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GEE 2019 Summary:

To summarise my experience in one sentence I’d say that: *true growth happens when you venture through the path of most resistance, not when you take the easy route.* You will never realise the upper limits of your potential until you step outside of your comfort zone and enter unfamiliar territory. This is what GEE has been all about for me, stepping outside of my comfort zone.

The Global Enterprise Experience has been one of the most difficult yet rewarding projects I’ve ever been involved in. There’s been many ups and downs, sleepless nights, unexpected challenges and even tragic events. If there’s one thing that I’ve learnt over the past 3 weeks, it’s that I really still have a lot to learn.

Going into this competition, I set the initial goal of leading a team that will produce a winning-quality report. In the first week of the semester, I looked into the archives to view prior year winners to understand the standard being set. I thought long and hard about innovative business ideas for addressing UN sustainable development goals and I started to develop ideas around the nascent and revolutionary technology of blockchain. Seeing the slow and steady adoption of this technology in the financial world made me think about ways in which blockchain can be applied to promote social change and equality.

However, the further that I progressed into this challenge though, the more that I realised that it’s not just about me and its not about winning. This competition is much more meaningful than that. It’s about building relationships with people all over the world, understanding their different perspectives, learning from their ideas and helping each other succeed. Recognising the problems in this world and finding innovative ways to make it a better place is far more important than trying to win. It’s been a truly humbling experience and one I’m happy to have been a part of.

Lessons Learnt and Personal Reflection:

- **Find a way to keep progressing even when things go wrong.** One of the most important lessons that I’ve learnt during GEE is the importance of persevering and find a way through when things don’t go as planned. A death in the family occurred halfway through the competition. I had to make sure I was there to support my family but at the same time it was important I kept progressing with the report, lead my team and not let them down.

- **Understand that leadership styles vary across the world.** What works in one country may not work in another. I found that the collaborative and laid-back New Zealand leadership style was unusual for some of my team members. I’m not an authoritarian person so giving out direct orders was a challenge for me. It wasn’t until one of my team members suggested that every member received different tasks and responsibilities to be achieved by certain dates that I realised my leadership style was perhaps unique to New Zealand.

- **Your ability to extract and utilise the unique talents of every member in the team towards a collaborative goal will determine your success.** This is much harder than it seems and it was particularly difficult with our topic. Blockchain is a technical concept and it can be hard to fully comprehend at first. At first, I tried to share lots of different resources with specific team members that were perhaps a bit unfamiliar with the technology. After a while, I realised that I was bombarding the WhatsApp group page with different videos, articles and academic papers and this proved to be counterproductive. Instead of stimulating conversation this seemed to intimidate some members and they refrained from contributing. I started to talk to my team members individually, learn more about them and show a genuine interest in their lives. I then discovered that some of the more quiet members had unique abilities and they just needed some encouragement. One member in particular was excellent at motivating the team. His strengths perhaps weren’t in the more technical aspects of the report but he was a leader when it came to communicating, fostering teamwork and encouraging participation. Another team member was excellent at research. Recognising these individual traits and encouraging them was a vital component in producing a quality business proposal.
You must separate your ego and biases from the decision making process. When GEE finally commenced and our team was formed, we started making good initial progress and generated interesting ideas for applying blockchain technology to social issues. I had an idea going into the competition about exploring a combination of blockchain and RFID scanning to modernise supply chains in Africa and prevent the counterfeiting of fake medicine across the continent. This is a significant issue that results in almost 1 million deaths per year. However after discussing with my team, they had different visions. Keshia had an idea about using blockchain to solve the unregistered birth crisis for women across Africa. Unregistered citizens are often not afforded the same rights and legal status and blockchain was suggested to provide the mechanism for facilitating birth registration. Another team member Morne came up with the idea of implementing blockchain to optimise the electoral process and alleviate its inefficiencies. Instead of being stubborn and thinking that I was right, I accepted the merit in their ideas and we came up with a project involving elements from all of our perspectives and ideas. Completely removing my ego from the creative process helped to encourage full participation and contribution from my team members. The convergence of diverse perspectives helped us to generate and formulate some truly innovative ideas.

Sometimes in life you have to make tough decisions. Throughout the past 3 weeks, I’ve actively attempted to lead by example by modelling the actions and behaviour that I wanted my team members to show. I did this by presenting my thoughts and ideas to the group every day, exploring different creativity techniques, sharing important resources and information and encouraging all ideas, contribution and participation from all team members. While this helped foster great engagement from most team members, there were a few that failed to participate. On the 19th of May I still had next to no engagement from 3 team members so I made the decision to cut them from the team. I discussed with my other team members and we all agreed that it would be unfair to include them on the report as they hadn’t contributed. I didn’t want to have to kick anyone from the project but in the end it was in the best interests of our team.

Adaptability is a vital entrepreneurial skill. Finally, let’s return back to the first sentence. True growth happens when you venture through the path of most resistance, not when you take the easy route.’ This is a message I’d like to share with future GEE participants. 48 hours before the report was due, one of my team members urgently Skyped me and suggested we modify our business model. At this stage we had developed a complete draft that I was happy with but he saw a slightly different direction for our proposal. After listening to his new ideas on a 2 hour video call at midnight and just a couple of days before the deadline, I asked him ‘Do you think we can do this? He replied by saying ‘yes we can’. “So let’s do it then” I said. I then consulted with the rest of the team and they were happy to pursue this modified direction. I couldn’t ignore the merit of his perspective. I knew we had to try and pursue this alternate direction. I believed in his vision and I was willing to help rewrite our whole report and restructure our business model with just two days left. This was a moment where I stepped completely outside of my comfort zone, relinquished control of the situation and took the path of most resistance. I believe we produced a report 10 times as good as it would have been had we stuck with the first draft. I learnt an incredible amount from taking this risk, challenging my abilities and most of all learning from my team members.