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Creating a Community of Leaders

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LOUIS “TEX” GUNNING

Picture 250 company leaders, ranging from top corporate officers to local brand managers, spending two to three days in India visiting ashrams, hospitals, schools, micro-enterprises, and charities. They tend to the needy, offer service and support, and ponder how spiritual leaders, caregivers, and community entrepreneurs can accomplish so much with so few resources. In a desert campsite, for three days thereafter, they reflect on the meaning of their experiences, talk over its relevance for them, and rediscover what a true mission is—and what a new form of leadership could mean.

Said one leader: “Looking at the Sikh community I cannot overstate the power of common values. People can simply work together in perfect harmony without a formal organization.” Said another, after visiting the charity of Mother Teresa: “The sisters and volunteers really inspired me with their humility, selflessness, courage, and mostly their faith. The energy they have to serve the poor, disabled, and left-over really touched me, and honestly I cried during the visit.” While such experiences deepened understanding of the people and communities in India, there was more to this than benchmarking or lending a hand. Tex Gunning, then president of Unilever Foods Asia (UFA), posed this to the assembled leaders, “We confront ourselves with the questions: What life do I want to live? Do I want to live my own dream? And, can we as a leadership community create a common dream, and take it into our hands and realize it?”

These questions provoked deeper considerations. An Indonesian recalled, “A new challenge arose for me: How could I be worried about my job and ‘how much tea

we sold last week’ when thinking of all those who are giving their lives to care for people for whom life seems so unfair. This was a gap I could not bridge, and I struggled with the rest of the group to see the link between those communities and our business driven environment.”

To bridge this gap, the 200 leaders came to the conclusion that they would have to reexamine their own community and reconsider their corporate purpose.

BRINGING LIFE TO MISSION

The idea that vision, mission, and values can guide a business and give meaning to its people is well established. Practitioners and professors alike agree that clarifying and committing to one’s own aspirations creates a strong personal sense of purpose; and that a strong personal sense of purpose can energize organizations and make them more effective in the long run. Yet, in so many cases (including Unilever’s), company mission statements merely hang on the walls of offices or appear on mugs and plaques without carrying any real meaning for employees who don’t – either individually or collectively – embody the mission. The results: empty rhetoric and uninspired people.

To build a sustainable, profitable food-and-beverage business in Asia, we are experimenting with a new way to create a genuine mission and infuse it with personal values. A starting point, in 2002, was to connect senior leaders of 17 national companies in the Asia Pacific region – which operated independently – and to include the next layers of country marketers, supply chain

managers, and corporate staff in setting strategy and reviewing performance for the whole of the regional business. Behind this was a desire to build the capacity of this entire leadership body to think, feel, and work together, that is, to operate as a *community of leaders*.

This is where Mirvis comes in. We two first met in 1998, based on our interest in the work of M. Scott Peck—who pioneered an approach to community-building that brings large numbers of people together to talk openly and authentically about their lives and circumstances. The intent is for the assembled group to develop deeper connections and ultimately find common ground. Tex had used these methods, along with other group development and learning tools, to join together 180 business team leaders and turn around Unilever’s foods business in Holland—going from years of losses to double-digit growth. He brought this philosophy with him to Asia when he took charge of the foods-and-beverage business in 2002.

But it is one thing to unite people from a single country with a relatively egalitarian culture; quite another to bond leaders of so many different nationalities, and in many cases from ethnic cultures that favor hierarchy and social distance. Furthermore, the UFA leaders were based on historically independent country business units and, to this point, had progressed through single-country career paths. The new model called for the creation of pan-Asian business models and managers. The challenge: UFA leaders would have to find common cause and learn to work together.

BUILDING A LEADERSHIP COMMUNITY

What comes to mind when you hear the word leadership? Most often the image is of the heroic individual, often charismatic, whose positional power, intellectual strength, and persuasive gifts motivate followers. But this is not necessarily the ideal in Asia, nor does it match the requirements in large global

corporations, where forms of distributed and shared leadership are needed to address complex, interlocking problems. The case for connecting leaders across units and levels in UFA also hinges on a simple proposition: *none of us is as smart as all of us*. Now some companies enlist collective brainpower through multi-level teams or tiers of committees. We prefer the more inclusive image of a community where leaders truly share responsibility and value being together.

The process of building such a leadership community cycles back-and-forth from the individual to the collective. The foundation is individuals who understand “*who I am*” and make a conscious choice to lead with others. Self-consciousness is crucial, as only those who can “lead from within” are able to connect fully to others and forge mutual, reciprocal ties. Efforts to deepen person-to-person relationships, in turn, create a sense of trust and unity that brings a collection of individuals into community.

Getting there, as in all kinds of personal and group development processes, is marked by conflict and paradoxes. Thus, UFA leaders spend collective time looking at their differences and trying to understand one another’s emotional and cultural makeup. The intent is not to “work through” differences by confronting them directly—as in so much human relations and diversity training. Instead, the leadership body serves as a “container” that holds differences and conflicts up for ongoing exploration. Thoughtful, if sometimes heated, reflection on “*who we are*” yields a collective identity and oneness that, at the same time, preserves individuality and diversity in the community.

The next layers of community building engage collective consciousness and enrich it with new perspectives, challenges, and inspiration from the world around us. Here is where experiences such as those in India tap into the emotional and spiritual as well as cognitive character of a leadership body and surface questions of purpose and values. The practical work of the leadership community is then to tackle these questions and other complex business problems in such a way

that every individual thinks and acts mindful of the “whole”—themselves, fellow leaders and employees, the enterprise, and, of course, customers, shareholders, and other relevant interests.

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH LEARNING JOURNEYS

During the first year of forming the business, UFA leaders spent many months in varied forums sharing market information, consumer insights, and competitive analyses to develop a holistic picture of the region and to decide where to use local products and processes and where to reach across country lines. The cultural challenge, less clear and more daunting, would be to unlock barriers to connecting and bridge the diversity in the region.

Communication is integral to building community – not surprisingly, as the two words have the same root word, *communus* – to share. To build a sense of community, leaders in the region would be asked to open up about their life experiences, values, and dreams, talk frankly about their own leadership, national culture, and business, and listen thoughtfully to one another in search of commonality and differences. It would take time to create an environment of candor and trust. “If we as leaders live in denial about our fears, doubts, and anxieties, and about the differences of opinions amongst ourselves,” Tex said when the top 200 leaders first met together, “We will never get convergence; we will never get the sense of a powerful group pushing in the right direction.” He then explained, “Community is important. It stands for a safe environment to share.”

In principle, this kind of sharing can take place in meeting rooms and in the course of everyday business. And it has. But UFA has created deeper bonds through a series of annual “learning journeys” where all of its leaders come together to see the region – and themselves – with fresh eyes. We have

traveled together to locales of historic and cultural significance, hiked through mountains and deserts, met with school children, indigenous peoples, everyday consumers and the poor, learned from leaders in business, government, and community organizations, and talked deeply with one another about our personal and business lives.

The journeys, lasting up to a week, are multi-layered, multi-sensory experiences that engage the head, heart, body, and spirit (see Tex’s reflections on learning journeys in Box 1). They are tribal gatherings in that we typically wake at dawn, dress in local garb, exercise or meditate together, hike from place-to-place, eat communally, swap stories by the campfire, and sleep alongside one another in tents. In our daily experiences we might meet monks or a martial arts master, talk with local children or village elders, or simply revel in the sounds and sights of nature. We spend considerable time along the way in personal and collective reflections about who we are as a community, what we are seeing, and what this could mean for our work together. Throughout a journey, a team of researchers prepares a “learning history” that documents key insights for continued reflection (quotes used here come from these learning histories).

It is important to note that Unilever people don’t take these journeys to get away from business. On the contrary, it helps them to see how their business can connect better to the larger world. Community service is an integral part of this. In India, for instance, we formed into 17 “study groups” that lived in several communities, including Mother Teresa’s hospital, the Dalai Lama’s monastery in Dharmashala, the Brahma Kumaris’ retreat in Mt. Abu, Ravi Shankar’s Art of Living foundation, as well as cloth spinning communes, the self-employed women’s association (SEWA), schools and colleges, and so forth. Leaders were asked to use their five senses to work through a study guide on how these communities functioned and to rely on their sixth sense – intuition – to connect to the more tacit rhythms of human and community life. In so doing, they were prepped to be

Box 1 REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEYS—TEX GUNNING

Our journeys have been all about the “How?”—How do we bring our mission to life? How do we become great leaders? How do we create a great business and culture?

Great businesses have great leaders at all levels of the organization. They take care of the needs of all their stakeholders and want to make this world a better place for all of us. Great businesses have great cultures understanding that business beings are human beings who want to belong, live meaningful lives and want to have space to create, grow and contribute to a better world. It is therefore no surprise that business leaders of great companies are first and foremost great human beings. They care and live in service and they commit to a lifelong journey of personal mastery, developing all the necessary skills and competencies and all their intelligences—PQ, IQ, EQ, and SQ.

In Unilever Asia Foods we have through our various journeys attempted to become great human beings, understanding deeply that it would make us more effective as business leaders.

To help develop our EQ and SQ we confront community service and take care of the underprivileged and destitute. We experienced that it humanizes our characters; it reminds us that we have a soul and qualities of love and compassion, all innate qualities of great leaders. It also reminds us that leadership is not a position but a responsibility to act; it's not a noun but it's a verb.

So, we went to Sri Lanka to help the tsunami victims, as we had committed ourselves never to close our eyes again to the misery around us.

We worked, cried, played with the beautiful people of Sri Lanka who taught us again that greatness has many faces and has all to do with compassion, service and care for others.

The profound lesson was that while we can give people in need assets like shelter and even food, what they need most is love and a rekindling of their spirits. They taught us those in times of despair and total destruction, the only thing that we human beings can rely on to persevere is the human spirit.

It's our spirits that ignite our souls. It's our souls that give us guidance and wisdom and it is our souls that animate human qualities of love, compassion, and humility. To be conscious of these innate qualities is essential for leaders, as it will help us to have the faith, courage, and wisdom to persevere in complex situations of flux and adversity, and to stay truthful to our mission to make this world a better place for all of us The journey continues.

aware of preconceived assumptions; to be open to what they might experience; and to reflect on the lessons for themselves and the business.

Many were surprised at what they saw and found some aspects dispiriting and others delightful. Most connected deeply with the people they met:

You go into Mother Teresa's place and it is full of sick and dying people, but the atmosphere is not that of misery but of joy and love. (My coworker) and I were told to massage some who

were just flesh and bones. And this volunteer, who had been there for 14 years, came to us and said: “Look, this is how you've got to do it. It improves their blood circulation and bedsores. But most importantly, it's the human touch that they've missed for years that you give them.” We saw so much love in that place. You start doing things that you thought were impossible for you to do.

Beyond personal enrichment and communal bonding, such encounters stimulated

thinking about leadership and how to lead the UFA business. Tex's field notes exemplify one such lesson:

The core insight about great leadership comes down to service. Somehow it humanizes us. One of our problems, especially as we advance in positions of leadership, is that our egos get bigger and bigger, we suppress our human sides, and we don't listen to people – employees, customers, and others – whose needs should shape our business agenda. Face-to-face with great need, a leader is compelled to listen to the one in need.

The reflections of a supply chain manager illustrate another takeaway:

We met the principal of the Ramakrishna College. He quoted from Jim Collins' *Good to Great*. A monk talking about Collins' greatness concepts! He said: "Look, whether as an individual or as a corporation, we waste 90 percent of our energy in creating an image that is not our real self. If that energy is actually spent in exploring your own uniqueness, the greatness that is there inside you, then you will be really on a journey to greatness. Otherwise you're just wasting your time.

These reflections, in turn, fold into business talk during a journey. Country teams typically meet separately to digest lessons and consider the implications in their national business environments. Then we meet as a whole community to reflect on and review our collective intent. This open and inclusive forum aims to sharpen the regional strategy and build emotional commitment to delivering on it. It can also spark tough questions about strategic direction and the corporate mission.

While learning journeys of this sort may be beyond scale or interests of some business leaders, we believe that the components are

relevant to every organization that wants to build new leadership capacity and bring its mission to life. Here we describe in brief the Asian journeys and how they help UFA to build a community of leaders. The first Asian gathering of 250 was held in Guilin, China in 2003; the next took us throughout India in 2004. The most recent took us to Sri Lanka in 2005, where we offered service to survivors of the tsunami. In addition, journeys with smaller groups – of senior regional executives and emerging future leaders – have led us to the jungles of Sarawak, islands of Thailand, and shores of Vietnam. Here are the key elements.

Self-Knowledge: Leadership is a Choice

UFA has adopted the mantra "leadership is a choice" and encouraged its leaders to inquire into their motives, ambitions, personal strengths, and weaknesses. Like many companies, Unilever uses personality tests, 360-degree feedback, coaching, and the like to enhance self-awareness. And, while these have their place in personal development programs, we use less formal, more timeless means to promote self-awareness in the full community of leaders.

One approach involves personal reflection and storytelling about one's life history and lessons. Tex, for instance, has shared his own "lifeline," traced from early childhood to the present, with attention to emotional highs and lows. The first time, in the Dutch food business, was not easy. In a torch-lit cavern in an abandoned monastery in the Ardennes forest, he talked hesitantly about his abusive stepfather, scraps with authority figures in childhood and military service, and assorted ups-and-downs over the life course. Subsequently, all the Dutch leaders shared lifelines with one another. In collective reflection thereafter, one recalled "moments of silence became tangible." The combination of emotional openness and vulnerability seemed to touch people's hearts.

In Asia, self-reflection and storytelling are part of every leader's work. In a future leader's

forum, for example, younger execs have written and shared their life stories with one another. "It's like a surgery of the soul, you begin to see the roots and patterns," says one young leader about this self-reflection, "and you understand what truly moves you." Biographical studies by psychologist Howard Gardner underscore this point by showing that formative experiences shape the beliefs and practices of leaders in almost every culture. They make up the leader's identity. UFA has also encouraged its current senior leaders to delve into their roots and convey their life lessons to their people. The telling of identity stories, Gardner finds, builds deep connections between leaders and followers and, in particular, informs the identities of younger leaders.

During the China trip, after a hike into the mountains, Asian leaders wrote letters to "mom and dad" that surfaced heartfelt discussion about the emotional sides of leadership. Some 10 or 12 leaders read their letters aloud, many striking the same themes:

While writing to my parents I nearly choked with emotion as I realized how much I loved them. But I had never shared my feelings with them. I had always been taught that open display of emotions was a sign of weakness. The credo of my clan is that "Men are born to face the challenges of this world. They do not cry. They lead. They are the pride of their family and must not fail." This was drummed into me since I was a little boy.

Till now I had been trying to live up to this myth of invincibility even though I knew that I didn't have all the answers. I could not share my emotions and my fears with even my family as this, I thought, would be perceived as a sign of weakness. Now I realize how much more I could have done if only I had sought the emotional support that I knew was there all along.

This kind of introspection has helped to develop the emotional intelligence and vocabulary of UFA leaders. At a subsequent gathering, we heard a young marketer from Hong Kong – a modern woman raised by a traditional mother – talk movingly about what she and her mother have found in common. In turn, an Australian – deeply disappointed by his failings in the family business – spoke of becoming a parent and reconciling with his father. Through sharing life stories, the leadership body has come to see commonality in everyone's life experiences and talked together about how these experiences, good and bad, shape who we are as leaders and who we hope to become.

From Me to You: Connecting to "Other"

A second stratum of community has people strive to understand and connect to others. It is well established that human relations develop and deepen as people begin to see themselves in another person and see another in themselves. "In listening to other people's stories, you hear your own story," remarked one leader. "Other people's stories often clarify things in your own mind—what your past is and what drives you." Sharing such stories also establishes bonds of mutual understanding and empathy.

"This is really about connecting to a group of people," said a leader from Taiwan, "so we really know the people, and have a feeling about who they are. That's the only way we can really commit ourselves to build a great Unilever Asia together." "In Chinese we always say it's quite easy to break one chopstick," added another. "But if you put the whole bunch of chopsticks together, it's unbreakable."

In the competitive business culture, it is difficult to "lower the guard," as one senior leader put it. "The initial step of sharing personal information was difficult," he recalled, "But once you sense the value of truly connecting, building on it seemed relatively easy." "I have understood myself and I

have understood my team," added a Filipino, "I also feel that the emotional bonding within the team has now developed even more. It's great to hear everyone's view and aspiration, and also to see our willingness to put the entire burden on the table to discuss, all to speak up and honestly share."

Connecting to others extends beyond the boundaries of the UFA leadership group. In the journey to China, for instance, we spent time "getting into the skin" of villagers in the ancient hamlet of Xin Ping. The leaders worked alongside local people in the daily lives—sweeping streets, herding buffaloes, forming cement blocks, cooking noodles, and teaching school. One commented: "We spent the day with a family who made ropes from the dried grass and pine tree skin. The grand old man in the family – the way he taught us to make ropes, the way he kept his cool despite our silly mistakes – made me think about my style of management when teaching the new managers at the factory."

A Pakistani added, "We met villagers in rural China whose income was less than \$125 USD per annum. Seventy percent of my country's 140 million population is similar to the family of the man I met today, while only 5 percent has a lifestyle similar to mine. I respect and value these villagers for who they are and what they deliver to all of us."

The power of connecting person-to-person has had a palpable effect on UFA. The leaders, for example, no longer refer to each other "colleagues;" instead they call each other friends. "I feel as if strong ties of friendship bind us," said a Vietnamese. "(It is) absolute friendship, rather than a dry 'network,' that helps you when you need it." A young Thai's comments to a top European executive exemplify the benefits:

Getting to know you as a person was very valuable. I never thought I would have the opportunity to meet you, let alone hear your real story. In Thailand, we don't get to see our chairman. If he's around, we are too scared to meet him. But, with you now, I feel different. Whenever

you come to Thailand, I hope you will visit us. Now it feels like we know each other, not that you are "Mr. Chairman." It feels good to know that, even in a big position, you are a real person.

Collective Dialogue: Developing "Us"

Group consciousness is the next layer of community; it concerns the creation of a collective "us." The community building process engages what M. Scott Peck calls a "group mind"—the ability of a collective to see both its constituent parts and the whole. This mindfulness develops through free-flowing conversation, as people pay close attention to both their own thoughts and feelings and to what is happening in the group overall.

In UFA, we use a large group discussion methodology called "dialogue" to help develop collective intelligence. We sometimes talk in smaller, 15–20 person groups, and sometimes as a full community of two hundred plus, all sitting in a circle, with everyone given the opportunity to speak, irrespective of rank or tenure. The expectation is set to speak openly and frankly, and to deal with the "difficult issues" that would otherwise be avoided or denied. There is also space for "process comments" – observations about how the collective is operating – and periodic moments of silence so that leaders can reflect quietly on what's been said and what they next want to say.

UFA leader's first experiences with dialogue were mixed at best. The Indians and Pakistanis, already heated up by their two nation's cricket match, dominated conversation with long-winded, albeit elegant, philosophical commentary on leadership in their lands. Meanwhile, the Chinese and Southeast Asians leaders were silent. One commented, "The first dialogue was very frustrating, despite my own pitiful efforts at involvement. In an Asian culture, it's not easy to speak out. The risk is very high to stand up and say something. It must be the right

thing." "I was one of those who didn't stand up to talk," added another. "Why? Well, truthfully, I was scared. Nervous about standing up in front of 200 people to express how I feel. Not knowing if I could trust them." But then, he said, "It finally dawned on me that everything must come from the 'heart'. That is where it all begins." A third chimed in, "The experience drove me and a colleague, with whom I had never had a discussion before, to open up. We shared deeply our thoughts and difficulties. It was worth the pain!"

To learn to dialogue among so many people across so many different cultures takes time and patience. At the communal gathering in India, one year later, leaders, irrespective of nationality, spoke easily and naturally to the collective, built on each other's comments, challenged gracefully, and encouraged new voices to emerge. Said one, "It was great to see that words just poured out from everyone. We are starting to see the connections with each other."

What helped the process to mature? More time together, familiarity with one another, and a degree of psychological safety established from our past encounters. In addition, some practices of community building – speaking personally, raising difficult issues, and talking from the heart, while originally "foreign" to these Asian leaders – were proving agreeable.

The leadership community has now evolved to a stage where leaders can talk about sensitive and emotional subjects, like "saving face," and confront the assumptions and cultural values behind each other's points of views. "Whilst there are differences in our appearance, speech and food," said an Indian manager, "sharing innermost feelings and fears so openly has bonded us emotionally." The leaders have also come to realize that intellect, wisdom, and virtues are not the heritage or property of any particular nation or a group of people. Noted an Indonesian, "We have different backgrounds. I have to look into that deeply, open my mind up, and be big enough to accept each of you in my heart. So we can have some sort of the same

understanding and then become more united."

Reaching Out: From Us to the Larger World

What do the UFA leaders talk about collectively? About what all business leaders have to talk about: profit margins, market shares, trends, budgets, targets, and the like. We typically address these matters, however, at regular strategy sessions and operating reviews. On our journeys, we talk more so about leadership, culture, and purpose.

The next stratum of community is the connection between people and the larger world. In our trip to China, we spent a playful day with schoolchildren in a mountain village. There was a dragon dance, winding through and around the schoolyard, plus volleyball games, and jump rope. The happiness of kids, their purity, innocence, energy, smile, spontaneity, and eagerness really touched the UFA leaders. "Watching kids, I ask myself if I really live my life innocently enough," said one. "The passion for life that I saw in the children we met was amazing." "I have always been caught up between the past and future," said another. "I have brought back with me this wonderful gift of living in the moment."

After celebrating a birthday party with all of the children, the leaders hiked off toward a campsite and reflect on this encounter. At a stop along the way, the leaders were asked for "words" to describe the kids and they shouted out:

friendly, fun, simplicity, inquisitive, sincere, love, unpretentious, celebration, courage, sharing, smile, curious, honest, naïve, sparkling, real, generous, joy, full of life, unbiased, genuine, creative, ambitious, spontaneous ...

Next they are asked for words to describe UFA company culture:

aggressive, control, competitive, complex, scared, rigid, pretentious,

hierarchy, ambitious, judgmental, growing, defensive, political, compassionate, challenging, connecting, reactive, structured, demanding, family ...

The contrast between our corporate world and the children's was sharp, and provoked lots of talk about energizing the UFA culture. "I heard a comedian say that as children we laugh between 100 and 200 times a day. And as adults, this drops to 11," observed one leader. "We should remember to have fun; laughter can be very energizing and we should not underestimate it." "We need to consciously and constantly remind ourselves to take off the professional masks that we put on, communicate from our heart, and enjoy life as a kid sometimes" said another.

At a meeting in Sarawak (once part of Borneo), attention turned to the natural environment. The Southeast Asia leaders encountered the terrible costs incurred in the clear-cutting of tropical rainforests. We heard a talk by an expert from a natural resources group and then, to get physically involved and symbolically lend a hand, we cleaned a nearby beach of industrial flotsam and tourist trash. A trip upriver in hollowed-out wooden canoes took us to the village of the Penan people where we met their chief, medicine man, and tribe. We then took a long walk with them through their clear-cut forests. The experience led to earnest discussion of the benefits-and-costs of economic growth in the region. This, in turn, led to calls to incorporate criteria of environmental sustainability into strategic and operating plans.

In principle, knowledge about environmental and social conditions can be gleaned from text, talks, and conversations in any forum. But the experience of being there and seeing first-hand adds texture and has greater potential to raise collective consciousness. The community visits in India illustrate. There was inspiration in applying insights from our visits to the mission of UFA. Said one: "I started getting the feeling that my work need not be confined to producing and selling as efficiently as possible, but has a

higher purpose of community service to the people of Asia." Said another: "In the context of the larger things in the world, I feel I can do a more fulfilling job. Something bold that I will be proud of, something that has the humanity that I have valued."

Ongoing dialogue brought the leaders closer to the conclusion that organizations have to be driven by their missions rather than by numbers and processes. "This changes the paradigm of thinking that we are selling to consumers," said one. "Instead we are serving our communities." Hear some other reflections:

Connecting with poverty in India reminds us that UFA, as a member in Asia, has strong social responsibility. We need to build our business success while taking on social responsibilities—to help to protect the environment, to relieve poverty ... At the same time these actions will help our business grow.

I was struggling with the concept of community in a business corporation such as ours, but the layers unpeeled over the days slowly. It is a very powerful thought and I am still trying to soak it in. The contact with Indian communities really touched me as I saw voluntary work, devotion, sacrifice, purity, truth, belonging, affiliation, caring, working together in a responsible and dedicated fashion like a family. While family is so central to me in personal life, I feel that similar core thoughts need to be internalized and become a way of life in work life.

An imperative emerged: the leaders had to put flesh onto these caring aspirations and translate them into a mission that would emphasize the healthy, nourishing aspects of food. We pledged to become responsible partners with the people of Asia, and to address the health, vitality and the development of the children and families through

better food and beverages. We also pledged to be actively involved in communities, and especially to understand and respond to the needs of the economically underprivileged and children.

BRING MISSION TO LIFE

Passion. Purpose. Community. Fine words and uplifting sentiments, but what meaning do they have in business? In sharing their final thoughts and feelings on the challenge, some found the prospect energizing. Says a country manager: "We had put together aspirations for our country and where we want to go. But we found out, actually, it was very superficial. We were not truly listening nor truly talking from our heart. So this morning, we started to be truly open. Of course we know that there will be stormy periods. We will have debates and arguments. But at least it has started. It's just the beginning of our journey." On a more personal note, another added: "I am excited with the idea of creating something magical, and I am committed – realizing fully well the newly found meaning of this word community – to making this happen."

Others were more daunted, "What still concerns me is how I will make this transition with my own selfish interests—of career growth, financial security, being in good books of my bosses, saying the politically acceptable things, taking short-cuts, putting myself ahead of others, etc.?" Or, as another remarked, "This mission cannot co-exist with bad business performance or in the absence of immediate action to bring it alive."

Will this community of leaders be able to deliver on the promise of their mission? The jury is out and will be for a while. A shared aspiration and declaration of intent is not enough to bring the mission alive. To truly care for the needy in Asia will take tough business decisions that might threaten the core business. Even so, UFA has begun making major investments in kid's nutrition to fortify its offerings to enhance children's

mental and physical performance. It is also reaching out to the poorest-of-the-poor with enriched inexpensive foods and community based distribution systems—broadening Unilever's bottom-of-the-pyramid portfolio.

UFA is also partnering with development agencies and working with local companies to enlarge its own community of leaders and expand its definition of itself as a socially responsive company: "With the kind of community and mission driven approach that we have in UFA it is possible for us to make a difference to our society and still be in business," said one leader. "And it is important for us to be in business because that that is the only way we will continue to make a difference to society."

Reaching Beyond: A Higher Purpose

A final stratum of community is when people connect with something larger than themselves. "Truly, this is a soul searching journey," said one leader about our times together, "it is a journey of self-connecting, connecting with others, connecting with the universe and certainly connecting with God." UFA is by no means a church or cult, but its leaders have reached a level of comfort and candor where they can talk openly about their spiritual beliefs and about the importance of a higher power and higher purpose in their lives.

The journeys provide many opportunities for this sort of contemplation. We often begin the day with yoga, meditation, or tai chi. In China, for example, we awoke daily at dawn, dressed in red and black silk outfits, and walked to a large field where a tai chi master led us through the fighting and dancing styles of this martial art. He tells us that a master must be aware of himself, his opponent (or partner), the situation around him, and then forget it all when fighting (or dancing). This opens up deep conversation among the leaders about how to integrate consciousness of the self, other, and the world around when taking action. And the fact that our teacher, nearly 80 and revered

for his skill around the world, does not yet consider himself a true master, provokes a new appreciation of the importance of discipline, persistence, and especially humility on a leader's journey.

Nature is another of our teachers. The majestic mountains of Guilin, for instance, informed our deliberations. "This is not scenery," said one of our leaders, pointing to a lush valley. "This brings us food. It gives us air. It gives us water. It gives us light. When we die, we become this," he said, the sweep of his arm drawing gazes to the magnificent setting in which we were trekking, reflecting, sharing. The impact of nature was beginning to sink in: "One night in front of (the) camp fire, I imagine that we were looked upon from a satellite. I saw a small campfire light in the middle of vast land on the earth. I felt how small we were and how small I was." "Great nature raises people," said another, "One can only reflect on it with honesty and purity."

This connection to a force or field larger than ourselves goes by many names: the religious call it karma, grace, or God. The more secular terms used are transcendence or connecting to "universal consciousness." Such larger-than-life themes were palpable on the recent journey to Sri Lanka, where UFA leaders offered service to people and villages ravaged by the tsunami.

As we progressed on this mind-opening and heart-rending journey, we saw ever-increasing signs of the tsunami's destruction: the wreckage of small whitewashed homes, their former inhabitants living alongside in pup tents; boats, cars, and trains pitched on barren beaches and ravaged roads; and then a large tent city constructed to shelter survivors. One leader reported: "We felt the tension in our bones. The place was pregnant with disaster and it was racing towards us in all its ferocity. The community had lost its will to survive, let alone live. What was the contribution we were going to make? These thoughts screamed through our brains."

Several days were spent cleaning up debris in a school, helping local merchants to assess inventory and reconnect with suppli-

ers, and talking with Sri Lankans, individually and in large gatherings. Some reflections on some connections made by two leaders:

Walking through the village, a young father gestured a friendly 'hello' towards me. Before I could say anything, he started to tell his tragic story of how he lost his four children and his home. He led me to his wooden cabin where his wife was waiting for him and she looked pleased to meet a new face. They showed me photographs of their lost kids which left me in tears. They made me feel at home right away; grief became our mutual language.

This man who had lost two of his family members told me how God has been kind to him – his neighbor had lost all of his five family members. He made me realize that there is such goodness in simple lives – where I have never bothered to look.

We have an ennobling experience sitting with a whole village that lost so much from the tsunami. One by one, the women of the village told their stories and we witnessed their trials and courage. A leader reflected on its impact, "We were all crying listening to their stories, but it brought them together, and it brought us together. We stood there with these people we had met only one hour ago, hand in hand, in silence, tears pouring out our eyes in togetherness."

Through personal reflections long into the night and on a solo journey to a quiet place, the leaders' sense of being a part of something larger than ourselves was given voice. "We listened to the fears and hopes of the mothers, fathers and children left behind in this beautiful but devastated country. We shed tears of pain, hope and love," recalled one, adding, "We shed even more tears when we realized that by simply sharing our spirit with them we made an incredible difference not only to their lives but also to our own. It continues to surprise me how care and ser-

vice for others helps me discover my own love.”

“For me spirituality is about the interconnectedness between each and every one of us,” reflected another leader. “What connects me with the tsunami victims in Sri Lanka goes beyond emotion, it is our shared humanity.” A third said: “We are all souls whether we are born in one religious family or another. This goes beyond body, birth, nationality, color, caste, religion, culture, etc. The original nature of soul is love, peace, happiness, mercy, tolerance, patience. That’s who we really are.”

These profound reflections also apply to what UFA is striving to create as a leadership community:

I realize that words like emotions, feeling, or moods may not sound businesslike; however, once used in their best and sincere form (they) have real consequences for getting work done. I am beginning to understand that building a resonant culture, one where all of us can bring out the best in us, will bring us to greatness.

I feel very close to the Asia group. There is some weird sense of bonding that has developed even though I didn’t know more than half of the people. I really can’t explain it well but it is a sense of oneness or being together. It is strange because I felt this when (we) weren’t even talking. It was a nice feeling. For the first time I experienced it outside my family. Maybe this is what we call community feeling.

It is uncertain whether this community of leaders will be sustained. No doubt its continuity will be challenged by personnel moves and restructuring. And surely UFA’s efforts to meet its new mission – to be responsible partners with the people of Asia, to promote health, vitality, and the development of children and families through food and beverage – will have its ups-and-downs.

All agree that this means earning the trust of consumers; having authentic standards for food health and production; and being at the leading edge of nutrition science and technology. They also say it means being actively involved in communities and applying business acumen to their human needs.

Tex closed the journey to Sri Lanka with these remarks to the community of leaders:

As leaders, we need a whole new level of consciousness about the functioning of organizations, deeply recognizing that ours is a living and therefore continuously changing organism, adjusting itself to its new circumstances and to the humans that make it up. You cannot force human beings to adjust themselves to organizational logics; you can only let the organization adjust itself to the universal needs of all human beings. People want to live meaningful lives; they want to live in service and care for others; they want the freedom and space to be creative; they want to grow and they want to be part of an organization that helps them to contribute to something that is far bigger than they could ever on their own.

Caring for community needs to be in heart of all our actions. I think once we get this right, then the rest will come into place. The profits will be there because we are heading in the right direction. If our competitors start doing things similar to us, we should not be mad at them. In fact, we should be happy, because they will also help people and grow the marketplace. And with that in mind we will have a very strong foundation to bring value into to this world.



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M. Scott Peck's approach to community building draws on an amalgam of methods from human relations training, 12-step programs, and Quakerism. The community building process has people "empty" themselves of barriers to others by sharing reflections on their own lives and listening deeply to others' stories. The result of this emptying and empathizing is the emergence of group consciousness, whereby a group begins to think, feel, and operate as a "whole." In Peck's model, this has a spiritual dimension, in that the process often opens a sense of wonder about human purpose and the presence of a higher power. See M. Scott Peck's *A World Waiting to Be Born: Civility Rediscovered* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) and *The Different Drum* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

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