

Lessons in life and leadership

Laura Huang learnt more than mere methodology at hsead's Singapore campus, discovering how to embrace change and the idea of 'un-nice'

I had my pen poised over the offer letter, ready to sign.

Just before I was about to sign the document that would indicate the official start of my post-MBA career in marketing, a good friend delivered one final piece of advice: "Think about where you want to be 10 years from now and then progressively take yourself back year by year. If this position that you are about to accept is the job that will get you where you want to be in 10 years, then it is the job that you should now take and you will know that you are making the right choice."

I believe that this advice is sensible and at the time I should have been thinking about the soundness of the argument. Instead I was contemplating his choice of words and preoccupied over how it sounded deceptively like a calculation of financial net present value applied to career choices.

Two days later, along with my fellow participants at Insead's Singapore campus, I finished my last project as a business school student and gave my final presentation in a risk-free classroom environment. Now, as recent MBA graduates, I wonder whether we are primed to enter the real world again.

I still remember my first day, when I met my core course team members, a work team that was assigned at the start of PI, the first of five academic periods at Insead. The group - consisting of a German physician-turned-consultant, a Greek engineer who doubled as a

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national swimming champion, a Russian top-tier strategist, an Indian engineer who runs marathons in his spare time and a Spanish banker interested in entering the world of fashion - will forever encapsulate some of my most remarkable yet frustrating memories.

In those days, the most difficult part was figuring out how six natural-born leaders could possibly operate cohesively in a single work group. By the end of P5, group dynamics consisted of parcelling out assignments

and hoping someone would volunteer to lead the "consolidate and make consistent" effort. I dare say we are almost ready for the real world again.

Indeed, we have worked hard to get the most out of our Insead courses, picking up new frameworks, methodologies and processes that can all be applied to our new roles. For me, the benefits and new applications are most evident in the gaps that I had, especially in finance and economics.

We are also now equipped with myriad business examples of how an organisation should or should not run. Not only have we pored over vast numbers of case studies but we have also been privy to classroom discussions among Insead students of diverse backgrounds.

One of the most valuable lessons I learnt about organisational management was revealed to me not in course notes but through a comment made by a Portuguese classmate about his previous company. I learnt that sometimes as a leader it is great to be "as nice as you can be", but sometimes it is also okay to be as "un-nice as you need to be".

And now we have an immense ring of supporters - a family comprising professors, fellow participants and



On track: Laura Huang exchanged ideas with people from diverse backgrounds at Insead, including faculty members, fellow students and housekeeping staff

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alumni contacts. More than once I have stayed up until the early hours of the morning, bouncing ideas off another member of the Insead community, be it a faculty member or a member of the housekeeping staff.

Yet one of the tragedies of an MBA emerges from the fact that we now know the right way of doing things or at least the method in which the maximum probability of success can be assured.

In the real world, business does not always operate in this fashion. The rewards do

not always go to the swiftest, the smartest, the most efficient or even the most prepared. Sadly, they sometimes go to those that are vicious or those that have manipulated the process along the way. We know this and we have learnt these lessons.

However, it is exactly this type of lesson that makes our MBAs so valuable. Through reflection, many found themselves becoming engaged, getting married, having children or settling down - all consciously decid-

ing during the year that families and friends are of the utmost importance, or at least as important as their careers. They have embraced the idea that it is all about the people.

Others have found themselves switching career, finding their passion and choosing to do the things that they love. These participants belong to the school of thought that you must find what you love as soon as you can because the only way to do great work is to love what you do.

Yet still others have found themselves with a more pragmatic view, perhaps realising that a job in a particular industry may not be the ideal but will pay off the loans or give them geographic freedom. Or perhaps it might just pave the way for future benefits.

This is the beauty of Insead. Not only is there diversity among students, experiences and perspectives, but there is a shared view at the end of our time there - a tacit agreement that we will disperse once

more and go back to our varied lives.

None of this is monumental. In the end, we try to plan as well as we can. But then we remember that anything can be changed, especially where we want to be 10 years from now. We are able to inspire progress and change. Sometimes in 10 years, sometimes in a matter of seconds and sometimes over the course of an intense, one-year MBA.

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