

CATALYST ASIA

ISSUE 04
OCT 2016 – MAR 2017

A Publication By The Institute
For Societal Leadership

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INSTITUTE FOR
SOCIETAL LEADERSHIP



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FOUR DOLLARS, WELL SPENT

Despite days filled with hard labour on the fields, they barely made enough to cover the most basic needs.

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BOTTOM-UP REVOLUTION

"Staying where I am is the right thing to do. I can keep my ears close to the ground. The higher you go up the ladder, the tighter your hands are tied."

COVER STORY

The Heart of an Uncommon Leader

"I just want them to succeed. I wouldn't want them to look up to me and say, "Oh, K did this for me". I just want them to make it, and be happy. And that's all I want for them and I'm still going to try my best for them."

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HELP FOR THE EXPLOITED



In Singapore where success is usually defined in material terms, Michael Chiam, a humanitarian leader with 16 years of experience on the ground, brings a refreshing outlook on life. He stumbled into humanitarian work after a good friend introduced him to his first job at World Vision Singapore.

In this interview, the Executive Director of Hagar Singapore talks about what it takes to build and lead a charity while forging his own definition of success.

How did the decision to lead Hagar come about?

The same (friend) who gave me a call (14 years ago to work at World Vision) had just joined the board of Hagar, which was looking to hire an Executive Director (ED) for the Singapore office. I wanted to continue in humanitarian work and she readily connected me to the CEO of Hagar International for an interview.

Once you took the job, did you have to face any personal struggles financially?

Very few people knew about Hagar then. The organisation didn't have many donors too. The board asked if I would be ok with working without a salary until I was able to bring in the first funding.

After the first nine months of joining Hagar, I was paid just half of my salary, because the income raised did not justify paying me the full salary. We prioritised the needs of the trafficked survivors and sent whatever income we had to the ongoing programmes and operations first. I received the other half of my salary the following year.

Thankfully, I didn't feel the struggle, because when I accepted the offer, I had

already adjusted my expectations. It also helped that I wasn't focusing on my overheads. Along the years, my wife and I had crises and cash flow issues but we've never had a need that we wouldn't be able to cover.

However, in growing the organisation, we've needed to develop a strategy to reach a certain income for the next five years, so that the work can be sustained. When we reach the five-year mark, we will decide if we're satisfied with how the organisation has grown.

What's your aim for Hagar's income for the next five years?

Some big organisations like World Vision have a regular income-generating programme (like their Child Sponsorship programme) that allows them to have, say 70% of their income before they start funding programmes in the field. It took World Vision almost 2 decades to establish a base of donors to provide for a regular income.

Organisations like Hagar need to establish something like that. Now, we're only hitting half a million, but it's a lot more than when we first started. The aim is for us to hit over one million within the next 3 to 5 years – that's 50% of the income we need in order to support all of our programmes, operations and administrative costs. If we achieve this, we'll be starting off with income that we know already exists.

What keeps you going in this challenging work?

I am motivated to see every individual we work with break out of the vicious cycle of being

exploited. It's very fulfilling to walk with the clients directly and to see their transformation.

Because you're involved in their lives, you can change the trajectory of their paths.

Share with us a meaningful experience you've had.

When one of our clients, then 17 years old, came to us in December 2014, she seemed really unmotivated to live. She couldn't speak English too. But after she went through Hagar's programme, she started to have more confidence. We linked up with the Ministry of Manpower and the police to get a temporary job permit for her, so that she could work in Singapore. Her English has improved so much since then. She is also now learning how to write and not just speak.

When her mother passed away and she wanted to return home, her request was rejected many times. When we finally got the permit for her, we bought the ticket to send her home. She was the first client whom the police trusted for us to send home and to return to Singapore again. Thankfully, we had already built rapport with the police and established partnerships with other agencies in her home country. When she came back, she was more than happy to work with the police to serve as a witness against the perpetrator.

What values do you (and Hagar Singapore) champion and how do you communicate these to your supporters?

Transparency, honesty and integrity. It's ok to let people know more than what's needed and to be prepared to answer more questions than what is necessary.



For example, if there are issues with client offices, everyone should know, especially our staff and volunteers, so that if our volunteers are talking to anyone, they can communicate the same message. We shouldn't be afraid to share any good news openly and if there is bad news, we need to share what went wrong and what we're doing to rectify it.

What is your advice for anyone who is inspired to lead a non-profit?

Have a big heart and be passionate about what you want to do. Running an organisation on your own means doing it almost 24/7. If you don't have the passion, it'll be very hard to last.

Michael Chiam

Michael Chiam is no stranger to global poverty issues and social evils that are prevalent in impoverished and oppressed communities in the developing countries – he has spent more than 14 years serving in the international humanitarian sector. Beyond his senior management experience, his last stint as the head of operations with World Vision Singapore saw him taking on the responsibility for the direct oversight of some 30 global development projects in about 25 countries worldwide. Michael has an MBA in NGO Leadership and is happily married to his wife, Lynette – a passionate social activist and key volunteer with Hagar Singapore. 🌱



WHEN SOCIAL REVOLUTIONS BEGIN WITH #HASHTAGS

