

Leadership in Psychiatry

An extract of the presidential address delivered by the President,
Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists 2015/2016 on 07th February 2015

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Chief Guest Senior Professor Narada Warnasuriya, Emeritus Professor of Pediatrics, Guest of Honour Dr. Arvind Mathur, WHO representative to Sri Lanka, Dr. Palitha Maheepala, Director General of Health Services, other Directors of Ministry of Health. Immediate Past President of the College Dr. Ranil Abeysinghe, Past Presidents, Council members, Fellows and members of the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists, my dear teachers, friends and distinguished invitees.

It is indeed a great honour and privilege to be inducted as the 8th president of the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists today.

I would like to take you through the journey of our College and then move on to today's topic, leadership in psychiatry.

Our journey commenced in 1955, under the banner of the Ceylon Mental Health Association. This association acted as an advocacy group for advancement of psychiatric services and as a professional group for those involved in the provision of mental health services in Sri Lanka. In 1972, the Ceylon Mental Health Association was transformed to the Sri Lanka Psychiatric Association. It then continued its journey until the late 1990s where an extensive revival took place following successive leadership of vibrant councils. It was finally transformed to the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists in 2003. I was fortunate to serve in several successive councils as the secretary during these challenging times, and then become a signatory to the constitution of the College. The successive Presidents and the Councils of the College worked tirelessly during the past decade, focusing on training needs of the country, developing a national mental health policy and attempting to transform our previous mental health act to one which is more humane and relevant to present times. Our immediate past council, under the guidance of the dynamic past president, Dr. Ranil Abeysinghe took immense efforts to uplift the image of psychiatry, to combat stigma and raise public awareness. I believe the secret ingredient behind our success has been the untiring effort of the dedicated membership. As we stand here today we are looking at the future with a strong sense of optimism, as the College is now stronger than ever in team spirit, and we look forward to achieving our goals with high standards.

Leadership in Psychiatry

Professor Johann Christian Reel, who coined the term psychiatry, stated in 1808, "Psychiatry needs great

leaders, as we speak for those whose voices have been stilled by illness, stigma and marginalization". He further mentioned, therefore "It is only the very best of physicians who can become psychiatrists."

Mental health service in Sri Lanka has seen a significant improvement over the last decade. Sri Lanka has 80 psychiatrists at present who give leadership to mental health services. Psychiatrists who work in major centers and regional areas require leadership qualities and skills today more than ever before in order to develop services, to work in collaboration with stake holders, lead multi-disciplinary teams and to lead a balanced life while doing all of these.

So what is leadership? Is it telling people what they want to hear or taking people to where they need to be?

Leadership involves establishing a clear vision, sharing that vision with others and setting direction to realise it. This involves coordinating and balancing conflicting interests of all members and stakeholders to create something new, collectively.

Leadership is about the future of fundamental concerns of the relevant parties, and not management of day-to-day affairs. A leader must guide people in a smooth and efficient way whilst being empathetic. In doing so, leadership can be shared as it conserves energy of the leader and the team, to reach the desired destination. Migratory birds fly in a v shape, allowing them to save energy, which is the lifesaver in their long journey. The birds at the back save energy by flying in the up draft of other birds in the flock. The leader of the flock keeps changing to avoid fatigue.

What are the qualities that one should possess to become a meaningful leader in both professional and personal spheres of life?

Credibility, honesty, commitment, competence, effective communication skills, teamwork, positive attitudes and creativity are some of the cornerstones in building a successful leader.

Credibility

Leaders should do what they say. Honesty, integrity and transparency are important in maintaining credibility. A leader should act with highest ethical standards. If a leader shows honest and ethical behavior, the team will follow suit.

Commitment

There is no greater motivation for people, than seeing their leader working alongside everyone else, showing that hard work is being done at every level. Commitment will earn respect and instill that same quality among members. However it is important to note that different work is done at different levels, in order to reach the goal.

Competence

There may be days when things aren't going according to plan. A good leader should be able to maintain confidence, and assure the team that setbacks are natural and it is important to focus on the larger goal.

Communication

Effective communication skills are mandatory for a successful leader. The clear goal in a leader's mind may be an unreachable destination to the member if not communicated properly. Availability of the leader to discuss the concerns of others is vital for smooth functioning of the team. Team trust will grow and the members will be less hesitant to work harder.

Delegation and teamwork

Delegating tasks to the appropriate people is an important skill that a leader should possess. The key to delegation is identifying the strengths of the team members. It is important to remember that trusting your team with your idea is a sign of strength, not weakness. It empowers the team members and prevents the leader from getting drained of energy and effectiveness. It is said that when the best leader's work is done, people say, "We did it ourselves". Teamwork is about sharing responsibility and not placing blame or fault finding.

Attitudes

Attitude is always a 'player' on the team. Attitudes have the ability to lift up or tear down a team. Leaders can help people to change their attitude in a positive or negative manner.

Creativity

When leading a team through uncharted waters, there is no roadmap as to what to do. Decisions are not always clear-cut. We may be forced at times to deviate from our set course, and make spontaneous decisions. Drawing on past experience is a good reflex, as is reaching out to your mentors for support. Eventually though, it will be up to the team leader to make the tough decisions. This is a point where the natural intuition and creativity of the leader will prove to be vital. It is during these critical situations, that your team will look to you for guidance and you may be forced to make a quick decision. As a leader, it is important to be creative and think outside the box in making certain decisions.

If I were to address the young leaders of tomorrow, you may feel that you possess some or most of these qualities that I just described, but is that alone sufficient to be an effective leader?

You will also require proficiency in time management, assertiveness, team building, coaching and mentoring and managing burnout. I will only address a few of these aspects.

Finally, a good leader should be equipped with a sense of humour too. It will help ease the tension in challenging situations and help increase productivity.

Time management

Time management is one such area that I wish to describe. Shown below is the matrix given by Stephen Covey in his book on seven habits of highly effective people.

Time Management Matrix

		URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	(I) ACTIVITIES:	Crisis Pressing problems Deadline-driven projects	(II) ACTIVITIES: Relationship building Recognizing new opportunities Planning, Recreation
	(III) ACTIVITIES:	Interruptions, some calls Some mail, some reports Some meetings Proximate pressing matters Popular activities	(IV) ACTIVITIES: Trivia, busy work Some mail Some phone calls Time wasters Pleasant activities
NOT IMPORTANT			

Source: The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People - Stephen R. Covey

Crisis situations as described in the first quadrant are rampant in each of our lives. However we must learn to manage our time so that the majority of time is spent in the second quadrant, i.e., building relationships and planning for the future, so that we can avoid crisis situations and be effective leaders. Spending more time on quadrant 4 activities will not take us anywhere.

One must be proactive and not reactive to situations, and being aware of what you are capable of changing gives you a greater degree of control over your life.

Assertiveness

In order to have time to work towards one's long term goal, one must learn to say "No" to things which will trap time and energy. Being courageous enough to say 'No' in a non-apologetic pleasant manner is a skill that can and should be learnt, which will enable you to be assertive in a variety of situations.

One could also get things done by being aggressive. However by being aggressive, in the long run you violate the rights of others and hence it is not a desirable skill.

Managing difficult people

A leader's path does not lie along a bed of roses. There are many obstacles and difficult moments. One of the most effective tactics to overcome these difficulties is to be familiar with the behavior patterns of the people you have to deal with. Some behavior patterns that people resort to when they are threatened or thwarted may have a negative impact on others and it is important to identify their habitual behaviour pattern to combat them.

I will now describe patterns of behaviour and traits, which may have a negative impact on teamwork. Some people believe they know everything and have a very low tolerance for correction and contradiction. Such people will rigidly adhere to their own opinions. Others say "yes" in an effort to please others and to avoid confrontation, but they rarely stick to their word; whereas others can be extremely negative. Doleful and discouraging, they drive others to despair. On the other hand, certain people are very much non-committal, and will not provide any form of verbal or non-verbal feedback, which can be disappointing.

A covert operator identifies other's weaknesses, and uses them to sabotage goals. This can have a very negative impact on teams. In contrast, others may explode into aggression as an expression of his or her inner despair and dissatisfaction.

Dealing with such difficult people is definitely a challenge for a leader. Making adjustments according to the circumstance, obtaining commitment from reliable people and transition to problem solving will help to focus and take control of the situation.

To be a dynamic leader one must have a vision. Therefore, you need to have a long-term goal in mind, right from the start. The frame of reference in my mind is the future of psychiatry in Sri Lanka, and the day when it would be on par with international standards or beyond.

I would like to end with the concluding remark of an article published in the Journal Psychiatric Bulletin.

"It is also vital that trainees are prepared for their eventual role as consultant psychiatrists with leadership roles in multidisciplinary teams, hospital services and management. Beyond this, consultants should be in a position to support and teach trainees of the future. We feel that this area of training may have increasing relevance in the future, as the role of the doctor changes within the clinical team and organizational setting".

Acknowledgements

I stand here today as who I am, mainly due to the guidance and encouragement I received from my beloved late parents, Mr. Hendrik and Mrs. Teslin Wickramasuriya who are remembered with much respect. I acknowledge my sister and brothers and my late aunt for their support rendered to me. My husband Mr. Ranjith Kaththriarachchi and daughter Manodya receive special gratitude for supporting me at all times. My schools Sanghamitta Balika Vidyalaya and Devi Balika Vidyalaya, dear madam principal, teachers, my dear medical teachers and mentors are acknowledged with special gratitude. My dear friends, colleagues and staff of University of Sri Jayewardenepura and the Teaching Hospital Colombo South are remembered with gratitude. The members and council of our College, dignitaries are remembered at this important moment, and finally I extend a heartfelt gratitude to all of you who are present here today.

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