
Career Insight: Saif Saeed Ghobash on Why Great Leaders Should Study History

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Saif Saeed Ghobash is the undersecretary of the Department of Culture and Tourism in Abu Dhabi, a city in the United Arab Emirates. During our recent global travels, KWHS met Ghobash for a Knowledge@Wharton interview about his key role in helping to bring Paris's famous Louvre museum to the UAE. The Louvre Abu Dhabi opened in November 2017. Here, Ghobash underscores the importance of history as you become effective leaders.

Any leader has to navigate through troubling times and great times. Chances are, a lot of the incidents that we face today as business leaders are not very unique, unless they are driven by technological disruption. But the methodology you would use to navigate around these is the same as the methodology used by someone 500 or 1,000 years ago. I think it is good for a business leader to be grounded in great business education today, but it is also very important for them to be well read when it comes to history, and especially the history of nations, leaders and biographies. There's a lot to learn, and it helps you to accelerate and steepen your learning curve, instead of having to recreate the wheel.

I studied at Wharton as an undergraduate and then I got my MBA from IMD Business School. At IMD, we were given books and case studies to read – how did that guy turn Whirlpool around and what happened to Hewlett-Packard there. Why do we do that? Because if we take the lessons learned from the mistakes and successes of past business leaders and we apply them in our work, we will avoid making these mistakes and we will unlock greater value.

Then we have to pay it forward. When we discover hurdles that no one has ever seen before, the onus is on us to document what we face and how we overcome the challenge – or, all the attempts we've made to do so and failed, because we need to embrace failure as leaders. People get very busy with their work and don't allocate enough time in their lives to document what they've learned. That's something you owe the broader business community and the public, so that you can drive together toward a more prosperous future.