

# Passing the baton

Two generations of Rainbow Centre executive directors June Tham and Tan Sze Wee discuss why good leadership continuity is especially vital in the social service sector



Ms Tan (left) and Mrs Tham have decades of social service experience between them. PHOTO: TED CHEN

When Mrs June Tham, 68, retired as executive director of Rainbow Centre (RC), a registered charity and Institution of a Public Character after 25 years, her successor, Ms Tan Sze Wee, 43, had big shoes to fill. But Ms Tan rose to the occasion with the support of the RC Board and her team, as well as the Tote Board's Overseas Scholarship Programme. They tell us more about the transition process.

## Why is a smooth succession process so important?

**JT:** There are social service organisations that struggle with succession planning and end up hiring people from the corporate or non-social service sectors as candidates — who don't stay long.

This can impact on organisation's mission and sustainability of the quality of services and outcomes of its clients. It is important for social service leaders to have sector knowledge and experience, passion to serve, and be strategically aligned to the sector directions and the organisation's values and mission.

## How was it carried out?

**JT:** I had already looked within RC for a suitable and ready successor, before an external consultant was engaged and a management leadership team comprising senior management — including Sze Wee — was formed.

She was soon identified and approved by the Board, having already assumed different leadership roles that enabled her to learn and understand RC's mission. To be a good leader, you also need compassion and shared values with the organisation; Sze Wee has these qualities as well.

**TSW:** I had mostly been working part-time at RC, and initially did not feel ready to take on the role of executive director. But the Board, June and my fellow leaders encouraged and helped me understand the responsibilities to come. I had also taken various roles in RC — social worker, early intervention manager, and vice-principal — and these roles broadened my perspectives, deepened my skills and prepared me for leading the organisation when I accepted the role in 2016.

By availing to my staff the same opportunities I enjoyed, I hope to build a pool of leaders who will continue to take up key positions in RC.

## What did you gain from your scholarship programme?

**JT:** The Tote Board Overseas Scholarship Programme has ardently supported the improvement of service standards and the quality of lives of the differently-abled. We appreciate it for acknowledging the need to develop good, effective leaders in the social service sector.

The Strategic Perspectives in Non-Profit Management programme I attended at Harvard Business School honed my leadership skills to think, plan and lead strategically. Upon my return to Singapore, I would continuously reflect on whether we were doing right, or how we could do better.

**TSW:** The Developing Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals at Columbia University that I attended impressed on me how leaders need to have a lot of self-awareness — of how you are as a person to the people you lead. I'm grateful for the opportunity to learn from, and with, other non-governmental organisation leaders from around the world. Many of our leadership challenges are similar though we are from vastly different organisations in different countries.

## Helping leaders go beyond

The Tote Board Overseas Scholarship Programme has been instrumental in developing leaders in non-profit organisation (NPO) such as Mrs June Tham and Ms Tan Sze Wee. Tote Board has identified Capability and Capacity building of NPOs as a strategic focus area, and funding of \$1.64 million has been allocated to develop the Overseas Scholarship Programme from 2008 to 2021.

The programme enables senior leaders from the non-profit sector to attend executive programmes in four universities: Harvard, Stanford, Columbia and Duke. This year, INSEAD's Social Entrepreneurship programme (Fontainebleau, France), with its strong focus on social entrepreneurship and sustainable revenue models, will be the fifth university in this programme.

Through the Overseas Scholarship Programme, NPO leaders will network, share and exchange best practices with overseas practitioners. NPO leaders will also build and deepen their competencies to lead NPOs in Singapore to be high-performing and sustainable.