Seeing the world in a new light

FELICIA YEOH and DENNIS WEE discuss how MBA classes helped them to venture beyond their comfort zones

WHEN family, friends and colleagues were told we were joining the pioneer MBA class of Singapore Management University (SMU), we were fired with many questions. Dennis’ six-year-old daughter asked: “Will you have crayons and colouring books in your school?” Sensing the question wasn’t quite right, she quickly followed with: “Papa, why are you going back to school?”

We decided to do an MBA when we realised our first college degree wasn’t enough – and work experience still limited – to succeed in the corporate world.

We sought a programme that would enhance and broaden our view of the business world. At MBA was just what we needed. We were given an excellent environment for networking with classmates, professors and business leaders – all of whom could boost a career, offer a well-placed connection or simply be an inspiration.

For Felicia, getting a chance to interact personally with prominent CEOs and entrepreneurs during the SMU MBA’s sector talks was one of the biggest highlights of her experience.

We discovered that the value of our learning transcended the classroom and workplace. Many courses in our MBA have a direct relevance and impact on our personal lives.

Dennis discovered that coaching techniques learned from a course provided the very framework for parenting his spirited little girl.

Even his wife remarked to him over dinner: “There’s something different about you after you started your MBA – you’ve become a better listener.”

The diversity in the classroom was remarkable. Drawing on our collective competencies, the leverage each one of us gained was enormous – we were tapping close to 300 years of cumulative work experience!

A doctor in our class provided us a first-hand insights into the business processes of a hospital; an engineer, the operational challenges in semiconductor fabrication plants; and an energy executive, the inner workings of the dynamic oil and gas industry.

Our negotiations professor advised us to use our MBA classes as a laboratory for venturing beyond our comfort zones, trying new ideas and discovering more about ourselves in the process.

While trial and error may be too risky or costly in a corporate setting, the MBA learning environment presented us with abundant cases, simulations and opportunities to experiment.

Our negotiations simulations were especially fun (and useful) as we competed against each other – an exercise which became increasingly challenging as the term progressed.

The multi-disciplinary pedagogy of the MBA has changed the way we view the world. Take, for example, the recent meeting of world nations for climate change in Copenhagen (COP15).

The game theorist in us would view COP15 as a very challenging problem of a prisoners’ dilemma; the negotiator in us would think about each nation’s utility function for carbon emission cuts versus their GDPs; and the leader in us would explore coalitions and areas for mutual benefit.

After going through an MBA, one can truly appreciate the world from a multitude of vantage points. The SMU MBA has helped us appreciate the world not only for the diversity that it holds, but also for the complex challenges it brings.

At the close of our MBA journey, we are now better-placed to become leaders of positive change in our own special ways.

Our MBA went beyond the technical training of finance, marketing, strategy and accounting.

And that was exactly where one little girl got it right when she thought of crayons – our MBA has enabled us to add more colour into our own lives and given us unexpected new lenses to view the world.

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