

Dear Fellow Social Service Leaders,

At the end of 2014 and early 2015, I shared 2 letters¹ with all of you on leadership in the social service sector. I shared about the expanded horizons for learning in the sector with initiatives such as the sabbatical leave scheme and how this allows for self-directed learning. I also touched upon the importance of customized coaching and building a culture of learning in order to grow and mould leaders within the social service sector. I shared four key factors needed in order for sector leaders to succeed, namely: 1) Supporting Team Leadership, 2) The ability to collaborate, 3) The ability to manage outcomes and produce quality improvements and 4) The ability to innovate and implement. I also shared my hopes for the sector in the coming years, emphasizing the key role seasoned leaders have in nurturing the new generation of leaders to lead improvements for the sake of our clients. As we start the New Year, it is timely to start considering what leading improvements may look like.

Investing in Others

Nelson Henderson said, “the true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you do not expect to sit.” This is true too of investing in others.

To invest reasonably well, we need to appreciate the future and its opportunities and risks. We can then invest in helping our people to gain broad insights into the complexities of social issues and a vast capacity to continue working in spite of constant frustrations and disappointments. We need to stay on course as leaders to instil a sense of mission and to be considerate leaders who can lead and inspire employees to take an interest in higher-level concerns. To do this, leaders need to be intellectually stimulating and be able to articulate a shared vision of jointly acceptable possibilities. We need to frequently raise standards, take calculated risks and get others to join us in our vision of the future. Employees are looking to leaders who are willing and able to show them new ways of looking at old problems, to teach them to see difficulties as problems to be solved and to emphasize rational reasoning.

Results focused and social skills

We are often asked what the two characteristics leaders should sharpen are. Most would narrow these to being results focused and having social skills. Being results focused involves having strong analytical and problem solving skills while social skills combine attributes like communication and empathy. Socially skilled leaders are able to diagnose and address interpersonal problems both at the workplace and in working across structures and systems. A good leader would keep working on strengthening both of these. To be both results focused and socially skilled requires a constant balancing effort.

Raising productivity

As part of being results focused, leaders can play a role in raising productivity and especially so in the social sector as it is highly reliant on manpower. So let’s explore some possible productivity efforts that do not require innovation or big bang strategies. Leaders should start to lead changes in areas where unnecessary efforts can be reduced.

1. The first area of change is ***the shift to the application of research findings and learning rather than having multiple small scale attempts at research***. It is encouraging to see the content and curriculum of more and more programs, services and efforts drawing from research that show what works in

¹ The letters titled “Reflections on Social Service Leadership 1” and “Reflections on Social Service Leadership 2” can be found under the Social Insights tab, at www.msf.gov.sg/odgsw.

helping to bring about positive change. Giving more attention to the conscious translating of learning when working with clients and families will mean more purposeful work. In the same vein, research should inform us about moving our efforts out of work which do not make a difference no matter how good those efforts may make us feel.

2. The second area of change is that of ***balancing resource deployment in integration***. The ideal state of integration for all services is expensive and unsustainable. Coordination and integration needs to be focused on areas that present a lot of complexities and where access cannot be overcome by access to good and timely information. This is a targeted approach. With systems, IT infrastructure and the sharing of information and data being made more adaptive for service delivery, agencies play an important role in helping those who need help. One way to achieve access to services must therefore be for individuals and agencies who are able to navigate the system, to do so by themselves. Oftentimes, the discussion may not be about integration but about managing expectations by giving applicants and potential users a sense of the time required for the whole process.
3. The third area to raise productivity is about ***focusing expertise on service delivery and less on paperwork beyond the documentation of professional judgement and interventions***. Paperwork is crucial for the purposes of accountability, however, it should be thoughtfully designed and made efficient. Enabling professionals to devote time on clinical practice and service will translate to better service to clients.
4. The fourth area where we can raise productivity is by ***re-visiting and distilling performance outcomes***. By being more deliberate in shifting towards recognising outcomes that are linked to research findings, we will shape behaviour and intervention that target change in behaviour, wellbeing and outcome for clients. This requires a refreshed evaluation of programs and services drawing on what works in practice within resource constraints and consistency in implementation.
5. The fifth area that warrants attention is in ***tapping into mobile technology and application for service delivery and doing away with some steps in processes***. In some areas, the shift to mobile technology be it reminders of appointments and commitment, completion of tasks and responses can save time, raise completion rate and fulfilling of criteria or condition. For a manpower intensive industry, the potential of this technology can help services to leap frog in service delivery design.

Food for thought

I will end with one of my favourite quotes. "I like a teacher who gives you something to take home to think about besides homework" by Lily Tomlin as "Edith Ann". As leaders, we are called and committed to support teams, build collaborations, manage outcomes and produce quality improvements and raise productivity. We do this in our local context in a very tight labour market with fresh inflow of young, mid-career and diversely-skilled manpower into the social service sector. Our challenge is to stay focused on what the people we serve need and require of us to make their lives better, be it in protecting them, giving them hope or helping them to reach their potential.

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