

# SMALL IMPROVEMENTS, BIG DIFFERENCE

We are always encouraged to dream big but many of us never get to taste it – why is this the case?

***Some people dream of success while others wake up and work hard at it.***

Napoleon Hill, author in the area of the new thought movement

Most of the time it remains a dream as we don't put in the necessary steps and efforts to achieve it. At least this is what happens for most of us.

As generations evolved together with technology, we can observe a reduction in people's level of patience in achieving something – people are less tolerant in waiting. Everyone wants to achieve things fast without having to put in too much effort, often dressing it up with the term "work smart". This is most obvious in those from Generation Y, also known as the millennials. They are so used to getting things fast, information in particular, which creates the expectation that everything else in life works the same way as well.

People from this generation get easily motivated, which is a positive trait in its original form. However, coupled with the attitude of always looking out for a quick success, the combination does not produce the necessary behaviours and actions required to produce positive outcomes.

For example, they are easily motivated by success stories of young self-made millionaires and billionaires – every other person wants to give it a shot, aspiring to be the next Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg. However, most of them cloud these success stories by putting aside the hard work these successful people had put in to achieve their success – all the hustles and sleepless nights, struggling and striving to deal with challenges and failures. What they only see is the big money.

***If you're chasing your dream, you're not running fast enough, run faster.***

Sean Combs (P. Diddy), American rapper, record producer and actor

What is the important point that we are trying to establish here?

Although we had use a characteristic that is commonly seen in Generation Y as an example, in reality, the same behaviour is apparent in people across all generations, be it baby boomers, Generation X and not forgetting, the latest edition, Generation Z, the generation that comes after the millennials.

To further illustrate this point, let's talk about an example that cuts across all generations. In Malaysia, from time to time, we would hear about new "Get-Rich-Quick" schemes that promises high returns within a short period of time. Basically, these are deceptive and manipulative schemes created by greedy people for the greedy. None of these schemes have ever managed to deliver the promised results. The situation always ends up with frustrated participants being swindled right in front of their face.

Nevertheless, despite these obvious facts, each time a new scheme pops up, the number of people joining these schemes is jaw-dropping; it goes up to thousands of members involving funds amounting to millions of Ringgit. The one thing that all generations have in common when it comes to this type of schemes is that all of them would eventually get cheated by it. Participants of such

schemes come from different type of professions, education levels, genders as well as ages, cutting across generations. It just shows that greediness applies to everyone, driven by the desire and dream of making tonnes of money the easy way.

What does this example tell us?

We can conclude that a habit or tendency that a majority of us have is that we always want to achieve something big but we loathe putting in the hard work, not wanting to go through the trouble of taking the small and tedious steps required to achieve it.

We can deny these allegations all we want but it does not change the fact that there is a lot of truth to it. Even if we don't exactly behave in that manner, given a choice, we would likely choose a shorter route to achieve our goals rather than a troublesome path that requires us to put in a lot of efforts. Shortcuts are naturally appealing.

This attitude of wanting big things fast has many other negative effects. There is the high tendency to rush, causing us to miss or skip certain necessary steps, be it unintentionally or sometimes intentionally. This causes a chain reaction to the whole process – when something goes wrong at a particular point, problems and issues are automatically brought forward – a snowball effect. The journey itself is tiring and full of anxiety and stressfulness.

Come to think of it, it is also actually the root cause of many of our problems in life, especially those involving execution and implementation. As we rush things, we have a tendency of doing too many things at one time causing us to be overwhelmed – we end up biting more than we could chew.

This leads us to losing control and if we are unable to regain it back as quickly as possible, we will end up losing control over both the situation and ourselves entirely.

## **Big Intimidates the Small**

I believe most of the things we have discussed above have happened to most of us in one way or another. It sure has happened to me. I was caught in most of these situations myself in the early years of my career. This was mainly due to my personality, coupled with the influences from my surroundings, especially so from my mentor who shared the same drive of wanting to settle things fast. Guilty as charged – I was just as driven and wanted to achieve big things fast. I gave it all and expected almost immediate returns. But the world does not work that way, and it never will. Nature already has a perfectly working system in place that teaches us the meaning of patience.

Even though I thought I had given my best, many times without realising it, I had fallen into the trap of rushing into things and causing me to mess and miss certain necessary steps. Many times I had to redo the whole thing all over again to rectify mistakes at various points of the process. I had taken for granted the small but important steps, thinking that skipping them could still produce the desired results. I realise now that most of the time it comes with a price to pay – at the expense of quality.

I had learned that dealing with life requires a certain degree of calmness. This is a trick I learned from a brother whom I used to work closely with during the setting up of a Takaful Operator, Elmie Aman Najas, who is currently the CEO of one the top Takaful Operators in town.

He taught me that from time to time, we need to pull the handbrake and take a step backward to reflect and review the things we have done, to identify any potential gaps and to redo, if necessary, our action plans. Basically, he was saying that we should not forget the small steps along the way and ensure we don't miss any of it – every single step counts.

This particular lesson had significantly changed my ways in approaching life, both professional and personal. I realised that the calmer we are, the more focus we will be, the more control we will have and therefore the better we will become. All it takes is taking one step at a time but with a sense of urgency. The best thing about this lesson is that it is a technique that could be acquired and learned, to be good at it requires practice and patience.

***Abu Hurairah narrated that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "Take on only as much as you can do of good deeds, for the best of deeds is that which is done consistently, even if it is little."***

Ibn Majah

### **Little Things that Matter the Most**

I also came to realise that it is the little things in life that matters the most. I believe this concept applies to everyone. We may not realise this – because they are small in nature, we tend to take them for granted. Myself, included.

It was after a business discussion I had with a former Chief Operating Officer of the national postal services provider back in late 2013 that I came to realise this fact. We were discussing the potential possibility of promoting and providing Takaful protection to the underserved rural population whom the national postal services have access to. During the discussion a particular statement of hers caught my attention –

***"...from our experience, to the people in the rural, it's the small things in life that touches their hearts and matters, not the big ones. We may think such a service is insignificant but to them it means a lot. That is why we have high traffic in the rural branches."***

I found this statement to be so true especially after relating it to my own life – it's the small things in life that matters. How many times do we feel good and happy when a person lends us a hand or pats us on the back? It was not the days that we achieve success that really matter but it was the small steps along the way and the people who were with us that made the difference.

The more I think about it, I realised that there are a lot more small little things that had a big impact in my life rather than the big ones. Just like how the mere advice given by my brother, Elmie had changed my ways instead of the other so-called big experiences we shared together, e.g., the day we successfully launched the Takaful Operator.

What the phrase basically tells us is that sometimes we focus too much on the big things that we forget that it is the small things that count – it is the small things that make us a bigger person. So, in chasing success, we should focus on addressing the small things, instead of worrying too much on achieving the big objectives. Our main focus should be on putting the right processes in place and have faith that eventually, the results would come.

### **Step by Step**

It was only in 2015 that I found a person whom I could groom and train as my protégé, someone who could keep up with me as I transfer and impart my knowledge on strategic planning, which I had kept to myself (not by choice) for many years. This person is Wan Intan Suhaila. She reminded me a lot of how I was when I first started my role as a strategic planner; driven and wanting to make a difference but overwhelmed by the many things that needed to be done. In my case this situation was, unfortunately, mainly caused by me; I imposed the unnecessary pressures on myself.

There would be times when I would just lose grip of the things I am doing, not knowing which is which or which should come first. Stress and frustration started to build up inside of me. The problem statements were simple –

- a) I have so many different things to do;
- b) Everything needs to be completed around the same time.

How do we balance these two requirements and successfully achieve both?

It was the day when Intan came to me with these questions that I finally managed to give her an answer that I personally believe would be able to effectively address these issues – ***approach everything step by step, break it to small steps but do it fast.***

There is no point of mixing and combining everything together and making it a single large problem – we have to look at each item individually, by steps. For each step, we then need to break it down further to even smaller steps, for example, coming up with the list of action or to do items. The next step is to actually execute those steps in an orderly manner so that the issues could be resolved systematically.

The problem that most of us face is that once we adopt a step by step approach, we tend to spend too much time on it – sometimes, even the planning stage becomes a long-drawn process. We let ourselves become victims of over-analysing and procrastination. If we were to allow this to happen, coupled with the long list of things to do, we will never be able to achieve our goals and objectives on time.

This is the part that we need to address through practice and discipline – to create a sense of urgency and execute those small steps quickly. Coincidentally, during the Leadership Energy Summit Asia 2015, another speaker proclaimed the exact same thing. In his own words –

***Dream big, start small, but do it fast.***

Budi Soehardi, CNN Hero of the Year Award Recipient 2009

### **Time is of Essence**

It is all about attitude and time management, if we fail to understand the importance of our role and actions, we will never be able to create the sense of urgency that is essential to resolving matters on time.

***Time is what we want most but what we use worst.***

Will Penn, English real estate entrepreneur, philosopher, early Quaker and founder of Pennsylvania

Time management is given its rightful importance in Islam; it is so important that a specific surah is dedicated to it. The surah is a call upon mankind to not waste time and to utilise it for goodness.

***By time, indeed, mankind is in loss, except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to patience.***

Al-Asr 103: 1 - 3

A similar call is repeated in other parts of the Quran. Remember that each action for the benefit of others is considered a good deed and an *ibadah* worthy of rewards.

***...So race to [all that is] good.***

Al Baqarah 2: 148



Among the most frequent and popular excuse we usually dish out when we are unable to cope with things or fail to deliver is limited time. This is why time management and sense of urgency are so important; it is to enable us to optimise and fully utilise time to complete what is necessary and required of us.

***Ibn `Abbas: The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "There are two blessings which many people lose: (They are) Health and free time for doing good."***

Bukhari

In many cases, it is not that we do not realise that something is important – we know it is something we want to achieve or complete, we do admit this, but for whatever reason, we still find excuses to not do things and continue to blame it on not having enough time.

Deep down, we know that there is a different reason that is stopping us from facing and dealing with the issue. It can be anything – we may not like the subject matter, we find the work to be tedious or perhaps the people that we need to deal with in order to get the matter resolved are not exactly the people we are terribly fond of. Regardless of the real reasons, we need to put them aside and deal with the matter at hand so that we can continue to move forward.

Resolving it is simple, we just need to realise that if something is important, we need to make time for it, period. Stop coming up with excuses for delaying or not doing it. Come to think of it, these excuses are there not to satisfy other people but rather to satisfy ourselves.

We should therefore stop lying to ourselves and start taking action. Such lies just prove that it is not worth running away from dealing with the matter. At the end of the day, we are the ones who need to face the unavoidable difficulties and problems should the issues continue to persist and not be resolved.

***I don't care how busy I am – I will always make time for what's most important to me.***

Kevin Hart, actor, comedian, writer, and producer

The discipline of making time for important things has always been in the life of Muslims. It is part of the most important act of worship – the obligatory (*fardh*) 5 times a day *salah* or prayers. We were reminded that it would be the first thing that would be brought into account and measured on Day of Judgment.

***It was narrated from Abu Hurairah that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: "The first thing for which a person will be brought to account on the Day of Resurrection will be his Salah. If it is found to be complete then it will be recorded as complete, and if anything is lacking He will say: 'Look and see if you can find any voluntary prayers with which to complete what he neglected of his obligatory prayers.' Then the rest of his deeds will be reckoned in like manner."***

An-Nasai

We are required to perform the obligatory prayers in all conditions. Even when we are travelling long distance or when we fall sick, we are still required to perform the *salah* with some leniency in the way we perform it. If even sick people are required to do it, what more healthy people like us – there should not be any excuse for not performing the obligatory prayers.

Nevertheless, many still fail to do so because they fail to make time for it. Here we are talking about the most important event in our daily lives; worshipping the One who created us – what can be more important than that? If we fail to even do this, it is very unlikely that we can make time for other important things in life.

From the act of *salah* or prayers, Allah has made it clear for us that if something is important, no matter how busy we are, no matter how lazy we are or how tired we are, we need to make time for it – there is no two ways about it, no exception.

### **Step by Step – How We Are Naturally Wired**

Why is step by step the best approach for us? Is it a technique or concept that was only discovered recently?

There is actually a fundamental reason behind the approach that makes it fit our nature perfectly. It is closer to us more than we think, tying closely to our natural self. It is basically part of us – we are simply structured and wired in such a manner.

Everything we experience everything in life is in stages, right from the start. We go through the different stages of pregnancy in our mother's womb, spanning over a period of nine months. Each of us goes through the same experience (except for Prophet Adam) with the only exception of some being born prematurely.

After being born into this world, we then go through the different stages in life i.e. the different phases of growing up, from a baby to a toddler to a preschooler to a teenager to an adult to a geriatric. Our learning abilities at each stage differs and are appropriate to our mental and physical capabilities of that stage.

To illustrate this, let us ponder further on the different stages of life. As a baby, we are unable to talk but once we move up to the next stage, i.e. a toddler, we slowly start to develop the ability to talk. By the time we are a young child, we are able to master our mother tongue. We then continue to grow and mature with age until we finally reach old age building up knowledge and experiences

along the way. Everyone generally goes through the same cycle and nobody gets to skip a step.

***It is He Who has created you from dust then from a sperm-drop, then from a leech-like clot; then does he get you out (into the light) as a child: then lets you (grow and) reach your age of full strength; then lets you become old, though of you there are some who die before; and lets you reach a Term appointed; in order that ye may learn wisdom.***

Ghafir 40: 67

One may argue that there are certain exceptional people who seem to progress much faster than everyone else, either in terms of intelligence or maturity. Example of such people would be those young children and teenagers who enter and graduate from the reputable and distinguished Oxford University. The youngest graduate from the prestige university thus far is Ruth Lawrence, who became its youngest ever mathematics graduate in 1982, graduating at the tender age of 12. However we need to fall back to a few general facts –

- a) These are truly exceptional cases; the majority of us progress naturally according to life's normal cycle;
- b) Even for these exceptional people, they did not skip a step. Basically what they did was complete the steps much faster compared to everyone else. They still went through each of the different stages in order.

In fact, the same step-by-step concept applies to everything else we do in life. Let's take the example of the rudimentary things we do in life such as cooking – each recipe has its own steps. As long as we stick to the recipe – the ingredients, measurements and order, it should produce a delicious dish in the

end. It is the same case for all other actions, such as driving a car, riding a motorcycle, taking a bath, every single action has its steps and order.

This just proves how we are wired in a structured way, processing different small steps, one at a time. As we get familiar in doing a particular action, we are able to do or complete it faster. For instance, the act of wearing clothes; just imagine how difficult it was for us to put on a shirt when we first learned how to do it as a toddler. It would have taken us few minutes just to button up. As an adult, it takes us a few seconds to do it.

Our mind is trained to process knowledge and experience in a structured manner. This is why our Creator, who knows us much better than we know ourselves, introduces new things to us gradually. He knows that we need to adjust ourselves to new things step by step.

A classic example was the process of prohibiting alcoholic drinks or intoxicants for Muslims. I had heard this story during one of the Certificate in *shariah* classes.

The prohibition of drinking alcohol did not happen overnight. Drinking was a norm during the pre-Islamic Arabia and early years of Islam. If Allah were to forbid drinking completely in one go, it would have been very difficult for the early Muslims to abide by the law immediately. The gradual approach simply shows Allah's mercy and consideration for His creation.

The prohibition came in three stages; the first verse informed mankind that alcoholic drinks pose more harm than benefits. Although the verse did not prohibit alcohol directly, it clearly indicates the harmful effects of alcohol and also the fact that it not liked by Allah.

***They ask you about wine and gambling. Say, "In them is great sin and [yet, some] benefit for people. But their sin is greater than their benefit." And they ask you what they should spend. Say, "The excess [beyond needs]." Thus***

***Allah makes clear to you the verses [of revelation] that you might give thought.***

Al Baqarah 2: 219

At this point, some of the Muslims started to refrain themselves from drinking alcohol. The majority however, did not give it up. The next verse then prohibits the performance of prayers when one is intoxicated due to drinking.

***O you who have believed, do not approach prayer while you are intoxicated until you know what you are saying...***

An Nisa 4: 43

This verse was about people who were in the habit of drinking and then offering prayers while they were still drunk. This caused them to make blunders in their prayers – they did not know how many units of prayer they performed or what they were reciting in their prayers. This is the reason why the verse strictly prohibits prayers after drinking.

As a result of the revelation of this verse, the people who continued drinking changed the timings of their drinking so as not to clash with the timings of prayers. Many more Muslims refrained completely from drinking alcohol after this second warning – they reasoned that what good can there be in something that deprives someone from performing prayer.

Then came the verse that completely prohibited the drinking of alcohol –

***O you who have believed, indeed, intoxicants, gambling, [sacrificing on] stone alters [to other than Allah], and divining arrows are but defilement from the work of Satan, so avoid it that you may be successful. Satan only wants to cause between you animosity and hatred through intoxicants and gambling and to avert you from the remembrance of Allah and from prayer. So will you not desist?***

Al-Maidah 5: 90 - 91

This is the beauty of a step by step approach in implementing a new rule, our mind is able to process, internalise and accept it better.

### **Small Differences Make the Difference**

Without us realising, a lot of us give up on pursuing success at the last juncture, just when we are close to tasting it. We fool ourselves thinking that there is still a lot that needs to be done for us to attain success. On the contrary, most of the time, it only requires a bit more to be put in – the small improvements that could have closed the deal.

Let's ponder a bit on what it means to be the best. Actually, what differentiates the best and the second best are usually small differences, but we seldom remember the person who finishes second. If only the person who had finished second had put in a bit more effort and achieve those small improvements required, he or she could have ended up as the champion instead.

***When you want something, you go the extra mile.  
It's the little things, the little extras that make it happen.***  
Scooter Braun, business, owner of two record labels

You would have of course heard of Usain Bolt. As I write this chapter, he is reputedly the fastest man on the planet, holding the world record for both 100m and 200m individual sprints. On top of that, together with his teammates from Jamaica, he also holds the world record for the 4 x 100m relay. Without a doubt, his achievements is extraordinary, which makes him worthy of the nickname coined to him by the media, "Lightning Bolt". He is the first man to win six Olympic gold medals in sprinting and an eleven-time World champion.

His continuous extraordinary achievements have landed him with the Best Male Athlete of 2015 award by the International Sports Press Association (AIPS). It is the fifth time that he has won the award, following his victories in 2008, 2009, 2012 and 2013, the years in which he similarly won three gold medals at global championships.

He had broken his own 100m world record at the 2009 World Championships held in Berlin, recording a time of 9.58 seconds and winning his first World Championship gold medal. But not many people remember who finished second that day, what more the timing he had recorded.

The person who finished second was Tyson Gay, an American track and field sprinter. He currently holds the American record for 100m and is reputedly the second fastest athlete in the world after Usain Bolt. On that legendary day, Tyson Gay recorded a timing of 9.71 seconds, only 0.13 seconds behind Bolt. In fact, he was actually only 0.02 seconds behind the previous world record of 9.69 seconds recorded by Usain Bolt in Beijing.

The small difference, the small improvement of 0.11 seconds Usain Bolt recorded against his own record made him the sprint legend he is today. It proves how a small difference actually *makes* the difference. People never remember who finished second, they only remember champions.

***There is little difference in people,  
but that little difference makes a big difference.  
The little difference is attitude.  
The big difference is whether it is positive or negative.***  
Clement Stone, businessman, philanthropist and author



## **Approaching it Step by Step**

Let us summarise some guiding tips to help us approach life step by step so that we don't miss any small, yet important, parts of it.

### **1. Define the big purpose.**

First we need to be clear about our purpose and what we want to achieve. Look at the big picture and imagine the end in mind – how we want success to look like. Having clarity in our goals and our definition of success is critical for us to move forward. It would help us to define our next steps better.

### **2. Step back and list down the small steps.**

Once we have managed to set the goal post, it is time to take a step back and spend time listing down all the action items required to achieve our goals. This process is troublesome and tedious but it is very important. Remember, we need to make time for important things and this is one of those important things that we just cannot avoid.

The key is for us to seriously spend time and analyse the journey so that we don't miss any critical paths or steps. The more detailed we are, the higher the chances of us attaining success. Miss one step and it might cost us our success – we might just end up in failing, all the efforts we had put in would go to waste.

### **3. Execute each step effectively and efficiently.**

Now that we basically know what to do, it is time for us to execute every single one of the steps we have identified. We will need to go through it as planned, step by step. Before we actually execute each step, we should take one last look at it to identify the best and most cost efficient way to do

it. We may even find that we don't need to perform certain steps anymore. This isn't cheating – we still go through the steps in an orderly manner and reassess the situation. The act of reassessing a step is also part of execution.

However, it needs to be an honest assessment, if not it would just be an excuse for us to take a shortcut route to simply skip a step. Remember, whatever decision we make or actions that we take, at the end of the day, we are the ones who need to bear and live with it. We're only kidding ourselves if we assess it dishonestly according to our desires.

#### **4. Maintain sense of urgency.**

As we have discussed, the key to achieving our big dreams or goals is to take small steps, but taking them fast.

Among the common mistakes most of us do is procrastinating; whenever we find a step that we dislike or face something difficult, we tend to put it aside and postpone its execution. Usually, we would come back and attend to it when we are in the mood or have found someone else to do it for us. This attitude is a no-no if we are serious about attaining success. We just need to attend to it regardless whether we like it or not. In short, we just need to deal with it.

Once we are able to get rid or contain this bad habit, we can concentrate our energy on creating the necessary sense of urgency required to drive the execution. Creating a sense of urgency is an internal struggle, we are the ones who need to establish and develop it. It requires us to have a good understanding and awareness of the situation, the steps involved as well as the impact of any delay or incomplete steps.

Let us treat the situation like managing a project; we need to be sensitive towards the schedule, timeline, dependencies and critical paths of

the project plan, knowing that a hiccup at any point would delay the delivery of the project or worst still, cause the project to fail. We would be able to tackle and manage the project effectively by having a sense of urgency. If practised and executed well, it would usually result in the completion of the project ahead of time. Therefore even if we make mistakes along the way, we would still have ample time to rectify them.

#### **5. Remain calm and composed, be in control.**

No journey is without challenges. There will always be various forms of issues and problems that we need to deal with. Normally, such problems would agitate us and if not managed well, it will cause anxiety and panic. Once that happens, we would start to lose control and that is when the real problem starts – everything would start to go haywire.

This is why it is very important for us to always remain calm and composed despite the waves that come our way. We just need to go with the flow, step by step, keeping up to date with where we are and the status of things, resolving each issue we encounter as we go along.

It is all about having control of the situation and the things we do. As long as we are able to do that, we should be on track to achieve our goals.

#### **Making that Difference in Life**

Now we know that achieving success and being great in life is not only about big dreams or achievements. On the contrary, it is about the small things or components that make up the big achievement.

We should never belittle the importance of these small things in life; they are the ones that make us who we are today.

***The day you stop doing the small things is the day you think you're above everyone else.***

Kevin Hart

As long as we remain sensitive towards the small steps and not skip any of them, we should be on track to achieve great things in life. At the very least, we would be able to achieve some small great achievements.

Remember, it only takes a little to make a big difference. So continue to take those small steps and confidently move forward, you'll reach your destination in no time.

***If you can't do great things, do great things in a small way.***

Napoleon Hill