

Measuring Results – Why measuring performance is not enough? ...Leadership insights from the “A” Levels (National 12th Grade) Results

“Embarrassing to get 4 As” screams the headline in the New Paperⁱ.

Jane was bawling because she had four As for four subjects but got an A1 for General Paper (GP), two distinctions and one merit for her special (S) papers. She had expected to be a perfect scorer – all distinctions for the special papers. A merit is not good enough.

Raffles Junior College, one of the top junior colleges in Singapore, had 55% of the cohort with 4 Asⁱⁱ.

On the other hand, we have Alex Jafarzadeh, who was over the moon because he had A for English literature, Bs for Economics and History and A2 for General Paper.ⁱⁱⁱ His teachers and parents felt the same way too.

Why is this so? A personal satisfaction model will help us understand these different reactions.

$$\text{Personal Satisfaction} = \frac{\text{Achievement}}{\text{Expectations}}$$

This equation has three possible answers.

If we achieve less than our expectations, like Jane, then personal satisfaction is < 1 , and we will feel disappointed.

If we achieve 4 As and we have also expected 4 As, then personal satisfaction is $= 1$, and we will feel nonchalant about our result.

But if we achieve more than our expectations, like Alex did, then our personal satisfaction is > 1 , and we will be elated.

Unfortunately, in Singapore, we have cultivated a culture of perfection not excellence. A perfect culture focuses on what we have not achieved rather than what we have achieved. We want and expect perfect scores. Anything less will not do. No wonder, one girl pined, “It’s hard here (at RJC)... There is so much pressure to get these perfect grades.”^{iv} Unfortunately, this spirit is translated into the corporate world and family systems.

Parents are always criticizing their children for what they have not done rather than praising them for what they have done. Leaders are focused on the faults and weaknesses of staff rather than the successes and strengths of their staff. The result: A perfectionist society, which is detrimental to our mental health and esteem needs.

We need to transform the way we define personal satisfaction.

1. Need to measure effort

There are many who have worked very hard. My daughter has a friend, Danielle (not her real name), who did not do well for her preliminary O levels exams (10th grade) and nearly did not make it to a junior college of her choice because in those years, - she was suffering from cancer.

Many letters of appeal were written in the lead up to the release to the A levels results. She did well enough to confirm her place when the O levels results came out. She was still going through chemotherapy during the two years in college.

She persevered. In-between her classes, she went for chemo and regular check ups at the hospital. Then she rested at home, studied on her own, went to school despite her condition. Her family and friends gave her all the support. She persevered relentlessly.

But that did not deter her from being diligent and studying hard. She got 3 As. The whole school rejoices with her. It was an achievement with a plus. What an inspiration!

2. Need to be grateful

It was reported that many college students who got 4 As seemed blasé because it has become normal to get this kind of result in that college. One of the students said, "It's no big deal to get 4 As in this school, because half of us have obtained such scores. It's only when you are severely below average that you will stand out."

Veena Bharwani reported in her interesting article, "There was another kind of strange reaction among the RJC students – nonchalance. At least 15 students the New Paper spoke to bore no expression of happiness or sadness: they just looked bored. They too had almost 'perfect' scores – 4 As, A1 for GP and even a distinction or two for their S papers (advanced). Yet, it all seemed so meaningless but they took out a pack of cards and started playing. They looked neither overjoyed nor relieved. But blasé."^v

This sense of gratitude can only come when there is a sense of awe. A sense that the result is not of your own doing. Who helps the students achieve these grades? There are the visionary principals, sacrificial teachers, supportive parents and a wonderful system. A self-made person finds it difficult to be grateful.

3. Need to be measure character

We should be concerned with how we achieve our results not just the results. Some 'kia su' (hokkien for afraid to lose) students are very selfish, always copying other people's notes but unwilling to share theirs.

We should also be concerned with character other than grades. My friend's son came back one day with a 'colorful' report card. He is not as bright academically, failed a few subjects. But the teacher remarked, "He is a very caring person, always willing to help those who need help."

Honestly, he confessed he didn't even care about that remark. He was totally focused on his grades even though he believed that EQ was more than IQ. But in actuality, his behavior showed otherwise. That experience convicted him that he never really believed that character was more important than grade. It caused him to change his perspective about what was really important.

4. Need to be joyful for those who succeed

Some of the students were overjoyed when their classmate did extremely well. The ability to enter fully into the joy of others is a special gift, far more impressed that achieving your own grades. The other-centeredness brings a greater satisfaction. One girl shared, "When I heard that Danielle had gotten 3 As. I was truly overwhelmed. I cried. It was pure joy." Pure joy indeed is when we can share and enter into the success of another.

5. Need to share sorrow with those who failed

Another group of students gathered around a friend who tried hard and didn't do well. They just sat around, consoled him. Failure in our society can be devastating. They think that failure is final. Some parents and teachers add salt to the wound when they go berserk as though the world has come to an end. The best thing any parent or friend can do is to be there for those who feel disappointed and failed. It's not the time to gloat or despise, or chastise. This brings me to another point: the need to recover.

6. Need to recover

Failure is never final unless we make it so. This is the power of recovery. An A level is just an A level – not the end of the world. There are many more exams to go, more walls to climb and more mountains to conquer. Yes, we need to grieve. We need to feel the pain. We need to get angry with ourselves for a while.

But, these feelings must be temporary. We need to recompose, recalibrate, reconstitute and move on. Failure to recover will only exacerbate the situation. The future is only as bright as what we do with our past and what we do with our today.

Although I have gleaned lessons from the A level results and students' responses, these principles hold true for life and work.

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ⁱ Veena Bharwani, Embarrassing to to get 'just'4 As. The New Paper, p.8, 5 March, 2007. Times Publishing. Singapore.

ⁱⁱ Veena Bharwani, Embarrassing to to get 'just'4 As. The New Paper, p.8, 5 March, 2007. Times Publishing. Singapore.

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Chin, Embarrassing to to get 'just'4 As. The New Paper, p.8, 5 March, 2007. Times Publishing. Singapore.

^{iv} Veena Bharwani, Embarrassing to to get 'just'4 As. The New Paper, p.8, 5 March, 2007. Times Publishing. Singapore.

^v Veena Bharwani, Embarrassing to to get 'just'4 As. The New Paper, p.8, 5 March, 2007. Times Publishing. Singapore.