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QUDWA 2017

Inspirational Stories

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Dave Duarte, CEO, Treeshake, South Africa

Moderated/Facilitated by: **Anas Bukhash**, founder Bukhash Brothers and co-founder of Ahdaaf Sports Club

Summary Paragraph/Key Points

For someone described as “a passionate educator” Dave Duarte did not have a great start in school. He “scraped by” for much of his youth, not getting the grades you might expect from someone who would become a speaker at the United Nations, TED and the World Economic Forum. He eventually found the motivation to achieve in school, but then dropped out of university when his father took ill. He regained momentum and worked in the technology industry before burning out. Then he got his groove back and started Treeshake, an organization that gets people involved in urgent issues ranging from environmental protection to digital education. But he still has not stopped failing; in a recent project to publish textbooks on a chat app (ReachTrust), Duarte thought he had pulled off a great coup. He hired a great designer and gamified the app, then partnered with a local grocery store to offer less-privileged kids coupons for food if they completed their schoolwork. He had a budget for TV ads and a PR campaign that led to a million sign-ups. The result? Less than 10% of those sign-ups returned to the app. Why? “It is still education,” he said. “It is like covering broccoli in chocolate.” The second version of the app targeted teachers and became a roaring success with a return rate of over 100% because teachers referred it onward.

“I am where I am because I struggled,” Duarte said. “We need to nurture the human will to succeed. We need to focus on basic human truths to get students ready for the future workplace. Some skills are helpful, but kids need to develop grit, resilience and problem solving.”

One of the main themes of Duarte’s session was the need to develop a healthy relationship with technology. But to do that, it helps to look at what technology means. Breaking the word down into its roots, we discover that “techno” means an art or craft, while an “ology” is a systemic treatment of a subject. Duarte learned early in life that technology could be as simple as something that helps you see the world in a different way.





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“I did poorly at school because I needed glasses,” he said. “Getting them had a fundamental impact on the way I learned. Glasses are technology. And why was I able to drop out of university and start my first business? Because I did not have glasses. I had to become a self-sufficient learner. I came up with new ways to learn.”

Once you understand that technology is not something foreign and scary, you can start using it to solve problems. “If you do not know, give it a go,” Duarte said. “You must get kids into the space where the only failure is the failure to try.” One of the best ways to learn technology is chance to build technology. Robotics, in particular, teaches students coding, fine motor skills and how to use web-connected programs. Games such as Minecraft also allow the user to use their creativity; because there is no end to the game, there is no way to fail. “How do we get more freedom into our lives?” Duarte asked. “Do not lose sight of the value of play. I burnt out many times when I got into technology because I thought the job was to become most like a machine. Technology should be leveraged to do tasks quicker to liberate us to play.”

Entering the fourth industrial revolution, it is important to remember that while the games and multimedia we spend more and more time with change constantly, basic human truths are the same as ever. To solve problems such as climate change quickly and with ingenuity we should be thinking of what Amazon’s Jeff Bezos said: “Rather than asking what will change in 10 years, think of what won’t change.”

For teachers like those at Qudwa who will be the first to encounter kids to whom technology is native, this means focusing less on rote learning and memorization and more on making sure students have at least one ally in the classroom. “The teachers who had the biggest influence on me were the ones who had compassion,” Duarte said. “They were the ones who when I was naughty did not tell me I was a bad person but tried to figure me out. There is no need to control every aspect of kids’ lives.”

Takeaway: Teachers should work to erase the stigma around failure so that students develop the grit to keep on trying to solve problems if at first they don’t succeed.

