

Teachability

Teachability is the quality that makes one continually strive to grow, learn and improvise. There has to be a desire to learn, adapt and grow. Striving for excellence in everything one does will bring success. The world-renowned actor, director and filmmaker, Charles Spencer Chaplin, who applied no shortcuts, remains an example to be described. The talent, and equally the drive, made him the most successful entertainer of all times. But, what made him reach this pinnacle was mainly his teachability trait.

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*"Leadership and learning are
indispensable to each other"*
-John F Kennedy

What comes to your mind when you think of the image of a little man sporting a tiny moustache, a cane in his hand, baggy pants adorning his legs, clumsy shoes bigger than his feet, and a derby hat that he tips for every lady? Charlie Chaplin! And most of the world recognises him. Born in London, his father was a versatile vocalist and actor; his mother an actress and opera singer.

The funny man

The early demise of his father and the ill-health of his mother left him and his brother

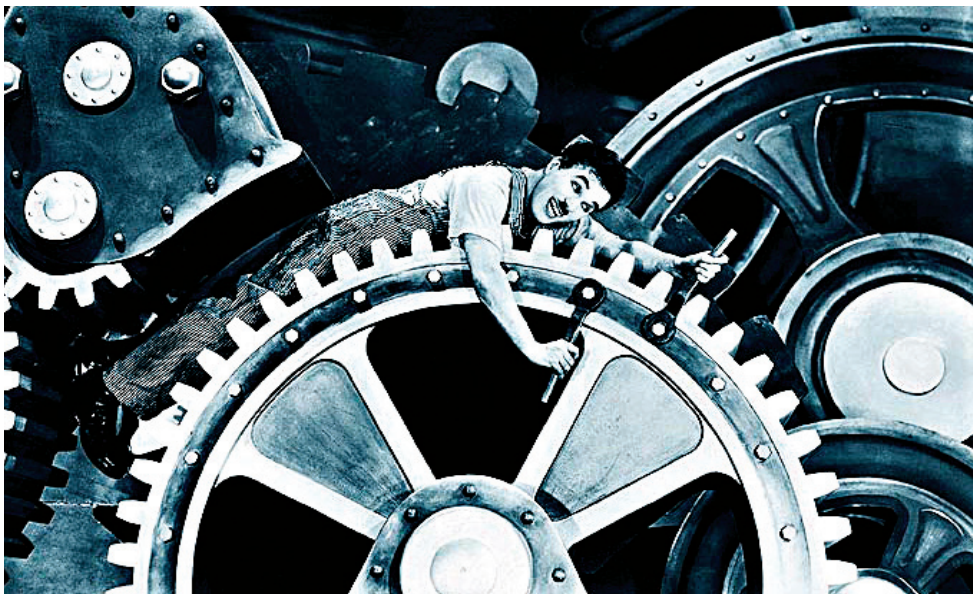
to fend for themselves. Charlie was less than ten years old. After years of working in houses and orphanages, he began working on stage to support himself. Charlie debuted as a member of the troupe called "The Eight Lancashire Lads" where he won acclaim for his performances.

During the decade before the First World War, he was perhaps the most recognisable person in America. Nearly a century later, in similar category would probably be Edson Arantes do Nascimento (you know him as Pele) and Michael Jordan.

At the age of seventeen he was hailed as a performer. In 1914 he earned \$ 150 per week, and he was in his mid twenties. He worked as an actor, a writer and director making films. Working at Keystone Studios in Hollywood he made thirty-five movies in his first year and a year later he was earning \$ 1250 per week. He then did something that was unheard of till then. In 1918 he signed the entertainment industry's first million-dollar contract. This made him rich and famous; he became the most powerful filmmaker at that time in the world. He was twenty-nine.

The Chaplin way

Charlie Chaplin was successful because he had great talent and drive. But from what I have read, those traits were fuelled by teachability.



Teachability is the quality that makes one continually strive to grow, learn and improvise - in case of Chaplin, it was perfecting his craft. He was not content with simply being the highest paid performer or the most popular one. Chaplin himself has said this in an interview, "When I am watching one of my movies presented to an audience, I always pay close attention to what they do not laugh at. If, for example, they do not laugh at a stunt I mean to be funny, I at once begin to tear that trick to pieces and try to discover what was wrong in the idea or in the execution of it. If I hear a slight ripple at something I had not expected to be funny, I ask myself why that particular thing got a laugh."

It was this desire to learn, adapt and grow that made him successful and brought a level of excellence to everything he did. His work was hailed as wonderful entertainment, and he was recognised as a comic genius. Many of his movies were considered as masterpieces. He enjoys the reputation of being one of the greatest filmmakers of the last millennium. His work is reputed to have the finest pantomime, deepest emotion, and rich and poignant poetry.

Had Chaplin replaced his teachability with arrogance and self-satisfaction when he became successful, we perhaps might have forgotten him by now. But Chaplin kept growing as an actor, director, and filmmaker. Chaplin realised that filmmakers were at the mercy of those who owned studios and distribution networks. So, he started his own organisation called United Artists along with Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and D W Griffith. Chaplin's company is still in business today.

Leaders always face the danger of contentment. Contentment may lead to complacency. A leader who has achieved success, respect and a level of influence needs to keep growing. Why, you may ask. It is simply for these three reasons:

- Your growth determines who you are
- Who you are determines who you attract
- Who you attract determines the success of your organisation

If you want to grow your organisation, you have to remain teachable.



Cultivating the quality

How can one cultivate a teachable attitude you may ask. Here are a few suggestions:

The destination disease: Some people believe they no longer have to grow because of their accomplishments. It can happen with any accomplishment – a degree, a position, an award, a financial goal, etc. It is ironical that lack of teachability is often rooted in achievement. An effective leader cannot think that way. Thinking that way, they forfeit their potential and stop to grow. This could impact the potential of the organisation to grow too. This is what Ray Kroc, the founder of Mc Donald's once said, "As long as you are green, you're growing. As soon as you're ripe you start to rot," Cure yourself of the destination disease.

Avoid getting heady with success: Success hinders teachability. Know this, "what got you there, may not keep you there." Become extra careful if you have been successful in the past. Always remember, "if what you did yesterday looks big, you have not done much today."

Pay the price: When I am working on lean projects, I remind the aspiring company that, the longest distance between two points is the shortcut. The



right process is the shortcut, and there is no shortcut to this shortcut. For everything of value in life we pay a price. Price may be in the form of time, effort, sacrifice, giving up, improving, changing, better thinking, etc. As you desire to grow in a particular area, you must figure out what it takes, and pay that price. You must consciously keep off the shortcuts.

Pride comes before fall:

Admitting one does not know everything, does not make one look bad. Unfortunately, some people tend to think so. Remember what John Wooden, the basket ball coach says, "It is what you learn after you know it all that counts." Perhaps their pride holds them back. Pride as much as ego hinder being teachable.

One cannot be brimming with pride and expect to be teachable. In the words of the author, poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, "For everything you gain, you lose something. To gain growth, give up your pride."

Avoid repeating mistakes: Success is built on failures. Remember the proverb, 'failure is the stepping stone to success.' Roosevelt once said, "He who makes no mistakes, makes no progress." Do not be frightened of mistakes. Just do not keep making the same mistakes because it makes no progress.

Bringing it home

When the fruits or flowers that a plant bears is not good enough, or has something wrong with it, the problem is often with what is happening below the soil. It is like the saying, "If the crop you are reaping is not good enough, check the seed you are sowing." The crop is you. What kind of 'you' do you want? Is your leadership and life getting better everyday? Are you fighting to hold your ground? Are you where you want to be in life today?

If not, the problem could be teachability. When did you last do something for the first time? When was the last time you made yourself vulnerable by venturing into an area that was not your stronghold? Try and observe your learning and growing in the coming weeks, it will tell you where you stand.

Here are a few suggestions to improve your teachability:

- How do you react to mistakes? Do you admit them? Do you apologise when wrong? Are you a defensive type? Ask opinions from people around you; family, friends, colleagues, subordinates, boss, etc – whether you are teachable, how you react and whether you make mistakes at all.
- Become creative and do something new and different. What should I do? You may ask. Do something that will be creative. Do something that will stretch you mentally, physically and emotionally. Challenges change us for the better. Read 'Power of Possibility Thinking' in 'Modern Machine Tools' of December 2007. Making new challenges part of your daily life will make you grow.
- How much do you read? What do you read? Do you read what will add value to your life and help you grow or do you read trash? If you read one book a month, you complete twelve in one year and one hundred and twenty in ten years. An average human being does not read even one book in a whole year. Imagine how far you can leave the crowd behind. Effective leaders are readers. Consider books in your areas of professional excellence and those that will add value to you and fuel your personal growth.

For when you continue to learn in an area where you already are an expert, it will prevent you from becoming unteachable. "The more one learns the more he understands his ignorance. I am simply an ignorant man, trying to lessen his ignorance," writes Louis L'Amour in 'To the Far Blue Mountains'. **MMT**



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