Social Service Leadership

Dear Social Service Practitioners,

Words such as purpose, success, well-being, capacity, and capability are frequently used in conversations, discussions and emails today. Many, if not all leaders, are trained and have upskilled themselves in various competencies and explored approaches to ride out COVID-19's demands and effects on operational work. Hopefully, many have sailed into the calm (even if it was short-lived), after riding the rapids.

Some fundamentals that build the foundation of leadership are however worth revisiting, as they have been instrumental in tiding us through the past two years. Let us explore the insights that these fundamentals continue to provide for us in leadership. As we do this, it is useful to bear in mind the difference between leadership and a leader. A leader refers to the person who is leading and his or her attributes; while leadership is about the role, responsibility and process of leading people towards a purpose or vision.
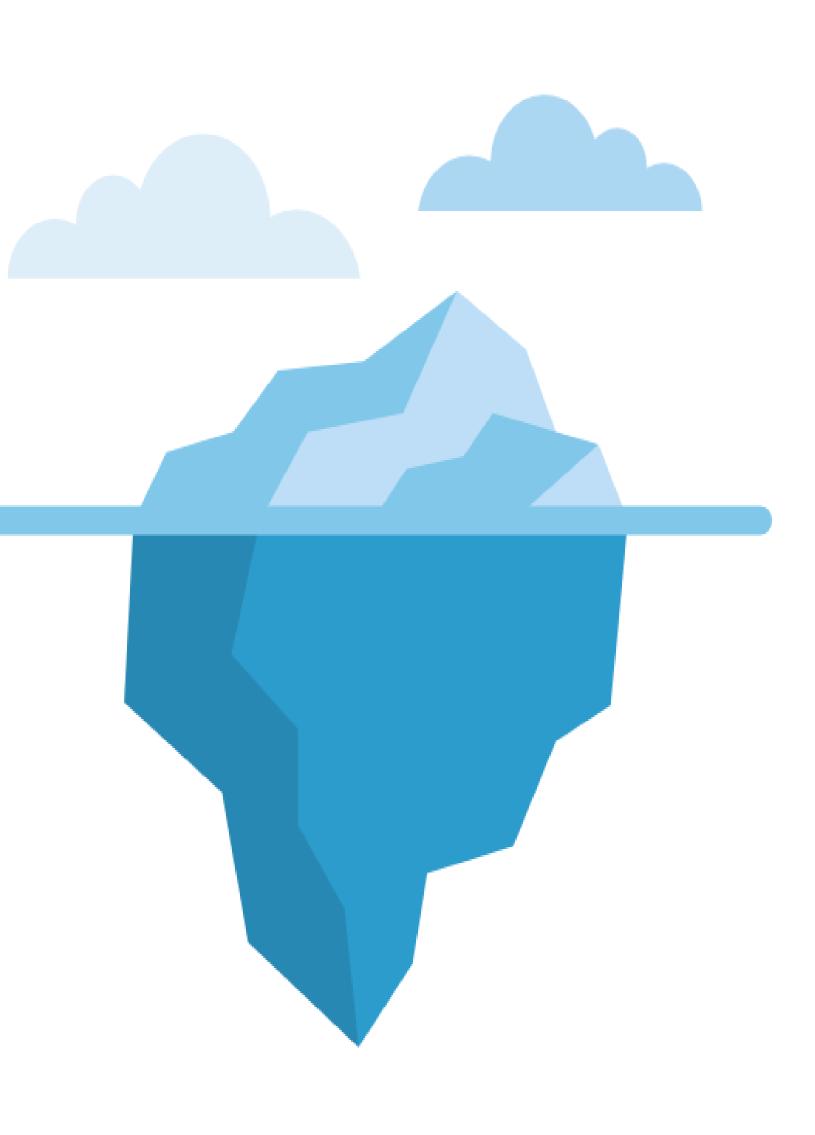
The unseen

What is less spoken about are aspects of what constitutes a firm foundation in leadership; a foundation that can withstand the stress and strain of challenges and events. What is even more defining, will be what keeps leadership steadfast, during stressful times in unprecedented events and crises. What is clear from the insights of leaders who have lived through such situations, is that humility, wisdom, and perseverance, are crucial trademarks of leadership.

Humility to work in partnership with fellow leaders; wisdom to draw from past experiences while adapting to the present situation; hope for a better future; and perseverance to stay the course and cause. These are aspects that are less visible and iconic. They are however built over time through the reflection of leaders, and the process of personal mastery.

Another interesting perspective of leadership is offered by the iceberg analogy. The analogy is well used to show various concepts in areas such as psychology, social work, mentoring and coaching. Applied to leadership, we see that status and stature (oftentimes represented by one's designation) are above the water. Below the water, is the less visible yet far larger part of a person, which is often not known about the person or not known even to the person. This forms the "substance" of a person, which includes their morals, values and purpose in life. How leaders apply the iceberg analogy to live a life that means something is important. It affects how a person chooses to participate rather than be a spectator of life to contribute to the well-being of others. These factors contribute to a person's decision-making process, such as whether one should take up an active role in making the lives of others better.

Above the water, the leader has the responsibility to equip and empower the team. Below the water, the leader has gifts and abilities that can be used to fulfil his or her responsibilities. Much of what lies below the water, are traits and blind spots as well as knowns and unknowns that leaders need to be mindful of to avoid jeopardising the work that needs to be done above the water. This mindfulness and consciousness can come from daily reflection, feedback and insights that contribute to the growth and development of a leader. It also applies especially when we match the gifts of a person to the role that a person plays. It can apply in the hiring of staff or forming of teams, which are key responsibilities of a leader. What will emerge is that the better the match of the gifts, abilities and roles of a person, the better the teamwork and the trajectory for growth and development.

Let us now revisit a common question posed to leaders: what does success look like? The same is asked of most investments of money, know-how and time. In some places, the measure of success is often focused on quantifiable outputs, products and services, what is acquired and a person's abilities, accomplishments and associations.

Having measurable factors and outputs is important and useful, but the question is better addressed by reminding ourselves about our purpose - why we carry out the work in the first place. Revisiting our purpose is extremely important as it avoids drifts and meanderings during implementation. It is not uncommon when programmes and services deliver suboptimal results or outcomes when resources are diverted, and new and unevaluated demands distract. Hence, implementation must focus on the purpose. Shifting our eyes away from our intent may lead people to lose their sense of purpose, particularly among employees who work on the delivery of products and services.

So good leaders often remind employees of their purpose and use it as a daily guide to steer through the rapids of crisis and events. While this sounds simple and obvious, it is not practised habitually. Organisations can drift away from their purpose when they get preoccupied with micro designing and diversions. While these efforts give us acceptable results, it can lead to sub-optimisation and wastage of resources. Working with a purpose in mind would thus help us to see what else could be done better, and how we can work more efficiently.

So, the more clearly we define our purpose, the more easily we can measure success.
The more we link what we do directly to purpose, the clearer our intent.

Unity in diversity

Another common theme in social work and the social sector is the acceptance of diversity. This is now twinned in the conversation of inclusivity. The aim is often about including a diverse range of views, perspectives, abilities and vulnerabilities in building communities and circles of practice. How can we grow the common space for diverse groups? What else needs to be added to the journey of inclusiveness? Perhaps it is worth considering the sense of shared purpose that unites people. With unity, it is easier to bind the process of inclusivity and empowerment to increase participation and the accessing of opportunities.

As leaders, we need to constantly keep a look-out to foster unity in diversity,
and lead in creating the space to foster it.

In the context of diversity in the community, some consensus on fostering unity in purpose must be present to enable constructive dialogue and partnership. Unity, which does not mean sameness and total agreement among people, must be present to provide the foundation for constructive work and participation to take place.

Another two terms that are used almost interchangeably are capability and capacity; both are necessary in leadership. Capability refers to the ability to do something. In the context of work, it refers to a person's knowhow, skills and aptitude in relation to the job that the person is employed or deployed to do. Within the capability domain, what perhaps requires more attention is that of critical and creative thinking and being equipped with the tools and frameworks to do so.

Capacity refers to the ability to do or produce something, bearing in mind the volume and to hold the space within a context or parameter. So, it is possible for a person to have the capability, and not the capacity to deliver something. One typical situation would be the application of training and learning. Most places will invest in training and almost view it as a panacea to solving problems. A team can attend lots of training and develop high capabilities, but lack the capacity to operationalise what they have learnt or lack the capacity to scale, be it through efficiency or space. These aspects can be developed over time and have implications on our inner and emotional strength. A person who develops a "holding space" for capacity, would oftentimes have a cache of endurance, knowledge, and confidence to finish well, and can function effectively under great pressure.

Thought partnership

As leaders, most of us have heard and embraced thought leadership and even aspire to hone our skills in it. However, as global development and dynamics in recent times have shown, the reality has emerged quickly that no singular entity is in control, and there is no solution for present and emerging complex problems. This poses a challenge to thought leadership in many areas. I would say that there will be a greater realisation and acceptance of the need to think together in systems leadership, which I will term as "thought partnership". This partnership can be a key to opening new windows of insights, understanding and appreciation of opportunities and threats that any phenomenon poses. One such phenomenon would be climate change.

Reflection

As senior practitioners and leaders, what can we continue to work on in personal mastery, so that we can continue to be a better version of leadership? How can we collectively continue to ride the crest of the wave of change, stay ahead of the curve of development; and mentor and coach ourselves to navigate the roads or rapids ahead, with greater ease and confidence.

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References

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