



# The Art of Survival

Listening, negotiating, goal setting, resolving conflicts, developing backup plans and execution are some of the skills schools should provide to students as they prepare for life and career challenges.



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This year marks 50-years of the iconic Hollywood movie, *The Godfather*. One may wonder what has this masterpiece motion picture got to do with survival skills. This movie is centered around mafia world in New York city but has several life-lesson pearls. I know many in my life, who have been influenced by this movie and has enabled them to reach professional heights. The story is a melodrama involving victory, loses, tragedy, etc., as all are part of everyday life. In this movie, discussions by senior Vito Corleone and his sons Sonny Corleone and Michael Corleone leave everlasting lessons for us. No wonder this movie has its place in history and forever changed Hollywood. Observations in day to day lives provide valuable lessons which in a way will provide more valuable skills to tackle demanding situations as highlighted in *The Godfather*.

## Art of Listening

“Never talk when you should be listening,” advises Senior Corleone to his son Sonny. How sage is this advice and apt-indeed. Solutions to the current geopolitical crisis and medical emergencies like Covid-19 are dependent on listening to those concerned, effective negotiation, crisp and timely communication. The great Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar attaches immense importance to listening and credits listening as a great wealth. As our society has become fast-paced, time for others has become a rare commodity. The ongoing Covid-19 has created an awakening in the importance of personnel interaction, more importantly when interacting with students. Learning experiences is for superior in face-to-face classroom set-ups than looking at screens in virtual set-ups. Parents in many societies demanded reopening of schools when vaccinations were in full swing as students’ education in classroom settings occupied front row seat. It is well perceived that students social, listening, and other important life skills were suffering in virtual classrooms. Listening, reciprocating and expression of appropriate emotions are essential survival skills and support early childhood development. Again, emphasis is on listening!

## Negotiating and Leadership Skills

Listening, reasoning, having facts while negotiating, smooth and effective communication are requisites for good negotiations. “If you cannot communicate, no one will know what you have to offer,” stated Mr. Bill Miller, CEO of Breedlove Foods, Inc., the largest non-profit humanitarian food processor in the United States of America.



Students are rightly advised that “sky is the limit,” and to dream high. This is an important optimistic message for all of us. In realistic sense, life in most of the times take us away from dreams. Not knowingly, we negotiate on daily basis and in every aspect of life, for example between our conscience and deeds.

In job interviews, an important bottom line is negotiating the terms.

A better deal in terms of deliverables, compensations and working conditions will eventually result in career development and growth. A good deal is a path towards success.

While negotiating, a few important points are to be remembered. By being a good listener one can clearly understand other party’s expectations to seal the deal. It is good not to show any immediate reaction and/or provide an ultimatum. To borrow a famous line of senior Corleone from movie The Godfather, “Never let others know what you think,” we understand the importance of being diplomatic. This is indeed a classic negotiating skill!

“Leadership skills, communication and conflict resolution skills are extremely important to possess. These skill theories can be learned in the classroom and applied in out-of-classroom learning environments that provide hands on experience. Students should engage in student organizations and leadership positions that provide opportunities to manage peers, organize events and collaborate





Bill Miller



Kyle Jacobson



Susan Peterson

with others,” highlighted Ms. Susan Peterson, Director of Toreador Media with 36-years of experience with the student run media at Texas Tech University.

It is always good to go out of one’s comfort zone to explore new paths. Kyle Jacobson, Vice President of Government Relations at Lubbock Chamber of Commerce agrees and stated, “I encourage people to challenge their comfort zones. If you’re not a technology person, take a training course in coding, software, multimedia, etc. If you’re not an extrovert or a “people person,” force yourself to go to a networking event or engage in public speaking. Once you’ve identified strengths and weaknesses about yourself, challenge your comfort zones and start trying to improve your weaknesses.”

### Backup Plans: Important Tool for Survival

One should clearly identify one’s goal and plan towards achieving it. Again, planning is a negotiation art within oneself. If Plan A does not work, it is good to keep Plans B and C. While Plan A will get one towards their ultimate aspiration, accepting reality and using other plans will enable one to achieve success in life. I am a personal testimony to this strategy. While I was undertaking Ph. D. research in Leeds, initial project on machinery, was going nowhere. As a foreign student with limited financial resources, one could imagine how lack of progress in research will aggravate situations. It was one of the lowest moments in life. Fortunately, I had befriended with Dr. Manickavasagam Sundaram, who is now a successful physician in a Toronto

hospital system was then conducting high level research in molecular biology in Leeds, U.K. In fact, Dr. Sundaram adores The Godfather movie and has gleaned a few life lessons by watching it multiple times. Dr. Sundaram was undertaking a project on cloning a gene, which is a challenging task. With initial failures, he developed a strategy to conduct multiple small projects that can yield new information. Having seen him and listened to him, I switched to a project to evaluate the feeling of fabrics by humans. This resulted in the development of “artificial human finger,” to mimic the feeling of fabrics. This research was quickly recognized in the field and enabled me to lecture in Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and many institutions around the world. Having backup plans and listening to others surely help and I am a witness to this strategy.

### What is Success?

Surviving and being successful is a skill and an art. Several tools in the toolbox include: 1) Good listening; 2) Negotiating 3) Backup plans and 4) Careful execution. Bill Miller emphasizes the importance of discipline, focus, emotional intelligence, critical thinking skills, transparency, and an ability to listen.

While no one can predict one’s success and chart out defined plan, success can take different forms. Susan Peterson stated, “True success is what makes you happy. Happiness is not the amount of your paycheck. It’s finding your true passion, that thing you really enjoy doing and finding a way to make a living doing it.” Adding to the views on path to success, Kyle Jacobson stated, “The ability to remain open-minded to continued learning even in the years following a formal education is important to one’s success in a competitive world. I think this aids in one’s ability to be flexible and adaptable to the constant change occurring around us.”

