



Laying Tracks For The Future: Dr. Kriengsak Chareonwongsak

By Dato' Dr. Jessie Tang



What does it take for one to ascend to a position of trust within a nation's innermost circle of elite policy makers, providing counsel on matters of national interest with the power to shape the future lives of millions?

"The key here is trust," said Dr Kriengsak Chareonwongsak, a 62-year-old Thai scholar whose impressive career involves handing out critical advice and strategic guidance in a score of political, business and academic positions. "A trust that is built not solely upon honesty, but rather is crystallised upon the marriage of integrity and capability."

It is no surprise that leaders in the Thai government placed respectful credence in Dr Kriengsak Chareonwongsak, a man of honourable principles and astounding capabilities, whose noteworthy appointment as the trusted advisor to Prime Ministers, Deputy Prime Ministers and various Ministers came amidst turbulent times of political unrest as well as promising, pivotal phases of nation-building and recovery.

Dr Kriengsak built his trust with people through dignified counselling, allowing freedom of debate and respectful dialogue to take course in the nation's highest office, and a willingness to stay behind the scenes, selflessly letting those in power to succeed using his ideas to lay tracks for Thailand's future development.

"There are times when we tend to worry more about our relationships with others than about speaking for the right things, for the common good of the society," Dr Kriengsak said, adding that in his advisory role to policy makers the long-term advancement of society takes utmost precedence over any other considerations.

This admirable scholar credits his success to his parents and his early beginnings, where Asian family values of honesty, selflessness and hard work, as well as principles on the greater good of society are instilled. Born into a large family of five, Dr Kriengsak is the son of a Thai businessman of Chinese descent and a doting and nurturing Thai housewife. The importance of education and life-long learning, was made known to him at an early age, when his parents worked hard to ensure that he had academic fulfilment at the best schools in Bangkok. "For my parents, education is very important. They always wanted their children to have good opportunities and eventually succeed in education."

His enrolment into three of the world's most prestigious universities in three countries is a testament to his academic calibre. After completing his high school in Thailand and USA, Dr Kriengsak graduated with first class honours and Top of the Class and obtained a PhD in Economics in 1981 at Monash University, Australia. He obtained a Master of Public Administration from Harvard University, a Master's Degree from Judge Business School, Cambridge University, having also a DPhil (Doctor of Philosophy in Management) and

Post-Doctoral Studies (Policy Studies and Management) at the University of Oxford, UK. He graduated from the National Defence College of Thailand and also graduated from the esteemed King Prachatipok Institute.



But more notably, Dr Kriengsak is a principled man of astounding capabilities and accomplishments. With the aptitude for sound, strategic thinking and the mastery of broad multidisciplinary subjects, he has reached expert status in multiple diverse fields – politics, academic, business, international relations, community development and media.

Being the Chairman of the Success Group of Companies, a conglomerate of businesses involved in the media and knowledge industry, biotechnology, finance and securities, leisure and travel and many other industries, Dr Kriengsak shared his winning strategy: setting a forward-thinking vision, and providing consistent guidance to his team to devise actionable plans and creative, practical solutions to achieve the vision. "It is important to have a shared vision that is believable, and that your team and your stakeholders are inspired and motivated along with you," he said.

Dr Kriengsak is currently entrusted with fifty other positions in a number of national organisations and committees, as well as multinational enterprises and public listed companies both in Thailand and overseas, including the directorship of a Singapore-listed semiconductor equipment manufacturer ASTI Holdings.

When asked about what is the one advice he will give to someone in pursuit of success, "Build trust with the right people through integrity and capability, make the best of your constrained resources with long-term and action-orientated planning, and have the grit for success and life-long learning," Dr Kriengsak responded. He added that this applies to anyone and everyone, be it in one's pursuit of professional success or personal fulfilment. "The best advice is often universal."



Among many of his mammoth roles and responsibilities, Dr Kriengsak is also a prolific writer, and the author of over two hundred books, as well as a popular radio and TV commentator, and a newspaper and magazine columnist. The shoes that he has to fill is unfathomable to most people. "I have many things in mind. I guess what keeps me getting things done is being productive with minimum resources, through a creative and innovative way," he said when asked about how he juggles the numerous commitments in so many fields.

Q & A

"The way I live my life, I surround it with the work I love and the work that is purposeful. And because of this, work never becomes a burden for me, rather it becomes a lifelong learning and enjoyment."

Inspire: An advisor, a president, a chairman, a professor, an entrepreneur, a politician, a social activist, and not to mention, a husband and a father. How do you balance your time and excel in all these commitments?

Kriengsak: I think my advice is – manage your time well, manage your people well, and just be creative so that you'll yield the most out of whatever resources you currently have.

When dealing with multiple commitments, projects or businesses, there will definitely be challenges in the process. And the reality is this - you'll never have enough capability and resources to do everything on your own. It is so important that you prudently and logistically work out how to invest the minimum time for the maximum result, and learn to coordinate and work with your team, whom you must trust wholeheartedly. Thus, good management and leadership is very important.

Personally, my main challenge is really how to combine or synergize the efforts of my team and mine in order to bring about achievement within constrained resources. And I learnt that it is absolutely crucial that you find the right people who have similar values and goals, and inspire them to share the same vision so you can work in synergy to achieve that vision.

Inspire: You have achieved much in higher education. What were some of the challenges and the special moments of achievement?

Kriengsak: The biggest challenge I faced happened at the time when I was studying at Monash University in Australia. There were a lot of foreign scholars from many developing countries including Singapore. They were all so brilliant! As for me, I graduated from a high school with an American education system, which frankly was of less rigour compared to the British education system, at least when it comes to

Mathematics. So, when I was a freshman at Monash, I had to study advanced calculus by myself for 3 months in order to catch up with my friends, whom had a few years of calculus ahead of me. And amazingly, I ended up getting the top score from that class!

This experience made me realize that to reap the most out of a formal education, sheer participation in education is not enough – it also requires an inspired motivation for self-learning. Which is why today, as much as I believe that higher education is very important for our youth, I think that this motivation for self-learning, or lifelong learning, is equally, if not, more important.

There is new knowledge to be discovered every day, and consequently, learning new knowledge is a never-ending process. Since graduating with the Doctorate Degree, I made a personal commitment to continuously learn – whether it is new industry knowledge or knowledge in new fields. To date, I have attended more than 50 domestic and international courses in leadership development and senior management. In Thailand, I took several courses from various institutes such as King Prajadhipok's Institute, Political and Electoral Development Institute, the Administrative Courts of Thailand, Capital Market Academy, The Stock Exchange of Thailand and the Thai Institute of Directors (IOD).

So, my advice is - never stop learning.

Inspire: Your role as Advisor to the Thai Government is very prestigious, yet requiring very subtle and diplomatic advice. How do you cope, taking into consideration ethics, governance and human rights issues?

Kriengsak: I suppose working with people of various personalities and backgrounds is always interesting. Being an effective advisor in the high office, I knew that it is important that I learn how to navigate through the psyche of elite policy makers and those in position of power. And I realised that this requires finding a balance: between being truthful and having conviction in our advocacy.

It is absolutely critical that firstly, emotions, biasedness or fallacies do not interfere or hold weight in the discussion, and secondly a firm conviction is maintained - believing in and being convinced that the approach is right. Only then, we can move forward with a clear conscience knowing that we are advising something for the common good of the country.

At times, being an advisor requires me to be very ambitious when dealing with challenges, and table "out of the box" solutions or plans that helps the nation achieve certain milestones. I always love to allow the freedom to debate, to engage in constructive dialogues and to ask questions, so that ultimately those in power can objectively decide what is best for the country and whether they agree with the proposal.

Such engagement allows them to have ownership over what is being proposed behind the scenes so that publicly

it becomes their own idea, and ultimately grants them the honour of sharing the success. Willingness to hide behind others and to let them succeed using your ideas is the key.

Inspire: You've credited much of your success to the great parenting and role modelling of your parents. As an expert in societal development, how can we effectuate a good environment for our youth and the young millennials to grow up?

Kriengsak: Frankly, I consider myself as having grown up in a very good environment. My father was my role model in honesty. He was one of the most honest person you could ever meet – he always kept his promises. My mother, on the other hand, is my role model for her kindness and open-mindedness.

When I started to make regular visits to orphanages as a young boy, I came to realize the importance of family as the first institution to lay the foundation for every individual. Proper parenting and support from a loving and caring environment, irrespective of one's financial standing, are enablers for important family values to be imbued and instilled from young, and is important for the eventual development of our society as a whole. This is an issue that must be addressed when it comes to nation building for our youth.

Then, when I started to make regular visits to the blind as a young man, I realised the importance of education when I had to learn the blind language of Braille so that I would be able to translate books for them and eventually teach them new knowledge, hoping that it would help them to find decent work within their circumstances and earn a living. Truly, education opens the door to opportunities.

Then as I entered into the professional world as an adult, I realised the importance of involvement – for an individual to be proactively involved in societal issues and offer contribution selflessly for the greater good, especially when one is at a more advantaged position in society. This is the motivation I gathered while being entrusted with a position in the Nation-Building Institute, so that more youth are able to be actively involved as future nation builders of their own society.



Inspire: Millennials hold the keys to future leadership for countries throughout the world. What areas of development could they play for the immediate future, especially in ASEAN countries?

Kriengsak: I think there are a number of ideas that I can propose.

First, build education links by establishing education exchange programs between students in secondary schools and universities in the ASEAN region, and by creating a culture to form academic networks with their counterparts in other countries. This may lead to the development and betterment of education throughout ASEAN.

Second, strengthen cultural links by fostering cultural exchanges among youth in the region. As each country in ASEAN has its unique culture and traditions, such exchanges will allow our youth to have an awareness of the region's cultural nuances and differences, thus building common ground so as to work better together.

Third, form future professional links by allowing a more integrated professional community in the region, where young professionals can migrate and work in other ASEAN countries more easily. These professional links will help prepare future young professionals to work in these other countries and support the existing professionals working and residing in other ASEAN countries.

Fourth, form economic and business links by supporting the new generation of young entrepreneurs in ASEAN. Entrepreneurs who are part of an economic and business link will have a greater chance to succeed in their business, knowing that it is costly for each and every business to find and establish their own connection with other entrepreneurs overseas.

Fifth, build political links. ASEAN countries are very different and have their own political ideology. These differences may cause conflict and hinder future development. Therefore, the political link and cooperation of future politicians in the ASEAN region is very important, and will sustain a good relationship among ASEAN countries.

Inspire: Do you see areas of better cooperation for millennials in Thailand and Malaysia?

Kriengsak: Absolutely, the potential for close cooperation between our two countries is there.

Firstly, Thailand and Malaysia share the same border which makes traveling between the two countries easy and very accessible; the number of people crossing between the two countries annually is in the millions. Being two relatively larger continental countries with large economies in the region, Thailand and Malaysia share logistical advantages and can act as good connectors in integrating other ASEAN countries. Moreover, if we exclude Indonesia, which is an archipelago, we may say that the largest countries in ASEAN are Malaysia and Thailand. We can explore further a number of factors of coordination and cooperation so that both countries can benefit from these logistic advantages for our future millennials.

I think a good idea will be to set up a Thai-Malaysian Youth Group in order for our youths to exchange ideas and proactively create a structure that supports a stronger, sustainable relationship – politically, economically and socially. If the two countries cooperate in earnest to push forth the formation of such Youth Group, then there is a great opportunity to help the youth in both nations to be strong and eventually benefiting the remaining 8 ASEAN nations.

Inspire: WIM has just created a WIM Millennials Support Group. Have you any advice and suggestion for us?

Kriengsak: I believe most millennials still lack the time-distilled wisdom and experience that we as adults have, and may also lack strong financial support from their community.



Therefore, I propose that individual adults, existing big corporations and support groups can assist the millennials to form meaningful links and cooperation by: firstly, providing financial support in the form of special funds or donations; secondly, providing and assigning mentorship to youth across diverse fields, through a regional committee comprising of experienced and successful people; thirdly, setting up annual meeting for the various Youth Groups in ASEAN so that they may discuss relevant matters and foster friendships; and fourthly, encouraging educational institutions to include foreign students in ASEAN countries to take part in collaborative projects.

I sincerely advise that WIM Millennials Support Group must establish a framework that guides our millennials to have a shared vision and work together to put in place an actionable plan objectively and systematically through meetings and projects. And I believe that this can eventually be a successful, forward-thinking model that will serve as an example to other youth groups in the broader ASEAN region. ■

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