

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES: RESPONSIBILITY AND A CONSCIENCE



Dr Habibah @ Norehan Haron

The new millennium has seen a lot of changes in the leadership scenario in relation to women. Today, women in leadership positions are more common and this is in line with the country's national agenda. Professional organisations, private and public organisations, non-profitable and volunteer organisations... each has a different mission and work environment. Each has its own challenges and relevant leadership approaches.

In this article, we talk to 2 women leaders. One is a specialist medical practitioner who runs a private clinic, leads a humanitarian organisation and has made high risk missions to help save lives.

The other is an engineer who, after spending a few good years in the field, has made her way up the ranks and developed a training institute which not only generates income for the parent organisation, but also leads the establishment to a successful peak.

The questions we asked these women were: What challenges did they face? What support did they need? What efforts have they made, as leaders, to help other women become leaders? What are their leadership

styles? What are their key success factors in leading the organisations?

There were some common responses, particularly in relation to the challenges and type of support they valued. Among the challenges common among working family women are having to take on multiple roles as wife, mother, daughter and employee or employer, and the cultural expectations that they should conform to.

Both women talked about juggling roles to maintain a work-life balance, which is a constant in the equation. This is particularly so in a leadership position where much of one's time is spent at the workplace or having to travel within the country and abroad. It is never easy and not without sacrifices on their part and on others close to them, particularly their families.

Another common challenge is the attitude of people they work with, either as a colleague or employee. In a humanitarian organisation, leading volunteers is easier than leading paid employees because generally, volunteers who have signed up are passionate about the cause and are willing to go to all ends. As for corporate organisations, the competency of employees and even gender bias at the workplace are challenges that need to be addressed.

It is most important that a career woman has the support of her spouse. An understanding and supportive spouse is essential for any woman to excel in her job or at the workplace, particularly in Asian culture. Dr Fauziah Mohd Hassan, a gynaecologist and leader of Rose To Rose (the women's wing of a humanitarian organisation) said: "I owe this (successful leadership role and humanitarian missions) to the strong support from my spouse, my family, my chairman, my Board of Trustees, staff, friends and fellow Malaysians."

She had been in many humanitarian missions with MERCY Malaysia, travelling to war-torn countries and disaster areas such as Kosovo (1999), Maluku Indonesia (2000), Afghanistan (2001, 2002, 2003), Aceh (2005), Pakistan (2005), Gaza (2009, 2012), Women's Boat To Gaza (2016) and Cox's Bazar (2017).

Meanwhile, Ir. Dr Khalidah Haron identified cooperation, trust and authority as the kind of support women need to carry out their leadership roles effectively, particularly in



Dr Fauziah Hassan (2nd from the right) with Syrian orphans in Istanbul

the corporate sector. After she graduated from Brighton Polytechnic, she worked as an electrical engineer at Lembaga Letrik Negara (LLN) and then at Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) until her retirement as the Managing Director of TNB Integrated Learning Solution (ILSAS) in 2013. ILSAS, the training and consultancy arm for TNB, was established in 1978 and incorporated as a subsidiary of TNB in September, 2008. Ir. Dr Khalidah has played a vital role in the development of ILSAS to what it is today.

The success of an organisation is the responsibility of its leaders. Ir. Dr Khalidah was motivated to lead ILSAS in order to be able to make changes in the organisation. In the past, gender bias was quite apparent, so the changes she brought about included mentoring and coaching other women to fill leadership positions. She strongly believed in making a difference.

As for Dr Fauziah, she felt it was her responsibility, as a medical doctor, to provide humanitarian services. She had a strong conscience to be on the ground where help was needed. Though it was not her desire to be in a leadership position, the role was thrust upon her and she carried out the responsibility to the best of her abilities, because "there was so much that needed to be done – to liberate Palestine, Syria, Kashmir, Uighur and our society too".

She helps other women to become leaders by encouraging them, especially the younger ones, to be involved in the many activities, starting with smaller programmes and slowly growing their confidence as leaders. As an advisor, Dr Fauziah provides them with the opportunity to appear on television and other media.

Both women may have different emphasis when it comes to leadership styles but they are aligned with the nature of their organisations. Dr Fauziah highlighted the importance of acknowledging contributions from others such as those who had helped at the frontlines and behind the scenes. Especially in a humanitarian organisation, she said, her successes and achievements should be shared with the people who supported her work. When she received awards, she would remind herself to tell them that she was "receiving it on their behalf".

On transformational leadership, Ir. Dr Khalidah said the only constant here is change. She preaches and practises "begin with the end in mind" and stays focused on and with the cause of the organisation. Describing herself as task-oriented, she added: "I practise the right fit for a job. Fitting skills to job. Fitting emotion to job. Fitting passion to profession. Training a person is based on job evaluation, prior to interviewing for new recruits or promotions. If one is not fit, re-skill and, if not trainable, re-assign. I work for the organisation, so it (the organisation) comes first."



Ir. Dr Khalidah Haron's retirement activities help her maintain her work-life balance



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With regards to the “key success factors” for women in leadership positions, Dr Fauziah said women have lots of scope for improvements, including training opportunities. Particularly in a humanitarian organisation, one necessary skill to have is a high sense of empathy for the people around, from staff members to beneficiaries.

As for Ir. Dr Khalidah, the three main success factors she singled out as “key success factors” were ethics, competence and guts, with emphasis on human capital development and competency.

Finally, leadership is about responsibility and conscience decisions. Whether leading a humanitarian or corporate organisation, the types of challenges and support are somewhat similar.

According to the 2 women, being a successful leader is not about the job title or designation but rather, it is about one’s skills sets. Women have a lot of advantages over men as agents of change through their natural ‘affective’ skillsets. But women must first remove their own barriers and fears, gain confidence and may need to be ‘hungry’ enough to want to move forward in order to become leaders who can make a positive difference and have an impact on society. ■

Author's Biodata

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