



Stepping out of comfort zone: As in business leadership, taking charge in the social sector requires courage. As Mr Mandela discovered, courage is not the absence of fear but the triumph over it. 'The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid but he who conquers that fear.' PHOTO: REUTERS

Towards good leadership in the non-profit world

'Real' leadership requires ability to transform other people's fears and anxieties into hope

By THOMAS MENKHOFF

AS in the corporate world where leaders have to cope with volatility and constant challenges, there is also a need for more capable leadership in the non-profit sector despite the good work of numerous social innovators such as Bill Drayton, founder of social entrepreneurship organisation Ashoka, and Nobel Peace Prize recipient and banker to the poor Muhammad Yunus, who developed and spread the highly successful Grameen Bank micro-credit concept.

In view of increasing social and environmental demands, it is imperative to nurture a thriving and diverse third sector in Asia, comprising voluntary organisations, community groups and social enterprises to create a better future. Without guts (and the five Cs), this won't work.

The hallmark of "real" leadership in the non-profit sector is the ability to transform other people's fears and anxieties into hope. Successful social leaders envision a better future and translate that into reality. They are passionate, transformational, enterprising, inspiring, motivating and engaging, and they have a stoic will to make good in order to change the status quo for the common good.

Urgent demands include the fight against sexual trafficking so as to protect young women and children, the mobilisation of resources to help more dads to become involved fathers in support of their children's development and the dedicated coaching of disabled athletes.

As in business leadership, taking charge in the social sector requires courage because there is often a need for leaders to step outside their comfort zone which can be risky. Potential risks include fear of rejection, losses of material and psychological rewards, exposure to ridicule or worse, ending up in jail. As Nelson Mandela once said: "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid but he who conquers that fear."

Fear is an unpleasant emotion which can paralyse both leaders and followers. Compassion can help to transcend fear into positive energy which coupled with optimism, conviction and the mastery of influencing tactics, ranging from mediation and prayers to goal setting and coaching are necessary requirements of effective social leaders trying to reach the top of the leadership excellence pyramid: ego-absent leadership.

Such leaders are motivated by a larger purpose (other than their ego) and are willing to make decisions which are "right" in order to meet urgent social needs, be it shelter, freedom from oppression, income generation or simply dignity. Examples include India's political and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi, (the lesser known) Aaron Feuerstein, the boss of textile company Malden Mills located in Lawrence, Massachusetts, who rose to fame in the 1990s because he continued to employ and pay his workforce while his factory, which had been destroyed by a fire, was rebuilt (he also rejected the then very popular suggestion to move factory operations abroad) or Singaporean Pamela Yeo,

whose social enterprise Saught (= peace) sells jewellery from deactivated weapons in Cambodia in support of the local population.

An interesting story of doing good with conviction is the evolution of the Raiffeisen Group of banks (a pioneer of micro finance) in Europe, which dates back to the mid-19th century. The founder of Raiffeisen Group, social reformer Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen (1818-1888), was a mayor of several villages in the German Westphalia province who set up charitable co-operatives in order to help the indebted rural population to fight poverty and to get rid of loan sharks.

Going beyond Christian principles of charity, Raiffeisen propagated and implemented the idea of organised, cooperative self-help, self-governance and self-responsibility in order to help peasants help themselves in their fight for survival. A few years after he had pioneered the benevolent "Society for Bread and Grain Supply", Raiffeisen founded the first rural credit co-operative in Germany (1864), predecessor for today's omnipresent Raiffeisenbanks in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Powerful message

The rise of the Raiffeisen banks sends a powerful message to leaders in business and society: Innovative social initiatives can be scaled up with enormous benefits at national level provided capable leaders with guts and an unshakable belief in a social cause, courage and compassion take charge and support social visions in order to tackle unmet needs.

An important enabler of this is system-

atic leadership development and carefully managed synergy between the profit and non-profit sectors. As there is an abundant supply of successful and experienced corporate leaders here, more attempts should be made to create effective knowledge transfer mechanisms to link both groups so that generic key leadership competencies required in both sectors which include staying focused, promoting ownership among followers, effectively managing upwards, situationally smart leadership can be meaningfully shared and imparted to the energetic talent pool of non-profit leaders, followers and volunteers.

An example of an innovative leadership development initiative is the Singapore Management University's professional iLEAP course for non-profit leaders (now in its fourth year) which together with social leadership programmes taught at other local universities continues to enable the non-profit sector here to do good well by contributing to the acquisition of the fourth C of good social leadership: competence.

As authentic leadership development experts US professors Jack Gabarro and Bruce Avolio have stressed, leaders with greater self-awareness and the will to nurture their own leadership abilities continuously, for example through observational learning or role modelling, will be more effective and lead more enjoyable lives. Without character, however, leadership in both business and society will not endure.

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