Module Code : MBAM949

Module Name: Personal Transformations

Candidate Number : 157764

**Word Count: 1415**

In this essay I seek to reflect on this past year, to highlight achievements and growth and areas for improvement. In assessing the year, I will also look to the Personal Development Plan (hereafter PDP) produced in late spring and compare outcomes to expectations. My main observations from the year are two-fold first that my main motivation for taking on the MBA was to assess my professional competency and to get more clarity on areas that I have to improve. I believe I have made good progress in this area and I will list how in the following paragraphs.

The second conclusion is that I erred in believing the answers to personal development were all based on choices that were solely mine to make. On re-reading my PDP I believe that I placed focus on my wellbeing without working to identify what, beyond my personal choices, may have been affecting my wellbeing. For example, what the nature of the institutions that I was operating is. What my access to resources are. What my access to relevant mentorship is. Or whether choice such as ‘work less’ were even relevant to me. I also put emphasis on trying to assimilate with the cohort and other groups of people, believing that this would increase my competency without fully reflecting on whether that was true.

So far this year I have ran my business successfully during a pandemic and with an 80% reduction of resources, I have almost completed a degree and have begun to develop a new venture. I managed to carry out these activities in tandem because I became more critical about how I was choosing to spend my time; what resources I was using what resources I wasn’t. I became much more effective in managing my team, giving them more authority and giving them a clearer sense of their responsibilities. I improved the outcome of my business, which at the beginning of the pandemic was at risk of closing, by reviewing what new products customers wanted and improving our competitive positioning on price, on speed and on service. Overall the year gave me access to an objective set of tools I could use to reassess challenges in my personal and professional life in order to pursue better outcomes for myself and my peers.

However, when comparing the outcomes of this year against my PDP I see that I was unable to make improvements in one area that was significant to me. In my wellbeing. In my PDP I identify the need to rest, and that I felt it would be possible if I were to make better connections with the cohort or different groups of people within the cohort.

Although I did not define what I meant by other groups of people – by looking at the course as mainly dominated by white and Asian members it can be inferred that what I was referring to was race. Since writing the PDP and since sharing reflections of my experiences this year and in my work life with other professional women of other backgrounds I can see that full assimilation into groups which differ from my identity is never something I can fully achieve. The reason for this is because our relationships are always framed with a structural inequality and our implicit biases. As a minority and as a woman these biases are often to my detriment.

To exemplify this point I would like to share a conversation with a friend and lecturer at The University of Exeter, a black male. On his first day at the University he arrived early, ‘at the crack of dawn’ he describes. To settle into a new position, in a new town, in a world class university and this next stage in his career. Having worked 20 years prior to be an effective candidate for the position he felt ready to begin. As he settled into his office the door opened, and before he could introduce himself, he hears the frightened scream of the office cleaner, who has never seen a black man in the space. She runs away to find campus security who on arrival demand to see paperwork for this man. Who is he? Why is he there? Is he allowed to be there?

Despite being on a pay grade and authority far above both the cleaner and security person he needed their permission to exist in that space. When he raised this incident with leadership, they dismissed it, failed to record it, and everything continued unchanged. When I walk into spaces where I am a minority, which is currently most professional spaces and has been every space I’ve experienced this year at the University, people ask the same questions. Sometimes they ask directly sometimes indirectly with assumptions that existed far before they met me and will last when I leave.

When asking my course tutor and Business school leadership why there are so few Black professionals in the Business School or why I was not given the opportunity to learn from a Black person my questions go unanswered. If it were possible to assimilate why would I need to justify my presence in so many spaces, to so many people, many of which are not my peers? Why would this be the experience of each of my professional peers? On reflection, I don’t believe assimilation is a useful tool for me to better navigate the world of business. It is instead the choice of the individuals or institutions who hold the space in which I enter whether I can assimilate into them.

One may argue that it is my responsibility to try to negotiate, persuade and perhaps even change these institutions and workplaces. However, my experience so far is that this is an unrewarding and unsustainable process. For example, over the past few weeks I have communicated with different levels of leadership in The Business School to help them identify its path to meeting the standard of diversity and inclusion it promotes. This attempt has been met with inconsistent messaging and gaslighting. Most disappointingly it has been met with insufficient action. There has been no attempt to consider this feedback to have financial value, and there was no offer of pay. In sharing my experiences with other academics and admin staff within the institution it has been made clear that it is common practise where a person of colour is given the load of identifying and then having to offer solution to issues of racial inequality whilst not being offered compensation for their work burden. Meaning that lack of pay is not the result of being a student or my inexperience, but rather because the feedback is not considered valuable enough to pay for.

As there are only so many hours in a day, I can carry out free labour, I will need to direct my energy elsewhere. The lesson learnt here for my professional development is that value adding can only be acknowledged by the party who holds resources. Until they acknowledge the value added I ought to not make myself available. I am glad to have recognised this now as I can free myself of the mental burden of knowing that my input can improve an organisation and feeling the responsibility to provide it.

To have more autonomy over my personal development I will need to seek answers to my wellbeing that is not rooted in assimilation but in standing more comfortably in my difference. And in a better understanding that I cannot influence how others treat me or my peers from a position of lesser power to them. As the rate of mental health challenges are disproportionately high amongst minority women, I believe this is an important observation for me personally and for my peers.

To conclude, I have progressed this year, but that progress could have been more holistic in a more inclusive environment. I feel relieved that I have seen success in business and acknowledge a better understanding on subjects that affect my professional competency which helped to secure that success. I do however feel that the peace that I hoped to find in meditation spaces or in walks offered to my peers will not be available to me until the impacts of systematic racism and implicit bias are addressed. And unfortunately, I have little control over when or how affectively they will be addressed. In the meantime, I can continue to improve my effectiveness in work and reflect on my contribution to the development of my peers. Hopefully at some point those who allow space for racism and discrimination through their inaction will instead create safe welcoming and peaceful spaces for myself and my peers and hopefully then I will be able to work on improving my wellbeing.