross the line. These activities are specially drawn up to unleash the potential in youth. One of the most powerful activities is 'cross the line'. The ultimate message for this activity is to show the youth that their growing up experiences are the same regarding their family backgrounds. Respondents were asked to imagine and cross the virtual line in response to the statement questions posted by the facilitators. 'Cross the line' can start off with very simple statement questions – Cross the line if you've been hurt by a friend before – and can go to very deep questions. This activity made the youth realize their similarities regardless of the environments in which they grew up.

The camps are conducted in English. However, in every camp, the language barrier exists for some participants. The facilitators will plant themselves strategically to assist the youth by translating the coursework or instruction into languages that they understand. They have to do this discreetly without embarrassing the youth. Thus, the participants not only learn leadership skills, they can also brush up on their languages during the camps.

The facilitators have to be very sensitive and tactful in supervising the youth. As the participants come from very different backgrounds, the facilitators have to be careful in the choice of words used. For those staying at welfare homes, parents are often replaced with guardians so that they do not feel left out. With their vast corporate experience and leadership skills, Leaderonomics leaders, including its CEO Roshnan Thiran, are often invited to give

talks. No fee is charged on the corporate sharing but companies are urged to participate and sponsor participants at the youth camps.

Thus, Leaderonomics is an important platform for corporate companies to involve and engage in youth activities. Companies interested in investing in youth may sponsor and nominate participants to join the leadership camps through Leaderonomics. Funds received by Leaderonomics are through sponsorship and directly channelled to the camp funds to sponsor more youth to attend the camps.

Challenges

Recognition – The initial challenge for Leaderonomics was to gain recognition. As a new player in the market, their name was not recognized. Parents were fearful and reluctant to send their kids to the camps and Leaderonomics could not reach out to the kids without the consent of the parents.

“I spent two full weeks on the phone with parents, one after another, to assure them that we are credible people,” said Geraldine. “Parents would ask: Who are you? Can I come and see your office? They want to make sure that Leaderonomics is real because they are sending their kids. Without a brand name, it was quite hard to build the trust.”

Their strategies were simple. ‘Give your best and people will observe’. This is their best advertisement. They need not go out to market their company. People came to know Leaderonomics through its activities and programmes. Over the years, Leaderonomics has successfully run many camps and this, in itself, is a very good testimony for the company. Now, more people are aware of its existence.

The next stage of the challenge is to maintain the brand name and trust. People at Leaderonomics have to continually be on their best behaviour. It is very hard to build trust and credibility but it is very easy to lose it. The company holds to the maxim: ‘We have to practice what we preach’. This is very important as the people represent the company and become the role models for the youth they train.

Youth Development – The few days of camp have to be very effective due to the short time frame. It is good to kick-start and instil values during this time. However, while the youth can learn the skills at camp, they might quickly lose them without practice. Leaderonomics facilitators have to strive hard to build a post camp relationship where the youth are able to sustain whatever they learn in the camps and continue to grow from there. If they do not continually practice what they learn, they will return to their original self.

The social networking is there, but Leaderonomics has to continue to develop activities that will attract the youth to stay connected. Moreover, the needs of youth change and vary from time to time and Leaderonomics has to continually identify the real needs of the youth and stay relevant.

The current activities of Leaderonomics include training youth from their teenage years. However, Leaderonomics believe that leadership skills should start at an even younger age. They hope to start training from as early as pre-school level. Right now, they are still trying to fill the gap, searching for the right module for this group. To ensure the effectiveness of its programmes, Leaderonomics wants to be with the youth in their growing up journey. This means starting from pre-school to teenage years until the youth leave school, so as to prepare them for universities and working life.

Leaderonomics does not want the journey to stop after the youth leave school. Leaderonomics wants to stay connected so that they give back to the society and encourage more youth to be on the right path. It is their hope that these youth will come back and share their success stories and enlighten others. This poses huge challenges for Leaderonomics. On the one hand, it has to sustain the relationship with the youth participants, while on the other it has to sustain the company so that it serves as a platform for future relationships and as a communication base.

Expansion – At present, Leaderonomics only focuses on the Klang Valley. The company wants to expand and reach out to more people across the nation. However, it still does not have the resources to build a similar capacity in the northern as well as the southern regions. Leaderonomics is looking for people who are passionate in developing the youth. As the coaches will become the role models for the youth, it is very critical for Leaderonomics to find the right candidates to lead in youth development.

Another challenge in the expansion process is the training module. Leaderonomics is still in search of the best module that can be emulated and shared for further expansion. The whole process will take a long time, as continuous improvements are necessary.

The expansion process is in the pipeline but will take some time to accomplish. The current financial resources are only sufficient to maintain an office. However, the company is confident that they can introduce camps in more localities if they can find the right human resources to manage them.

Impact

‘I do not know how to measure impact but if somebody’s life was changed, that to us is already an achievement.’

Leaderonomics helps to shape the future of youth and the nation as the youth today are the future leaders of the nation. The camps help to shape youth behaviour as the young generation is trained to be more respectful and responsible.

The camps are open to all youth from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The rich, poor, broken, smart, egoistic, arrogant, slow learners, happy, sad are then grouped. The activities in the camps allow the youth to share their experiences, and see the differences and similarities among themselves.

The camp helps the youth to understand and accept their differences, enabling them to find the best in them as well as in their friends. At the end of the six days’ camp, parents can see the difference in their kids. The proud peacocks will become more humble and the shy squirrels will gain their confidence and stand up to speak out for themselves. It is all about building their own capabilities.

The youth can see the potential in themselves and their teammates and work together to achieve their team goals. The fast learners are encouraged to lead the slower, while the slower are encouraged to lead in the task that has been assigned. This will help to better prepare youth for the future.

The camps have actually given the opportunity for people at Leaderonomics to guide and help the youth in their problems. Through the camp, facilitators help to reunite siblings who are not on talking terms. The camp actually helps to build trust between the youth and the people of Leaderonomics.



When the participants trust the facilitators, they are more open to sharing their problems. Facilitators of Leaderonomics are able to help and coach them in the right direction, thus reducing social problems in these groups. Leaderonomics aims to build a long-term relationship with the youth they train. Youth are welcome to approach their office to share their problems and happiness. They can even spend their leisure time in Leaderonomics by helping to prepare for the upcoming camps.

In fact, they are always encouraged to give back to the society. The campers, who are blessed with the opportunity to participate in the camps, are encouraged to return as helpers at the camps. This way, they can spend their time more fruitfully. On the corporate front, more socially responsible companies are being created. The design module of the corporate training incorporates corporate responsibility activities. 'We bring a lot of people through long-term programmes, we see the changes in the people.' People who attended the corporate training programmes designed by Leaderonomics are not just concerned about building their careers but also aspire to give back to society.

At the end of each corporate training programme, Corporate Responsibility activities are a must where companies are exposed to community services, especially among the youth. More and more people are becoming more aware of the importance of developing youth through the encouragement of Leaderonomics.

Instead of a group of twenty individuals from Leaderonomics doing the youth development project for the entire nation, the job could be spread out to individuals and companies who see the importance of youth development. Individuals who had gone through the corporate training with Leaderonomics are more than willing to give back. Many successful individuals have returned as guest speakers to share their successful stories. The journey and challenges they encountered in life will enlighten and encourage the youth to have the courage to lead.

It cannot be denied that Leaderonomics has become a catalyst for change. The journey was started by few founders who believe in developing the youth and is now being shared among people with a similar philosophy. Transformation of the nation depends on the transformation of the youth.

Questions:

1. If Leaderonomics did not find a partner that shared the same passion to invest, what do you think they could do to initiate the company besides collecting donations?
2. What post-camp activities can Leaderonomics do if they want to ensure their participants practice what they learnt?