

Secret of My Success: The ASEAN Experience

by

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Assalamu Alaikum W.W.

Distinguished guests, high officials of the Government of Brunei Darussalam, members and friends of the various Women Organizations, Ladies and Gentlemen, a pleasant good afternoon.

I came from a family of educators and had been inspired that someday I would become a teacher, too. As I was self-reflecting, I could still call to mind what I wrote in my Primary 3 composition entitled "My Ambition". I wanted to be a teacher and nothing else. From then on, I started my teaching mission. Every night, I dragged my younger brothers to attend my compulsory teaching class. My mom's wardrobe became my blackboard. By that time, I worked as a substitute teacher, I realised that I have fallen deeply in love with the teaching profession.

But, it was not easy to realise my ambition. My father has always been a very religious disciplinarian. As a teenager, I enjoyed debating with my father on the role of women in our culture. Women, according to him, should not have a career of their own. They must be supportive, and even subservient, to their husbands. So, after my pre-university education in Singapore, he had found a candidate to be my husband. But I had to refuse very, very politely in order to realise my future ambition. At that time, my most important goal in life was to be a teacher.

Upon completing my tertiary education and teacher's training, I started to work as a teacher in a private school. After some years in teaching, I decided to leave this stable job to venture and set up a private school with a business partner whom I finally married. Dr Pengiran Amir Mohd Yusof, my husband is a man who shares my vision in education. My marriage was the life event that my father had been praying for since my teenage days.

When we told our friends about the business venture, many of them thought it was not a wise decision. Some opposed the idea while others said it was a big joke. Quite a number said it was a crazy plan and were not comfortable with the idea of a woman going into a business venture. I must, say it was very discouraging.

At first, there were many problems. I had no social capital and collateral security. Resources were costly and I needed to convince the various authorities that I could do the job and do the job well.

It was not easy at first. There were many rejections and application processing by the different approving authorities which took much time. But, finally, the approval was granted by the Ministry of Education. The school was registered in 1975. It is called the Nusa Laila Puteri School. It was the first among the few private schools owned by a Bruneian. I started my first kindergarten class with a very small group comprising of 8 students only.

At work, I was doing the one woman act because of financial constraint. Other than teaching, I was also the caretaker, the school clerk and, at the same time, the business accountant. It was very challenging, but I needed to prove to myself that I was not a quitter.

I soon realised that it was relatively easy to be successful in good times. But when the going gets rough, the tough may make an exit. That almost happened to me about 20 years ago. The venture was faced with problems like high overhead and aggressive competition. All these happened after so much money, time and energy had been invested.

To make matters worse, I found it difficult to strike a delicate balance between work and family. I guess time management is the essence of the issue. At times, I feel like 24 hours were never enough - I wished I could dedicate more quality time to my family, time to be at peace with Allah and work longer hours at the office. I went through many sleepless nights worrying about the school problems, but I can still smile!!

At that point of time, I was so overdosed with the negative idea of giving up. But it is important not to lose our vision. "Never get the camera out of focus" - that was the usual reminder from my husband. With determination and the desire to succeed, the annual student enrolment increased gradually. And today, Nusa Laila Puteri School has managed to have established 5 branches in Brunei-Muara District and one more branch in Tutong District with a total enrolment of more than 2000 students.

In Nusa Laila Puteri School, changes have always been on top of our agenda. Over time, strategy, goals and technology must change. Lots and lots of things must change. Even to myself, previously, I was size S with a 26 inch waistline but as I have said things changed.

In life, nobody is ready for a change because it throws us out of our comfort zone. I think, the only person who likes a change is a wet baby. But changes are unavoidable in education. With new trends and expectations, new laws and requirements and changing needs in education, yesterday's dynamic formula may not be relevant today.

To respond to changes, Nusa Laila Puteri School has to work out new formula incorporating innovative teaching and joyful learning strategies. We have to look into the importance of EQ in addition to IQ. We also have to look into thinking skills, enrichment programmes and the use of IT. This will help to give our students a more well-rounded education. To gain more experience related to educational management, I participated in many school exchange programmes and visited schools in various countries in the world. Moreover, we have also organized annual educational tour and

trips abroad for our teachers, students and parents as well, for them to gain new educational experiences.

Another challenge of this business is staff recruitment. To complement our local staff, we also employ music, art and religious teachers, child psychologists, programme managers, health educators and management staff from the region.

In education, we deal not only with the children who have many sad stories but also parents with problems. Let me share with you some of my colorful experiences in this business. One day as I was having lunch, this very loud couple who were divorced stormed into my office with their 5 year old daughter, shouting at the top of their voices, fighting about who should the child spend time with over the weekend. The man used indecent words I won't dare repeat in this hall. The mother started to cry and the daughter cried even louder. That afternoon, my office sounded like a nursery class.

Ladies and gentlemen and participants, in my 25 years of experience, I have come across many businesses in education come and go in their search for short cuts to success. Some run the whole education business like a commercial enterprise with total emphasis on the profit motive. But the education business, I believe, means more than that.

Education is about developing potentials. We have to attend to the needs of learners with problems like attention deficit, personality disorders and temper tantrums. I have seen kids being emotionally and physically abused, kids with fathers who were terminally ill, kids losing their parents at such a tender age and parents who practiced favoritisms on their children. In education, we have to deal with hyperactive and hypersensitive children who make classroom teaching almost impossible, we have to deal with students with single parents who can't afford to finance their school fees. In addition, we also have to deal with slow learners, the underachievers, the underprivileged and the late bloomers. The list goes on and on.

Education is also about dealing with overcritical parents who make unreasonable demands on the school. Just the other day I had to attend to this case in which a mother pinched someone else's child for stealing her son's pencil and causing the matter to get real ugly. Education is also about managing a 3 year old kid who needs to be brought to the toilet about 10 times within 3 hours.

Ladies and gentlemen, education is a business with a moral responsibility. More than anything else, the education business is about grooming our young people to be good members of society. For many of us, it is a business that can be emotionally and psychologically draining.

But I have no regrets. The personal joy and satisfaction are really great. Everyday, I grow as a person in this business. Every day is a learning experience. In education, I have never stopped learning. My chosen career in education did not stop within the four walls of the classroom. I have to upgrade myself to strengthen my competencies in the field of education and to prepare myself for a more challenging aspect in

teaching by attending seminars, conferences and also training in educational management.

Having established myself in education, I have also expanded my business portfolio to venture into other small businesses like tailoring and boutique, construction and writing books. I have also set up a restaurant by the name of SERAMBI HIJAU'.

Before I take my leave, I must say, I owe a deep gratitude to my husband, for his guidance, patience and assistance. I must also remember my late mother, who instilled in me discipline and faith. She taught me to live an honourable life guided by Allah. Last but not least, a very special thanks to all the staff of Nusa Laila Puteri School who have contributed greatly to the school's progress and all parents who have invested their trust in us. I also wish to extend my deepest appreciation to my fellow participants and to the Women Council of Brunei Darussalam for the acknowledgement of my humble contribution.

My guiding principle which I would like to share with every one here is that - the bend in the road is not the end of the road unless we fail to make the turn. To attain success in our goals, we don't need perfection, we only need progress. My final words- "Take baby steps every day and we will get closer and closer to success". I wish you well. Thank You.