*Daniel Mason on Richard Branson*

*Sir Richard Branson, the founder and chairman of Virgin Group, is an exemplary leader, and truly embodies the Total Leadership spirit taught in this course.  A serial entrepreneur, multi-billionaire, humanitarian, author, actor environmentalist – the list could go on – Branson has achieved a great deal in his 60 plus years on this earth.  In this essay, I will provide a brief biographical sketch, an overview of major accomplishments, an analysis of Branson’s integration of his four domains and a discussion of how to apply lessons learned from this leader’s example.*

*Born on July 18, 1950 to Edward James and Eve Huntley, Branson struggled through his early academic career, in large part due to his bout with dyslexia.  He dropped out of school at the young age of 15, and embraced the entrepreneurial zeitgeist.  His first venture began in the crypt of a church, where he published The Student Magazine to advertise records sold for considerably cheaper than “High Street” distributors, and he achieved instant success.  In 1972, he launched the record label Virgin Records with Nik Powell, and purchased a country estate to outfit with a recording studio.  What would become the Virgin Group – a diversified multinational conglomerate – had launched its first business.*

*The name “Virgin” was suggested by one of Branson’s early employees because all of them were new at business.  Soliciting input from his employees was not an uncommon practice for Branson – then and even now after he has made his billions.  Starting with the Student Magazine, Branson has grown his business empire into over 400 companies, varying from airlines, railways, and limousines to gyms, gambling houses and bridal boutiques.  He is very demure when asked how he has built so many companies, and is quoted as saying that companies are all about “…finding the right people and inspiring those people, drawing out the best in people.”*

*Among his various business accomplishments, Branson has tackled environmental and humanitarian causes.  He launched the Virgin Green Fund to address global warming by investing in renewable and other clean energy sources in the U.S. and Europe.  Along with musician Peter Gabriel and Nelson Mandela, he organized and funded a small group of dedicated leaders with significant influence to help solve global conflicts.  He’s funded AIDS research, helped unemployed teenagers and even used his own aircraft to rescue people trapped by the Gulf War.  On the personal front, he has broken numerous world records, including crossing the Pacific Ocean in a hot air balloon and the English Channel in an amphibious vehicle – both faster than anyone had ever done before.  He is the proud husband of Joan and the proud father of his recently married daughter, Eve.  And who says you can’t have it all?*

*Revered in management circles, Branson is someone who should be emulated.  He is often referred to as a “transformational leader” who challenges conventional wisdom.  His Virgin Group is known for being driven by informality and information with a bottom-heavy approach.  He incentives management by empowering them, which in turn gives managers and employees pride in their work.  He goes out of his way to spend time with all levels of employees, and no different than his early days, solicits their feedback.*

*Branson’s true gift is his ability to connect with others.  While I am sure he never had the benefit of a formal stakeholder dialogue, he appears to seamlessly integrate the domains in his life: self, family, career and community.  One example is through his success in business – his ability to create and run companies that disrupt the status quo, benefit the environment and provide an economic return creates overlap between self, career and community.  Another example is his hiring of his daughter, Holly, who completed five years of study to qualify as a junior doctor and was about to enter her second year of hospital training.  He hired her with the task of launching a network of “super-surgeries” under the Virgin Banner.  This is a very clear integration of self, family, career and community.*

*Published in 2012, Sir Richard Branson’s autobiography, Like a Virgin: Secrets They Won’t Teach You at Business School, outlines five guiding principles to his success.  The principles are as follows: i) If you don’t enjoy it, don’t do it, ii) Be innovative – create something different, iii) Pride of association works wonders, iv) Lead by listening and v) Be visible.  Most of these principles are explicitly or implicitly captured in the Total Leadership framework created by Professor Stewart Friedman.  If Sir Branson demonstrates anything, it’s that he is successful BECAUSE he integrates the various domains in his life, NOT despite of it.  It is my aspiration to start focusing on my stakeholders and integrating my domains now, so that I, too, can achieve success because of their alignment.*

*Key references:*

*1)*[*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\_Branson*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Branson)

*2)*[*http://www.ted.com/talks/richard\_branson\_s\_life\_at\_30\_000\_feet.html?quote=215*](http://www.ted.com/talks/richard_branson_s_life_at_30_000_feet.html?quote=215)

*3)*[*http://www.npr.org/books/titles/162571925/like-a-virgin-secrets-they-wont-teach-you-at-business-school#excerpt*](http://www.npr.org/books/titles/162571925/like-a-virgin-secrets-they-wont-teach-you-at-business-school#excerpt)

*4)*[*http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikaandersen/2013/03/16/11-quotes-from-sir-richard-branson-on-business-leadership-and-passion/*](http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikaandersen/2013/03/16/11-quotes-from-sir-richard-branson-on-business-leadership-and-passion/)

*5)*[*http://www.islandconnections.com/edit/branson.htm*](http://www.islandconnections.com/edit/branson.htm)

*6)*[*http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1039174/Holly-Branson-quits-medicine-work-billionaire-father.html*](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1039174/Holly-Branson-quits-medicine-work-billionaire-father.html)