



## FROM INTENT TO IMPACT

Meaningful change requires more than good intentions. It takes clear purpose, practical discipline and the ability to mobilise others.

**G**ood intentions are abundant. The harder question is what it takes to convert them into outcomes that last. Denise Phua, Mayor of the Central Singapore District, President of the Autism Resource Centre (Singapore) and Co-founder of Pathlight School, has spent two decades answering that question in practice, helping to shape national disability policy, build cross-sector partnerships and lead community programmes at scale. Speaking with editor-in-chief Scott Fritzen, she reflects on how leaders can move from personal conviction to collective action, and from promising ideas to outcomes that endure.

**Looking back at your wide-ranging journey across corporate, non-profit and public sectors, what does the concept of resilience mean to you, personally and professionally?**

Resilience is often defined as the ability to withstand challenges and to pick oneself up after setbacks. That is a definition that resonates with me. But the strength of one's resilience is grounded in one's sense of purpose and clarity of objectives. As the saying goes, "without purpose or vision, men shall perish."

I believe resilience can also occur at a national level. When Singapore became independent in 1965, our forefathers rallied people to stay resilient and persevere in building our nation despite our lack of resources. We saw something similar in spirit during the SARS epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic, when our national leaders encouraged people to stand together and overcome those challenges.

Many may come to think of Singapore as a highly resilient society on both individual and national levels. But throughout my work, I see resilience at both family and community levels as well—families from disadvantaged backgrounds that rise against all odds and become successful, not only in the conventional sense, but also in uplifting the people around them.

**How has your personal experience with the special needs community shaped the way you think about impact and leadership?**

I firmly believe that nothing happens by accident, and that prior experience can be drawn upon to make a real difference. During my time in the infotech industry, working as a corporate executive in companies such as Hewlett-Packard, my son was diagnosed with autism. Like many parents, I moved through a series of difficult emotions, including denial, anger and grief. As I was thrust into the world of special needs, I met several families in similar circumstances, some of whom were faced with even greater hardships. Through those conversations, I discovered a clear gap—a social injustice that needed to be addressed.

At first, I did what many Singaporeans would do: I wrote to our government and the media, telling them what should be done to better support the special needs community. But it soon became evident that, in order to effect change, I needed to be part of the solution—and so I became one. I brought the skills and experience from my corporate career into the non-profit sector, where I helped establish two special needs schools and became one of the architects of three Enabling Masterplans for disability inclusion in Singapore. Driven by a belief that I could shape policies and help direct resources to those who were most vulnerable, I joined politics as an MP for the Jalan Besar GRC and later became Mayor of the Central Singapore District.

Looking back, there are three principles that emerge from this experience. The first is the power of one, where even the smallest act of kindness can leave a lasting impact. If you cannot feed a thousand people, start by feeding one. The second is the power of others, to harness others’ strengths to reach greater heights. In the words of a familiar saying, “if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” The third is

to always be part of the solution—to work within your circle of influence rather than being overly concerned about your circle of concerns. All of us have concerns, things over which we may not have control. But there is always a circle where we do have influence and where we can make a difference.

**What does impact actually look like on the ground—and how do you know when something is truly making a difference?**

Many in the corporate sector would be familiar with performance dashboards and process indicators. In public service, a similar set of indicators is used to assess the impact of our initiatives—namely, output indicators, outcome indicators and impact indicators. The indicators we track are determined by the type of programme, the target audience and the resources available to us.

The Purple Parade, one of the Central CDC’s largest projects, illustrates this well. It is a movement that supports inclusion and celebrates the abilities of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). We partner with over 200 corporate leaders and nearly 50 disability organisations for our annual marquee event. One possible output indicator is the number of people that participate in the event. For outcome indicators, we may examine how many attendees went on to engage meaningfully with PWDs. An impact indicator would be a measurable increase in public awareness and inclusion of PWDs.

However, not all initiatives have a clear pathway to impact. Our work with students from institutes of higher learning, for example, involves cleaning the homes of vulnerable seniors. The outputs and outcomes can be measured, but the initiative may not lead to broader societal impact. In that sense, one must be realistic about impact and measurements—not everything that counts can be measured, and not everything that is measured really counts.

**How do you navigate the challenge of engaging multiple sectors and actors in society to try to achieve your desired outcomes and impacts?**

For organisations such as the CDC, working with partners from various sectors is necessary to carry out

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its objectives. To enable more effective partnerships, there are a few prerequisites.

The first is having a shared vision and values. The giraffe is the Central CDC’s mascot for good reason: with its long neck, it can look out beyond itself and encourage the common good. Ensuring that potential partners share this vision is critical in establishing that all parties are working towards the same objective.

The second is diversity. Where a shared vision aligns interests, diversity brings different perspectives and strengths into the partnership. It is what allows groups to find solutions to achieve that shared vision—which, to me, is what synergy really means.

The third is clarity in the desired outcomes. With a common goal and a range of capabilities, determining the outcomes that you and your partners want to achieve provides guidance and direction. The CDC

Vouchers programme is one example: organisations such as the Ministry of Finance, GovTech and the People’s Association came together successfully with our CDCs because the outcome was clear and the goal was shared. As the Cheshire Cat says in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, if you don’t know where you are heading, it doesn’t matter which way you go.

**Could you walk us through one initiative that shows how an idea moves from good intent to real outcomes?**

When I first started volunteering in the special needs sector, I noticed a clear gap in the education landscape: students on the autism spectrum who were cognitively able to access mainstream academics did not have a suitable learning pathway. Neither the typical special school nor the typical mainstream school was the right fit. A small group of parent and professional volunteers

got together around the idea of setting up a school like no other, one that was designed specifically for these students and built around their needs and abilities.

We developed this idea further and presented it to various stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education and potential donors, to share the vision and make the case for why such a school was needed. The long and short of it is that we had to convince people, and convince them to part with their resources and give us their support. Pathlight School, now Singapore’s largest special school, is the outcome of that effort. From 42 students at founding, it has grown to about 2,200—seeded from a small idea, and now a reality.

**How do you think about scalability and the challenge of scaling in impact work?**

Scalability may not be the objective of every project—nor should it be. I have observed many instances of neighbours helping one another, and that single interaction, that impact on one family, matters. When the focus is on systems that kind of intentional one-to-one connection can get overlooked. There are unsung heroes on the ground making a difference every day, even if the word “scalability” is not in their vocabulary. To me, that is important enough.

Scalability comes in when there is a goal to embed an initiative within a broader system to improve the lives of many. A key first step in scaling impact work is piloting the initiative, to ensure that it creates the desired outcomes for its target beneficiaries at its smallest scale. It can then be unpacked and shaped into a formula that can be replicated. From there, the right tools make the difference—developing playbooks, building in ongoing training and capability-building, establishing systems by which one can audit results and bringing in technology where it adds value. There are many tools that can be used to ensure an initiative is scalable, but they only matter if scalability is the objective.

**Cross-sector partnerships often bring competing priorities and tensions. As a leader, how do you work through them?**

My approach to navigating those tensions can be expressed in four C’s. The first is Clarity. When working with different partners, there is often a lack of clarity regarding the goals they wish to achieve. As Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, once said, “the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” The objectives of each party must be clearly defined to establish a common understanding.

That common understanding can be gained by holding Crucial Conversations with partners. Simply agreeing to work towards a common goal is insufficient; there must be a collective agreement on the desired outcomes, the steps required to reach those outcomes and ways of measuring progress.

As partners come from different sectors, each of them will bring their own distinct agendas and priorities to the table. It is critical to have both Courage and Consideration during these conversations: the courage to speak up for your own priorities, as well as consideration for the needs of others. Striking that balance between courage and consideration is what reduces misunderstandings and tensions, and it requires constant calibration.

**What advice or guiding principles could you share for those that seek to drive meaningful change and have an impact?**

I live by a change management framework called the four ‘A’ model: Awareness, Affiliation, Action and Advocacy. The first step towards effecting change is building Awareness of the initiative’s purpose and the gaps it seeks to address. To rally people to your cause, a positive Affiliation needs to be formed to connect individuals meaningfully to the initiative. After building an affiliation, you must take Action, being clear about what steps will bring about the change you wish to make. The highest level is Advocacy, when others cross over and champion the cause alongside you.

Another set of principles that I find useful is the TOP model: Talent, Others and Passion. Talent and Passion involve identifying what you are good at, and love respectively. Through your skills and passions, how can you help to fulfil the needs of Others? That intersection between Talent, Others and Passion—which I call ‘service best’—represents the best place that you can serve, allowing you to fully harness your strengths and passions to support those around you.

For me, that intersection has been the combination of my management and leadership background, my passion for working with people and the needs of the communities I serve. I feel fortunate to have found that place of ‘service best’ at various points in my career, and I hope to continue doing so. [AMJ](#)

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