

## DIFFERENT FOLKS, DIFFERENT STROKES

Each of us is different in our own unique way. To illustrate this obvious point, let us ponder on the wonders of the human fingerprint. Science has proven that everyone's fingerprint is unique. In today's world, it allows us to perform identification checks all over the world. In the over a hundred years of performing these checks, no one has ever found a set of identical fingerprints. The only matching ones are of the same person.

Scientist has also recognised that there are differences in our psychological make-up that renders us unique individuals. Our characters are different from each other and are molded by our surroundings and experiences built over time. Another component that makes us different from each other is our level of intelligence. There are times this is not by choice; some of us did not have the privilege to be part of a formal education system.

***Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it will live a whole life believing it is stupid.***

Albert Einstein

We do however share certain similarities with each other due to the common inputs we receive in a shared environment.

This is why we can see certain common behaviours amongst people originating from the same place, usually in the form of values and culture. As a general example, in most parts of Asia, people take off our shoes before entering a house, where else in western countries, people don't.

Nevertheless, no matter how many similarities we share, there will always be differences. Even if we are exposed to the same experiences throughout our life, we will never be entirely the same with another person. Just take a look at siblings – better still, identical twins. They literally look the same, brought up in the same environment, exposed to the same things, given more or less the same attention, share the same toys and games, but in the end they grow up to be different individuals with different personalities.

***Like everybody I have many different sides.***

Juliette Lewis, actress and singer

Similarities pose minimal challenges; it is the differences that need to be attended to tactfully. This is why it is important for us to understand and develop the ability to deal with people uniquely according to their individual personalities – different strokes for different folks.

***Everyone is different.***

***Sometimes it's very exciting; sometimes very scary.***

Emanuel Ax, Grammy-winning classical pianist

There are various definitions for the proverb above but among the best explanation I found was this:

*"The approach to different people should be individualized. The proverb also means that different people have different tastes. Nobody knows exactly where*

*the saying comes from. Wolfgang Mieder thinks it originated in the United States and traces 'different strokes' to Southern blacks in the 1950s." – Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings by Gregory Y. Titelman (Random House, New York, 1996).*

The ability to practice “different strokes for different folks” is not something that should be practised just for the sake of practising, there is an underlying benefit that we will be able to harvest if we can master this skill. It is the secret of reaching out to people – remember we always need others in life. Who do you know who do not love to be appreciated, do not love to be noticed and do not love personalised attention?

Most, if not all, of us do.

If we are able to inject even a bit of this into another person's life through our interaction with them, imagine the impact we would have on others and how it would strengthen our relationship. This is when the acts of being there for one another and helping each other naturally takes place. The moment we are able to touch another person's heart is the moment it gives birth to mutual respect, care and love, which are the best ingredients to success and happiness in life. We can look at it as an act of humanising interaction, deepening connections and relationships through personalisation.

### **The Need to Personalise**

Why is it necessary for us to practise "different strokes for different folks", instead of a general approach for everyone? It would be definitely be much easier to adopt a single approach according to our preference, instead of going through the trouble of understanding everyone around us.

First and foremost, we need to realise and acknowledge that we cannot live alone in this world. We need other people in our lives, especially if we are thinking of achieving great things in life.

Leaders need followers to help achieve goals and to do that, a leader needs to reach out to their people. If a leader fails to reach or engage his or her people, achieving the desired goals would be difficult and many times it would remain as just a dream. There are times it is not even about achieving something, it's about maintaining control and putting things in order.

The same applies to relationships between colleagues. Take for instance the scenario in an office where a structured working chain is already in place with departments dependent on one another. Although the process is already there, the ones behind each process are still people with unique personalities. We also cannot deny that wherever we are there will always be those difficult individuals whom we need to deal with. If we are unable to reach or engage them, how do we expect to get things done?

Such need exists in general situations as well – in the lives of normal people like you and me. There is always a need to reach out to someone for something, and this can be as simple as asking our children to eat vegetables or take a bath. These are every day events that we cannot avoid.

Generalising makes it difficult to achieve this. Basically, when we generalise, what we are doing is taking a selfish approach of forcing people to understand a matter the way we understand it and imposing this on them. There are a few fundamental problems to this approach.

For a start, through a generalised approach, people would be able to see through the selfish intentions we may have. Even if we don't have such intentions, we will be perceived to have them. What people look out for the

most is sincerity, and if they cannot connect or relate to us, how can they feel it?

We also have to acknowledge the different levels of intelligence people have. Sometimes it is just different interpretations due to the exposures a person has received. Nevertheless, it is something that needs to be addressed at an early stage. 90% of the world's problems are due to communication – it can either be miscommunications, misinterpretations, misunderstanding, – it all boils down to the failure in understanding a matter in its actual form, which is equally due to the person communicating it. This is the biggest danger of taking a generalised approach in everything we do.

At the same time, I am not saying that every single communication needs to be personalised and that generalisation is an absolute no-no. What I am saying is that at the minimum, there needs to be some level of personalisation in that generalisation. For example, in mass communication, we need to understand the dynamics of the group of people we are addressing and we could then personalise the messages according to certain general characteristics of the audience.

For instance, a CEO would need to take different approaches in addressing the staff and top management. The staff might not be able to fully grasp certain high level matters that only the top management is exposed to. Also, there are certain sensitive matters that the staff should not know about to start with.

We cannot use the same method to explain technology to different generations – take for example, between generation Y (people born from early 1980s up to end of 1990s) and the baby boomers (people born post World War II up to mid-1960s). Their level of understanding technology is quite radically different from each other – generation Y basically grew up with the development of technologies such as personal computers and internet during

their childhood and teenage years. It is obvious that generally, they would be able to grasp knowledge or information on technology faster compared to baby boomers.

I remembered having to teach my baby boomer seniors and friends on how to use Microsoft Office products when I just started work, something that was mastered by people of my generation during our university years.

Another good example of “personalisation in generalisation” is in branding. If you notice, big brands such as telecommunication companies would personalise their advertisements according to the location, taking into consideration various factors that would influence the local market's receptiveness towards a brand or message.

For instance, if you were to go to my wife's hometown in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, a state in the far east of Peninsular Malaysia that is known to be an Islamic state. The primary language used there is Malay with a strong and unique local dialect. You would notice there are billboards of certain brands that are totally different from the ones in the federal state of Kuala Lumpur – the billboards are injected with local flavours to attract and engage the locals.

For example, the female models on the advert would wear a headscarf to cover their hair as required by Islam. The language used on the billboards is usually in Malay considering the majority population in Kelantan are Malays. Some brands even go to the extent of localising their messages according to the local dialect.

In short, it is all about reaching out to people and getting them to understand the messages we are trying to get across. The more they understand it, the easier our life (and theirs) becomes.

## The Best Example

The approach of dealing with people differently according to their unique characteristics has been there since ages ago. Again, the best example is from the life of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). He had always practised such approach after carefully taking into consideration the unique characteristics of a person as well as the situation the person is in.

An example of this can be seen in an advice given by Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) to two different people on the same matter.

***Abdullah Ibn `Amr Ibn al-`Aas said: "We were with the Prophet (ﷺ) when a youth came and said: 'May I kiss [my wife] while I am fasting?' He (the Prophet (ﷺ)) said: 'No'. Then an old man came and said: 'May I kiss [my wife] while I am fasting?' He said: 'Yes'. So we began looking at one another, so Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said: 'The old man is able to control himself'.***

Graded Hasan by Ahmad

The hadith tells us the story about two men asking the same question – whether it is allowed for them to kiss their wife during fasting. Besides abstaining from eating and drinking, fasting also requires married couples to abstain themselves from sexual intercourse during the day. If someone were to do this, the couple would have to either free a slave, fast for two consecutive months or feed sixty poor people, depending on the person's ability.

***Abu Hurairah reported that a person had intercourse with his wife during Ramadan (while fasting). He asked for the religious verdict (about it) from the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ), whereupon he (the Prophet (ﷺ)) said: Can you find a slave (to grant him freedom)? He said: No. He (the Prophet (ﷺ) again) said: Can you afford to observe fasts for two (consecutive) months? He said: No. He (Prophet (ﷺ)) said: Then feed sixty poor men.***

Muslim

In the earlier hadith, the first person who asked the question to Prophet (ﷺ) was a young man and he was given a “no” for an answer. The second person was an old man and was given the answer “yes”. The question is, why did Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) gave different answers for the same question? This is without doubt a beautiful illustration of adopting the "different strokes for different folks" approach when dealing with people.

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) had taken into consideration the individual characteristics of the two persons, in this case the main difference was age; one was young and the other was old.

We know that younger men have higher sexual desire and drive compared to older man. A simple physical contact with their spouse could trigger the desire for sexual relations. Where else for older men, the desire tones down with age as well as with physical capabilities. This enables an older man to control his desires better. It would take more than a simple physical contact to trigger an old man's desire for sexual relations. This is the reason why Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) gave different answers for the same question. He evaluated the situation and gave the most appropriate answer unique to the person.

This was something that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) had practised consistently in his daily life. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was able to understand the social psychology, as well as the individual characteristics of the people who made up the society, and thus used different methods of communications. For example, he acted according to the conditions of the region he was in when eating, drinking or dressing.

When he delivered speeches or talks, he would constantly observe the abilities of his audience, and the examples he used were chosen from a world in which his audience lived and understood well. For this reason, he would give camels and dates as examples instead of other animals or fruits. Some of the



people around him were from the city while others were Bedouins who lived in the desert. He chose methods that were in accordance with their values, perceptions and abilities.

To further illustrate this great ability of his, in another example, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) had a conversation with a Bedouin, whose wife had given birth to a black child and the Bedouin denied that the child was his. To resolve the problem, Prophet (ﷺ) reasoned with the Bedouin using an analogy that the Bedouin was familiar with.

***Abu Hurairah narrated: A Bedouin came to Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) and said, "My wife has delivered a black child." The Prophet (ﷺ) said to him, "Have you camels?" He replied, "Yes." The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "What color are they?" He replied, "They are red." The Prophet (ﷺ) further asked, "Are any of them gray in color?" He replied, "Yes." The Prophet asked him, "Whence did that grayness come?" He said, "I think it descended from the camel's ancestors." Then the Prophet (ﷺ) said (to him), "Therefore, this child of yours has most probably inherited the color from his ancestors.***

Bukhari

There are many other examples that illustrate Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) ability to use this skill naturally in his communications. This ability is among the factors that contributed to his success in spreading Islam throughout the Arabian Peninsula and beyond within a short period of time – he reached out to people in ways that no one else could.

### **Stumbling Blocks**

Before we elaborate the approach further, let us first identify the main stumbling blocks that may stop us from treating each other uniquely.

### **1. We love to generalise.**

The most common mistake we do in everyday life is generalising. Although at times a fact does project the majority but it still does not mean that everyone behaves the same way. For instance, generalising that women are bad drivers or men are bad listeners. These days, we see a lot of skillful lady drivers around even winning races or performing skilled driving such as drifting. There are also many top psychiatrists who are men, which prove that men can also be good listeners.

If we can judge a person fairly instead of generalising, we will be able to treat everyone differently according to how they should correctly be treated.

***Everybody is different. Everybody has different styles.  
Just do it the best way you know how.***  
Vince Carter, professional basketball player

### **2. We care for ourselves more.**

Humans are selfish. We care for ourselves more than we do for others and therefore we would prefer to take the easy way out. It is always easier to get people to adapt to our rules and ways instead of us having to adapt to theirs.

This is why we are unwilling to vary our ways to adapt to others as it is always easier to treat everyone the same according to our own preference.

### **3. We listen to react, not to understand.**

One of the biggest problems we face in communication is listening to others – we usually listen to react to what that other person says rather than listen to understand. What does this tell us? We usually avoid putting in the

effort to understand others and if we are unable to do that, how can we adjust ourselves to treat each person uniquely?

### **It's in Us by Default**

Despite the existence of these stumbling blocks, without us realising it, the ability to treat each person uniquely already naturally exists in us, well, at least for most of us. It is most obvious for parents who have more than one child and perhaps for people who have many siblings.

As parents, we know that each of our children is different and has their own specific personalities and attitudes. Because of the unconditional love we have for our children, we celebrate these differences. No matter how difficult it may be, we would always adjust our ways in dealing with them individually. For instance, our eldest child might have a tougher personality, and therefore we may be forced to practise “tough love” more i.e. being firmer or stricter. Where else our youngest child softer and pampered personality, which would require us to deal with the child using a softer and more interactive approach.

Similarly, this can be seen in interactions between siblings. Despite the many similarities we share, there are a lot of unique characteristics or traits that differentiate each sibling from another. I come from a small nucleus family, having only an elder brother as a sibling. Even between the two of us, we differ so much in terms of personality – almost the total opposite I would say. I observed how my parents dealt with each of us differently throughout our growing up years.

My mum applied the best approach in managing me as a teenager. During that period of my life, I must admit that I was a bit of a rebellion who refused to be controlled. I was quite outgoing and spent a lot of time out of the house hanging out with my friends. Knowing my personality, instead of controlling and

limiting my movements, my mum put her trust in me. Looking back, I believe that it was the best approach she could have used on me. I always remembered and appreciated her trust, so I made sure that I never misuse it. The trust she gave helped me avoid a lot of temptations in life and helped mold me to become the person I am today.

I also managed to observe a larger sample. Both of my parents came from large families – my dad had eleven siblings and my mum had nine. Although the families are rather large, the siblings are very close to one another. I am fortunate to have the chance to get to know most of them and I came to realise that despite being siblings who are very close to each other, each one of them are different from one another – all of them have unique personalities and characteristics. Nevertheless, everyone acknowledged and accepted these differences, and dealt with each other appropriately according to their individual personalities.

The secret behind the ability to practise this approach among close family members is this – unconditional love. Once we put aside any barriers or limits in dealing with people, we will be able to look at each person individually and embrace their unique traits.

### **Common Influencers**

Everyone faces different kinds of people every day. There are many factors that influence a person's behaviour. Among the factors that influence a person the most is the person's geographical origin.

My dad originated from a state in Northern Malaysia, Kedah. Although I was brought up in Kuala Lumpur, the federal state of Malaysia, I always had a strong connection with my dad's hometown. Maybe it was because I had used the dialect since I was young, although this was not really because of my dad. It

was the communication I had with my nanny, whom I fondly call "Kak Mah" that caused this. She spoke to me using the Northern dialect throughout my life. By the way, she is from Perlis, the neighbouring state of Kedah.

To some, the Northern dialect might sound a bit loud or rough. Some might even find it to be rude especially for communities that are soft spoken. To folks from the North, the tone and words used reflect the closeness we have with each other.

Fate then worked its way where my closest team members at work, who also happen to be among my closest friends, are also from Kedah. Sometimes, when we talk to each other at work, people around us would think that we are fighting with each other where else that is just the way we interact and to be honest, that is what bonds us closer together.

At the same time, we do realise that we cannot speak the same way with other people. We would need to adjust our ways according to the people whom we are talking to. Back in 2009, when one of them just started work, we realised that some of the ladies could not take his communication style. As time goes by, he adjusted his ways and people started to accept his style a bit more – all it takes is a little give and take.

The geographical influences become more obvious when it involves people who originate from places far from each other. Just like the earlier example given of how taking off shoes when entering houses in eastern and western countries, there are many other more sensitive differences that we need to take consideration and be wary of.

Besides geographical influences, there are also religious differences that influence our character and personality. Actually, among all, these differences are the ones that we need to be most sensitive of; it hits us the most when people disrespect it. For instance, how hugging between different genders

during greetings is considered wrong and disrespectful for Muslims; only spouses and immediate family members are allowed to do as such.

### **Practising It – Application Tips**

Now that we have a better understanding of the approach or concept, what is left for us is to practise it in real life. To help us do this, here are some tips that could perhaps help us in applying this approach in life.

#### **1. Get to know people.**

First and foremost, the most important step is to get to know people, we need to get to know a person more than just skin-deep – we need to put in the effort to really get to know a person; their origins, background, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses – the more we know about a person, the better.

Once we get to know the person better, we will be able to adjust our interaction methods accordingly to suit the personality of the person. This would enable us to build up our emotional banks with each other and optimise the outcome from the relationship.

#### **2. Be a good listener.**

As mentioned before, we tend to listen to react rather than to understand. The secret to understanding others is to be a good listener. Everyone loves to be appreciated and being a good listener does exactly that – the concentration and sincere feedbacks we provide through attentive listening will leave a good impression on others. Besides transmitting appreciative energy, it also plays a main role in capturing key information

about a person. It becomes the strongest tool to achieve our first step – to get to know people.

### **3. Flexibility and adaptability – give and take.**

The secret to dealing with others in a unique way is for us to be flexible in our thoughts and actions so that we can adapt to the rhythm of the other person. Along the way, there might be things that we disagree on, and these disagreements may need to be reconciled. This is where we need to learn to give and take in order for us to achieve a point of agreement.

At times, the point of agreement is when we agree to disagree but with an additional condition, mutual respect. It is all about give and take in building a healthy relationship.

### **4. Be unconditional.**

As discussed before, the biggest barrier that stops us from treating others uniquely is the barrier we ourselves build internally – we set our expectations of others and impose these on them, and we then manage our relationship and interactions according to such expectations.

What we need to do is the actually total opposite – be unconditional and accept the person for who they are. Remember that no one is perfect; everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses, including ourselves. The moment we are able to embrace these differences, we will be able to see the person for who he or she truly is.

### **5. Relate and engage.**

It is nature's law that we tend to click with people who share the same interest as us. This is because we can easily relate to each other on the things

we like and once we are able to do that, we will start to bond and engage with one another.

It is also easier for us to understand things that we can relate to, just like how Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) used the example of a camel when he was explaining to the Bedouin who did not believe that the child was his offspring.

Engagement is pivotal in our relationship with others. The more engaged we are, the better we will be at treating others according to their personality.

## **6. Different communication methods.**

Next is for us to equip ourselves with different communication methods and styles to suit our diversified audiences. There are people who we need to tackle softly, while there are others we need to exert firmness. It all depends on the personality of the person and the situation we are facing. This ties in with the English proverb, "there's more than one way to skin a cat" – there is surely more than one solution to a problem.

There are times that we might need to even combine different communication methods in a single setting. The ability to personalise communication methods according to the audience is a skill that exist in successful people, especially leaders. I categorise these leaders as leaders who practice a “situational” leadership style. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) is the best example of a leader who had successfully practised this skill.

## **7. Remain focused on our purpose.**

Although we try our best to accommodate the different personalities around us, it does not mean that we can compromise the main objective of



the matter at hand. We need to always fall back to our purpose while we attempt to build and balance our personalised communication approach.

There will be times that we might need to approach the person using a method that is the total opposite of that person's preferred style. There will be times where the only option available is to be firm and stern; when that time comes, so be it – as long as we consciously know it is right.

We should not let emotional harmony come in the way of what is right or wrong – remember, we are here to be effective and righteous, not to be popular.

### **It's about Respect and Sincerity**

The key to living a happy life is respecting the differences we have with each other and finding harmony in living with these differences. It takes a lot of practice to master the skill to treat people uniquely. Nevertheless, no matter how hard it may be, it is a necessary skill we need to master – at a more fundamental level, this is what mutual respect is all about.

***Everybody is different. Everybody deserves to be given an individual plan that's best suited for them.***

Johnny Almaraz, American baseball figure

However, practice alone does not guarantee success. A component that is far more important than practice is sincerity – it is only when we truly care for others that we can apply this approach effectively in life.

Fundamentally, it is more than just an approach, there are basic underlying values in the approach that helps form a lasting, healthy and happy relationship chain with the people around us, which would eventually produce positive and sustainable benefits for everyone. In the end, everybody wins.