

Interview with Datin Goh Suet Lan on Business Coaching

Interview by Vahid Nimehchisalem

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

E-mails: vahid@upm.edu.my, nimechie@gmail.com

Received: -
doi:10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.4n.4p.81

Accepted: -
URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.4n.4p.81>

Published: 31-10-2016

Introduction

I had the pleasure of meeting Datin Goh Suet Lan and one of the key members of her team, Mr Murali, in the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia with three of my colleagues, Associate Professor Dr Shamala Paramasivam (who initiated this meeting), Dr. Ilyana Binti Jalaluddin, and Dr. Ramiza Binti Darmi. At the end of this meeting, Datin graciously accepted the invitation for an E-mail interview, which is the result of what you are going to read here. The interview will show how it is possible to educate women who are the bread-winners of poverty-stricken families to work more wisely for a better living. In this interview, Datin, who is the president of an NGO called *Women of Will* (www.womenofwill.org.my), shares the insightful experiences she and her team have reaped in their journey of making a meaningful difference in their community.

The interview

VN¹: Tell our readers a bit about the background of your Women of Will. What was it that inspired its initiation??

DGSL²: At *Women of Will*, a non-profit organisation, we aim to transform the lives of disadvantaged women and the communities in which they live. Focusing on women-headed households at the poverty line, our objective is to empower the women towards financial independence so as not to have to rely on handouts. Through a combination of micro-credit financing, entrepreneurship development and skills training, the women beneficiaries are equipped with the financial support and skills necessary to initiate and sustain their own small businesses.

Our founder, Dr. Selvamalar Ayadurai, was under studying with Professor Mohd Yunus, when on a trip to Sri Lanka in 2004, she saw the need to initiate a transformation program with the war widows in North East Sri Lanka who had lost both their homes and husbands. They founded an NGO, called TECH Outreach, in Sri Lanka to help uplift the lives of these disadvantaged women. Based on the Grameen model and working with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), a micro-credit and entrepreneurship development program was initiated to support the women in building a sustainable livelihood income for themselves.

Similarly, in Malaysia, our first program was implemented in 2009 in partnership with The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to help uplift the lives of 300 refugee women. Today, our focus is on both the urban and rural poor in Malaysia where to date, we have helped transform the lives of close to 800 women.

VN: What are some of your developments?

DGSL: There are 2 areas of development this year, the first being business coaching where we have looked at ways to raise the bar on our business coaching, and the second being the introduction of bazaars for our women beneficiaries. As part of our transformation program, we developed a 6-month business coaching program whereby each woman beneficiary is assigned a business coach to mentor her both in her business performance as well as in her personal life.

The coaching program is a customised program developed by Boston Consulting Group. The “train the trainer” component ensures our business coaches are trained using a common approach and that the development of the women beneficiaries' progress is tracked based on a standardised template.

Business coaching is a key element in our transformation program as we have found that these 6 months of support are a critical element in helping the women beneficiaries remain motivated, focused and driven. Many of the women have been abused, abandoned, widowed, or live with incapacitated husbands whilst having to raise their families and earn an income at the same time. As such, the day-to-day challenges which comprise both physical and emotional components can be extremely daunting and overwhelming at times. The support offered by the business coaches who come and visit them on alternate weeks provides the mentorship which is so critical to these women and is a key contributing element in the success of our program.

¹ Vahid Nimehchisalem

² Datin Goh Suet Lan

The other recent development is the bazaars which we organise for the women beneficiaries. The bazaars provide the women with the opportunity to put into practice the skills which they have learned in our program, as well as the opportunity to set up shop in an area outside their usual domain which is usually out of home or close to home.

Marketing skills which include the ability to pack, price, promote and place their products appropriately are put into practice at these public bazaars. As well, the women are also given the opportunity to network with other women vendors as well as new customers at these bazaars.

The bazaars have proven to be very beneficial for our women beneficiaries. At our April bazaar in Brickfield's Asia College, many of the women earned between RM600-RM800 in a day, which represents close to half of their monthly earnings for many of them. At our November bazaar in Publika, the women learned how to market to a more affluent crowd, whereby packing, communication, display and even hygiene were important components which had to be appropriated.

VN: What is it that makes your team unique?

DGSL: Our team which comprises a staff of four and numerous dedicated volunteers have come together based on one common objective, which is to serve the interest of supporting women who live in poverty. It is a team deeply committed to a women's cause, and who have not hesitated to offer their skills, time and dedication to this cause. It is also a team who is time and time again humbled to be serving in this capacity - a phrase you will constantly hear from our staff and volunteers is how they constantly learn something new and humbling every time they engage with the women beneficiaries.

VN: What is the factor that has contributed a lot to your success?

DGSL: In aiming to empower the women to transform their own lives and achieve financial independence, there are a few factors which play a key role in achieving this.

Firstly, recruitment of the right woman beneficiary is important. Our selection criteria not only includes demographics of women-headed households in the lower end of the B40 (bottom 40%) category, but also women who have the initiative and desire to make a difference in their own lives, as opposed to relying on handouts.

Secondly, the concept of providing the women with micro-loan helps empower them. The interest free loans are repaid on a weekly basis and the women feel prouder, more independent and more confident knowing that what they are doing is self-initiated.

Thirdly, *Women of Will's* Entrepreneurship Development Program (WOWED) is important in helping the women kick start or grow their business successfully as they are taught the basic skills of financial literacy, marketing, and communications.

Additionally, as described earlier, the business coaching which follows through for a period of 6 months is a critical factor in ensuring that the women's journey towards success is supported with mentorship as required.

To sum up, there isn't one critical factor but rather, it is the sum of each of the steps in the program which helps determine its success.

VN: How can institutions of higher education and/or the government contribute to what you are doing?

DGSL: Long term and strategic collaborations help us achieve our objectives as we cannot work in isolation and by ourselves. It is only through partnerships that we are able to jointly work together for a common cause.

Our partnership with Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) is highly strategic as impact assessments are essential in our program. Being able to measure the impact of our work, and being able to implement this through the help of professionals who understand our work and care about it speaks volumes. In fact, I would say that our emphasis on the importance of impact assessments and our partnership with UPM on this have been a strong contributing factor in getting many of our program proposals approved.

VN: What are some of the future programs that you are planning to run?

DGSL: Moving forward into 2017, our strategic planning includes our objective of positively impacting the communities in which our women beneficiaries live, instead of reaching just the women beneficiaries themselves. For example, if we are running a social program on women's health, we can extend the program to reach residents of the entire PPR (low cost housing apartments) instead of just our women beneficiaries.

Secondly, we have just launched pilot programs in Sabah (poorest state in Malaysia) working with women farmers living in poverty. The objective is for the women to plant in small groups and sell their crops as a business instead of planting for their own consumption alone. Here, we have managed to address the key issues which have posed as barriers to these women farmers: the financial support required to plant quality crops on a larger scale (through our micro credit loans), the expertise required to plant the right crops in the right manner (through consultations and partnerships with Subject Matter Experts, or SMEs), and the ability to create an end market for them as their villages are isolated (through identifying buyers who will purchase their crops). We are hopeful that this pilot will be successful and we will be able to learn from it and expand our outreach in Sabah and also replicate the program in relevant areas in West Malaysia.

VN: What are your goals moving forward?

DGSL: We aim to continue our outreach work aggressively, reaching out to women and communities in need of socio economic transformation in both rural and urban poor areas of Malaysia. Specifically, for 2016-2018, our objective is to have transformed the lives of 1,500 women-headed households in total in both East and West Malaysia.

VN: Any last words for *IJELS* readers? Our readers come from various fields like Post-Secondary Education, Physical Education, Rural Education, and Vocational Education, among many others.

DGSL: We have been asked why our work focuses on women. I'd just like to highlight that of the single parent families within the B40 population (bottom 40%). It is estimated that 70% of them are women-headed households. Many of these women are victims of their circumstances and the women beneficiaries whom we work with are more than willing to take the opportunity to work for a better life for themselves and their families. With time, we have seen the multiplying effects of assisting these women – not only do they serve as adequate providers and role models for their children, but they positively impact the communities in which they live in as well. Emerging as community leaders who take an interest in the welfare of other women/mothers, sharing business opportunities, providing a network of support are but a few of the positive developments we have witnessed.

As such, in reaching out to one woman, not only is her life transformed, but there is the potential to positively impact the lives of many others within her family and community as well. In moving forward, we will be exploring how else we can better integrate our services to create a stronger impact on not just the women beneficiaries, but on their communities as well and would most certainly welcome any input or support with this.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our gratitude to Associate Professor Dr Shamala Paramasivam who made this interview a reality.