

Dear Fellow Social Service Leaders,

As we come to the close of the year, we can say that we have strengthened the foundation for the nurturing of leaders for our sector. Our sector is growing fast. And as leaders, we need to be able to know what is changing and how to be adaptive in such situations. We have arrived at where we are today with some assets. This is due partly to the capacity we have built a decade ago through the Social Service sabbatical leave scheme and a few other programs which are aimed at the ongoing and sustained development of leaders. Through it, we now have more than two hundred leaders who have benefited from the approach.

Expanded horizons for learning

The sabbatical scheme provides flexible resources that permit each individual person to identify how best to advance his/her learning goals and to take charge of advancing his/ her knowledge and skills. While we often associate sabbaticals with taking a break, many of the leaders in the scheme use the gift of time away from the day-to-day demands of work to broaden their horizons, break out of familiar patterns, and expose themselves to new ideas and approaches. We cannot overstate the value of these experiences. These leaders return reinvigorated, refreshed, and energized. They bring back new ways of thinking and doing to their organizations, and hopefully amplifying the benefits of the sabbatical. In a sense, there is no better empowering support than to offer trusted participants the resources, freedom, and support to address their leadership aspirations in ways that work best for them.

Coaching and mentoring for customizing

At its core and at its best, coaching is a highly customized activity that considers a leader's particular skills, context, and opportunities. With the guidance and support of a good mentor, leaders can realize their full potential. Such relationships if well developed can have significant payoffs even though they are time-intensive and can be more expensive than group training. In the social service sector however, mentors often offer their time as a gift. Good mentoring serves to push the individual's thinking, challenge assumptions, and hold the individual accountable for improvements. Mentoring is about customization so that the individual can develop a contextualized approach to applying leadership skills. Mentoring as a relationship then enables leaders to do their best work without having to follow a prescribed path to achieve the desired results.

Building a culture of learning in the organization

Too often, leadership development programs focus solely on the organization's top individual or individuals. Yet, as most leaders at the top of not for profit organisations will tell us, their success is highly dependent upon other leaders across the organization, both at the staff and board level. If this is so, what is needed then is for us to actively support leadership teams and build more effective systems for organizational leadership and governance. This can start with having a few dedicated "fellows" or "interim leaders" from the organization to convene platforms for peer learning and mutual support. The aim is to build a culture of learning where time is set aside for leaders to facilitate learning and in turn grow leaders across the sector, starting from within organisations. Through these efforts, the organisation can support the ongoing growth of emerging and effective leaders. We must realize that leadership development is not a stand-alone, separate domain. It is not a single-dose approach confined to trainings, workshops, or retreats. It is as much about day-to-day opportunities to learn and hone skills.

Stepping up and stepping out as leaders

We now have a range of approaches and opportunities for leadership development in the social sector. It is time to rally those who have benefitted from these to mentor others and go alongside newer ones to coach and impart what they have mastered. Such efforts can be initiated by leaders who are willing to step up and step out. There is the saying: "you don't know what you don't know." Leaders in reaching out can offer insights, perspectives and generate curiosity. There is however a word of caution for leaders. Leadership development and nurturing others is about empowering growth and development to improve the lives of others. It must however, not be centred on us as leaders, but the well being of people, families and communities that we are called to serve.

Ang Bee Lian

Director of Social Welfare, MSF 2014 December