

# Barefoot Leadership

The Art and Heart of  
Going That Extra Mile

Alvin Ung



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For Huey Fern  
who has walked that extra mile with me

and Andrew  
whose journey has just begun

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INTRODUCTION

The Journey  
Starts Here



It was twilight as we sped through the dark waters of the Kinabatangan River in a *perahu*.

Around the bend, the lights of the Sukau Rainforest Lodge twinkled like a fairy-tale palace in the jungle. Fernando, my river guide, cut the throttle to the four-stroke engine. The wooden boat slowed down, settled into the belly of the river, and began drifting starboard towards the river bank. Fernando killed the lights as he lashed the boat against the jetty. Silence and darkness descended on us like a black cloak, and at the same time the sky lit up with a thousand pinpricks of ancient light.

Suddenly, there were big, crashing sounds on the opposite side of the river. It was the sound of small trees being leveled, branches breaking, and twigs snapping like invisible firecrackers. It was like the crack of distant thunder, only more purposeful.

“What’s happening?” I asked Fernando as I walked with rubbery legs on the bobbing jetty.

“Pygmy elephants on a pilgrimage,” he said. “They’ll arrive at our lodge before midnight.”

I, too, was on a pilgrimage.

At dawn, I had flown three hours on a jet plane across the South China Sea, hopped onto a propeller plane, boarded a mud-caked four-wheel-drive, and held on tight to the guardrails of an 800-horsepower speedboat that roared past salty mangrove swamps lining the Kinabatangan River. Finally, as dusk fell, I clambered on a hand-hewn wooden boat and arrived here at the lodge next to this mighty river that flowed deep into the heart of Borneo.

It felt good to be here. It felt good to take off my shoes and feel the weather-worn wood against my feet. It felt good to go barefoot.

As I wiggled my toes and breathed in the heavy tropical air, I pondered the reason that led me to one of the most far-flung parts of Malaysia: I was looking for a different kind of leader.

The leaders most familiar to us wear business suits and leather shoes. They carry briefcases and ride the elevator up to their office on

the highest floor of the tallest building in the city. They are the chief executives who hold the authority to hire, fire or change the secretary’s pay grade. They are the media-savvy politicians and lawmakers whose slightest whisper can influence vast networks of powerful people to do their bidding. They are the publicity-shy tycoons who buy and sell companies in the time it takes the rest of us to eat a packet of *nasi lemak* for breakfast.

The kind of leader I was looking for is quite different. I was looking for ordinary people who are wired to inspire and motivate others to achieve extraordinary things. I wanted to track down leaders who can get the best from their people – even when they have very little to work with in the first place. Ever heard the story of a man who managed to feed a few thousand people with just a few fish and some bread?

The leaders I was looking for do not need leather wingtips or four-inch killer heels to command a persona of power. They do not need to inherit wealth or be born in blue-blooded families in order to lead. If I removed their shoes and threw away their power tools, these leaders would simply shrug and proceed to lead ... even in their bare feet. And I would be willing to remove my shoes and follow them.

The leaders I was looking for lead by serving people at the ground level where true needs are met. These leaders are, so to speak, grounded. They are grounded by the basic principles and values in their lives that guide them forward. They do not go fast all the time. But they can go far – one step at a time – and bring everyone else with them.

And not least, they know what it is like to walk in someone else’s shoes. They possess empathy and compassion. By choosing not to stay “up there” and choosing to walk on the ground, they identify themselves with me. They will also go the extra, costly mile just for *me*. Would you not want to walk with such a leader? I would.

The kind of leaders you and I are looking for are Barefoot Leaders: ordinary people who inspire others to go that extra mile with them in order to achieve greater good.

And that's why I traveled for hours to arrive at this one dark spot next to the Kinabatangan River in the heart of Sabah. Soon, I would be meeting Albert Teo, the founder of the award-winning Borneo Eco Tours. A former executive director of a three-star-hotel in Kota Kinabalu, Albert gave up that job and set off on a quest to transform a bunch of primary school dropouts and illiterate adults into confident employees of an award-winning ecotourism company (I had already met one of them – he was Fernando, my river guide). The amazing thing is that Albert accomplished so much with so little. All he needed was two massive white boards, a bunch of marker pens, several shelves of books – and a great deal of ingenuity. This alone makes Albert Teo a Barefoot Leader.

In this book you will meet many other Barefoot Leaders – who comprise men and women of Malay, Chinese, Indian and indigenous ethnicity who work in urban and rural areas in East and West Malaysia. These leaders grew up drinking the unique brew of ethnic-based economic policies and religious differences that have shaped Malaysia's identity. They may not always agree with the policies; they run across the political divide; they may not even agree with one another. But one thing these leaders have done is remain where they are and choose to make a difference. Their stories show us how.

The Barefoot Leaders include:

- a village boy from a dying tribe who learned how to turn around deadbeat companies and transform them into thriving organisations
- a headmaster who quit his job and lived among the poor, so he could learn how to rewire the brains of poor students into lifelong learners
- an obstetrician and gynaecologist who gradually relinquished her successful medical practice to mobilise hundreds of doctors to save lives in disaster-stricken zones, including Afghanistan, Iraq and Sudan

- a homemaker who dropped her middle-class life to tutor refugees – which led her to start a Montessori school for the poorest of the poor
- a theatre professor who conducts workshops that teach youths how to discern aesthetic, historical and cultural values in an ordinary meal of *pasembur*
- a high school principal who has a track record of transforming bottom-ranked secondary schools into academic powerhouses
- a struggling mother who founded a food and clothing empire – and who spends one-third of her time counseling people who are bereaved or broken-hearted
- an English-illiterate boy who went to MIT, and wrote computer algorithms in a hotel basement that has revolutionised how millions of Asians look for jobs online
- an Ivy League scholar who left the world's most glamorous city to run a shelter for homeless children in one of the most dangerous parts of Kuala Lumpur
- a poverty-stricken teenager who dropped out of high school to design a microfinance and savings system that has lifted thousands of families out of poverty
- a young man who quit Yale so he could work as a community organiser among rural villagers who eventually voted him to the hallowed halls of Parliament
- a human rights activist who persisted in speaking up for abused migrant workers in Malaysia despite enduring a thirteen-year legal battle that nearly bankrupted her.

## What Makes This Book Special

In *Barefoot Leadership*, there are stories, case studies and reflection tools. Above all, the book contains ten principles of Barefoot Leadership that will help you discover your own leadership path.

## Stories from the Heart

The real-life<sup>1</sup> stories of Barefoot Leaders offer you a snapshot of who they are as ordinary people and what they did to accomplish breakthroughs despite great odds. The source material for this book comes from more than one thousand hours of interviews and close observation of these leaders in the thick of action – on the field, in their offices, with family and loved ones, and even when they are by themselves. (See Appendix I for a detailed description of the three-phase research methodology I developed for this project.)

I invite you to approach these stories with an open and generous heart. As you empathise with the leaders' experiences, I want you to make their stories your story. You may discover that their struggles are similar to yours. I believe that their successes will help you find your own roadmap to success as well.

## Case Studies: "Step Into the Shoes of ..."

In each of the ten chapters that follow, I offer you a set of shoes to try on temporarily. When you wear the shoes of these leaders who have gone barefoot, you are invited to step into their world. You will read about their real-life dilemmas. And if you were in their shoes, how would you respond? For example:

- What would you do in your first thirty days if you were asked to save a failing airline?
- What would you do to raise the performance of the bottom-ranked class in the bottom-ranked school?
- How would you react if someone stole your prized orchids?
- How would you convince villagers to entrust their hard-earned savings to you when you yourself are poor?
- What would you do for the next forty-eight hours if you were

<sup>1</sup> To the best of my ability, I have attempted to check and recheck the facts – including names, places and quotations – and if there are errors, the responsibility is all mine.

among the first to reach Aceh after a tsunami just obliterated the town and left the survivors homeless?

- How would you respond to your preadolescent daughter who beseeches you to teach her how to cook – at a time most inconvenient to you?

There are no right or wrong answers in these case studies. The Barefoot Leaders' responses to a particular situation, I hope, will serve to provoke your thinking and offer a unique perspective that will enrich and equip you to respond creatively when you face equally daunting challenges.

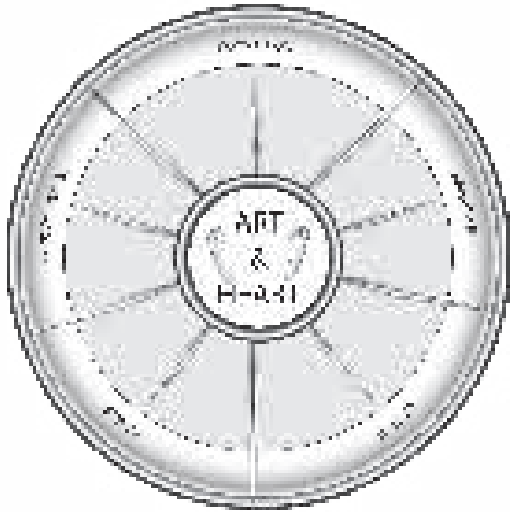
## Going Barefoot Exercises

No one can become a great leader by trying to be like someone else. Eventually, I believe you will want to take off your shoes and go barefoot too. In this spirit, I have provided you reflection tools and exercises at the end of each chapter. These exercises invite you to integrate the book's best ideas with your life's most unique challenges and opportunities. By investing only ten to twenty minutes per exercise, you will gain important insights about yourself.

## Principles of Barefoot Leadership

The next ten chapters in this book represent the ten principles of Barefoot Leadership. The principles are simple, timeless and profound. The principles are not meant for knowledge alone; they are meant for practice. They challenge us to become deep people with a broad and generous outlook towards our fellow brothers and sisters.

You are welcome to jump to any chapter that arouses your curiosity. But I believe you will enjoy and learn from this book best if you begin at the beginning, reading it one chapter at a time, step by step, like a real journey. Each of the ten principles will bring you through five stages in your evolution as a Barefoot Leader:



1. *Conviction*: How do you gain the urgent conviction to begin the journey of Barefoot Leadership?
2. *Character*: How do you cultivate a resilient character that will endure the challenges of Barefoot Leadership?
3. *Capacity*: How do you develop an extraordinary capacity that will propel you to the highest levels of Barefoot Leadership?
4. *Compass*: How do you find a trustworthy compass that will help you navigate the twists and turns of Barefoot Leadership?
5. *Consciousness*: How do you arrive at a higher consciousness that affirms and loves every person you encounter on the journey of Barefoot Leadership?

## Putting Art and Heart Together

The ten principles of Barefoot Leadership are governed by one simple idea: you need both art and heart in your leadership to rise to the highest levels. The art and heart of Barefoot Leadership are like the two

feet you stand on. It is possible to stand on one foot. But only for so long. Then it gets awkward and you will fall down. You need both feet to stand comfortably; you need both feet to go places.

The *art of Barefoot Leadership* focuses on *what* the leader needs to do. It is all about doing. It focuses on knowledge that translates into behaviours, skills and actions with just one outcome: getting things done. In its extreme form, the art of leadership resembles a military school. Here, you develop yourself through drills, exercises and hard work so that everything gets hard-wired into your responses. You cannot always change your character. But by practising the art of leadership, your actions will ultimately influence how you think and who you are on the inside – your heart.

The *heart of Barefoot Leadership* focuses on *who* the leader needs to be. It is all about being. It focuses on knowing one's self-identity, habits, thought patterns, mindset and values. In its extreme form, the heart of leadership resembles a mountain-top retreat. Here, the work you do is all on the inside. You exert effort to be true to your deepest purpose and values. You evaluate your life. When most leaders and managers keep on pushing themselves, you carve out time for rest, refreshment and reflection. You become attentive to life's possibilities. By practising the heart of leadership, your attitudes and values on the inside will influence who you are on the outside – your art.

You *need both art and heart*. One leads to the other. One without the other leads to excess. For example, without the heart of leadership, you become a task-driven manager who heartlessly manipulates people to achieve intended outcomes. Without the art of leadership, all your insights and wisdom lose effectiveness because you cannot command respect in getting things done.

When it comes to art and heart, most of us prefer standing on one foot. Leaders who stress on effectiveness and execution prefer getting things done (the art) while leaders who focus on authenticity and relationships are better at the human side (the heart). It is not so easy, initially, to stand on our two feet. But we need to.



In order to walk, it is important to shift our weight constantly between both feet, oscillating between action and reflection.

“To be is to do,” said Socrates, opting for the heart of leadership.

“To do is to be,” said Jean-Paul Sartre, opting for the art of leadership.

But the best Barefoot Leaders focus on doing and being. In the spirit of Frank Sinatra, Barefoot Leaders dance to the tune of *do-be-do-be-do*.

And, there’s one more thing. In practising the art and heart of Barefoot Leadership, try not to walk alone. Find one or two other people to read this book and practise the exercises together with you. Meet each week to check in on one another and review what worked and what could work better. And then repeat this cycle for at least three months before reevaluating whether to continue or disband. As the famous African proverb says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” (See Appendix III for an easy-to-use tool for walking the Barefoot Leadership journey in a small group.)

## My Hope For You

Ultimately all the efforts exerted by Barefoot Leaders boil down to a universal question: Can we make the world a better place?

Barefoot Leaders realise that at the end of their lives, they are not measured by the size of their bungalows or even how many companies they have brought to IPO. Barefoot Leaders also realise that the journey to the destination matters. They have to play to win – to the depth and breadth and height that their souls can attain. They do not set out to be heroes. They only set out to serve. And unwittingly, without intending to, their lives become a beacon of hope for us.

But this book is really not about them. It is about us – you and me.

Anyone can go barefoot. It does not matter who you know, how rich you are, or what kind of shoes you wear. Barefoot Leaders come from all walks of life.

You too can begin this journey of Barefoot Leadership. All that is needed is for you to take the first step that leads to walking that extra mile.

Join me in this journey by thinking about what Mahatma Gandhi would do if he lost his shoe.

One day, Gandhi ran to catch a train. As he clambered aboard the last coach, he noticed he was wearing only one sandal. The other sandal had been left behind on the platform. The train was gathering speed. If you were Gandhi, what would you do?

Take a moment to consider what you would do before reading on ...

Would you:

- a) Run after the lost sandal (and risk being left behind by the train)?
- b) Remain where you are (and resign yourself to buying a new pair)?

I have told this story to hundreds of people. Most people choose (a) or (b). The risk takers impulsively try to retrieve the sandal. The risk averse resign themselves to getting a new pair.

And then there are others who do ... nothing. Paralysed by indecision, they sit on the train, fretting, worrying or getting angry with themselves, until the train has left the station and the decision is taken out of their hands.

So what did Gandhi do?

He threw his other sandal on the platform.

That one powerful gesture<sup>2</sup> made Gandhi a Barefoot Leader (literally).

Barefoot Leaders make their world a better place one step at a time. Now go and do likewise.

<sup>2</sup> By choosing to throw his other sandal onto the railway platform, Gandhi gave away both sandals, and blessed a stranger with a gift.

"We must be willing to let go  
of the life we have planned,  
so as to accept the life that  
is waiting for us."

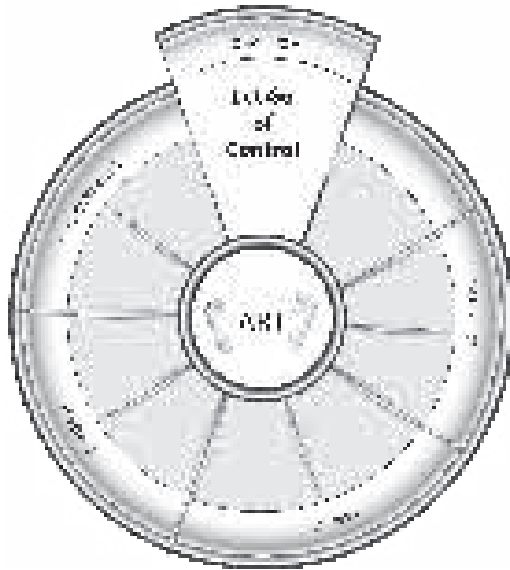
Joseph Campbell  
author, orator and professor of comparative religion

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CHAPTER ONE

# Let Go of Control





It was the size of the pails that broke her heart.

One morning, driving around the Sentul neighbourhood adjoining the city of Kuala Lumpur, Petrina Satvinder and her friend spotted two skinny children by the roadside. They wore threadbare clothes, and they were carrying two pails of water each. The kids looked so tiny next to the big buckets of water. “Why aren’t these kids in school?” Petrina, a homemaker, thought to herself.

Petrina stopped her car as she watched the panting children set down the buckets and rest their aching arms.

They introduced themselves to each other. Ganesh was twelve years old; his sister Letchumi was eleven.

“Where are you two going with the buckets of water?” Petrina asked.

“Home, we are going home,” they said. Petrina and her friend immediately picked up a bucket each and accompanied the kids to the last house on a lane lined with derelict buildings. The house had no running water, electricity, furniture or even food. Ganesh’s mother was a single parent with six kids. Petrina felt her heart swell with compassion for the family. “Without any kind of education, how are these kids ever

going to break out of the cycle of poverty?” Petrina thought. Who would help them?

Although Petrina did not know it, the children standing before her would chart her future. Petrina, an ordinary homemaker, was being jolted out of her comfortable middle-class lifestyle. She was discovering her calling to serve the children, and it would be the children who would lead her on the path she would walk.

Ahead of her lay many years of tears, trials and sleepless nights. She would gather up hundreds of children in her arms. Some of the kids – and their parents – would disappoint her and make her cry. Other kids would bless her back, and make her laugh. All of them would surprise her with their boundless potential. In less than a decade, Petrina would become founder and principal of Harvest Centre, a school that provides the highest-quality education for the poorest of the poor in Malaysia’s largest city, Kuala Lumpur.<sup>1</sup>

All these lay ahead of her.

This is the extraordinary journey of adventure, surprise and delight that unfolds when we take that first step of letting go of control in order to embrace our calling.

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Letting go is the first step of Barefoot Leadership. When we let go of control ...

- We gain the courage to live in sync with our convictions
- We choose to unlace the tangled knots in our life that hold us captive
- We count the cost, and we choose to move forward, despite an uncertain future.

There is a price to pay for not letting go of control. By seeking a safe and controlled environment ...

- We become complacent and never venture out of the comfort zone
- We fear the unknown
- We deceive ourselves into thinking that risks and unknowns can be managed.

It is normal for good managers and leaders to be excellent planners. The leaders I interviewed, for example, have managed companies that employ thousands of staff, provide jobs to millions of people, and serve food to countless thousands on a daily basis.

But what sets Barefoot Leaders apart from the rest is that they resist the temptation to turn their personal lives into a plan. Instead they live with openness to new possibilities. Barefoot Leaders go where few have trodden ... even if it leads to less pay, more insecurity, and an ambiguous future. For most of us, this is counterintuitive.

“It is dangerous to talk about letting go of control,” Ishak, a former top executive in the world’s largest plantation company, warned me. “We need controls.”

He recounted a story of how senior managers in his company were not kept accountable for their actions, which resulted in billion-dollar losses and lawsuits. Ishak, a seasoned strategist and previously on the fast track to the executive suite, was sidelined due to his links to the old regime. All the trappings of power – including the chauffeured limousine – seemed hollow to him. “I don’t know what I’m going to do next,” he told me, as we ate cocktail sausages at a leadership conference.

Ishak (not his real name) was in an unenviable position. And yet there was something redemptive about this. “Now that you’re no longer in control of things, you gain the time you’ve always craved to do some soul-searching and discover your calling in life,” I replied.

Letting go of control is the first and most essential task of pursuing a life of extraordinary leadership. At some point in their careers, the leaders I interviewed told me they learned to say no to conventional success. They decided to stop attempting to impose complete order on their lives. This required an existential decision to let go of control.

Jim Collins, the management guru and author of *Good to Great*, has written that organisations are by their very nature messy. “All attempts to impose complete order and predictability will ultimately fail,” he concluded. “Learn, adapt, change, evolve, grow ... but don’t ever expect to have things under control or to know fully where you’re going.”<sup>2</sup>

Great leaders do not control people, nor do they attempt to control their own lives. They are able to live with the ambiguity of not knowing what comes next. They choose to become radically open to the twists and turns, the ups and downs, the obstacles and opportunities, that comprise the elements of an extraordinary life.



### Leaders Who Let Go of Control

1. Ten years ago, Dato’ Sri Idris Jala was an oil man. He unexpectedly gave up a successful career at Shell to become chief executive of Malaysia Airlines. After turning the company around, he was asked by Malaysia’s Prime Minister Dato’ Sri Najib Tun Razak to revamp the government – and the economy. Idris’ job as CEO of the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) is relentless. Almost everything he is required to do lies beyond the control of his eighty-odd staff. And yet this is the kind of thing he thrives on doing.
2. More than ten years ago, Tan Sri Dr. Jemilah Mahmood drew out her personal savings to organise a medical mission to Kosovo. Far beyond her wildest dreams, MERCY Malaysia, the NGO she founded, has evolved to become a globally respected humanitarian organisation. Dr Jemilah has mobilised hundreds of doctors and volunteers to save lives, provide healthcare, and rebuild infrastructure in countries affected by disasters and wars. In Malaysia, the organisation also educates children and teachers on disaster risk reduction. Dr. Jemilah did not cling on to power, though. She eventually stepped down from leadership so that others could step up.
3. More than ten years ago, Helen Read, a homemaker, agreed to help a friend sew buttons on dresses. When the friend left

the business, Helen found herself running a garment factory. Soon she ended up running award-winning restaurants and clothing boutiques throughout the country. She is no control freak though. These days, she invests a great deal of time volunteering as a counselor helping the bereaved deal with grief.

Barefoot Leaders, who choose to step into uncharted territory, know what it means to let go of control. Letting go of control is an art – it requires firm actions. Here’s how.

## 1. Let Go of Plans

At some point during the long interview sessions which I conducted with Malaysian leaders, I always slip in the same question: “Did you imagine you’d be where you are today?”

And they would respond in chorus: no, no, no.

“I always thought I’d be a homemaker,” said Helen, who never imagined that one day she would be heading up businesses that generate more than RM50 million in annual revenue. Dr. Jemilah never thought that she would end up in Afghanistan or Sudan – or organise rescue efforts in the aftermath of the Aceh tsunami. As for Idris, the job he took on as CEO of PEMANDU, did not exist ten years ago. It was a specific job, for a specific man, created at a specific time, by the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

All the extraordinary leaders I met – who have transformed lives, led world-changing companies, and pursued greater good – agree that they never expected to be where they are today. They never attempted to orchestrate the important milestones in their careers and their lives. So why should we?

This does not mean we chuck long-range strategic planning out of the window. Project plans with clear timelines play an important function for getting things done. The trouble comes when we try to plan

our personal lives the same way. We think it is possible to set goals for the year, list out sub-goals for each quarter, and hammer out the action steps along the way.

The reality is that life is never predictable. There are too many unknowns, too many contingencies. The pace of change is accelerating faster than ever as technology, society and businesses change. The boss you are counting on for your next promotion might opt for early retirement and leave you stranded. Or you might get married, or have your third child, or get diagnosed with cancer – and all these things will change your plan. Sometimes the small things might kill your best-laid plans. Too much time on Facebook and YouTube, and soon your plans burst into flames.

In contrast, when we declare that there is no plan, it is wildly liberating because:

- We give ourselves permission to incorporate unexpected obstacles and possibilities into our lives.
- We give ourselves breathing room – to explore, play, relax, and stretch.
- We humbly admit that life is full of uncertainties. We humbly admit that our past winning strategies may not always work for us in the future.
- We are willing to put everything at risk. There is no guarantee that we will succeed. We may even fail. And we accept this reality.
- This means we will not shoot the troops if they fail to achieve their goals. And we will not shoot ourselves if we disappoint ourselves.
- We no longer care about the possibility of failure ... or success. We are *free* indeed to attempt seemingly impossible things.

### Tip:

*If letting go of plans still sounds too risky, try this instead: write down your ten-year plan. But use a pencil. And have fun using the eraser.*

## 2. Let Go of Comfort Zones

Though we might find Barefoot Leadership inspiring, we might also shake our heads sadly and conclude that such a life is not meant for us. The voices in our head tell us that we need money to take care of ourselves. It is not possible to give up stable jobs that endanger our future security.

“Most people don’t actually know how much financial security they need, so they continue in the rut that they are in because of the fear of the unknown,” Jonathan Khang, a high school classmate, wrote in an email, commenting about the challenges of letting go of comfort zones.

“What holds people back from doing something extraordinary is the fear of deviating from the conventional path,” Philip Rao, the Malaysian coordinator for Ernst & Young’s Entrepreneur of the Year Awards, told me in an interview.

Past recipients of the award have included CEOs such as Tan Sri Tony Fernandes (who founded AirAsia, the region’s most successful budget airline), Tan Sri Lim Wee Chai (who runs Top Glove, the world’s largest manufacturer of rubber gloves) and Tan Sri Francis Yeoh (who heads up the sprawling YTL Corporation, with businesses all around the world).

Philip has personally interviewed all the winners and nominees. “Impressive list! So, what do they all have in common?” I asked.

In response, Philip used his right hand to draw a line across the air – a slow and almost imperceptible upward climb. “This line represents the path of incremental success,” Philip said.

On this path, you study hard, graduate with a professional degree from a good university, work in a multinational corporation, buy a bungalow, drive a German sedan, send your kids to private school, and so forth.

The nominees and winners of the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award think different. “They let go of that conventional path,” Philip said.

For example, Tony Fernandes left his secure job as a music executive to buy two old planes – taking on a ton of debt – in his quest to build Asia’s largest budget airline. “They could unhitch themselves from the bandwagon. They did something they truly loved and believed in. And they didn’t just talk about it, dream about it. They did it.”

“Wow, that sounds tough,” I said. “Really tough.”

“It is tough. Letting go of past successes is not easy,” Philip replied.

“Can you do it?” I asked.

Philip smiled, and shrugged.



### Story from the Heart: Petrina Satvinder

Petrina Satvinder grew up in a poor farming community in rural Kelantan. Her father worked as a teacher and tailor while her mother sold shoes, clothes, fertiliser and fish nets. In a desperate bid to help their twelve-year-old daughter escape poverty, they sent Petrina to study in Kuala Lumpur. All alone, in the big city, Petrina slept in a foldable bed in a windowless, moss-covered room of a shophouse in a tough neighbourhood. “It was only by God’s grace that I didn’t end up in bad company,” Petrina said in an interview, her eyes widening, as she recollected her teenage naiveté.

So, many years later, when Petrina saw the two children hauling large pails of water, she felt herself walking in their shoes. Yes, she had escaped the cycle of poverty. But who would help these children do the same? She knew she had to do something.

Together with her husband, Elisha Satvinder, she began Harvest Centre. With a vision of providing the best education for the poor, she got herself certified as a Montessori-trained teacher. She recruited teachers from Australia and the United States. She persuaded corporate sponsors to give computers, televisions, shoes, jerseys and scholarships. Petrina was transforming herself from

housewife to teacher to fundraiser. The centre doubled, tripled and quadrupled in size. Refugee agencies, orphanages, schools and NGOs began turning to Petrina for expert advice. So she became a trainer, facilitator and lobbyist. “I never planned all this for my life,” Petrina said. “I just ended up doing all these things because I was led by the children and the poor. They are my teachers.”

Today, Harvest Centre has over six hundred children attending daily classes from pre-kindergarten to Form Five. The bright Montessori-style classrooms teem with life – potted plants, song birds in cages, a pet iguana, and a resident cocker spaniel. There are science, music and computer labs. Teenagers bake cookies and muffins at a youth drop-in centre. Volunteers prepare three nutritious meals for the children daily.

“Harvest Centre is a dream environment for the refugee children,” concluded a report from UNHCR.<sup>3</sup> Curriculum planners from Teach For Malaysia were impressed by how students were taught how to teach fellow students.

Petrina’s leadership is all the more remarkable because she did not set out with a ten-year plan to develop a sustainable model of education for the poor. She was an ordinary housewife. And yet, by letting go of control and allowing herself to be led by children, she has morphed into a community leader for more than a thousand families trapped by illiteracy, poverty and pervasive prejudice against refugees.

“I can’t see myself doing anything else,” Petrina told me as we sat in the principal’s office. “I made a decision to see the need. And I made a choice to respond to my calling.”

### 3. Let Go of the Past

Janet Pillai, one of DIGI’s Amazing Malaysians, has gained renown for facilitating workshops that rewire the brains of youths. She teaches young people how to write, interview, shoot videos and work in teams.

The kids learn how to collaborate with adults and subject experts. They share their insights through cooking competitions, traditional dances and street shows. Every teenager who attends Janet’s workshop becomes naturally curious about their world.

But to my surprise, when I asked Janet to recount her best memories of school, she could not. “I have none,” she said. The pain from her childhood memories was still too raw. Did that mean Janet was unable to let go of the past hurts inflicted upon her by her teachers?

On the contrary. Janet insists that it is critical to connect the dots between the past, present and future – and to map these down on paper and in our mindscape. “Geography is closely related with genealogy. When we are able to place ourselves on a map, we begin to value and keep our historical connections,” says Janet.

Janet, too, has had to let go of the ignominy of past failures in school. Today, the emotional wounds do not cripple her. Instead, the scars serve as a reminder for Janet to empathise with kids who experience failure. Janet has emerged stronger for her extraordinary ability to grow the potential of young people.

What’s better does not begin until what’s bitter is drained away.

- *Let go of past sorrows.* Recollect occasions when others failed you. This may include the loss of loved ones, humiliation, anger and mismatched expectations. In what ways have you closed your heart to pain? What is the worst thing that has been said against you? You have to name it, and let it go. You may also need to forgive the person who wronged you.
- *Let go of past failures.* Recollect occasions when you failed yourself. What are the disappointments or mistakes that come to mind? Be specific (e.g. “I failed as a parent to spend time with Sarah especially when she turned twelve” or “I failed to give proper recognition to my executive assistant’s hard work”). Describe how you feel without judging yourself. Share your insights with someone you trust. Confessing past failures frees you to become wiser, more mature and more grateful.



## How to Prosper in the Zone of Pain

Mark Chang, the CEO of Jobstreet, and the winner of the Ernst & Young Technology Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2004, offers three big tips for surviving – and thriving – when we let go of the comfort zone:

1. *Think of your comfort zone as the danger zone.* It is better to fail and fall, than to avoid trying something you have always wanted to do. “People who get locked in the comfort zone lock themselves out from achieving their true potential.”
2. *Do not run away.* A lot of people dare not venture into the zone of pain, so be grateful when you are forced to go there – perhaps through a setback, betrayal, accident or illness. Things may appear bad, but face the problems head-on. “Don’t give up. You can always adapt to adversity.”
3. *Give yourself permission to struggle and fail.* The answers will not be apparent to you when you begin the journey of change. “As long as you keep on working on the questions and solving problems, you will be fine.”



### Step Into the Shoes of Irene Fernandez

Irene Fernandez is perhaps Malaysia’s most well-known human rights activist. Tenaganita, the NGO that she founded, fights for the rights of exploited migrant workers in Malaysia and worldwide. Irene burst into national prominence in 1995, when she interviewed hundreds of migrant workers in detention camps who suffered from malnutrition, physical and sexual abuse. Her

report embarrassed the Malaysian authorities. A year later, Irene was arrested and charged with publishing false news. It took seven years for Irene to be found guilty in 2003, and sentenced to a year in prison. She appealed. Freed on bail, her passport was confiscated and her office raided. She was forced to attend more than four hundred court hearings over the space of thirteen years – the longest trial in Malaysian history.

Place yourself in Irene’s shoes. How would you have responded? What would you have done during those thirteen years when you lost control of your time, movement and freedom?

### What Irene Did

Irene Fernandez had no choice but to learn from her trials – literally.

1. *She changed her mindset.* Rather than seethe in resentment, she saw the court case as a fulfillment of her childhood dreams of becoming a lawyer. Like it or not, Irene was now getting a legal education. And she played the starring role!
2. *She opened her eyes.* As she sat on a bench waiting for her case to be heard, she began noticing the same drug users being hauled to court. It eventually dawned on her that the root issue was not being addressed: the drug users were suffering from a health problem, not a criminal problem. “I learned a lot about the legal system and the justice system just by sitting in court and observing,” Irene said.

When we purposefully let go of control, or when we lose control of our lives, it is easy to become embittered. Irene resisted this temptation. Irene chose to be grateful for how the legal ordeal blessed her with legal expertise, a global perspective, and self-knowledge. Barefoot Leaders who choose to let go of control are blessed with the ability to change and grow through unexpected or painful circumstances.



## Going Barefoot

### Exercise 1: Life's Milestones

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### Instructions

1. Write down a milestone, a major decision, or life-changing event on each of the ten lines (e.g. studying abroad, getting married, your first child). Do this step first before proceeding.
2. Now, for each item, ask yourself: "Were you fully in control of that event?"
3. Place a tick (✓) in the corresponding box for an event that turned out exactly the way you planned. Place a checkmark (✗) for an event that did not turn out the way you expected.
4. Number of ticks (✓): \_\_\_\_\_  
Number of checkmarks (✗): \_\_\_\_\_

Idris Jala, who taught me this reflection exercise, has discovered that more than 60% of the life-changing events he experienced were beyond his control. As a young man, he wanted to be a lawyer but the letter containing his scholarship to study in New Zealand got misplaced. He wound up studying at Universiti Sains Malaysia. He subsequently joined Shell and rose the ranks before becoming CEO of MAS and PEMANDU.

"If I had gotten the letter to study law, I would probably be a lawyer in Miri today," Idris said.

This exercise shows us that we are not in full control of the major events and turning points in our life. Leaders who rise to the top – often through command-and-control tactics – need to understand this. "This helps us to be at peace when we face situations that are beyond our control," says Idris.

***Letting go of control is the first act of Barefoot Leadership. As we let go of control, we free ourselves to identify – and embrace – our calling.***