

# PRINCIPIA

VOLUME 12 NUMBER 1 • 2020

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**Rethinking** Fundamentals,  
Transforming Schools

# PRINCIPIA

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## EDITORIAL

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

DR SHIRLEEN CHEE, PRESIDENT, ACADEMY OF PRINCIPALS (SINGAPORE)

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Recently, our education system has undergone significant shifts. There are substantial reforms – from the removal of assessments and major exams, changes in the PSLE scoring system and criteria for DSA, to the introduction of Full Subject-Based Banding. These moves are a reflection of our ongoing effort to ensure that education remains relevant in the face of changing times.

The theme of this issue is 'Rethinking Fundamentals, Transforming Schools'. This topic is not new. Since the 1960s, Singapore has continually revisited our education fundamentals and reformed our schools according to the needs of the period. Perhaps today, as a result of technology, the changes in our environment are more rapid and the impact of change more significantly felt. It becomes even more critical that as leaders, we rethink our fundamentals and work towards transforming our schools so that our students can truly be future-ready.

What are the fundamentals in education and do these fundamentals shift with the times? How should schools transform as we engage a generation of students that is different from our own? Most of all, as school leaders, how do we lead our schools effectively in the midst of such transitions? I leave you to find the answers in these pages.

In this issue, Permanent Secretary (Education) Mr Lai Chung Han shares his insights on how our education system has evolved to meet changing needs and what the role of school leaders is in the midst of these changes. You will also glean insights from fellow colleagues as they share their leadership principles in the face of change. Leadership is a journey and when confronted with uncertainty, it can sometimes be a frightening one. As part of the fraternity, be assured that you do not journey alone. Enjoy the read!

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# LAI CHUNG HAN

PERMANENT SECRETARY (EDUCATION)

## Rethinking Fundamentals, Transforming Schools

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### RETHINKING FUNDAMENTALS

Each day as I come to work, I am reminded of MOE's mission, "moulding the future of our nation", visible on the granite wall in front of the MOE building.

In front of the wall is a sculpture of a hand lifting up a child. It illustrates another mission we have as educators – to uplift our young so that they can reach their full potential.

Our mission anchors us firmly to our fundamentals. In the midst of disruptions caused by technology, socio-economic upheavals and globalisation, our overarching purpose remains invariant—to shape our young into self-directed learners, productive members of the workforce, responsible members of the community and global citizens in an increasingly interconnected world.

Even as we embrace the changes that come with the times, it is critical for us to remain grounded in our purpose. Our role is not just to teach, develop curriculum or run a school. As educators and school leaders, we have the privilege of shaping and influencing the lives of our nation's future, and uplifting every child to achieve their potential.

But even as every educator is unwaveringly and fully committed to this purpose, how we achieve it must change with the times.

Technological disruptions are changing the way we live, learn and work. Society expects a broader meritocracy that offers multiple pathways and embraces diverse talents. The shifting global economic centre of gravity towards Asia is opening up new economic opportunities in our region.

Our education system is evolving to address these challenges, and seize these new opportunities. Our school leaders play a critical role in understanding the context for these changes,



implementing well, giving constructive feedback on what works and does not, and being a pivotal player in improving our education system for each generation that passes through our school gates.

### STARTING YOUNG

Today, there is a greater recognition that the circumstances that lead to an uneven spread of opportunities start early. If left unaddressed, these can lead to growing inequality over time. In recent years, MOE has made significant investments into early childhood education to ensure that every child receives a good start in life. This means providing accessible, affordable and quality preschool education.

Our kindergartens have grown rapidly. This year, we will have around thirty kindergartens under the MOE brand. By 2025, this number will grow to about 60.

Every MOE kindergarten is located within a primary school and comes under the school's oversight. Primary school leaders will need to grapple with the new dynamics of having five- and six-year-old children in their schools in addition to their current cohort of students. At the same time, school leaders have to be mindful that they do not gravitate towards the schoolification of kindergartens. The

focus of every MOE kindergarten should be to encourage exploration and curiosity, and develop a child's confidence through play and social interaction.

### **REDEFINING SUCCESS BEYOND GRADES**

Students must come to understand that their identity and success is so much more than their grades. The recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 results indicate that 15-year-old students in Singapore are more afraid of failure compared to their counterparts in other countries. Findings like this strengthen our conviction that we are making the right moves away from a narrow emphasis on academic results to embrace a broader definition of success. We must go back to the fundamentals encouraging an intrinsic motivation to learn and nurturing the joy of learning.

We have been reducing the school-based assessment load to free up time and space to deepen teaching and learning. In 2021, there will be a landmark change in the PSLE scoring system so that students are not differentiated down to the last mark. We have expanded DSA opportunities to recognise talents beyond academic results.

School leaders and educators need to understand the intent of these changes – it is a deliberate shift away from a focus on grades and exam preparations so that teaching and learning become a more enriching and fulfilling experience.

### **CULTIVATING A GROWTH MINDSET**

Perhaps the most significant change in our education system is the gradual phasing out of streaming and replacing it with Full Subject-Based Banding in secondary schools. Besides

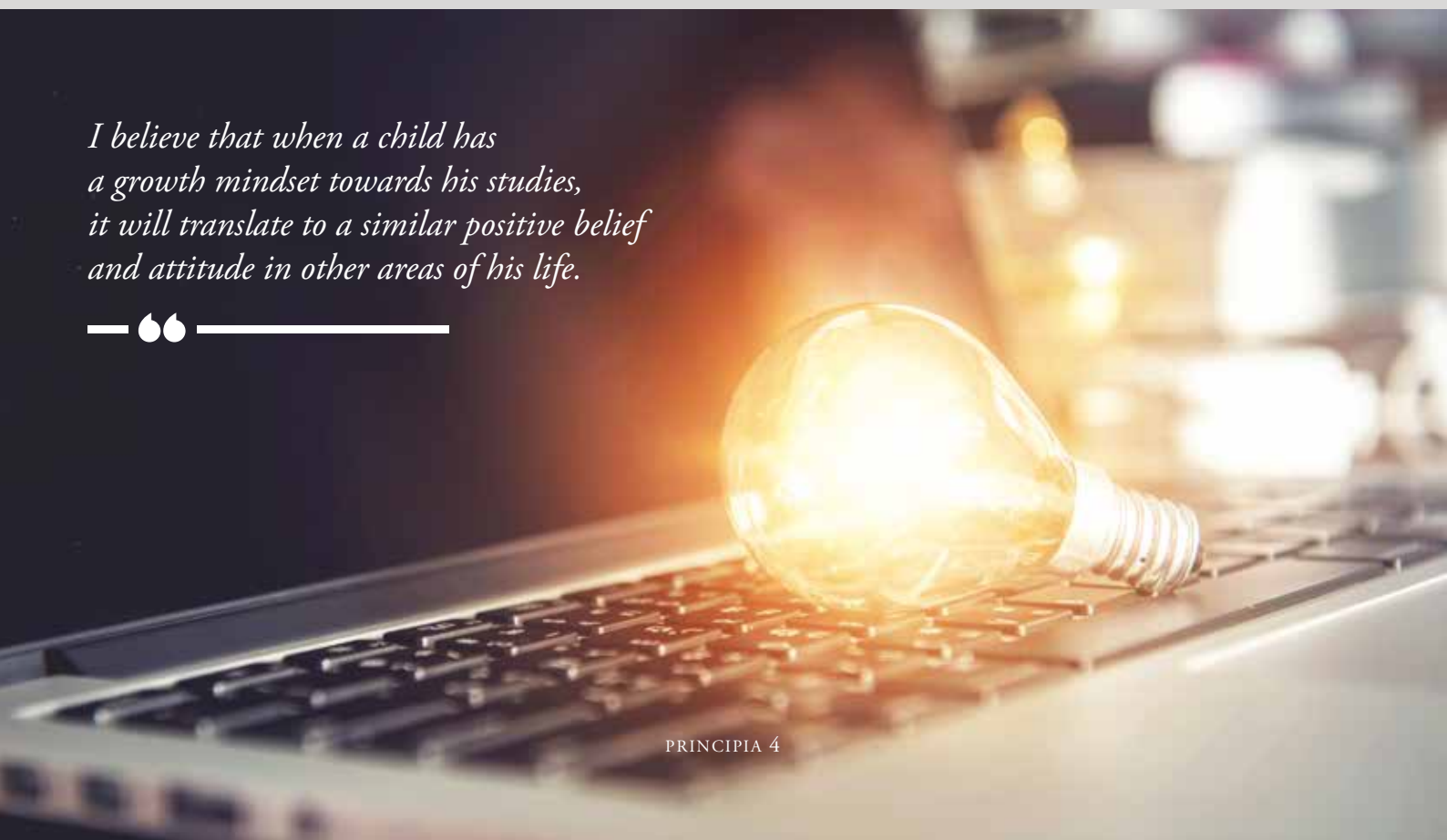
removing the stigmatisation that comes with streaming, this deliberate move aims to engender a growth mindset in all our students. Students can pursue subjects at a higher level, based on their strengths and interests. I believe that when a child has a growth mindset towards his studies, it will translate to a similar positive belief and attitude in other areas of his life. We have also opened up more pathways for students transiting from secondary school to higher education such as the Polytechnic Foundation Programme (PFP) and Direct Entry Scheme to Polytechnic Programme (DPP). The porosity of pathways serve as conduits for students to reach their highest potential regardless of their starting points.

Schools now face the challenge of managing and implementing these transitions. School leaders will have to re-organise the way classes are run and teachers will need to adjust their classroom management styles. With the more diverse pathways and options, educators also play an even more important role in understanding their students' passions and strengths and guiding them along the appropriate pathways.

### **ANCHORING ON STRONG VALUES**

In the midst of these changes, our Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum will also be refreshed. One of the fundamentals in our education system is inculcating strong values in our children. When our students possess strong values, they will be well-anchored in the face of challenges. The refreshed CCE curriculum will focus on developing a student's identity, enabling them to build a healthy network of relationships, and equipping them to make the right choices in life. We will also address modern forms of stress faced by students such as mental and cyber wellness.

*I believe that when a child has a growth mindset towards his studies, it will translate to a similar positive belief and attitude in other areas of his life.*





## **UPLIFTING THE DISADVANTAGED**

To strengthen support for underperforming students from disadvantaged families, we have formed the UPLIFT taskforce. This initiative is part of our effort to support disadvantaged students so that they have an equal footing in terms of educational opportunities. We have established vendor-run student care centres in all our primary schools and in an increasing number of secondary schools to give students a structured and supportive environment after school hours. Moving forward, I hope that school leaders will continue to strengthen their connections with the community and collaborate with industry partners to ensure that the after school care programmes are well-run and effective.

## **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

We are also seeking the support of every school to incorporate Special Education Needs (SEN) into their agenda, as we continue to improve our provisions over time. About 80% of school-aged children with SEN attend mainstream schools in Singapore. Every child, regardless of their aptitudes or learning needs, deserves the opportunity to learn and grow. School leaders will have to prepare for such changes as schools are transformed into more open and inclusive spaces where children of different backgrounds and abilities, and aptitudes can learn together.

## **TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS**

### **SCHOOL LEADERS AND EDUCATORS – OUR SECRET SAUCE**

Singapore's education system is like a distinctive dish where teachers are the special ingredients. In the course of their careers, our teachers continue to grow professionally to meet the changing needs of students. With such extraordinary shifts

in our education system, school leaders and teachers must be prepared. MOE will continue to raise the competencies of our teaching workforce through SkillsFuture for Educators so that they can implement these changes successfully in the classroom. Some areas of focus include SEN, e-pedagogy and differentiated instruction.

Besides strengthening the professional development of our teachers, we need to utilise technology more effectively, so that it enables our teachers to become more effective educators. Even as teachers continue to be at the heart of schooling, technology plays an increasingly important role in augmenting teaching and learning in the classroom.

While teachers constitute the special ingredients, our school leaders are that secret sauce in our education system. The secret sauce is often the ingredient that gives a dish its unique flavour and makes it stand out. Our school leaders are the ones who make the difference.

School leaders do not get the credit they deserve. Often, when we recall our schooling years, we fondly remember the teachers who impacted our lives. Generally, principals were seen as authority figures and a visit to the principal's office was something to be dreaded! In my time at MOE, I have come to appreciate school leaders even more. They make education happen on the ground and carry the heavy responsibility of making every school a good school. They lead their teams to provide the holistic and quality education that is the hallmark of Singapore's education system.

The transformation of Singapore's education system is akin to changing the engine while the car is in motion. Our education machinery continues to run day in and day out even as we explore and implement changes on the go. Every weekday, without fail, we have half a million students learning and being cared for safely in more than 300 schools run by over 30,000 educators. The system runs efficiently and continually even as it is concurrently fine-tuned and reformed so that our schools are ready for what the future holds. The professionalism and passion of our school leaders and teachers will continue to anchor our success.

As we look at 2020 and beyond, I hope that school leaders will continue to exercise leadership amidst change -- creating unstructured space in our curriculum, opening minds to multiple pathways and seeding lifelong learning. When we succeed in these areas, we will achieve our fundamental purpose in education.

I have every confidence that you will continue to lead your schools well, and in so doing, play a vital role in moulding the future of our nation by raising every child to reach his potential in life.



*A key educational fundamental in Singapore is to provide a holistic education so that we develop well-rounded individuals who are well-equipped and willing to contribute to our nation's future.*





# MICHAEL DE SILVA

YISHUN INNOVA JUNIOR COLLEGE



## The Philosophy of Leadership

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*The founder of a local supermarket chain once shared that when he tours his supermarkets, he constantly reminds his staff that he is not really their “boss”. He points at the customers milling around and states that they, not he, are the bosses - without customers, the employees would have no role to play. It is natural when listing fundamentals therefore to state the obvious: that, schools exist for students. Educators play the role of shaping the children under our charge and are the focus, whether directly or indirectly, of all that we do.*

When I was involved in leadership development at HQ, I facilitated a series of workshops that collectively involved almost all of the principals. In workshops of about 25 principals at a time, principals contributed to the writing of a philosophy for educational leadership. At the first few workshops, it seemed the participants felt that the intent was to produce a document on school leadership that would be universally accepted by educators “all over the world”. However, it did not take us long to realise that while there were universal principles behind education, it was clearly also about nation in Singapore. The Ministry’s mission is explicit: education is about moulding the future of the nation. It is also clear from the appointment letters that principals get at the start of a school tour that “in (our) charge are lives in the making ... they depend on (us) to guide, mould and nurture them to become better individuals and useful citizens.”

As education in Singapore focuses on both child and nation, an agility is needed to address this high and noble call. Neither the profile of children nor the anticipated future needs of the nation can be described as unchanging. As such, I try to inject a sense of agility and future orientation into the school. At a base level, staff need to be attuned to the varying needs of students and be finely honed in the craft of teaching and learning. Beyond that, leaders must also understand national and global trends as the students we teach today will be living as contributing adults some decades later. In the Singapore context school leaders are fortunate that the discourse between professionals and thought leaders often reflect that national responsibility of developing what is often quoted as our only resource - the human resource. Our political leaders, whom we have access to the thoughts of, remind us that Singapore

needs to thrive in a rapidly changing global environment as well as meet longer-term domestic challenges such as aging, social mobility and economic transformation.

These challenges have a significant impact on how I see my mission in leading my school. A key educational fundamental in Singapore is to provide a holistic education so that we develop well-rounded individuals who are well-equipped and willing to contribute to our nation’s future. More so in past years than in the present, I had found that a core duty of mine was to inject the importance of holistic education into conversations around policies and programmes, not only with staff but also with parents. This nudging is much easier for me today as policy changes at a national level have reinforced the importance of holistic education and encouraged a broader view of what meritocracy is.

While educators have a belief that “every child can learn”, the George Evans version of the quote adds that, “just not on the same day, or the same way”. Learning is growth and growth means that we are reaching for a level of attainment that the child is currently not at. At my school we have high expectations of student attainment even though, for example, students enrol with a wide range of academic abilities. As educators we may not find tried and tested ways easily available to bridge such gaps but the answers lie in innovation and learning – at both the personal/professional and organisational levels. We employ design thinking, for example, to conceptualise programmes to help students learn to learn and develop a growth mindset. We have had no President’s Scholars as yet but we celebrate our unsung heroes like the L1R5 20 pointer who repeated JC1 and then went on to score a maximum University Admission Score of 90.

## FUNDAMENTALS IN LEADERSHIP

I served in various roles in the SAF over the course of thirty years of National Service and there were many lessons in leadership in that context that have shaped my perspective of leadership to this day. My interactions with a diversity of Singaporeans in the army also helped me to relate to a wide array of home environments very different from mine. The army instilled in me a mission orientation and a can-do attitude (because nothing beats motivating oneself at 4 am in the morning to perform a physically demanding mission). I understood the importance of good preparation and that one is better prepared for contingencies when planning considers multiple possibilities. I also learnt that the best plans and intentions will fail if the soldiers in the front lines executing the plans did not have the capability and/or motivation to carry out the mission.

Perhaps admittedly with some bias, having been involved in its development, I subscribe to the four leadership principles in the “Philosophy for Educational Leadership in Singapore”. These principles form the basis of my beliefs as a leader. They are, namely, that leaders must have a strong sense of moral purpose and be anchored on values; leadership is shared - a leader’s role includes not just growing leaders but also growing a capacity for leadership in all; leadership must be a shared purpose; and leaders not only manage change, but also lead it.

Leaders must have a strong sense of moral purpose and be anchored on values. A leader must understand himself and possess a strong belief in his mission for his school. He creates a culture of openness and trust, making transparent his own values and motivations for all to see. As a school leader, I believe that every child can succeed. We need to have high expectations of student achievement and of our school’s capacity to make it happen. I also believe every child needs a high degree of care and support. Safety is of paramount importance. These are my beliefs and I clearly share them.

## FRATERNITY SUPPORT

As leaders of schools within a national system, we negotiate the alignment between HQ and our school. We keep an eye on global trends either directly on our own or by proxy through seminal speeches and directions by our political leaders and senior leaders at HQ. We note these inputs to understand the rationale, importance and urgency of such directions. We then add our understanding of our school context to make purposeful decisions while shaping the pace and form of how change will be realised.

A high degree of organisational awareness is involved in balancing this autonomy with alignment. Leadership is difficult and leaders often have to make choices between two ‘rights’. Like many school matters that are complex in nature, we deal with many tensions and dilemmas. Fortunately, the ministry pays great attention to ground perspectives in policy implementation and to some extent schools can often choose when they want to adopt a top-down initiative and the manner and pace it is to be realised in a school. However, school leaders generally accept that sometimes when an initiative is urgent and important enough there will be less autonomy and compliance is expected. Effective school leaders possess a high degree of organisational awareness.

We also keep abreast of developments in our profession. It is important to be part of a community such as the APS or school clusters to receive support and gain practical knowledge. During my stint at the Ministry, I was given the chance to learn how leadership programmes were run overseas. At one of the universities in the USA, the professor in charge of a leadership programme attributed the success of his programme to having a “cohort approach”. We were curious to know what that was. It turned out that it was about having the same twenty or so participants attend all modules together as a class for the duration of the programme. This was as opposed to a traditional master’s programme where students would choose different modules and therefore may have had different

classmates at different times. The cohort approach allowed for the building of bonds between course mates which were maintained after they graduated and provided a source of support as they took on leadership appointments after the course. In Singapore, our principal preparation courses at the NIE has always adopted the cohort approach. I realised that day the importance of what we had taken for granted - that our school leaders have multiple professional networks – LEP alumni, clusters, MOE/zonal/cluster that we could rely on. Such communities help us to support one another as we perform our leadership roles.

## GROWING OUR TEACHERS

Our role as leaders involves growing the leadership capacity of all our staff including those not in formal leadership positions such that everyone has a shared goal. In education, teachers play the most important role as they directly affect student outcomes. The impact of the principal’s work to student outcomes is less direct - principals create the systems, structures and culture that allow teachers to thrive and make an impact.

Good teachers are in the profession because they want what is best for the students. It is important therefore for leaders to frame teacher-work in terms of how it will impact students. As an example, each of our areas of teacher assessment must have an obvious link to student development. This is easy to do for the areas of assessment that relate directly to achieving student outcomes. For the assessment areas of professional development of self and of other colleagues, having high expectations of student development that cannot be attained with our current capacities, serves as enough motivation. In the last area of assessment that relates to staff contributions to the school as an organisation, I do challenge teachers to identify any area in the college for which they have duties that did not have at least an indirect impact on student learning. As examples, it does not take much to see how being in charge of prize giving at College Day motivates student achievement, or how time-tabling or

discipline management duties create the orderly and conducive environment that allow students to learn.

While the above reminds that teachers are motivated most when their work is clearly linked to student outcomes, should teachers be seen by leaders as just factors of production? Dr Low Guat Tin, a respected academic at NIE, often asked if school leaders saw teachers as a means to an end or an end worthy of attention, in themselves. Good leaders should engage with teachers for who they are and see them as people with physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs. Teachers need to feel valued. With this perspective in mind, my aim is to make my school a learning organisations with a high trusting and collaborative climate. I try to create a culture of shared information and vision, while giving clear direction and encouraging innovation and experimentation. Teachers are rewarded for taking initiative and given the opportunity to learn and grow.

### LEADING CHANGE

Yishun Innova JC is the result of two JCs merging in 2019. The process of the merger began when the respective principals of both JCs were privately informed about the merger in 2016. We saw our role as leading change rather than just managing it. While establishing sound processes for the merger was important, the greater imperative was to harness the imagination, energy and commitment of the people. There was a diversity of needs from different stakeholders which had to be met. For example, in 2018, there were JC1 students at YJC who would become JC2 students at newly merged YIJC who probably wondered if there would be stability in their graduating year. While at IJC, the JC2s needed assurance that they would receive the same quality of teaching and support with only half the teachers from the previous year remaining at the college. Prospective pioneer students at YIJC probably wondered if YIJC would be ready for them. Each step of redefining culture, creating a new vision, as well as setting goals and project management

required extensive collaboration and engagement at every function and level.

### MOVING FORWARD

As the education environment becomes increasingly complex and many issues remain uncertain or undefined, schools play an increasing role as sensors on the ground. School leaders need to take a more proactive role to understand and share issues that may require attention. While there are feedback channels currently, I hope to see increased school to HQ feedback through more formal structures and/or research.

With curriculum changes, we want to bring about greater student engagement leading to diverse student outcomes -- from academic to holistic, from content to skills such as higher order thinking skills, computational thinking, and mental health education besides physical education. In addition, internationalisation and global exposure should be on the cards.

Schools may also need to take on greater “entrepreneurial dare”. Technology must become an enabler; learning sciences should be leveraged with brain research such that the linkage becomes common place. The level of teacher expertise and capabilities should increase so that there will be a greater distribution of leadership. Schools may also need to revisit their roles. Do we build school expertise across a diverse range of capabilities that a student has to have? Or do we leverage partnerships and community tie-ups?

Perhaps there are more questions than answers at this point in time. As the world moves into a future that is significantly different from what we know now, it is important for us to revisit our fundamentals in leadership and transform our schools should there be a need to.



### Developing Intellectual Capacity

- Avoid jumping to conclusions too early
- Analyse from different perspectives
- See whole and parts
- Use creative thinking techniques eg divergence then convergence, brainstorming
- Use tools and frames of thinking eg 4 –player model, ladder of inference
- Expose self to ideas eg through scanning and engaging with knowledge bases

### Working with Others

- Be more transparent/authentic
- Know your preferred approach with respect to ‘thinking’ or ‘feeling’, build your capacity in the weaker aspect
- Find common purpose/ ‘enemy’ for a win-win outcome
- Strive to be more approachable eg reduce barriers, increase availability

### Developing Personal Drive & Stamina


- Develop self-confidence e.g. know your subject matter well
- Develop behaviour flexibility e.g. plan for contingencies, be open to feedback
- Be self-aware e.g. know your hot button areas, fears and weaknesses and manage yourself better
- Accept VUCA and respond with VUCA PRIME
- Take a risk management approach e.g. tolerate mistakes that do not have catastrophic consequences

### Organisational Leadership

- Vision and Goals – work towards whole staff consensus in establishing priorities giving a sense of overall purpose.
- Culture – Promoting care and trust among staff, respectful tone, willingness to change practice in the light of new information.
- Structure – participative decision making, supports delegation and distributive leadership and encourages teacher autonomy
- Intellectual Stimulation – encourage reflection; staff learn from each other and models continual learning in his or her own practice.
- Individual Support – provide moral support, shows appreciation for work; take in opinion in decision making.
- Performance Expectations – have high expectations for staff and students; and therefore be innovative to be effective.

### Leading a Merger

- Decide on your approach to the culture. Culture formation choices include: transforming one of the cultures to align with the other, amalgamate the two cultures leveraging the strengths of each, creating a new culture free of the stigma of either of the previous cultures.
- Create a compelling vision
- Set a series of goals
- Manage the project
- Collaborate
- Engage every function and level
- Develop change leadership capacity



*The fundamentals in education go beyond teaching children knowledge and skills, but enlarging their hearts and opening their minds, creating mindsets that keeps them growing, learning and aspiring to be the best they can be.*



# MAUREEN LEE

YUSOF ISHAK SECONDARY SCHOOL



## Becoming More

*Children are naturally inquiring and confident. With each cumulative year they stay in school, they should become even more curious and competent, more hopeful and optimistic, and ultimately, more gracious and caring.*

Education develops the whole person – nurturing a child with all the moral values and capabilities so that he will grow up confident to fulfil his purpose in life while having a heart for others. The fundamentals in education go beyond teaching children knowledge and skills, but enlarging their hearts and opening their minds, creating mindsets that keeps them growing, learning and aspiring to be the best they can be. It involves nurturing talents, passion, creativity and resilience in order to fulfil hopes and dreams.

### FUNDAMENTALS FOR THE FUTURE

As our children grow up in a society that offers them multiple options, they will need to have that confidence and space to choose how they learn best. They have to receive an educational experience that embraces their interests. Sparking curiosity and growing passion should become one of the important fundamentals in education. Schools should be spaces where opportunities abound, where students can discover their passions and work diligently and creatively towards fulfilling them. Passion drives self-directedness and motivation. If our learners are passionate about something, they will be curious and willing to explore and create possibilities. They will also have the determination to master what they learn, make connections across various disciplines and become creative.

Education should also prepare students with mindsets and skillsets for future readiness. Besides self-directedness, students need to be agile and adaptive to a fast-changing world. We need to ensure that our children develop the ability to think well, navigate and be inventive in uncertain situations. School experiences should create a hunger to learn, hone the ability to make sense of large amounts of data and enable sound decision-making in the face of limited information. Education should equip learners to be ‘waymakers’ by giving them the skillsets, mindsets and values to take ownership of their own future and make a path for themselves.

Most of all, education should cultivate an abundance mindset by helping students become more than who they are. Our goal is to raise a confident generation, bold enough to be the change they want the world to be, while striving to create a future for greater good.

### PURPOSE, PASSION AND PEOPLE

Even as organisations evolve, the fundamentals of leadership remain the same. Leadership is about rallying heart and minds to achieve a shared vision. With change becoming a constant and the world becoming more VUCA, more than ever, leaders need to be authentic and consistent. To be effective leaders, we must know what we stand for and have the courage to hold true to our

values. We need to be deeply self-aware so that we can be real. In order to lead others, we must be crystal clear about our beliefs, mission and purpose as a leader. It begins with “lead yourself-know yourself, improve yourself, and manage the appropriate balance in your own life”. As leaders, we often have a bias for action that prevents us from stepping back to re-calibrate. We need to practise reflection so that we can keep an even keel and hold steady when we are tested.

In the span of my thirty years in education, I have served as Principal for three schools. I have learnt that leadership is essentially about inspiring and growing our people. To do this, I must put people first before strategies and plans. If we want our people to follow us, we must first truly care for their well-being and personal growth. When our people are anchored and strong, they will be able to give their best to the children in every circumstance.

I have also learnt that nothing inspires more than a leader who is passionate about her mission. When we are passionate about what we do, we will inspire others with our enthusiasm, energy and commitment. A clear, positive and purposeful leader who grows and supports her people will inadvertently energise them. I tell my team that they are not working for me, but working with me and my hands are on the deck as I journey with them.

## SCHOOL LEADERS AS CHANGE LEADERS

Our increasingly fast-paced world demands that educators are adaptive, responsive and proactive. School leaders need to be leaders of change. My journey as principal of Yusof Ishak Secondary School involved genuine and consistent engagement of all staff and students in order to shift mindsets, challenge beliefs and change the way we see ourselves and issues to co-create the future with our students.

When I first joined the school, I intentionally worked towards transforming the way we believe, think and learn. Everyone at Yusof Ishak is familiar with the acronym BIG (Believe, Inspire and Grow). We believe in one another and appreciate our individual strengths and abilities. We inspire one another to learn and to reach our potential. We grow together so that we can be more than what we are. I use every available touch-point, from morning assemblies, class and cohort engagement talks each term, morning breakfast conversations with students, start-of-the-year picnics, and one-on-one dialogues with staff to reiterate the idea of BIG.

Our school is in the process of transition. We are relocating from our premises at Bukit Batok to meet the growing demand for places in secondary schools in the Punggol area. We have stopped Secondary 1 admission since 2018. In 2021, our Bukit Batok campus will finish strong with Secondary 4 and 5 students while we welcome the new Secondary 1 students at Punggol site. In a school that is getting smaller, the power of thinking BIG cannot be understated. We had to reframe our beliefs to see that the potential and standing of a school is not dependent on its physical size or the number of its students. Indeed, a school is as big as the staff and students think it is. Because we choose to see how strong we are and believe in our potential to grow even more, our school culture becomes more vibrant, our curriculum more progressive and our people more inspired.

## SCHOOL LEADERS AS CURRICULUM LEADERS

As we talked about BIG, we also created opportunities for students to be BIG. For example, we partnered the Singapore Institute of Technology for Secondary 3 (Normal Academic) students

to be mentored by undergraduates, conducted STEM related projects and gave school-wide understanding of coding, computational thinking, drones technology and Python programing. As students acquired knowledge through inquiry and built upon what they learnt, they developed new understanding and became knowledge creators themselves.

In the area of CCAs, we came up with the idea of combining efforts in CCAs to allow greater collaboration and sharing of resources. As we did not have the numbers to build a team for competition for certain sports, we started inviting students who had interest to learn skills of two CCAs and to collaborate in diverse teams for competitions. We had students from badminton and netball coming together for both practices and competing in both competitions. Similarly sepak takraw and floorball were combined. Not only did students get to learn two different sports, but they also had the opportunity to compete in the inter-school games, work with teams of different profiles, find opportunities in challenges and develop flexibility in mindsets and nimbleness to problem solve. In fact, our combined Malay and Indian dance groups won a Certificate of Distinction at the recent SYF! Our CCA programme is a testament to the power of thinking BIG.

Descartes has said, “I think, therefore I am”. Our mind is more than just a cognitive tool. It is an active and creative organ which controls how we feel and think. Our feelings and thoughts, in turn, shape our attitudes. Thankfully, as modern educators, we no longer subscribe to metaphors of education such as writing on a blank slate or filling an empty jug. We have also progressed beyond the traditional ‘one size fits all’ approach to schooling. School leaders need to understand the power of the mind so that we can enable our staff and students to grow beyond their limitations and reach their full potential. Understanding this principle, we redesigned our curriculum to include metacognition skills. Metacognition refers to the mental processes used to plan, monitor and assess one’s thinking, understanding and performance. Our students are trained to be aware of how they think and learn and

to consciously see themselves as thinkers and learners.

We also redesigned our curriculum based on our belief that students need to co-create their learning experiences in order to truly learn. For example, to enhance conceptual learning in mathematics, our teachers initiated a game-based learning experience in the form of a portable escape room where students needed to solve puzzles in groups in order to get out. This engaging way of learning allowed students to clarify their mathematical concepts.

For learning to truly take place, it has to be relevant and true to life. We believe in working closely with the community so that students have hands-on exposure and experience to real life challenges. We connected with the National Environmental Agency (NEA) to work on sustainability and the urban farming of microgreens and vegepods. Our students compared plants grown under LED conditions as opposed to those out in the sun. They gained understanding on what it means to be urban farmers, appreciating resource-scarce Singapore and sustainability issues in the future.

As Yusof Ishak Secondary School is the Centre for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE), we are grateful for opportunities to collaborate and grow with Master Teachers from Academy of Singapore Teachers and professors from NIE to be at the forefront of new curriculum ideas and teaching pedagogies. The unique tripartite partnership for the in-situ professional development of the teachers at CTLE has impacted the fraternity in raising the quality of learning amongst students. As school leaders, we need to constantly relook and rethink the fundamentals -- learning, unlearning, and relearning in order to ensure that our schools remain relevant.

## FROM SPACES TO PLACES

Just as fundamentals need to be to be relooked to meet the needs of the future, schools have to transform by co-creating the learning experience with students and community, revisiting the role of learners and teachers and reimagining the learning spaces to be inspiring and inclusive. Schools should be a community

where learners are not just consumers but actively involved in co-creating their learning experience. Learning should be customised so that the learner can be equipped with skills to be self-directed and to personalise learning for himself. Learning also needs to be socialised and contextualised. Knowledge comprises both 'know-what' and 'know-how'; it is social in nature and distributed among groups of people who use it to solve problems together. We need to move from giving our students head knowledge to knowledge that is applicable to real life and society, and where they can be knowledge creators as well as become more creative and innovative as a person.

As globalisation and digitisation make our world smaller and flatter, we need to acquire knowledge beyond traditional means. I see the environment and technology as third and fourth teachers respectively. Teaching spaces will no longer be used for single purposes but have multiple uses. Students and teachers will work together to design these spaces so that schools become a connected community offering inspiring learning experiences that is a collaborative effort involving teachers, interaction designers, instructional designers, programmers and storytellers. At Yusof Ishak, we have a Creative Art gallery where we honour every piece of work and where students continue learning art beyond the classroom. The school canteen, foyer and library were also reimaged to be multi-functional places where students engaged in lunch time activities, conduct speeches and performances as well as bonding activities. Students will no longer be restricted to classroom experiences, but be provided with open-ended opportunities for experimentation, interaction with different domain specialists and allowed unconstrained movement around the school campus for deeper learning to inspire creativity and innovation.

With the advances in technology, education has undergone a period of prolonged disruption. The internet has empowered individuals to author shareable content and students now have access to information in the form of downloadable PDFs, audio and video podcasts, video-tutorials, inspirational talks and lectures

designed for viewing on their mobile phones. Data literacy, digital literacy and innovation will be important pillars in education for the future.

### SCHOOL LEADERS AS CULTURE BUILDERS

A school leader plays the important role of creating the conditions for teachers and students for students to flourish. Our beliefs and practices shape and influence the culture of our schools. What will the school culture of the future be like? I believe it will be a growth culture compared to one based on performance. "A performance culture asks how much energy we can mobilise, and the answer is always a finite amount. A growth culture asks how much energy we can liberate, and the answer is infinite". For schools to truly transform, school leaders need to build a culture of growth. For growth to take place, we must give up control. Co-creation, collaboration, creativity, community and innovation are key words in the vocabulary of future-minded leaders.

At its core, education is about growing a whole person – anchored on strong values, possessing a positive outlook with an abundance mindset, having purpose in life, interacting well with different people, being globally aware, flexible, innovative, having empathy for others and a heart to serve. As we face the future and redesign our educational experience for future readiness, we should start with these outcomes in mind. For education to be effective, we need to engage today's digital natives in a different way – one that is more personalised, where we hear their voices and seek their involvement and where their individual talents and passions are nurtured. As school leaders, we have the responsibility to lead the change to transform our schools so that education remains relevant. All our roads point to one destination – nurturing a person to become more. The end result of education is a full and whole person – a confident optimistic life-long learner with the disposition, mindset, discernment, grit, grace and compassion to make the world a better place. When such a person is transformed to become more than who he is and what he thinks he can be, he is ready for the future. Only then would education have served its highest purpose.



### Leadership Fundamentals

*Leadership is about..*

Being the Inspiration for your people

- Purpose – leading by who you are, having a clear and inspiring vision
- Passion- modelling the passion and love for what you believe as you serve
- Humility – being deeply self-aware and being the Chief Learner

Being There for your people

- Love your people, be authentic
- Ask questions and connect with them
- Have faith in them, trust them
- Encourage, challenge and support them all the way
- Enabling them to grow and constantly improve

Becoming More

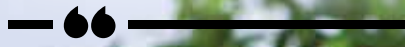
- Believe truly in the value of each staff
- Purposefully growing your people to becoming more, to be leaders in their own right
- Empower them to be more autonomous, healthier and more inspired in their role

### My favourite leadership books

- *The Infinite Game* by Simon Sinek
- *Leader Shift* by John C Maxwell
- *Developing the Leader Within You 2.0* by John C Maxwell
- *The 100X Leader* by Jeremie Kubicek
- *Stillness is the Key* by Ryan Holiday



*Leadership is not about positions held, self-gain or glory. It is a reflection of our beliefs and values that is expressed in everything we do.*





# JENNY LEONG-TAN

DAMAI PRIMARY SCHOOL



## The Foundations of Leadership

*When I joined the teaching service in 1990, it never crossed my mind that I would become a school leader years later. I simply served as a teacher to the best of my ability, living out the fundamental values that I held onto in all aspects of my life. Although we were not a well-to-do family, my parents worked hard to provide my siblings and me the basics in life, while demonstrating to us the good values of honesty, commitment, prudence and diligence. These values form the fundamentals in my life and to this day, they are the basis on which I develop my philosophy of leadership.*

Leadership is not about positions held, self-gain or glory. It is a reflection of our beliefs and values that is expressed in everything we do. When we live out these beliefs, we express leadership in a way that is personally and uniquely ours. Every leader has to personally own his or her leadership journey. As a child, I owned my learning and saved up to buy assessment books to revise. When I became a school leader, I decided to pursue a part-time degree while juggling work and a young child at home. The leadership experience is one that we have to craft for ourselves and it is established on sound fundamentals that will be tested along the way.

As a leader in education, I subscribe to some fundamentals that have never changed. First of all, I believe that every child is important and can succeed. Depending on his or her starting point, the definition of success differs. For some, success is doing well academically, while for others it could be something else. For example, for a child who refuses to go to school, success is achieved when he shows up for class. As leaders, we work towards bringing our children towards success and it is up to us to define what that means for every individual.

### LEADERS HELP AND BRING HOPE

Leaders need to make their presence felt in the lives of those around them. Do my staff feel supported and cared for? For those who are managing well, how do we enable them to achieve even more? Do we encourage sharing of ideas and giving opportunities to our staff to make things better? A good leader will consider the needs and growth of their personnel and not just take credit for herself. If a staff is not performing well, what is our attitude towards him or her? I always believe in giving second chances. While it is important to counsel and hear them out, at the end of it all, they need to know that there are opportunities to improve.

Leaders need to be involved whether it is mediating and solving problems, or working alongside our staff so that they are not alone. When I was Principal at Red Swastika School, I made it a point to wait at the gantry every day during drop off to support my operational staff. When faced with difficult parents, I will be there to give support. I willingly attend to parents, students or phone calls. After every event, I give a hand to help stack up tables and chairs. When the staff sees their leader as one who is

willing to dirty her hands, they will be more willing to do their part.

Leaders create positive experiences and when situations are difficult, they give hope. In 2019, my first year at Damai Primary, a Primary 6 girl confided that she feared failing her PSLE. While I could not promise that she would pass, I assured her that no matter what, Damai Primary would be here for her and so would I. She would not have to struggle or journey alone. I met her daily for a month and eventually she overcame her fears. Many of our students come from disadvantaged backgrounds and I remind my staff that we need to create positive experiences for them so that they will look forward to coming to school, and even see school as a safe place of refuge. With our newly built facilities, coupled with caring and dedicated teachers, our children do enjoy coming to school.

### A JOURNEY OF LEARNING

As a leader it is important to know our craft, be credible and reliable. Our co-workers are constantly looking to us for feedback and direction. Whether it is issues of discipline or working with parents, we need to consistently

role model the way for our staff. The leadership journey is ongoing. When you become a leader it does not mean you have arrived, rather, it is the beginning of a new path. To hone our craft and keep growing, we need to constantly learn. I make an effort to constantly learn through books and leadership materials, people, circumstances and experiences. My favourite leadership books include Carol Dweck's *Growth Mindset*, *The Skillful Leader* by Alexander Platt, and publications by ASCD. When I relate to others, I ask myself what can I learn from them be it their experiences, knowledge, wisdom, talents or even the behaviours I should emulate or avoid. There are opportunities to learn everywhere. It just requires us to be committed and work hard.

While we can learn in theory, it is often the practical situations that teach us the most. One of my learning milestones was my transition from Principal of Red Swastika School where I served eight years to Damai Primary in 2019. Damai Primary had merged with Bedok West Primary School in 2015. When I came on board, the school had just gone through a second assimilation with East Coast Primary School. Our team comprised of staff from two schools and I represented the third school! Inevitably, there were differences in culture, operational policies, work styles and personalities. As Principal, I had to set a new direction and incorporate the best practices from each side. I focussed on relationship building, spending time listening to various parties without making quick conclusions and controlling myself from imposing my views. I made it a point to involve everyone in the decision making processes. I then decided to curate what is best from both schools, integrating my own experiences, before coming up with a final plan. Instead of seeing the merging of schools as a point of stress, I saw that we benefited from having two sets of best practices, giving us the opportunity to create a better one.

One of the main challenges in leading a team is managing the different

working and communication styles. All my staff go through an assessment with Gallup's Strengths Finder and this helps me to capitalise on their strengths while knowing the areas they lack in. I discovered that 'Harmony' and 'Consistency' were my strengths. My team understands that my leadership style involves getting feedback, seeking consensus and thorough follow through. I am also very detailed and when there are confrontations, will take the time and effort to hear details from all parties so that I can address the root of the issue accurately. Knowing that I am stable and possess strong guiding principles in decision-making gives my staff great peace of mind. I also see myself as a gatekeeper protecting the interests and welfare of my team and will not hesitate to confront those who disrupt the harmony in the workplace.

#### **LEADERS ARE TESTED**

Our fundamentals in leadership can be tested under unexpected crises. In December 2014, Red Swastika School appeared in the press because we were cheated by an unethical school bus company. Due to a change in curriculum times, we had a new bus service provider. After collecting two months of bus fees in advance from 250 parents, this bus company could not provide us with bus routes and schedules even up to the day before school opened. After consultation with MOE, I decided to terminate its services on the evening of 31 December and quickly proceeded to find a way to bring about 500 students back to school via school buses on 2 January. Together with twenty staff, we called the frustrated parents to explain the situation, and eventually engaged another bus company. We prepared a proper script and even had an FAQ to help the staff answer to angry parents. As the bus fees had been paid up and the bus company refused to make a refund, it became a legal issue and I had to appear in court to testify. The saga lasted two years and we had to ride through it. While this crisis was extremely stressful, we learnt to be resilient and persevere. I reflected on

what happened and realised that even though I upheld to my fundamental values, there were others who did not. I learnt from such incidents. Leadership is about learning, unlearning and relearning. This event showed me that I was stronger than I thought and through it all, our team became even more united.

#### **FACING THE FUTURE**

One of the goals of education is to prepare our children to face the future. I believe that inculcating strong fundamentals will help prepare them to face the unexpected situations which will come their way. I make use of every teachable moment to show them possibilities in various situations. For example, when there is a fight or dishonest act, I walk through the process with the children to help them rethink their decisions and see different outcomes from the choices they make. When they realise their mistakes and make effort to change, I personally affirm them. The power of encouragement cannot be understated. If a child has a habit of avoiding school, I affirm him when he shows up at 8 am. To me, it is better he shows up late than not appear at all. I constantly encourage the children to be "better than before" and "be the best you can be" so that they can anchor themselves on these fundamentals in the face of challenges when they grow up.

In our school setting, our children are protected and sheltered. How do we teach them to be savvy and wise? We need to let them experiment and allow them to fail. Education is not about preparing everything so that life will be smooth sailing. I give my students opportunities to do projects and allow them to own problems and solutions in school. For example, there were long queues in the canteen because the children took a long time to decide what to buy. Our prefects came up with the idea for vendors to display set menus so that the students could decide what they wanted in advance. When the schools merged, there were concerns about making new friends

and the students came up with bonding activities that were shared at assembly. Education is about giving children the platform and opportunity to serve the community by seeing problems and tackling them. When they see what they have done right or what can be done in a better way, they open themselves to new ideas and possibilities of doing things. They become confident, thoughtful and engaged.

As a school leader, I work with the future in the mind. I want to raise a generation of leaders and workforce that will be able to make a positive impact on society. Education has to bring about transformation. For Damai Primary, I strive to provide opportunities for my profile of students, many of whom come from the low income bracket. I work towards uplifting them through inculcating strong values and skills so that they will have an edge in life when they grow up. For those children who are already well-provided for, I want to encourage them to see the world beyond themselves and to desire to give back to help others.

Education is not just about teaching knowledge and skills but also about giving our students a heart for people around them. Parents need to see that they send their children to schools not just to get something out of it. It is not about my child losing out or what my child can gain, but what my child can give and what he can become so that society can benefit. When we can move beyond just meeting our children's needs to see a bigger picture, then our schools can truly be transformed.

## FUNDAMENTALS THAT LAST

The leadership journey is one for the long haul. I have been in the education service for thirty years and I still look forward to coming to work each day. I continue to serve because I hold fast to the fundamentals that have kept me all these years.

- Every child matters. I may not be able to save everyone but like the boy who picks one starfish out of many and throws it back into the sea, if I can make a difference in one child's life that keeps me going.
- Change may not be immediate. It may take many years before we see results. I had a child who had anger management issues for three years. After he went to secondary school, he returned to visit and proudly showed me his report card which stated he had good behaviour.
- Make the most of every opportunity and touch points to teach good values even for those children who are wayward as they will recall what we say years later and may turn over a new leaf.
- Prepare young parents to start it right. Habits are cultivated from young and when not built, a child will have a tough time later on. Values are also caught and not just taught. Parents need to be role models to their children.

For any leadership journey to succeed, the fundamentals must be right. When we use awards as a goal for good leadership and work towards attaining them, we often end up going for quick fixes and the shortest routes. When fundamentals are grounded, the journey to success could take longer, but the awards will come later on. We live in an extremely competitive society and I have learnt to lead in my own stride. When my fundamentals are right, I sleep well at night because I know that what I do is built on a sound foundation and when the wind blows, it will not fall.



## Education Fundamentals

### *Education is about*

- self-development that is grounded on sound values – honestly, respect, responsibility, care and harmony
- self-realisation and discovery – strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes
- self-growth and striving to be better than before
- having gratitude and appreciation for what we have
- sense of hope regardless of circumstances
- a willingness to be an instrument of change

## Leadership Fundamentals

### *Leadership*

- is not the end point but the beginning of a new journey
- is a reflection on our beliefs and the values we hold
- involves knowing our craft, being reliable and credible
- is about giving – time, direction, support, service.
- has an abundance mentality – sharing and growing together so that everyone gains
- is about learning, relearning and unlearning
- is to be the best we can be
- and finally, hard work is a must!

## Fundamentals for the next generation

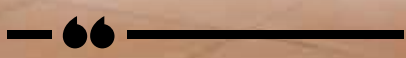
- strong values – ability to tell right from wrong, looking at issues from various perspectives, making right decisions
- having compassion and empathy
- MOE's emphasis on the five core social and emotional competencies – self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management skills and responsible decision making
- having a growth mindset - the need for tenacity, courage and resilience to persevere in times of difficulty, ambiguity and change



Hail Mary, full of grace,  
the Lord is with you.  
Blessed art thou among women  
and the fruit of your womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mother of God,  
pray for us sinners  
now and at the hour of our death



*When we realise our purpose  
and find alignment to what we do,  
our day to day work becomes meaningful.*



# STEPHEN CHIN

ST GABRIEL'S SECONDARY SCHOOL



## Leading from Within

*Fundamentals and principles are formed within a framework of beliefs. What I believe will determine the fundamentals on which I build my ideas about work and leadership. My leadership fundamentals are anchored on my belief that the individual is sacred --everyone is unique and has a personal identity unlike anyone else. My role as a leader is to help others to discover this identity and to draw it out. We need to ask ourselves the questions "Who am I" and "What am I here for".*

I constantly ask my teachers to dig deeper and to ask themselves larger questions like what their purpose in life is and what they find meaningful. I developed this conviction that leadership was about people, especially the individual, during a period of reflection when I attended the LEP. After the programme, I decided to shift my focus from work and performance to people and helping individuals grow.

When I was posted to serve as principal of Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary School in 2004, I began to practise my beliefs. For a start, I did away with the title 'reporting officer' and deliberately called supervisors 'mentors'. A reporting officer sets targets and benchmarks his staff to performance goals. On the other hand, a mentor focuses not on work outcomes, but on the individual – his strengths, aspirations, passions and hopes. The idea of mentorship is about helping someone to realise who he is in order to deploy him in an area of strength where he can best deliver and at the same time, feel fulfilled. Mentorship addresses identity, purpose and meaning. When teachers see that they do not just do a job but shape a child's personhood, their work becomes meaningful. Even the most mundane jobs can have meaning when we see how it fits into a larger purpose. A data entry officer may question the purpose of his

job, but if he sees how it helps teachers so that they can better influence the students they teach, the work he does becomes meaningful and even impactful. Everything starts with the belief that we are created for a purpose. When we realise our purpose and find alignment to what we do, our day to day work becomes meaningful.

### PERSONAL MISSION

Given this responsibility and duty to develop and grow our people, how do we inspire them to contribute to our organisation? The most sustainable approach is to help each of them fulfil their personal mission. This bold effort is founded on the belief that their personal mission is largely aligned with that of the organisation. Even when the selection and recruitment is conducted centrally and people are posted to various schools, there should be a large proportion who have their personal purpose in life aligned to serving in education. With this assumption, we need to ensure that they will be encouraged, enabled and supported to fulfil their missions. It is easy to detract from the core mission of education when we are busy with the systems, processes and activities that obscure the genuine reason for existing as a school. The role and duty of school leaders is to provide teachers with the safety needed in their work as the fundamental foundation, as well as

to provide the opportunity for them to flourish in serving and fulfilling their mission in their assigned work.

We serve because we want to enable and encourage people to fulfil their personal mission through the work they are assigned. Although we expect results, we must not let this expectation be the guiding force when mentoring others. Our focus should be to establish meaning in the work assigned and aligning these to the individual's personal purpose in life. People are seeking meaning beyond results, valuing process above products, purpose in place of KPIs. In mentoring, the aim is not to coach the person to become what we want them to be. The true purpose of mentoring is to help individuals draw on their strengths to flourish to become the person they desire to be. Will we worry that their desires are not congruent to our purpose as an educational organisation? Again, we begin with the belief that they have largely similar purposes for educating young people.

### TRUST

As a leader, I believe in trust. The core of every lasting and nurturing relationship is trust. Some would argue that it is foolish to completely trust anyone since it is human nature to cut corners and take advantage, especially in hierarchical organisations. Despite these arguments, I hold to my belief that as individual

human beings seeking to be authentic and fulfilled in our lives, each of us will want to and is able to be responsible for our roles, actions and the associated impact or consequences. If this is true, then we do not need to be afraid that people will want to skim on their responsibilities. If at all, when they fail in their duties, it is largely because they lack some abilities which make them less efficient and effective. Hence, we should put in place support for people to grow their capacities to fulfil their roles as they have desired and designed.

Trust cannot be built or developed like a competency or skill. When a person begins to trust others, it is the beginning of a culture. It is a culture that can only be established by individual choices. There are no structures, policies or processes to enable trust to grow in any group. Systems and processes are only as good as the people who live with them. Systems can only set the tone for a culture of trust, but it cannot replace the credibility of the individuals, especially those who lead and serve. We must each be credible in our lives as we live our mission to be flourishing and trustworthy persons.

Trust can only exist when we begin to believe in the worth of each person. We also need to examine our motivation and purpose so that they reflect this belief. At the same time, we need to build our abilities to perform our roles well. We might get worried about the complete trust we give people which might be abused or taken advantage of. As a result, we often take a pragmatic and practical approach to safeguard against such eventualities, which often destroys faith and trust. The safeguards we put in place in case people fail us will only erode the trust we are trying to build. We need to have faith that one distrust does not make others untrustworthy. Leaders who serve with integrity and credibility can inspire trust in the people, not letting common practices detract us from our true purpose to serve.

### **AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP**

Leaders are traditionally seen as people who have high abilities in professional and organisational expertise and knowledge. Those who get results are lauded as effective, even inspirational. However, recent shifts in people's demands for authentic leadership have

surfaced the inadequacies of this original set of leadership qualities. Personal beliefs and principles, summed up in a person's character, are now the cornerstone for strong and inspirational leaders.

There are several challenges to accepting these personal qualities as essential for leaders. These personal qualities are difficult to quantify. Although difficult to measure or even develop, these qualities and beliefs will manifest in sustainable behaviours that are difficult to maintain in the long term without deep conviction. These personal qualities are almost counter-intuitive in this world where success is defined narrowly by results and outcomes with largely economic or tangible quantities. Many may worry that we have gone soft on defining who is an effective leader. Hence, there will be a struggle to accept these personal qualities as crucial to leadership in the corporate world. However, the emerging voices in these times are clear-- authentic and ethical leaders are sorely lacking, and desperately needed.

Taking this new set of fundamental personal qualities as the benchmark of true leadership, we need to reorganise and refocus our people development approaches to recognise people as whole persons with personal missions and purposes, positive strengths and aspirations, who desire to make a positive contribution and difference to the world, and in particular, to our schools.

I have also learnt to believe that we must take care of our personal lives so that we can give of our best to those whom we serve. Hence, to live this belief consistently, I adopt a simple principle for people who need to take leave - "Go if you are needed at home, the organisation is always big enough." The idea is simple - there is no way the organisation, even with limitless resources, can replace the role of the individual person at home or in his personal domain. Besides, within the organisation, there are similarly qualified persons who can take the vacated role, either temporarily or permanently. Many leaders tout the tag line "no one is indispensable". I frown upon that notion as it gives a defeating sense of "we can do without you", degrading the value of an individual to a mere cog in a machine. This is a sure way to lose the hearts of the people. However, many leaders have also turned at me with cynicism and disbelief that I can trust people to be honest with

their personal needs when taking leave. It goes back to my fundamental belief in trust. Besides trust, we need to have wisdom to discern.

### **LEADERSHIP IS CHARACTER**

We recently had a process to engage our people with exploring the qualities of school leaders through personal experiences and stories of significant mentors and coaches in their lives. There seems to be clear expectations of strong personal qualities that enables people to trust their leaders and mentors. Such trust comes from the inner beliefs of these leaders who seek to genuinely grow with the people, without selfish agendas. These positive mentors and leaders, whom people tend to approach for help and support, are filled with empathy and compassion. (Encourage the Heart)

There is also a set of professional expertise, skills and knowledge that is required to be effective in their roles. These come with experience, continuous learning and growth, being open to new ideas and innovations, and taking into consideration the changes in the landscape of their roles. (Model the Way, Enable Others to Act)

Finally, there is also a set of organisational dispositions to work with an organisation, taking care of the needs and taking the lead to serve where needed. These mentors and leaders need the resilience to ride the challenges that assail the organisation, and the optimism to inspire hope in the people. (Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process).

When I was Vice-Principal at Raffles Junior College (2002), I was deeply inspired by Mr Winston Hodge who served as Principal. He was my mentor and besides teaching me how to run a school, he portrayed what it was to be a servant leader. Mr Hodge demonstrated that leadership was about service and he role-modelled it to staff and students. Under his leadership, CIP programmes at RJC no longer became the domain of teachers who previously had to look out for opportunities for students to get involved in the community. Instead, students were tasked to seek out needs and to find ways to serve those in need. CIP no longer became hours to be clocked but rather a genuine expression of wanting to make a difference to the

disadvantaged. The students were forced to get out of their shells and some of them started giving tuition to needy children. Mr Hodge honed my belief that leadership is really about character, service and shaping lives.

### LEADERSHIP IN THE FUTURE

How are we preparing ourselves and our schools for a VUCA world? While we are tasked with the responsibility to lead and guide young lives into this brave new world, are we ourselves ready? Until we have personally experienced these situations, not necessarily emerged victorious, we will be handicapped in leading others to be ready for them. Until we ourselves have dealt with the failures, pain and frustrations, we will only be at best teaching theories of coping with the VUCA world.

In the volatile situation, with all things known and taken care of, changes that hit us are unpredictable and beyond our control. We will need grit to face the shock, to hold out hope for a better outcome based on our faith in the love of what is good and right. In the uncertain situation, the unknown outcomes from our intervention throws us a curve ball, calling for us to be prepared to be hit, sometimes badly. We need resilience to bounce back, regain our confidence, esteem and strength. In the complex situation, we face a barrage of confusing and conflicting causes but we do not know how to solve them singularly. We just need tenacity to work through the thicket, not giving up when the going is tough. In the ambiguous situation, we do not even know what hit us and why. We need fortitude to evolve the situation to one of the other three unexpected situations, not losing sight of our greater purpose.

There is so much analysis of how we end up having a VUCA world to deal with -the phenomenal speed of technological advancement, the erosion of traditions and organisations, the tsunami of information and misinformation, and the disproportionate focus on the young generation. These changes are neutral in themselves except that the core of humanity and its values are also being corroded and shifting us into an age where what once was held as universal truths are being challenged and categorically displaced by relativism and individualism. In the face of these changes threatened by the corruption of humanity's core values, how are we who

are called to serve hold our credibility? More challengingly, how will we be able to hold our influence for a better future? To battle the VUCA world, eroded by the shifting values, we need to stay steadfast and appeal to the deep roots of the good in human nature to prevail. We need to be VUCA+ in order to inspire the truth:

- **Vulnerability:** not as a weakness to be exploited, although it might well be, but an openness that is genuine and honest, to draw others to be likewise, in order to build authentic relationships.
- **Understanding:** not only of the environment, emerging trends and complexities, but a deep understanding of people without biasness and judgmental condemnation, building trust and compassion.
- **Clarity:** not only of strategies, procedures and action plans, but the greater purpose of humanity and our place in the universe, world and society we are in.
- **Agility:** not only in managing resources and plans, but in realising our biases, incapacities, and our mistakes so as to learn and evolve to be better in the future.

Having grit, resilience, tenacity and fortitude can only get us through the uncertain situations when they present themselves. Having VUCA+ will anchor us on our core purpose of existence, sufficient to prepare and see us, and our schools, through the new world order.

### LEADERSHIP AND LEGACY

Ultimately, leadership is about writing our legacy. I sometimes imagine what my family, friends and colleagues would say about me at my own funeral. Such thoughts serve to keep me aligned to my personal mission and fundamental beliefs. In the face of challenging times, it is critical for us as school leaders to exemplify core and consistent values of authenticity, trustworthiness and credibility. These qualities will anchor us and stand the test of time. We will also need courage and determination to hold onto to our belief in the value and worth of the individual when our fundamentals are challenged. Let us press on, even as we work within an evolving but imperfect system, in the noble pursuit of shaping lives and fulfilling dreams, in service to our nation.



### Kouzes & Posner's 5 leadership practices

- Model the Way
- Encourage the Heart
- Enable Others to Act
- Challenge the Process
- Inspire a Shared Vision

### Books that inspired me

#### The Starfish and The Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organisations

*Ori Brafman, Rod A. Beckstrom  
Portfolio, 2006*

#### The Leadership Challenge

*James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner  
Jossey-Bass*

#### Influencer

*Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler  
McGraw-Hill*

#### The Radical Leap Re-energized: A Story That Will Change the Way You Lead

*Steve Farber  
Extreme Leadership Inc.*

#### Leaders Eat Last : Why some teams pull together and others don't

*Simon Sinek  
Penguin Publishing Group*

#### Man's Search For Meaning

*Frankl, Viktor E.  
Beacon Press*

#### The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World

*His Holiness Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams  
Penguin Publishing Group*

#### Humility Is The New Smart: Rethinking Human Excellence In the Smart Machine Age

*Edward D. Hess, Katherine Ludwig  
Berrett-Koehler Publishers*





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