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# Raising a new generation of societal leaders

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For The Straits Times

Leadership is probably the most overused and hackneyed concept in management studies. Over the course of my own association with leadership training for the past three decades – from the military to business to academia – the pendulum has swung from the alpha-male, hero-chief executive officer notion of leadership, to the humble, priest-like image of the servant leader, to the stoic charisma of Plato's ancient philosopher-king.

In the frantic and trendy search for leadership models, however, people forget the purpose of leadership. Is it to enable one to command and control vast numbers of underlings, like in the military or large corporations? Is it to empower someone to oratorically inspire, like in political leadership? What indeed is purposeful leadership, rather than just effective leadership?

A concept which has in recent years become more widespread, and which in Singapore has been pioneered by the Institute for Societal Leadership (ISL) at the Singapore Management University, is the notion of societal leadership. It defines societal leadership as the practice of creating sustainable value and impact for the betterment of entire societies within one's sphere of influence.

On a macro level, it is about wielding influence across sectors to make societies more inclusive, cohesive and progressive. The ISL was inspired by, and informally dedicated to, the leadership example of Mr S R Nathan, whose own life and career exemplified societal leadership, from his days as

a social worker, security official, diplomat, think-tank director and, finally, head of state.

Fundamentally, the ISL's approach to leadership posits two points. First, the purpose of leadership is to impact society as a whole, and not just particular sectors such as business or politics. Second, more than ever before, whole-of-society issues are increasingly common for three reasons. One, issues have become more intertwined due to an increasingly borderless world. As a result, the implications of a particular problem have ramifications on other aspects of society, domestic or international, faster than before. Two, the proliferation of technology and media has allowed alternative, often marginalised, voices to become mainstream narratives. Usually, this leads to a positive diversity of views. But recent history offers many examples of how radical, extremist and fringe views can influence mainstream thinking through devices such as "fake news". Third, the approach to leadership around the world has become much more short term in perspective and populist in appeal, resulting in more self-serving leaders. Names need not be mentioned – we all know recent examples.

Furthermore, leadership during the previous century focused on a binary model: a "win-lose" mentality influenced by the Cold War global order, which entrenched a zero-sum game mentality within society. Now that the Cold War is over and Pax Americana is giving way to a global order dominated by no single superpower, but with regional powers all competing for their space under the sun, the world needs a more collaborative approach as implied by the idea of societal leadership. Collaborative

leadership recognises that one may not always be the party that wins the most, but by allowing the other to also win, a true "win-win" solution is best for the societal good.

In the last decade or so, institutions have developed a more "societal" mindset, evidenced by the emergence of more corporate social responsibility programmes among multinationals, an increasing number of social enterprises that leverage on market forces to solve societal issues as well as the number of non-profit organisations that have been formed to harness a growing civic mindset among citizens.

All this is well and good, but the growing complexity of societal challenges means that these efforts, operating within silo mentalities, will not offer adequate responses. We need leadership that is more encompassing across various sectors of society.

To give an example: approximately 200 participants in ISL's South-east Asian Global Undergraduate Leaders' Programme were asked to name specific individuals and identify the traits or attributes which enabled them to be societal leaders. A total of 910 attributes were collated into seven categories, ranging in spectrum from the cognitive and problem-solving capacities on one end, to the social and personality skills on the other. In other words, from high IQ to high EQ, or emotional quotient.

Attributes in the social capacities category were coded the most, followed by the personality category. Problem-solving skills and cognitive capabilities ranked the last. These results suggest findings contrary to past concepts of leadership, social and relational skills – needed most for successful societal leadership – have attained primary importance.

In addition, ISL studied the findings of 40 societal leaders interviewed through its Digital Narratives of Asia platform. The findings showed that three common themes in the life stories of societal leaders can give further insight into leadership development: leadership as a learning process, leadership development through rallying for a social cause and leadership development arising from coping with difficult situations. The insights from these findings are being put to good and wider use.

The Singapore Summit is organised by Singapore's four premier agencies – the Economic Development Board, the Monetary Authority of Singapore, GIC and Temasek – and is Singapore's equivalent of Davos and Boao. Every year, several hundred top international CEOs gather in Singapore, many in their capacity as international advisers to one of the four agencies, and network and brainstorm on current and future issues.

This year, the Singapore Summit will introduce the inaugural Young Societal Leaders Programme, featuring 18 young leaders from Greater Asia, to start developing a younger generation of leaders in all fields of endeavour who can network among themselves to develop a greater pan-Asian consciousness. By adding their voices to the summit through the sharing of views, they will enrich the overall discussions and provide fresh perspectives.

These young societal leaders have exemplary records – whether it is 29-year-old Lotfullah Najafzada, an award-winning journalist and director of TOLONews, Afghanistan's top news and current-affairs TV channel, who puts his life at great risk in the eradication of extremism

in Western Asia; or Myanmar's 28-year-old Nang Lang Kham who is not only the deputy CEO of Myanmar's largest private bank KBZ Bank, but also the co-founder and chair of Brighter Future Myanmar Foundation, which has raised and invested more than US\$120 million (S\$161 million) in charitable giving to uplift underdeveloped communities since its founding 10 years ago; or Singapore's 31-year-old Rebekah Lin who is the co-founder of The Social Co, which initiated the 50 For 50 Project in 2014 bringing together 70 companies and more than 80 young people under the age of 35 to raise awareness of and funds for lesser-known causes such as mental health and suicide prevention. Ms Lin has created 38 sustainable projects and raised a total of S\$4.5 million for 58 local charities and is currently championing Pledge It Forward, an initiative supporting 51 charities to build a more inclusive and resilient community in Singapore.

These 18 young societal leaders, few and young as they may be, are just the beginning. To plagiarise my own remarks as the inaugural IPS-Nathan Fellow, they should not be seen as a drop in the ocean, but instead, as the entire ocean in a drop. They represent the best hope for their respective countries and society. Their participation in the Singapore Summit this year and the annual introduction of young people to the summit will help all of us understand better the differences in inter-generational perspectives and empower all of us to be better societal leaders.

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