

Carlos Slim Helu promotes education and critical thinking as a means to improve the economy

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Carlos Slim Helu, currently nominated the richest man in the world, spoke to an overflow audience at the American University of Beirut's (AUB) Suliman Olayan School of Business (OSB).

He was welcomed in turn by AUB Provost Ahmed Dalal who outlined Slim Helu's many philanthropic ventures, including his support for education; and by OSB Associate Dean, Khalil Hindi who praised Helu Slim's "vision, acumen, determination, willpower and kind heart."

Examining the topic "The New Civilization of Knowledge and Technology," Slim Helu, the Mexican born son of a Lebanese emigrant, took his audience on a part personal, somewhat philosophical journey based on history and commercial knowledge. To understand the "New Civilization" and its paradigms, Slim said it is important to look first at the old paradigms and the way in which society and technology have evolved from the post glacial period, through the bronze and iron ages, and into the industrial era which radically altered the way in which society functioned.

Arriving at the dramatic advances of the last fifty years, Slim Helu explained that a whole new set of paradigms took over: freedom, democracy, plurality, diversity, and mobility.

"Competitiveness is also a paradigm," he added, "and people need to be strong and know how to compete. Governments need to understand what these paradigms mean and what changes are needed to help society thrive."

As a man who believes in the power of education and has dedicated funds to improving schools in rural areas and providing scholarships, Slim Helu said it is important to understand that one of the main challenges society faces is in the quality and modernity of education it provides, and that early education is vital. He added that the time has come to start teaching children as young as six months, in a way that keeps them interested and engaged, not like in the days when he went to school and was required to learn by rote. "We need to teach them creative thinking and how to research," he said. "Because of technology, our capital and financial assets and access to markets, we do not have to sacrifice one generation for another like before."

Slim Helu noted that education can pull people out of poverty as it will help them land better jobs which in turn will give them greater spending power.

Moving on to his own principles and philosophy Slim Helu shared some of the secrets of his success including;

- keeping the organisation simple, with minimal hierarchy and titles
- guaranteeing personal development for executives,
- rapid decision making
- growing small companies
- maintaining austerity even in good times – money that leaves the company evaporates

“There are no challenges we cannot overcome with clear objectives and the tools,” Slim Helu said. His personal credo eschews negative thought and favors optimism and passion along with the courage to confront fear.

Slim Helu's one-week trip to Lebanon was a personal and emotional journey. He wanted to get to know the country that his emigrant 14 year old father wrote about to his brother all those years ago. The amazing thing about Lebanon, Slim Helou said, is the way that it has stayed alive in the minds, culture, customs and emotions of its emigrants. "Coming to visit is easy because there is so much that is easily recognized," he added. Slim Helu left the country on March 17.

Pressed on his reaction to Lebanon Slim Helu said, “I have, in these few days, a very clear view that with peace and a local vision, Lebanon will be sustainable, will grow and investment will be good here.” He did however call for the privatization of failing services: power, electricity, telecoms and the inadequate broadband supply being high on the list. “Based on skills, talents, banking, agriculture, tourism and services, a country like Lebanon, developing in any area, will work.”

Success, Slim Helu said in conclusion, is not about doing things well or garnering praise, it is about harmony between the soul and emotions. “Negative feelings and emotions need to be controlled. Live long but travel fast. Live fully in the present and not in the past. The future is the important incentive. Live with positive feelings: those of love, honesty, courage, joy and humour, and banish negativity. Mistakes are normal and human: Make them small, accept them, correct them, and forget them. Live without fear and guilt: Fear is the worst; it weakens. Guilt makes the present difficult so let us have the good sense to accept ourselves as we are. When we face our problems they disappear. So learn from failure and let success be the silent incentive. And most of all, always act as you are, never lie.”