

Dear Fellow Social Service Leaders,

As we enter into the New Year and SG50 celebrations, it is good to sum up the attributes needed for good leadership in the social service sector. For emerging and future leaders, many would like to know some helpful perspectives to adopt in order to lead well. Some may even ask what qualities are needed to be a good leader in the social service sector and whether there are skills that are more crucial in this sector. One perspective to take is a gap approach ie to know what is needed and what is required to meet the need. Adopting this approach means considering the capabilities needed to fulfil the emerging social missions effectively and to adapt to the fast-changing demands. One might then posit that a more systematic focus on and investment in leadership development in the social service sector could pay off in terms of more effective deliveries of social interventions.

What sector leaders need to succeed

So what are the attributes that are especially crucial for leadership in the social service sector? What are the few unique attributes that are particular to leadership in the social service sector? Various individuals will highlight different ones. In my opinion, these are essentials:

- a) team leadership,
- b) ability to collaborate,
- c) managing outcomes and producing quality improvements, and
- d) being able to innovate and implement.

A. Team leadership

As mentioned in my earlier letter, too often, leadership development programs focus on the organization's top individual or individuals when success is highly dependent upon other leaders across the organization, both at the staff and board level. As such, we must actively support team leadership through having systems for organizational leadership and governance.

The case for promoting team leadership is to help leaders to collaborate with other sector leaders to solve problems rather than to compete with each other. Such efforts call for cooperation to occur across the social service sector. Collaborating to gather multiple stakeholders and managing to gain quality improvement is a team effort. And team leadership harnesses diversity. A team with complementary skills from diverse backgrounds is better able to tackle a broad range of challenges in the current fast changing environment. Such a team also provides the opportunity for being a sounding board for ideas and generating improvements. Without diversity, the tendency is to place the interest of one's own organisation ahead of sector-wide collaboration. So the challenge is for organizations to give priority and more attention to new solutions and less on claiming profile for individual organisations.

B. Ability to collaborate

The sector by its nature is highly social mission-driven and this poses unique requirements. Leaders including staff and board members in social service sector organizations have a passion expressed through their mission. Mission is often where initiatives start and drive actions. Leaders in this sector therefore need to know how to harness the mission-driven energy of their staff, board, and volunteers. No social service sector organization is able to achieve its mission working alone. A social service sector leader needs to help the team and board focus on its mission and revisit its mission to avoid a situation of mission-creep. The mission needs to be refreshed and relevant to the operating environment. And to be effective, a leader needs to be an active and dedicated

collaborator, ready to reach out to others for advice or for partnership opportunities. This mission-driven centrality is what makes the sector different compared with the private sector and should skew it towards collaboration rather than competition as is usually the case in the private sector.

Collaboration however, requires unique skills, which social service sector leaders must cultivate to be successful. They need to, through initiating collaborations, work with multiple stakeholders to achieve quality outcomes for those they serve. This calls for working in and through peer networks including cross-sector networks of private sector-social sector peer networks. Private sector involvement could bring expertise in less familiar areas such as supply-chain management, social media, knowledge management and customer care.

C. Managing outcomes and producing quality improvements

Not unlike the private sector, social service sector leaders too have to manage outcomes and produce quality improvements as a core requirement of good leadership. However, this remains an ongoing challenge for most social service sector leaders as they operate with very tight budgetary constraints. They are often tested in stretching the funder's dollar and find it hard to scale and expand with long term planning. To a large extent, an unintended or intended outcome which has emerged from the social service sector is its ability to harness the strengths of volunteers and communities through the sheer need to see them as resources and assets.

So while we help social service leaders to develop in capability and capacity building, be it through more business-like strategies and operational efficiency measures, we must do so alongside the skills that volunteers and communities bring to solve social issues. Keeping the integrity of the social service sector as a birthplace for civic contribution to optimise the skills and goodwill of volunteers is worth upholding. These are worthy ideals to bear in mind in the face of a growing surge of the phenomenon of managerialism in social service sector organisations. The depth in leadership development must help leaders to use data and evidence as part of good problem solving and operational efficiency and produce quality improvements by optimising the support of volunteers and communities.

D. Innovate and implement

The challenge posed to social service sector leaders is usually that of innovation and scaling. Social service leaders will often cite time to experiment and innovate and sabbatical time to rejuvenate themselves, gain exposure, and broaden their horizons as reasons impeding them from innovation and scaling. So we should allocate time for organizations' leaders to step back, review and rejuvenate.

But a more important skill to teach is whether or not to scale. And it begins with gathering evidence of impact and how the impact happens. This is to ensure that what is to be scaled has evidential impact on end clients and is not used for promotional reasons. The evidence or data will then instruct on the readiness to scale.

Social service leaders looking to scale any program or service should take a very critical look at their work, their program model, and their impact before tackling the question of scale. It is useful to answer these questions squarely: Is the program or service something that people really need? Can we prove that it works and will have a broader application? And, always, always, always check if anyone is already doing something similar and determine whether partnering might help them do it better. It is through partnerships that the social service sector can succeed at innovating and scaling

social service delivery solutions. This is so because sustained interventions and solutions for the social needs in today's complex world will require skills from across organisations.

How to support social service sector leadership

What actions then can we take to better support leadership development in the social service sector. There are possibly three things that we can do and they will likely happen as there are now dedicated resources for leadership development. Firstly, there needs to be an increase in the number of leaders from both external and internal sources into the sector. This will widen the leadership band. Secondly, there needs to be stronger leadership capability development both through more opportunities and more systematic and structural support. Thirdly, there needs to be support (and may include funding) for the leadership resources that leaders say they need. More mentorship and coaching as a priority for a range of leaders beyond the top leadership will go a long way to nurture emerging leaders in the sector.

Hope in the coming years

The next generation of mission-driven professionals is considering social service sector careers. When asked, not unlike the existing leaders, they expect mentoring, professional development opportunities, and increasing responsibilities. The difference is that the emerging leaders will assert themselves and assess leaders and access opportunities appropriate for their needs. They will be a good investment of time and resources to ensure a pool of effective leaders.

We hope that in time to come, organizations losing a leader no longer have to find a replacement from another social service sector group, promote a manager who is unprepared for the role, or recruit a leader from the business or government sector who will face a significant learning curve.

The leadership capability development programs that will grow in numbers and range in the coming years will ensure that learning will no longer be limited to classroom training. There will be deliberate, thoughtful, systematic programs for a range of leaders who will serve in professional, specialist and generalist leadership roles. Mentoring and capability training where adults learn best in applied, real-world settings will help leaders to translate their skills and aspirations to serve individuals, families and communities better. The litmus test of leadership in the social service sector must be improved service delivery for citizens.

Seasoned leaders will have a critical role in coaching even as they nurture the younger professionals who should be given "stretched goals" as development opportunities. So whether one is a seasoned leader, a newly inducted leader or an emerging leader, we must lead improvements together with service users, clients and customers at the centre of our aspirations.

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