

Thank You Address by Dr Joe Tsai

Doctor of Social Sciences, *honoris causa*

Council Chairman Professor Frederick Ma and members of the Council, President Professor Stephen Cheung, and staff, graduates, parents and friends of The Education University of Hong Kong, it is my great honour to stand here to give a few words of thanks for the Honorary Doctorate degree you are bestowing on my fellow recipients and myself.

I am sure that Professor Edward Chen Kwan-yiu, Professor Christopher Day, Mr Lam Woon-kwong, and Dr Pang Yiu-kai are just as grateful as I am for your recognition. However, I cannot guarantee that I can be as eloquent as they are in expressing gratitude for such a meaningful honour.

When Council Chairman Professor Frederick Ma asked me to speak at your graduation Congregation, I immediately accepted the invitation even before he told me that I would be receiving an Honorary Doctorate degree. I jumped at the chance to establish a closer connection with you – the graduates of this great University, which is focused on educating teachers of the future.

Why am I so excited to do this?

Nineteen years ago, I walked into a modest second-floor apartment in Hangzhou, China, and that visit changed my life. I met a great teacher by the name of Jack Ma. I not only met him, but also his disciples – who were his students from university who followed him to start Alibaba. And later these students became great teachers in their own right.

Alibaba is a story of teachers. It is a story of teachers who became leaders. It is a story of leaders who begot more leaders.

You must be curious about how this happened, so here it is.

We went from humble beginnings in 1999 to being one of the largest technology companies in the world today. As our business became more complex, as we scale our operations from hundreds to thousands to tens of thousands people, we began to realise that we couldn't just add more people to handle all of that growth. We must train them.

So who was going to do that? All of that training and mentoring. The tendency was to delegate this work to our human resources department. But then we realised that people development was the job of the business leader, not the HR person. That was when we started to appreciate that the qualities of a teacher are common to sound leadership in business. That is, we began to realise that good teachers make great business leaders.

You say, “Oh yes I get it, big bosses always evaluate their people, ranking them from best to worst, and as a teacher this is what I do to my students as well.” Well, leadership is a lot more than grading and ranking your people.

Three things about teachers stand out to me.

First, good teachers are good communicators. Through communication they connect with students, not only enrich their minds but also touch their hearts. As a business leader, if you want to lead a company, you have to communicate clearly – excuse me, not only communicate, but *evangelise* – the company’s mission, vision and values to your employees. A company without clear direction and a strong moral compass from its leaders will be rudderless, with employees drifting off in different directions and ultimately failing in either execution or upholding ethical standards, or both.

Second, good teachers care about developing their students, and they are willing to spend the time and effort to make their students better. In a business, you are constantly looking to improve the capabilities of your talent base. The leaders who pay attention and invest personal time to develop their people will achieve more because with the support of a better team, you can scale your business to new heights.

Third, good teachers have that innate sense of humility in them. They are eager to see their student become more successful than they are – in Chinese we say “青出於藍”. The student has moved on to achieve career success, and the teacher is thrilled to see that, because they enjoy the fruits of what they sow. In a business, you want your leaders to have that sense of humility – what I call “胸懷” – which is best translated into English by Jack Welch, the legendary chairman and CEO of General Electric. In his memoir, which is the bible of business management, Jack Welch said: “Grade A people hire other grade A people; grade B people hire grade C people.”

In other words, you want your leaders to be able to hire people who are smarter and better than they are. Organisations improve only when you have leaders who possess the self-awareness and humility to identify and give young, smart people the opportunities to shine. Develop young people and then step aside. True leadership is about never taking credit for the success of your team. By the same token, when great teachers are asked to explain the secrets of their success in developing great students, they will say all they did was unlock the potential in their students.

We live in a very complex and challenging world. It is a world full of frustration and discontent. The trade war may last for a long time. As you walk out the gates of this institution, you will be faced with unprecedented challenges. But there are reasons to be optimistic. I am optimistic about your future because you possess the talent to lift up others, especially our younger generation which is so important to the future of our society.

I’d like you to remember, no matter what profession you end up in, your talents as a teacher – that is, your good communication skills, your eagerness to develop people, and your humility to let your students exceed you – will always be in great demand. So my final word of advice is: don’t forget to teach, whether it is to your students or your employees or your children. Always seize that teaching moment to make others better. By making others better you will make yourself better!

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share.