

Singapore Management University

## Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

---

Perspectives@SMU

Centre for Management Practice

---

10-2019

### Creating leaders for the social service sector

Singapore Management University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers>



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

---

#### Citation

Singapore Management University. Creating leaders for the social service sector. (2019).

Available at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers/522>

This Magazine Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Centre for Management Practice at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives@SMU by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [cherylds@smu.edu.sg](mailto:cherylds@smu.edu.sg).

# Creating leaders for the social service sector

31 Oct 2019

*Pay issues and career prospects have hampered recruitment for social service organisations in Singapore. A scheme called Sun Ray helped address that issue*

The provision of social services in Singapore is a topic that seldom make the headlines, be they local or international. While demographic issues such as low birth rates and economic ones, highlighted by rising income disparity and the government's efforts to level the playing field, sometimes spark public discussion, initiatives to address social service concerns rarely occupy the public's attention.

The situation on the ground, however, was clear: The social service sector needed to recruit or train more leaders due to the increased demand for social services, but it faced considerable difficulty in attracting and retaining talent. Demand for services, such as elderly and palliative care, outstripped supply. Such demand resulted in the establishment of over 400 social and welfare charities that conducted 2,000 social programmes in Singapore.

The difficulty in attracting and retaining full-time staff was perhaps the most pressing issue facing the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), a government statutory board. Well-known and considerable differences in pay between social service professionals and corporate executives made recruiting difficult, as did unclear career progression and prospects. While job satisfaction at making a difference kept some from leaving, organisations had to contend with high turnover rates, as employees were usually overwhelmed or burnt-out at a later stage.

## HERE COMES THE SUN RAYZ

Even though the government took on the lion's share of funding the social service sector, the organisations in it had difficulty attracting full-time staff, and had to use part-time volunteers to supplement professional staff in handling increasingly complex situations. Leaders were needed to support capability and capacity building.

In 2014, the NCSS introduced the Sun Ray scheme to mitigate the shortage of leaders. Promising leaders would be hired as 'Sun Rayz' by NCSS, and then assigned to individual Social Service Agencies (SSAs) – non-profit agencies working to benefit society as a whole – for a fixed-term secondment before moving to another SSA for a job rotation. In this way, the government would subsidise their salaries and allow the entire sector to benefit from their leadership potential.

By 2019, NCSS had deployed around 100 Sun Rayz to nearly 30 SSAs. Having seen several organisations benefit greatly from their presence, NCSS Deputy CEO **Fermin Diez** explains how it helps address crucial manpower issues in the sector.

"The basic idea for the scheme is twofold," he elaborates. "One, to ensure that we have enough leaders in the sector and two, to ensure that we have an environment in social services that will allow us to have more collaboration among the various social service agencies.

"You can impact capability and capacity in three ways. At the individual level, you want to make sure everyone has skills. At the organisational level, you can try to figure out if each organisation has the right policies. But then you want to go to the sector level and make sure that the structures are in place for collaboration. So I see the Sun Ray scheme as a sector-level type of intervention that also addresses organisations and individuals."

Despite the success, there were initial concerns at the SSAs, who needed time to get comfortable with the various aspects of the scheme. There were perceptions of the scheme

being elitist and costly, making it more difficult to hire Sun Rayz directly. Many were sceptical of the rotation policy, as they believed that only permanent hires would be loyal to the organisation.

While pointing out that people generally “do not believe in lifetime employment with one company,” Diez emphasises that “[w]ithin the scheme, we can plan a proper transition. After a Sun Ray leaves an organisation, we will send another one. The truth is also that if the employee wants to stay in the organisation and the organisation wants them to stay, we are actually very happy that they end up in a good place because that is the ultimate goal.”

In any case, there were examples of success. SUN-DAC, an SSA that cared for people with intellectual disabilities, brought in a Sun Rayz, Peng Hai Ying. As Executive Director, Peng helped reduce employee attrition level and more than doubled its headcount from 30 to 75, and achieved the Aon Hewitt Best Employer Award in 2017. Another Sun Rayz, Andrea Chan, joined TOUCH, an SSA that served the needy and disadvantaged, as an assistant manager and turned a S\$200,000 annual loss in her department into a S\$50,000 surplus.

## GOING FORWARD

The feedback received was that the Sun Rayz delivered more sustainable impact and helped create a more innovative and collaborative organisational culture. The less than 10 percent turnover rate for Sun Rayz was low when compared to the sector average of 20 percent. Still, NCSS was looking to improve the hiring process.

“When I talk to people in the sector, they tell me that the two main characteristics they look for when they hire staff are passion and resilience, so we need to make sure that the Sun Rayz have that,” says Diez. “To fine-tune our hiring process, we designed our own instrument to measure passion and resilience.”

Diez believed that expanding the number of Sun Rayz to 150-200 would allow the social service sector to benefit from network effects. What he needed to do was convince the government to release additional funding to improve the selection and training processes, and ultimately hire enough Sun Rayz to lead the social service sector.

*This is an adapted version of the SMU Case, "SUN RAY SCHEME: BUILDING LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES IN THE SOCIAL SERVICE SECTOR". To see the full case, please click on the following link: <https://cmp.smu.edu.sg/case/4136>*

*Follow us on Twitter (@sgsmuperspectiv) or like us on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/PerspectivesAtSMU>)*