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President Bill Clinton: Don't Worry About Yesterday, Embrace Tomorrow

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The person who occupied the most powerful political office in the world learned his most valuable lessons on leadership as a 13-year-old comic book entrepreneur. [President Bill Clinton](#) told me, "That knowledge played a huge role in shaping my identity and building my confidence."

The "Explainer in Chief" believes that successful leadership starts by asking the right questions. But great leaders are good listeners too. And while they forge new paths, they also build consensus and "creative networks of cooperation."

[President Clinton](#) is known as the greatest politician of the modern era. He's been incredibly active since he left the presidency (with the highest approval rating since World War II), especially through his humanitarian work with the [Clinton Foundation](#) and the [Clinton Global Initiative](#).



President Clinton Watches Sunset Over Victoria Falls

Last week he started a trip across [Africa](#) with his daughter [Chelsea](#). The 10-day trip, which concludes on Friday, has them visiting Clinton Foundation projects in [Malawi](#), Zambia, [Tanzania](#) (including Zanzibar), Rwanda, and South Africa. It was during this trip, that he found the time to answer a few of my questions about leadership, vision and failure.



Chelsea Clinton Visits with Children at the Anchor Farm Project

President Clinton is a endless font of curiosity and energy. "I always feel ignorant when I get up in the morning," he told those us in the room at a [recent event](#). "There's always something new to learn." In this edition of *Your Start-Up Life*, he has something to teach us all.



President Clinton with Zainabu Rashid, Owner of Beauty Salon in Tanzania

Q: What was your first job and what lessons did you take away?

A: I landed my first job when I was 13, working in a grocery store. The owner was so impressed with my enterprise, even though I was clumsy, that he let me open a used comic book stand on the side. From that day on, I never doubted that I could support myself.

I learned to make sure I understood what was expected of me and do it, to be friendly with and helpful to customers, and to talk contracts. From that first job through more than a dozen other things I've done to earn money, I never doubted that I could make a living. That knowledge played a huge role in shaping my identity and building my confidence. The dignity, security, and sense of empowerment that comes with knowing you'll be able to support yourself and your family is as important to the strength of a society as its economy. That's why economic empowerment has become a key tenet of the work I do with the Clinton Foundation.

I often say that intelligence, ability, and the willingness to work are evenly distributed around the world, but opportunities are not. Over the next week and a half, Chelsea and I will be visiting a number of Clinton Foundation projects in Africa again that aim to give people, no matter who they are and where they're from, the chance and the tools for an equal opportunity.

For example, the [Clinton Development Initiative's Anchor Farm Project](#), which Chelsea and I visited on Thursday, is a 1,000 hectare commercial farm that partners with thousands of neighboring smallholder farmers, providing them with access to quality inputs such as seeds and fertilizer for maize and soy production, as well as training and market access. 21,000 farmers are already benefitting from high quality inputs and increased yields, and we've seen profitability and productivity increase - meaning that many more people are hard at work, supporting themselves and their families.

No matter what the job, from running a comic book stand to smallholder farming, the lessons of economic empowerment are the same.



President Clinton Meets Smallholder Farmers in Malawi

Q: Describe your leadership style.

A: Explain where we are and decide where we want to go. Figure out how to get there. Get good people and trust them to do the job as long as they're competent, realistic, and flexible when change is required. Keep score - are people better off? How, and how many? That's my approach to leadership. I think many of the successes of my presidency were due to the fact that we began by asking the right questions: How can we build a nation and a world of shared responsibilities and shared prosperity? How can government, the private sector, and civil society work together

to solve the most pressing challenges of our time? How can we appreciate and benefit from our diversity in an increasingly interdependent world?

What I do now, especially at the Clinton Foundation, is try to answer that how question - how to solve problems and seize opportunities faster, better, and at lower costs. In their search for how, Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) participants work across sectors to create [Commitments to Action](#) to address significant global challenges. For example, CGI members have made 827 commitments that are active in Africa with an estimated total value of \$28.9 billion, in economic empowerment, global health, education, and environment & energy. Their work has left me incredibly optimistic about what else we can achieve through this approach.

The same *how* strategy drives the efforts of the [Clinton Health Access Initiative](#) (CHAI) to reduce the price of drugs and other medical products. We have been able to cut prices up to 90 percent for key drugs for HIV, malaria, and TB, and up to 80 percent for HIV diagnostics. How? By using a market-based approach and working directly with governments and drug manufacturers, we could prove that it's possible to lower costs, increase sales, and provide new and improved products and maintain -- even increase -- profitability for suppliers.

As result of CHAI pricing agreements, we have saved \$750 million in the cost of vaccines; \$450 million on contraceptive implants; and over \$2 billion on HIV drugs and tests. Thanks to this strategy, patients in more than 70 countries pay the reduced prices achieved through our negotiations -- that's more than 5 million people with HIV/AIDS -- 60 percent of all people being treated--and more than 30 million people with malaria have benefited from these reduced-pricing agreements.



President Clinton and Chelsea Clinton Examine A Baby with a Community Health Assistant

Q: Who would you identify as an inspirational leader and why?

A. I've had the unusual opportunity -- because of the long career I've had in public service as Governor and as President, and through my current work with the Clinton Foundation -- to meet many inspirational leaders in government, business, NGOs, and philanthropy. I've learned something from every one of them. Most people who get to the top of any field are smart, hardworking and honest. The best also inspire people to think bigger and to be bigger. [Nelson Mandela](#) did that in giving South Africa the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) and a unified government that included parties that had supported his imprisonment. [Yitzhak Rabin](#) did it in

giving his life to the cause of peace. [Helmut Kohl](#) did it in supporting a unified Germany, the European Union, and democracy and prosperity for Russia. There are many others who have inspired me in the U.S. and around the world. They have all moved people to think bigger and to be bigger.

Q: What skills or traits are needed to motivate teams and collaborators to rally around your vision?

A. This is a great question, and one we're exploring right now at CGI. In fact, our theme at CGI this year is "[Mobilizing for Impact](#)," which explores how leaders from every sector can mobilize people, organizations, and resources to achieve the changes in behavior, business, and policy that are required for a more prosperous and sustainable world.

The main skills required are good listening and the ability to build consensus for action. The main traits required are a belief that creative networks of cooperation work better than constant conflict, a call for action, and a willingness to change course if what you're doing isn't working.

For example, in 2008, the major global financial services provider [Barclays](#) partnered with international relief and development organizations [CARE International UK](#) and [Plan UK](#) to form the "[Banking on Change](#)" partnership to improve the quality of life for poor people in Africa, Asia, and South America by extending and developing access to basic financial services. Using an innovative community-led savings model, this CGI Commitment to Action enables individuals to join together in self-governing, community groups to save regularly and access small loans from a group fund. In just three years, the Banking on Change commitment has already reached 513,000 people, exceeding its original target by around 34 percent. When I travel to Tanzania this August, I'll have the opportunity to see this kind of collaborative and innovative work firsthand, and I hope to take away some lessons in how to motivate others to follow suit.



President Clinton Visits Barclays CGI Commitment to Action

Q: When do you know it's time to walk away from a project or initiative?

A. If a problem's worth solving, I don't believe in walking away from it completely, though it's necessary when you don't have a solution you can properly staff and pay for. Otherwise, I think we should recognize the honor in starting over. Social change can be hard, and denial is never a successful strategy.

Sometimes, it's better to see if someone has already tackled the problem successfully. If so, the best strategy is probably replication of the successful model. Many of the best commitments at CGI involve folks who rejected the glamour of being first for the wisdom in being second.

I think it's also important to recognize when you've worked yourself out of a job. Our goal at the Clinton Foundation is to create projects that will eventually be able to sustain themselves; projects that will continue to help individuals and communities long after their initial stages have been complete. Then you know that it's time to move on to something else where you can keep making an impact.



President Clinton and Chelsea Clinton Accompany Community Health Assistants on Home Visits

Q: What are your views on failure?

A. I've always preferred failing to inaction for fear of failure. One of the things I love about working with Clinton Foundation staff and CGI commitment-makers is that they don't fear failure. I'll be meeting with Foundation staff members on the ground in Malawi, Zambia, Rwanda, Tanzania, and South Africa who are working hard every day, realizing every little bit helps. I think we need to create a culture of creative experiment, where we face failure as soon as it's clear and then change course or develop a better approach. Then failure can be an opportunity to learn how to get it right. As we say in my family, it's always better "to get caught trying."

Q: What's the best advice you've ever received?

A. I've gotten a lot of good advice and wish I'd taken more of it! I once asked [Nelson Mandela](#) whether, when he walked out of prison for the last time, he didn't feel anger and hatred again for having all those years stolen. He said that, briefly, he did feel old demons rise up until he realized that if he held onto his hatred after his release, he would still be a prisoner: "I wanted to be free, and so I let it go."

On another occasion, I asked him how he found the inner strength to do that. He said the long years of confinement had taken a terrible toll. He had been abused physically and emotionally.

His marriage didn't survive. He didn't see his kids grow up. Then he said that one day "I realized they could take everything from me, except my mind and my heart. Those things I would have to give away. I decided not to give them away." Then he looked at me, smiled, and said, "And neither should you."

Mandela didn't give someone else the permission to define his life, his worth, and his tomorrows. If you have lost a bunch of yesterdays, welcome to the human race. You still don't have to give anybody your tomorrows. That's advice we should all take to heart and try to follow. Even for Mandela it was sometimes easier to say than do, but with discipline and determination, he did it. So can the rest of us.



President Clinton Visits with Families in Zambia

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