THOUGHTS ON LEARNING AND EDUCATION
by Robert Chung

There is a Chinese proverb: It takes ten years to grow a tree to be useful. It takes a hundred years to educate an individual to be of value. I submit that education is a life-long learning process.

To become educated begins with an attitude. Attitude is a mindset that’s difficult to teach or learn. Unfortunately, many young men and women attending school equate diplomas as their proof of education. They attended lectures, memorized facts, did homework in order to get that “piece of paper.” Somehow, many learning activities, formal or informal, stopped upon their graduation. To me, the motto of the Phi Kappa Phi honorary society—“Let the love of learning rule mankind”—represents a positive mindset.

In addition to the right mindset, we need to carve out a sound approach to learning. A sound approach to learning begins by asking the right question or research question before one jumps into the specific learning activities. I like to think that a right question is one that would stand the test of time. A right question is also one that not only you, but many people, want to learn the answer.

Once the right question is raised, a reasonable procedure or methodology must follow. The journey to reach a meaningful answer always takes more time and energy than one would expect. Other than being persistent about it, we may want to break a complex problem into a number of manageable pieces and address each in turn. Another useful procedure is to evaluate the progress to date and to document the efforts so as not to lose sight of the objectives.

Who would I cite as an educated person whose life has made a difference in the society we live in? Consider Chester Carlson, the inventor of xerography in 1938. Xerography is a method of reproducing a document by electrostatic means in an office environment quickly and inexpensively. Few of us knew that Chester Carlson was raised in a financially strapped family. He had to attend night school to educate himself while working full-time during the day in order to support his family. His road to success was long and difficult.

Even though Chester Carlson demonstrated the electrostatic imaging principle in his kitchen [in 1938], it took him an additional twenty years before he was able to turn his invention from concept to reality. An ordinary person probably would have abandoned his plan long ago, and no difference would have been made to the society. In 1998, short-run copying and digital printing represented a $40 to $60 billion business segment. It was Chester Carlson’s attitude toward learning, his ability to pick the right question, and his persistence toward finding the solutions which made a real difference to today’s society. Ironically, the long-term impact of xerography to the society was underestimated by everyone, including Chester Carlson himself. You see, one of young Chester’s dreams was to own a typewriter of his own someday. Little did he know that the use of a computer and his invention (a laser printer) would virtually replace the typewriter.

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