Connecting the dots...

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Mastering the art of delegation and getting priorities right!

Once the feverish buzz associated with the beginning of the school calendar fizzled out like a storm in the Mojave Desert, it was time to get down to serious business for both students and teachers at Rukweza Secondary School.

For those teachers who were taking examination classes, being Form Twos and Fours, their attention immediately shifted to completing the syllabus as soon as they could to free up time for revision come the third and final term.

Being in one of the Form Four examination classes, it was time for my classmates and I to get on with our studies as soon as the dust had settled and aim to finish our race strongly. As the Head Boy, I was over the moon, having exceeded my expectations by rising to the occasion in my first assignment as a student leader and managing to be on top of the situation in the wake of the frenetic start to the new year.

Having worked tirelessly to clear the decks, we no longer had silly excuses for not applying ourselves fully towards our studies, barring a few odd meetings that we would schedule here and there to fine-tune the odd loose ends which fell within our remit as prefects. In the year 1985, I certainly had a lot to look forward to!

To begin with, I had relished the opportunity to sit for Ordinary Level examinations as a formal student in order to build on the momentum I had gained from informal school a few years earlier, having passed my Zimbabwe Junior Certificate with flying colours, which marked the beginning of an invigorating turnaround in my life as a student. That we were now counting down to the final exams was a dream come true! What also made 1985 a special year, was that the clock was ticking towards my twenty-first birthday on the 26th of March, which meant that in a few months' time, I would be graduating from being a juvenile into adulthood with implied full legal rights to assume total control of my destiny – all being equal.

Even back then, society expected those having attained the age of twenty-one to have started the process of becoming independent of their parents or guardians since achieving this landmark came with the enjoyment of a lot more liberties than they would have had before.

Once a person reaches twenty-one years of age, they should be in a position to mentally plan for their future on their own, even if structurally they still need additional support.

It is little wonder that some families gift their daughters or sons with the symbolic door-key on their twenty-first birthday to signify their entry into adulthood. That symbolism has been an enduring tradition dating back to the times when at twenty-one, a person was considered old enough to be a key-holder to their home. This meant they now occupied a symbolic senior position among their tribe of men and women on whose shoulders the responsibility of caring for the family rested.

Despite being on the brink of turning twenty-one, it was not yet Uhuru for me and many others whose schooling had been disrupted during the liberation war in the 1970s. As a result, I still had a few months to become my own man, which is why I was so determined to put my all in the months leading up to the examinations. Whereas some of my well heeled age-mates were in their third or fourth year at university, others had elected to take up employment. Yet here I was, still studying towards my "O" Levels under the parental care of my uncle, Tongai Mataranyika, and his angelic wife, Laina, who were gracious enough to assume the burden following Father's passing due to hypertension on the 31st of August 1982.

At this point in my life, I had a different set of priorities than those of many of my age-mates at university and those who were now fending for themselves. Many of my companions were well ensconced in romantic relationships with partners of the opposite sex; taking to the bottle or worse still, becoming addicted to cigarettes and drugs in the name of newly-found freedoms.

Some had gotten into serious relationships, considering marrying their soulmates and having children, including those of my age-mates who were at university. At that time, there was only one institution of higher learning, the University of Zimbabwe. Getting entry into university was like a rite of passage into adulthood for those who made it. Unlike today, where parents have to cough up to pay fees for their children at university, in the years after our independence, students received substantial payouts, which were more than the wages of low-level earners such as factory and construction workers.

In my case, I was still trying to find my feet rather than experiment with any of the things that I considered to be sideshows that were not worth my time. It was quite apparent that if I were to do well in my studies and brighten up my career prospects, I needed to set boundaries for myself. I needed to subdue my biological clock from landing me in the sort of troubles that would have cut short my studies and undermined the commitment I had made to my father days before he passed on, without even saying goodbye.

Looking back, I am happy to have declared a jihad on anything that had the effect of spoiling things for me. The unfortunate situation that my former classmate, Christopher Haadivamwe, had found himself in the previous year served as a wake-up call to all of us. No matter how brilliant one could be in class, you would undoubtedly get burnt if you were to play with fire. Despite being much younger than me, Christopher had learned this lesson the hard way, after plunging himself into teenage parenthood, not realising the consequential fallout. Christopher would score another own goal when he elected to drop out of school once word started doing the rounds that he had impregnated two Form One girls during some moments of weakness.

Confronted with more mouths to feed in the form of his expecting teenage wives and the babies that were on their way at a time when he did not have any source of income to fall back on, the financial pressures that were brought to bear on him by his philandering would take a heavy toll on him. Having cut himself off from his peers out of embarrassment, he now cut a lone figure in the village where he had become the community's black sheep. After coming short of what was expected of him, it must have become too much to bear for him. It did not help that at that time, society had neither safety nets nor support systems, to share his burden.

Tragically, his misery and disappointment would end when he decided to take his own life to escape the ridicule and shame that was being heaped on him, leaving the mothers of his soon to arrive babies to face a cruel world on their own.

For some days, a sombre mood enveloped the school, as those of us who knew Christopher well mourned his untimely and tragic death, which served as a stark reminder of the dangers that could easily entrap us from realising our dreams. Consequently, no one in their right senses wanted to be in Christopher's shoes.

As painful as the news of Christopher's demise was for the school and surrounding communities, I refused to allow it to dampen the optimism I had for the months ahead. Having been turned away from voting due to my age in the historic general elections held in February 1980 to usher in majority rule, I was looking forward to casting my ballot for the first time in polls that had been slated for winter, now that I was well above the voting age of eighteen years.

Amid all these positive thoughts racing through my mind, not to mention the pressures in the high-stakes competition to earn academic stripes at school, the first term, came and went like morning dew. In no time, we broke up for the Easter holidays and returned a few weeks later to begin the mid-term.

We all knew that the second term was critical because it was the time of the year when Form Fours would sit for their mid-year exams around August, which gave teachers and students alike an indication of how well or otherwise they would do in the end of year exams. Along with my study-mates, we had put together a study schedule which we followed religiously.

We would meet almost daily after school to go through the work we had covered in class and touch on a few upcoming topics. Be that as it may, I knew that the class lessons and the extra study time that we had allocated ourselves as a study group were not enough to guarantee success come exam time.

To be on the safe side, I went the extra mile of allocating myself one-and-half hours of study time first thing in the morning, from four-thirty to six am. During school days, after the hour-and-half study time, I needed about thirty minutes to prepare to leave home so I could make it to school, which was about three-and-half kilometres away, on time.

It would take me another thirty minutes to walk to school, getting there at seven am, giving me another thirty minutes or so of study time, depending on the administrative issues of the day. In the event there were administrative issues to attend to in my capacity as the school's Head Boy, arriving at school at seven in the morning made it possible for me to attend to these before the start of lessons.

It helped that I had the latitude to go into class anytime I chose since I was the Head Boy. Regardless, I was mostly in class on time, as I didn't want to miss any of the lessons - not even for a split second. As my itinerary became hectic and intense, I initially found it energy-sapping having to strike a balance between my responsibilities at home, school and Church.

It also helped that I had grown stronger spiritually and as I matured, the Bible became my trusted source for solutions. For instance, my term as leader of the United Methodist Church's Rukweza Youth Fellowship would teach me how to delegate and cascade responsibilities to other members to avoid overloading myself with work, which happens to be the biggest contributor to inefficiencies and organisation failures.

As we were fellowshipping as brethren and sisters, I was captivated by the story of Jethro, a Midianite priest and father of Zipporah, the lady who would be married off to Moses. It is written that when Jethro witnessed Moses wearing himself out from morning to evening, as an arbitrator and passing judgements among the Israelites for the transgressions they committed on their way from Egypt to their promised land, he counselled his son-in-law. He advised him that this was not good and suggested that he find godly men whom he could teach the statutes and laws of God and make them judges among the people. These men would be ranked where some would judge thousands, others presided over hundreds, then fifty, and ten. The most difficult cases Moses kept for himself to make judgements.

This biblical model is credited for providing the foundations for setting up the judiciary system where the Supreme Court rules on the most difficult cases, while lower courts adjudicate more minor cases. Jethro's wisdom enabled Moses to carry out his responsibilities under challenging times. I took the Moses and Jethro model on board, delegating minor administrative duties amongst the prefects, reserving the major ones for myself, which allowed me to strike a good balance.

Apart from teaching Moses the art of delegation, Jethro was also a good role model for in-laws. He offered wise counsel without interfering in their internal affairs and quickly distinguished between right and wrong. As president of the Youth Fellowship at Rukweza, such inspiration came in handy since all eyes were on my executive and I, to lead by example and ensure that the pledge we had sworn to was translated into action.

Having pledged to submit ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, to serve Him with fear and humility and to be totally committed to Christ, we needed to walk the talk and ensure that our actions spoke louder than words. We had an obligation to carry ourselves in a way that made us the epitomes of love, respect, obedience, discipline, honesty and all other Christian virtues that we had committed to observing.

Apart from assisting in developing young adult spiritual leaders within our local congregation and advocating for the issues and concerns of young people in the church and in our local community, my executive had another herculean challenge. We were mandated to build a network of support and provide resources that connected the diverse experiences of youth and young adults in communities within which they lived.

To help advance God's work, as members of the Youth Fellowship, we were allocated a budget to be met through various fundraising activities that were not necessarily dependent on tithes, harvest or rupawo (subscriptions) and donations. Coming up with new ideas that would add to the kitty and putting them to work was challenging.

As a youth group operating in the rural areas where most families lived on the fringes of poverty, there weren't many options available to the Youth Fellowship to get the dollars to flow into the Church coffers. It was common practice for youth members to offer their services to farmers looking for reasonably priced labour to tend their fields, and their fee for working in the fields would be paid directly into the youth account.

Upon assumption of the reins, I challenged my colleagues to do things a little differently and depart from the time-honoured tradition of working the fields. Based on the experience I had gained back in Chifuri Village in Chiduku Tribal Trust Lands where I used to work for the Chikudo Family, I successfully pushed through the idea of moulding bricks to sell to locals for building houses, fowl runs or pigsties.

It did the trick! We were able to surpass our target from proceeds for the new venture, meaningfully contributing towards the smooth running of the Church while at the same time reducing our dependency on revenue from traditional sources.

When I look back at the work of the Youth Fellowship, I realise that it was an early entrepreneurial exposure for Church youths to come up with legal and morally upright ways of generating revenue. This was done without bending any of the organisation's principles that included living clean lives, consistent with Jesus Christ's example; giving total loyalty and service to Christ, through the Church; working for Christ and mankind and upholding the ideals of unselfish service.

Having mastered the art of delegating and making robust decisions, I couldn't afford not to cast my vote in the June and July general elections. As it turned out, they were basically a two-horse race between ZANU PF and PF-ZAPU, whose wartime relationship was beginning to show signs of strain after bouts of instability began to rock parts of the Midlands and Matabeleland regions.

In the election, ZANU PF bagged sixty-four of the one hundred seats that were in the National Assembly at the time, increasing its tally from fifty-seven seats it had garnered in the 1980 polls on the back of the power of incumbency and a groundswell of support driven by its progressive nationalist policies. Among the policies was education for all which helped drive the country's literacy rate to levels never seen in any country in Africa. My generation and those that came after us were beneficiaries.

In no time, we were headed for our mid-year exams. Despite my plate being full with responsibilities, I was well prepared for them. When the exam results were announced, I was thrilled to have once again achieved first overall, cementing my position as the top student in the school.

If anybody thought my coming first the previous year was a fluke; that I came first again must have silenced all critics. Although I didn't grow two tails, I was very close to it after my stellar exam performance.

Amid the hullabaloo created by the announcement of the results, it was once again the end of the school term, and we were away from school for three to four weeks. My study mates and I did not want to lose the momentum we had gained studying together. Therefore, we created a study schedule that required that we meet every weekday to study and revise all the school work we had covered up to then.

Often, there would be one or two of us who would have ventured ahead of the syllabus, and we would allocate them time to share, which helped all of us understand things better once in class as we would have prepared well for the lessons. Cephas Mukwawaya was good with Mathematics, while Alice Muzamhindo had an excellent grasp of English Literature, helping us comprehend better, scenes in our set books, namely The Merchant of Venice, by William Shakespeare and Far From The Madding Crowd, by James Hardy. I was good at Science, helping my study mates grasp science concepts.

There were no opportunities for extra lessons in those days like I see with students of today. We were on our own and had to sweat it out by ourselves. Coming together to study helped me understand better.

Once the schools re-opened in September, members of my study group and I walked with a spring in our steps with the feeling that the school holidays had been a welcome break. However, it would soon be clear that some of our classmates had taken the holiday break to disengage from their school work.

Unbeknown to them, the mind is a funny muscle. If you keep it busy, it stretches to accommodate all you want to take in. If you rest it, it contracts, losing even what you thought was stored in it. Those fellow students who had taken the mid-year break as time to switch off had not learnt anything from our lessons in Zim-Science. We learned about the two types of connectivity under electricity; parallel and series connections.

We had learnt that in a series connection, whenever one bulb blows out, all of them would follow suit. This is unlike in a parallel connection, where the place will be illuminated despite one of the bulbs blowing out. Likewise, our fellow classmates appeared to have had some series connections that blew out all their study bulbs, while my study-mates and I were in cruise control, leading to us enjoying school even more, after the holidays.

Credits:

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