

Damien Duhamel: Advising resilience and humility to achieve success



Gandi Faisal

Solidance

Damien Duhamel believes staying resilient and humble are keys to having a strong foothold in an industry.

Solidance's Damien Duhamel, who has his main office in Singapore but occasionally makes a round of visits to other offices across the region, has been in the consulting industry since he was in an internship program. He hasn't looked back. 'I kind of got the consulting bug and I've been in the industry ever since.'

He added that young people should really think twice about what internship program they want to join, as it can make or break their entire career. 'An internship program puts you in one direction,' he said and this direction can be a definitive one in terms of career development.

'During my internship I learned that I like to be in this industry, in this case helping companies to enter a certain market,' he said. 'I like to do this. Hence, I'll be good at it. So, I angled my life, education and career toward helping enterprises to enter and to grow in Asia.'

Asked why his focus is on Asia, he said it was because he knew the continent. 'An advisory firm needs some focus. Focusing on Asia, which is already quite big, was our way to gain traction and market share fast,' he explained. He wanted the company he co-founded to be perceived as the Asia expert. 'Asia is a patchwork of cultures, languages, foods, religions, economies and systems. So, as we focus on those, we can clearly explain to clients what they need to know about the continent.'

Thanks to this focus his company now has 14 offices in the region after only eight years.

Data-driven industry

Talking about the industry in the country and that in other countries in the region, Duhamel admitted the consulting industry is relatively new in Indonesia.

'Ten years ago the industry had a tough battle to educate the market. They didn't understand what a consulting firm can deliver. They either didn't know anything or they already had a preconceived idea about the industry,' he recalled.

He added that the market had also been very small. 'It was a small and unstructured market, but today the industry has moved from emerging to developing. Most clients know the value of a consultancy firm.' He believes that a consulting company with strong integrity and professionalism will always have its advice asked for.

Duhamel has been working with Fortune 500 companies in accelerating their growth and entering new markets in various locations across Asia.

He reiterated that data do not lie, so when clients come and ask for confirmation of their preconceived ideas or plans they have written down, he always advises based on what the company finds out about the issue.

Growing human capital

When asked about Indonesia, Duhamel said the country had an emerging pool of local talent ready to enter the industry. 'They are better educated, better traveled and better connected. There are more Fortune 500 companies in Indonesia today and they help train this talent pool.'

He added that despite the developing quality of the human resources in the industry, there is still big room for improvement. 'And this is not an issue the government can solve in a couple of years. We're talking about a 20-year period.'

Speaking more about human capital, Duhamel explained that he didn't really do a lot of motivation. He said he believes that recruiting staff who need to be motivated to be excited with the company's vision is not a good policy. Instead, he wants the staff to be the ones who push him to work better for the company.

'We want people to be self-motivated. What we do is provide training, education and an opportunity to grow, not give motivation,' he asserted.

Duhamel, however, cautioned that a company's top managers shouldn't spend all their time in an ivory tower. The top management still needs to know what goes on at the lower level of management. 'I encourage innovation. I want people to try out ideas they have and many of these ideas are driven by our Jakarta office,' he added. Thus, he said he believes in putting much trust in the staff. 'I think the staff value this trust they are given. They can leverage this trust and grow, or they can make a mess of it. The good ones will leverage this trust and grow because they know trust is a very valuable commodity,' he explained.

He added: 'Young people should really stop job-hopping; be resilient in the position you are in. Changing jobs every nine months or so will only ruin your resume. That's my tip for the young,' he asserted.

Staying humble

Duhamel said his style leaned toward a hands-on type of management. 'I believe in the people working in the company. We have a rigid recruitment process and we know about the people we are hiring right from the recruitment process.' That way, he hires only those with strong capabilities and high motivation who know what they want and strive to achieve this.

Duhamel mentioned Jack Welch, the former CEO of GE, as a person he admires in the business world. 'He is straight talker and is disliked by many, but he's the kind of person I'd love working with. He was a person who employed sharks, wolves, people who were hungry.'

Among political leaders, Duhamel said Winston Churchill was the one he admires. He said he likes his humility in success and in defeat. 'I like that in someone. Humility in our world is a very underappreciated quality, especially among business leaders,' he said while stating that leaders should realize they don't know everything and that's where humility is very important.

'Right now, I am doing a master's degree in urban development and sustainability. There is a great need to make Asian cities more livable. This is part of my passion: Observing the cities and understanding them and helping the cities and the people to live better. I want to be able to say that I did good in my life,' Duhamel said about the passions he has outside of the world of business consulting. **(Gandi Faisal)**

-----Birth

Paris, France in 1970

career highlights

Co-founder, CEO and managing Asia partner of Solidiance, which is based in Singapore (2006 to present); Asia-Pacific managing director of Dentsu Aegis Network (2000 to 2006).

Education

Certificate in Vietnamese studies from Hanoi University of Technology (1989-1990); diploma in international business from RMIT University (1993-1994); Bachelor's degree in business with a major in international trade from Victoria University (1994-1995); MBA in corporate strategy and finance from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business (2003-2005); currently completing a master's degree in sustainability and environmental management, city/urban community and regional planning at Harvard University (2014-2017).

AT EASE

Electronic dance music

I like EDM [Electric Dance Music]. Since its early days, while EDM was still an underground music, I was already into it ' not only listening to it. I also compose and mix my own electronic dance music. I also enjoyed deejaying, but not anymore.

Brazilian jiu-jitsu

I practice MMA [mixed martial arts], especially Brazilian jiu-jitsu. I think Brazilian jiu-jitsu is a great sport, but nowadays I can only practice it about twice a week.

Social work

In Singapore I also spend any spare time I have with the Make-a-Wish Foundation. We help children with terminal diseases fulfill their wishes. They may be simple to many of us, but for them it is something they will treasure.