

PURPOSE AND LEADERSHIP



From left to right

Ms Sharmila Kannan, Director, Administration, Research Affairs and Support Services, SERI
 Ms Annie Goh, Assistant Director, Nursing, KKH
 Dr Sng Ban Leong, Consultant, Department of Women's Anaesthesia, KKH
 Mr Peter Tan, Director of Leadership and Organisation Development, SingHealth

Effective leadership is about putting first things first, say participants of the SMU–SingHealth Graduate Diploma in Healthcare Management and Leadership

In this age of information deluge and perpetual connectivity, “urgent” seems to be the status quo, and demands for our time and attention bombard us from all around.

The principle of “first things first”, advocated by management guru Stephen Covey, therefore, seems more relevant now than ever. To achieve effectiveness, Covey said, we must prioritise work aimed at fulfilling long-term goals over tasks that seem to be urgent but are actually less important.

This can't be more critical for leaders, for they shoulder more responsibilities to strategise, inspire, mobilise and empower at higher levels, towards the “big picture” – their organisations' purpose and vision.

How does putting first things first enable effective leadership? Participants of the SMU–SingHealth Graduate Diploma in Healthcare Management and Leadership programme share their perspectives.

Challenges of first things first

Ms Sharmila Kannan, Director, Administration, Research Affairs and Support Services, at the Singapore Eye Research Institute (SERI), said: “The challenge of ‘first things first’ comes in the execution, as it is

often simply much easier to go with the flow dictated by reminders and to-do lists.”

Dr Sng Ban Leong, Consultant, Department of Women's Anaesthesia at KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH), agreed. He said: “It is easy to lose sight of our purpose amid our busy schedules and heavy workloads, multiple interests and urgent issues.”

However, for doctor-leaders, he said, “It is important to be guided by long-term goals, as these will give us compelling reasons to continue to pursue education and research for medical excellence.”

Ms Annie Goh, Assistant Director, Nursing, at KKH, remarked: “In reality, it can be very challenging to keep our priorities in order while maintaining focus, vision and attending to set goals. However, we do have a choice on how to invest our time and honour it.”

A high-performing team is one that knows which are the right things to work on, said Mr Peter Tan, SingHealth's Director of Leadership and Organisation Development. But he also acknowledged that it is often hard to do this, as demands come from everywhere, for everything. Priorities also change in fast-paced environments.

“I tell my team that situations do shift, and our role is to continuously adapt so that we remain relevant to the organisation,” Mr Tan said. “The principle of first things first comes with managing expectations and good judgement too.”

Focused on purpose

To overcome these challenges, the leaders have to help their teams see the purpose and long-term goals of their organisations clearly. Open communication is their key strategy to do so.

“Leaders should have a clear set of organisational goals, mission and vision, which is then well reiterated and cascaded to all levels,” said Ms Sharmila. “When everyone is aware of the big picture and the common goals, they will be better able to craft and carry out their priorities in alignment.”

To help her team put first things first, Ms Goh endeavours to lead by example and show them the way. “Enabling the team to learn from one another's experience and facilitating self-reflection is essential too,” she said. “It is prudent to stop and reflect on what we are doing.”



Prof Annie Koh
engaging with participants
during the programme



We should spend more time on being effective, not just being efficient.”

For Dr Sng, delegation is an important part of his leadership, in order to achieve more. He said: “I will explain to my team how the tasks are individualised to their capabilities and strengths, and how the tasks would help achieve our long-term goals.”

Sharing leadership insights

Before leaders can help others see the big picture, it is essential that they see it themselves.

In fact, the SMU–SingHealth Graduate Diploma in Healthcare Management and Leadership (GDHM), offered by the Centre for Professional Studies in collaboration with SingHealth and other clusters, facilitated by the SMU faculty, stimulated a rethink of our current ways.”

The knowledge and skills covered in the programme were wide-ranging, from strategy, leadership and people management to operations excellence, finance management and customer value delivery.

Ms Sharmila appreciated how the faculty brought home insightful theories through real-life application within the healthcare domain. She said: “That facilitated clearer understanding of the concepts and their future applications.”

For Dr Sng, the programme demystified the thinking behind policies and administrative decisions. “It helped me sharpen my perspectives on healthcare management and improve my leadership skills,” he said.

One significant feature of the programme was the exchange of insights among the faculty and the participants. Mr Tan, who found the diversity of thoughts particularly enjoyable, said: “The sharing by leaders from SingHealth and other clusters, facilitated by the SMU faculty, stimulated a rethink of our current ways.”

Ms Goh added: “Faculty and participants from different institutions came together in the programme and opened up new, varied perspectives. The discussions were challenging and thoughtful.”

“To achieve effectiveness, we must prioritise work aimed at fulfilling long-term goals over tasks that seem to be urgent but are actually less important.”

Note: The participants interviewed in this article were from the 5th cohort of the GDHM. The annual programme commenced in July 2013 and aims to develop holistic, broad-minded but sharply focused clinicians and hospital administrators to excel in both healthcare management and business leadership.