

# GOOD VS. GREAT – THE DIFFERENTIATOR

***Why settle for something good, when you can turn it to something great.***

Unknown

Success is often described and linked to the words “good” and “great”, with the latter describing the higher level or magnitude of it.

Good, apparently, is ordinary.

Great, on the other hand, stands out, gets counted and makes a difference.

Everyone wants to be associated with great individuals or group of people. A good example to illustrate this is by looking at the composition and trend of sports’ supporters.

We see the likes of famous football teams such as Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Manchester United, Juventus, Arsenal, Barcelona, Liverpool, Chelsea, and other big clubs having a large fan base supporting them in their respective leagues. Their fans consist of home ground supporters as well as people from all over the world despite the fact that most of them do not have any direct relationship with the clubs.

This disconnected scenario becomes more apparent during World Cup seasons.

A lot of people pledge and show support for their favorite teams even though they are not citizens of the countries. There are even instances where people support teams of other countries despite their own home country participating in the glorious event. Similar trends are observed in other sports such as rugby, F1, cycling and even individual sports such as golf or tennis.

Why does this happen?

The answer is straightforward – everyone wants to be associated with great people or teams.

All the football teams mentioned earlier are either champions or among the top of the league. The teams consist of high performing (also highly paid) players who exhibit great skills and passion in their games, attracting admirers from both friends and foes. Because of their determination and the winning spirit they emit, people continuously want to be associated with them – they become a magnet attracting followers. This is the power of great success.

***When you're good at something, you'll tell everyone.***

***When you're great at something, they'll tell you.***

Walter Payton, American Football running back

## Becoming Great – The Differentiating Factors

Improving ourselves and becoming good at something takes a lot of effort and commitment. To be fair, it is already commendable if someone was to achieve such state. Nevertheless, the question at hand has always been this – should we be satisfied with just being good?

One may think that becoming great involves complex or complicated formulas that only a selected few are able to achieve. On the contrary, the truth is rather the opposite, actually.

Firstly, anyone can be great – it is not the right or privilege of a selected group of people.

Secondly, (and surprisingly) being great at something is not that difficult to achieve especially if we have already managed to become good at it – sometimes it just takes a little extra effort to get there.

***Just remember, the difference between being good versus being great is just a few points, inches, or seconds.***

Dr. Bruce H. Jackson, author, human performance expert

Thirdly, there are apparent characteristics that differentiate between good and great individuals. If we are able to emulate these characteristics or approaches, we are closer to becoming great.

So how does a person become great from good?

I discovered the answer to this difficult question through a regimented working culture and experience that was imposed on me since I started working with my mentor. This was the concept he adopted in managing his teams to drive great performance and results. He basically sang the same song day in day out, year after year propagating the concept so vigorously that everyone understood what was required in order for us to meet our common objectives:

***A great individual or team still performs well even in two conditions – limited resources and changing environment.***

Does the concept make sense? Does it actually produce the desired results claimed?

At one glance, we might not be able to see the direct correlation between becoming great and the two factors mentioned above. But in actual fact, there

is an underlying basis for each of the factors with relation to becoming great, which I will elaborate further as we go along.

### **Limited Resources – The Unavoidable Circumstance**

First condition – limited resources. A condition a majority of us face in our daily lives, some more often than others.

There are people around the world who have to face it without choice due to misfortunes, difficulties or hardships caused by uncontrollable circumstances. We see people starving in poor countries and countries at war. We hear about families striving to survive the coldness during winter without proper attire and gear. This is the harsh reality for many people all over the world.

In a fortunate normal person's life, similar conditions also exist, more often than we realise, although not to extent of a misfortune. This also applies to organisations where the management is asked to deliver extraordinary results but is given inadequate resources. This is especially true for startups and rapidly developing companies.

I personally had a hand in the setting up of two startup companies as well as numerous new distribution channels and projects. I must say that there isn't one experience where we had adequate resources. There were not enough people, limited money to spend, outdated tools and infrastructure – while others enjoyed large and comfortable cubicles, we were working on cramped and narrow workbenches. Worse still are the ridiculously tight deadlines imposed on us; this is the killer of it all – limited time.

It is only natural that the majority of us would start to complain whenever we are put into such conditions. Many would say it is an unfair, impractical and ineffective working environment to be in. To a certain extent, this is a fair comment as eventually, an organisation would need to grow in terms of human

resources and infrastructure in line with the growth of the business. This is to ensure that the company is able to continue providing excellence services or products to their customers.

The question is then when is the right time? This is particularly true for startup companies where it would take time before revenue starts to build up – incurring high expenses do not seem to be the best option. In the meantime, we just have to grin and bear with the situation and make the best out of it.

Ideally, everyone would want to work in a comfortable and conducive environment with sufficient resources. This would include having enough people to carry out the long list of tasks, working at a comfortable workspace equipped with state of the art tools, and of course, at the top of the list – the luxury of time.

Any individual or team would probably be able to achieve success if provided with the best of everything. Take a football club for instance – if given sufficient funds, the club could buy top-notch players, engage well-known coaches and have state of the art facilities and infrastructure (be it the training field or home stadium). Similarly, if an employee is given the best of everything needed to perform his or her job properly, logically anyone should be able to do it.

However, the reality remains the opposite. In most instances, limited resources conditions are the norm, most times unavoidable. But then, does it always have to be viewed as a bad thing?

Let us see it this way – limited resources is something that will inevitably happen and is something that is unavoidable. So no matter how hard we try to avoid such situation, we are bound to face it. We are therefore left with no other choice but to deal with it.

Hence I say this – rather than being demotivated by this fact, why don't we embrace and make the best out of it. Like they say when life gives you lemons, go make lemonade! This is the underlying principle behind the concept of limited resources. It forces us to do our best even in difficult and inadequate circumstances. In an indirect way it brings out the best in us and teaches us a thing or two about efficiency.

### **Limited Resources – In Substance**

As mentioned above, limited resources forces a person to still perform well in spite of not having enough support to do so. Despite the hardship, such condition is actually the best platform to train a person or team to become great. This is why:

#### **1. It encourages creativity and innovation.**

Having limited resources teaches us to make do with what we have and in many occasions, requires us to be innovative in our work. We are left with no choice but to identify solutions and options to our problems with the little we have. At the same time, it does not mean it has to be within the limited parameters of a situation. The best answer usually lies outside the norm – thinking outside of the box. This encourages critical and creative thinking, which are incidentally also common traits of great individuals and team.

#### **2. It fosters discipline.**

In an indirect way, limited resources foster discipline as we learn to be thrifty, calculative and careful with the little resources we have. If harvested in a good way, it becomes one of the strongest assets of a great individual.

### **3. Working effectively and efficiently.**

Limited resources also force us to find ways to work more effectively and efficiently. In most cases, we would be required to multitask and at the same time given limited time to deliver – having to do a two (or sometimes, even three) persons job with the same tight deadline for all tasks. Although such conditions sound challenging and difficult to achieve, high performers have proven it to be possible.

### **4. It builds determination and focus.**

If correctly embraced, limited resources would build up a person's determination and focus. We often hear or read stories of successful people who had started off the journey with hardships and difficulties. We heard the stories of self-made millionaires who came from poor families but made it at the end due to their drive and determination to change their lives.

I remembered the story told by my wife about how my late father in law made it in life despite the hardships he faced during his childhood. He retired as a high ranking government servant after serving as the Director of Forestry for a few states.

He was an only child brought up by a single mother at a village in Pasir Mas, Kelantan. It was not an easy childhood for him. He managed to get into Clifford School, the oldest English boarding school in the state of Pahang. Realising that education was his ticket out of hard life, he studied hard to achieve good results. He would continue studying under the street lamp by the roadside after the lights had gone off at his dormitory. This was how determined he was to change his life despite the limitations he had and yes, he managed to achieve it.

## 5. It triggers survival mode.

When put in a situation with limited choices, we will force ourselves to strive for survival. As a result of that, we will come to realise that we can actually do a lot of things that we thought we could not do. We have heard true stories of people surviving seemingly impossible disasters. From being stranded at sea, on mountains, in the desert, in thick jungles, becoming victims of wars; no one would have been prepared for such adverse and unexpected conditions. Nevertheless, there are the significant few who managed to make it through and survived because of their strong will and more importantly, because they embraced the limited resources mindset instead of giving up.

### The Best of the Best

The best individuals and teams achieve great success even with limited resources – a fact that often goes unnoticed. This was even proven in Islamic history, as early as the first large scale battle for Muslims – Battle of *Badr*. It was one of the few specific battles mentioned in the Quran.

*Rifa'ah (who was one of the Badr warriors) narrated: Gabriel came to the Prophet (ﷺ) and said, "How do you look upon the warriors of Badr among yourselves?" The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "As the best of the Muslims." or said a similar statement. On that, Gabriel said, "And so are the Angels who participated in the Badr (battle).*

Bukhari

On the surface, it seemed that the odds of winning were with the enemies. They had a larger army of about 1,000 men equipped with the best weaponries and resources – they had about 700 camels and 100 horses together with them. On the other hand, the Muslim army led by Prophet Muhammad

(ﷺ) himself only had approximately 313 (according to certain narrations) to 330 people, three times smaller compared to the strength of their enemy. They only had about 70 camels and a minuscule number of horses.

Despite of this handicap, the Muslim army triumphed over its enemies due to having the right strategy i.e., building their base at the oasis to cut water supply to the enemies coupled with high spirits and passion for Islam. The enemies returned to Makkah with heavy losses and humiliation.

***And already had Allah given you victory at [the battle of] Badr while you were few in number. Then fear Allah; perhaps you will be grateful.***

Ali Imran 3: 123

In this battle, 14 men from amongst the Muslims were killed but the enemies suffered a greater loss with 70 of them killed and another 70 captured. The battle is one of the most remembered Islamic battles of all time, which became a major inspiration for future generations of Muslims as it served as a classic example of achieving greatness with limited resources.

### **The Football Team from the Fishing Village**

I had the chance to watch a short documentary video on the history of a football team, Panyee FC that originated from an iconic fishing village called Koh Panyee located in Southern Thailand.

What is so special about the football team and the fishing village?

The fishing village was established at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by nomadic Malay fishermen. During that time, land ownership was limited solely to the people of Thai and because of this, the village was built on stilts instead of land – basically, majority of the village sits above water, it is literally a floating

village. It was only years later the facilities in the village were upgraded, which includes a mosque and freshwater facilities to cater for the basic needs of the community. This was made possible following the increase of the community's wealth generated through tourism activities.

Obviously, the surroundings of the village were not conducive to play football – there was no land to do so. But this did not stop a group of village kids from living their dream. During the 1986 FIFA World Cup fever, this group of kids, who were crazy and enthusiastic about football decided to start their own football team. Realising that there is no space to play football, the kids decided to build a floating deck as their field from scrap woods they collected all over the village.

It seemed like a crazy idea at that time, they were constantly being ridiculed by the villagers to boot. But in the end, they managed to build the deck and started to play football on a small and rough field – it even had nails popping out from the planks. The field was so small that the ball kept falling into the water; it was extremely difficult to play football in such conditions.

Nevertheless, none of these challenges stopped them from continue playing, but instead it forced them to play better. They had to learn dribble swiftly to avoid the ball from falling into the water. The goalposts were relatively smaller compared to actual ones so they had to learn to shoot more accurately in order to score a goal. Without them realising, these conditions had improved their football skills tremendously.

One day, one of the kids brought back a flyer of a football tournament that will be organised at the mainland. The kids decided to enter the tournament even though they had no experience playing on soil.

To their surprise, the rest of the villagers had actually been watching them practise in admiration. To show their support, the villagers collected money among them and bought the team proper football attires.

The team actually made it to the semifinals – an achievement they can certainly be proud of considering it was their first football tournament and more so, it was their first experience in playing the game on an actual football field.

The team is regarded as one of Southern Thailand's best football clubs. They were Youth Champions of Southern Thailand for 7 years in a row, from 2004 to 2010.

This is the true story of a group of people who believed in a dream, decided to go for it and finally made it despite the limited resources they had – who would have imagined them making it that far.

## Changing Environment – Change is Constant

***The only thing constant in life is change.***

Heraclitus, Greek philosopher

A changing environment is unavoidable – change is, after all, inevitable. We ourselves constantly change every single day. Physically, we grow by age, from child to adult, short to tall, young to old with a touch of wrinkles and white hair. Smaller things change more often, and needs frequent attending to. Our hair and nails grow longer by the day, requiring us to trim them from time to time to take care of our hygiene and appearance.

The underlying principle behind the concept of changing environment is adaptability. Adaptability is considered by many as one of the most important traits of successful individuals and leaders. There are also experts who say that adaptability is essential to a happy and satisfying life.

***Whoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times.***

Niccolo Machiavelli, Italian diplomat and father of modern political theory

Hence, it is really up to us whether or not we want to adapt to change or remain stubborn and resist it. The impact is obvious – refusing to adapt to change hinders progress and we will inevitably get stuck in our present condition. This usually happens when we feel too complacent in our comfort zone. While others record progress and reach greater heights, we brag about previous successes and continue to live in the past. With such mentality, we will be far off from our peers in no time. Past history does not guarantee future success.

***Change is inevitable. Progress is optional.***

Tony Robbins, motivational speaker and self-help author

Allah has reminded us that He will not change anyone unless they want to change themselves.

***Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.***

Ar Rad 13: 11

We cannot expect to achieve great results if we keep on doing the same things and not adapt to the changes happening around us.

***Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.***

Albert Einstein

Many organisations lose their edge and fail because they refuse to change their ways. The seven most expensive words in business as quoted by Catherine DeVrye, the bestseller author are “we have always done it that way.” This is a guaranteed recipe for disaster. Instead, the right words we should continuously utter should be “can we do better?”

Nevertheless, changing just for the sake of changing is also wrong. Too often a lot of us get confused between necessary changes and simply changing for the sake of it. For instance, changing just because other people are changing or peer pressure, just to be in trend or accepted by a group. Sometimes we change just because other people tell us to do so. We hear people telling us that we are not good enough when in actual fact, we are.

We need to be able to objectively assess ourselves to decide whether a change is really required.

Changes involve a lot of cost, time and effort. Unnecessary change, therefore, would just add to inefficiency and sometimes even ineffectiveness. It needs to be properly assessed and executed.

Fundamentally, a change should be made with principles and with the right values, if not it would just cause chaos and makes things worse. Remember, our intention is to change for the better, hence the spirit should reflect the same.

***Change based on principle is progress.  
Constant change without principle becomes chaos.***

Dwight D. Eisenhower, 34<sup>th</sup> U.S. President

As change is constant and theoretically, each positive adaption to it should result in some kind of improvement. Hence, we should try our best to change as frequently and as consistently as possible. The concept is similar to

practising, the more frequent we positively adapt to change, the more we improve ourselves and the closer we get to perfection. Similarly to many other things in life, positive change requires persistency.

***To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.***

Winston Churchill, former Prime Minister of United Kingdom

## Adapting to Change

Adapting to change is never easy. This is the reason why many resist and fail to adapt. For that reason, the process of adapting needs to be supported by the right mindset and attitude.

***Any change, even a change for the better is always accompanied by drawbacks and discomfort.***

Arnold Bennet, English writer

### 1. Be flexible – keep an open mind.

When adapting to change, it is very important for us to keep an open mind. There might be things or actions that we might not be comfortable with but at the same time we still need to do it in order for us to adapt. Sometimes, the things that we hate are the ones that are good for us, as reminded to us in the Quran –

***...But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah Knows, while you know not.***

Al-Baqarah 2: 216

We can only positively and successfully adapt if we are flexible to the options or solutions available in dealing with change.

## **2. Be creative and innovative and at the same time, throw out the box.**

Change is unavoidable and also uncertain. We will never know what will hit us. Sometimes the initial hit is positive, sometimes it hits us hard. Regardless, in either situation it would most probably be something new. It's not the initial hit that matters but how it turns out at the end that makes the difference. We need to be creative and innovative in finding the best solution to adapt to the change.

We often hear the term “think outside the box” when it comes to creative or innovative thinking. However, the term reflects the existence of barriers surrounding the problem. Indirectly, it represents the obstacles that will delay the process of coming up with a solution. The best way to solve the problem is to actually “throw out” the box and treat creative and innovative thinking as a continuous process.

## **3. Think big picture, anticipate possibilities.**

As change is never-ending, our adaptability strategy should never be focused on short term results as such results would only be temporary. Challenging as it may be, we need to try and anticipate the possibilities that may arise along the way while we set our longer term objectives. The solution would not be full-proof, that's for sure, but at least it would minimise the time required for us to readapt whenever necessary – time plays an important role in adapting to change.

## **4. Be alert and continuously aware of surroundings.**

Change is constant, continuous and more frequent than we think. We might think that our proposed solution is the best at that point of time but the situation can suddenly change in a split of a second. For this reason, it is important for us to continuously be aware and alert of any sudden changes

that would require further adaptability. The faster we adapt to change, the higher the chances of us attaining success.

### **5. Self-motivate to persevere.**

Adapting to change eats a lot of energy and many times, we will experience disappointments and irritations. Keeping a positive attitude can help us deal with the negativities and uncertainties of change. No one else is in a better situation to do that than ourselves.

For instance, instead of worrying about the changes we will make, how much it will impact us or change the way we are, focus on how we can leverage and maximise our skills and experiences to successfully adapt to the change.

Focus on the things that are within our control and forget those that are not. This approach helps in managing frustrations and stress when dealing with change.

### **Limited Resources and Changing Environment – Back in History**

A classic example that illustrates both limited resources and changing environment is another important battle in Islamic history – the Battle of *Khandaq*, or also known as the Battle of the Trench.

The enemies were a confederation of the Jews and the polytheistic Arab tribes with the sole aim of attacking Madinah, killing the Prophet and eliminating the Muslims. They had managed to gather 10,000 strong men fully set on realising this purpose.

Outnumbered with only 3,000 men to fight, the Muslims unanimously decided to defend the City of Madinah instead of going an offensive strategy. One of the Companions, Salman al-Farisi, proposed to dig a large trench on the

north side of the city so that the enemies could not enter the city. The other sides were surrounded by mountains and trees, thereby fully protecting it from forthcoming armies. Prophet Muhammad (صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم) agreed to the suggestion and instructed the Muslims to immediately execute the strategy.

Everyone, including children, worked very hard to dig the trenches. Prophet (صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم) himself dug the trenches while supervising the digging activities. All this happened during a period where there was famine and drought in the Arabian Peninsula of which Madinah was not spared. Despite the constant hunger and thirst, they managed to complete digging the trench in six days.

When the 10,000 confederate soldiers started their attack, they were surprised by the existence of the trench. The trench had provided a great advantage for the Muslims to defend themselves. Despite numerous attempts, the confederate army failed to penetrate the Muslim's defence line. The strategy suggested by Salman al-Farisi was proven to be successful. The confederates realised that they needed a new tactic in order to reach the Muslims, so they decided to approach the Jew tribe, Bani Qurayza, who had earlier formed a pact with Prophet Muhammad (صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم) to not join the battle.

The sudden betrayal of the Bani Qurayza shocked Prophet Muhammad (صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم) and added to the difficulties that the Muslims were facing. Morale began to sink as hopelessness took over their minds. Nevertheless, the Muslims never gave up and continued to defend the attacks that were now coming from all over the place.

The siege continued for days causing great trouble, famine and cold for both parties. Everyone from both sides was terribly hungry, tired and exhausted but neither wanted to give in.

At this point, Allah had blessed a man from the confederates named Nuaym ibn Masud. He secretly became a Muslim; neither the polytheists nor his tribe knew that he had become one. During this difficult and critical time, Nuaym went to see Prophet Muhammad (صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم) to offer his service for the Muslims' benefit.

Considering the situation at that point of time, which had become disadvantageous to the Muslims, Prophet Muhammad (صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم) asked Nuaym to create distrust and suspicion between the confederates and the Bani Qurayza to divide them. Nuaym immediately executed the strategy by approaching all the parties involved and instilling distrustful thoughts amongst them. The strategy started to yield results – the atmosphere of distrust and suspicion between the participating forces disrupted their evil plans against the Muslims.

The confederate armies finally gave up after terrible winds and harsh storms blew away their shelters and resources, taking away their provisions and source of heat. The Muslims on the other hand was sheltered from such winds with the divine help from Allah. During the night, the confederate armies withdrew, and by morning the ground was cleared of all enemy forces.

With the permission of Allah and His divine help, the tough clashes and siege that lasted about a month ended with victory to the Muslims. This victory played an important role for Islam – it marked the beginning of Prophet Muhammad's (صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم) undoubted political ascendancy in the city of Madinah, which strengthened the base of Islam's religious and political expansion.

***So, verily, with every difficulty, there is relief. Verily, with every difficulty there is relief.***

Ash-Sharh 94: 5 – 6

## **Limited Resources and Changing Environment – A Personal Experience**

I had shared before that I had learned about these two factors through a regimented working culture and experience. To start with, during the first 10 years of my working life, I was running the strategic management portfolio all by myself – it was a one-man show. The function involved reporting, planning, monitoring, project executions and many other ad hoc tasks that frequently landed on my desk. In that sense, I had always been in a limited resources situation.

Changing environment happens everywhere but it is most apparent in projects. I had a large share of setting up and managing a lot of new things, including new channels, introduction of new regulations and the largest scale of it, the setting up of a company. I was fortunate to be part of the pioneering team involved in the setting up of a Family Takaful operator back in 2010.

When it all started, there were only about a dozen of us working on various areas of a Takaful operations – *shariah*, operations, IT, governance, distribution, product, legal, finance and other smaller areas. As we were short of people, a lot of us had to do more than one task – you could say that going the extra mile was not an option, it was expected. We had our *shariah* officer dealing with operations to develop forms, and then on another day having to deal with the IT and property departments to set up workstations, and on other days, sending out documents and letters to our various stakeholders on his motorcycle.

While everyone else had proper and comfortable workstations, we were recycling unwanted furniture as ours. While we waited for the license announcement during operational preparation, money was scarce but yet we had to put in place all the necessary components, which obviously involved some spending. We made a promise to the regulators that we would launch the

company within 3 months after receiving the license, a very tall order even after putting in a substantial amount of ground work.

Along the way, many things happened that resulted in numerous changes to our earlier plans. As requested by the regulators, we had to get a joint venture partner for our license application and the group had to acquire a troubled general insurer – these were some of the unexpected “big” things that happened along the way in relation to our license application. There were a lot of smaller ones too that we had to deal with daily.

But in the end, we managed to pull it off and successfully launched the company as promised on 10 December 2010. I cannot claim that we fall under the category of a really great company but I honestly think we did fairly well. In the following years, we received awards from an international body for three years in a row starting from the first year of the company’s operations – Best New Takaful Operator in 2011, Best New Islamic Finance Institution in 2012 and lastly, Best Takaful Operator (Asia) in 2013.

Although the journey was full of challenges, coloured with “limited resources and changing environment” all the way, it was among, if not the most memorable and fun working experience for me. All of us had a lot of fun doing our parts and after all the hard work, the results were truly fulfilling – we were great in our own small way.

### **Embrace for Greatness**

In a nutshell, limited resources and change are unavoidable, we are bound to find ourselves in such conditions whether we like it or not. Most of the time, we would not even realise their existence because they have become so embedded in our daily lives that we don’t notice them anymore.

However, the fact remains that if we do not embrace these factors and manage it well, we will not be able to attain success, what more greatness. If we have set our mind that we want to make a difference and be great, even if it is in the smallest setting, the best way to do it is to embrace and conquer both conditions – limited resources and changing environment. Let them bring the best out of us instead of the worst. We can achieve this by harvesting the main lessons behind these two conditions – efficiency and adaptability. Once we are able to do so, we will achieve greatness in no time.

***The measure of intelligence is the ability to change.***

Albert Einstein