Singapore - A Philanthropy Hub? Corporate Mindset is KEY

What happens when a successful private equity entrepreneur takes a year off to learn about philanthropy and social entrepreneurship? She wants to change the world through effective giving.

Giving out money is easy. Giving out money in a meaningful and sustainable manner is not. It is to this end that successful private equity entrepreneur, Ng Shin Ein, took a year off work in 2010 to research and understand the philanthropic and social entrepreneurship sectors. She attended courses in the UK, and spoke to philanthropists, foundations and corporate leaders in Europe, the US and Asia, and arrived at the conclusion that Singapore has the potential to be a philanthropy hub. As such, she started a group of similar enthusiasts from diverse professional backgrounds to debate, research and influence corporations and families to give in a more effective and less random manner.

“Asia is very nascent in its philanthropic efforts. Corporations tend to give money without much thought towards sustainability or social impact. They also lack the framework and tools to assess their own giving efforts. Most boards are not familiar with this space so they too, set a very low benchmark. Family foundations, on the other hand, generally give to causes that are close to their hearts but do not always address the issue of sustainability. Giving can be a lot more impactful when it is well thought out,” Shin notes.
“Singapore has great potential to be a philanthropy hub. We are, after all, the Asian headquarters for many global corporations, and we are a thriving wealth management hub in Asia,” she argues. “We have the infrastructure. The research and development aspects can be acquired. The Asian Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy (ACSEP) team is working hard to build databases, conduct research, and create some missing parts of this ecosystem, such as graduates who are familiar with this space. I am very happy to be working on this with the committed professors from NUS’s Business School and other NUS entities.”

The essential corporate team

Impeccably dressed in a crisp dark blue linen shift dress and heartily enjoying her cooked breakfast, Shin gives in to her motherly instincts and chides me for not eating my breakfast while it is still hot. The mother of three adds, “Western philanthropy has developed frameworks and structures which are more efficient and effective. However, unthinking adoption would not work in the Asian context. But we have to start somewhere - I would like to see Asian philanthropists move from ad hoc donations to more sophisticated philanthropic models.”

Key to this, Shin avers, is bringing the corporate mindset into philanthropy. “Information technology, fund management principles, and legal and academic expertise all need to converge in order to create the synergy necessary to bring about smart giving and strategic philanthropy. What we’ll then have is a group of people who are knowledgeable and relevant, with a mix of backgrounds. Diversity will lead to better ideas and different ways of doing things.”
“What I’d really like to see is for corporate head honchos who are keen on philanthropy to organise a more structured way of giving, strategising and bringing together a team of people with passion and expertise to think through effective giving, rather than be content with a public relations approach towards philanthropy, parked under CSR,” she adds.

Besides these additions, Shin says we need depth and research. “Here is where ACSEP can complement organisations carrying out corporate or family philanthropy. The centre carries out in-depth research and has a network of practitioners with whom it can work to advance insights and efforts.”

**Changing the mindset**

Traditionally, philanthropists maintained an arm’s-length relationship with the organisations they supported. Shin says what we need in Asia is a closer and active relationship between the donor and the social organisation. “We are talking about a partnership and one where the achievement of measurable goals is carefully tracked, and an effective giving model is well thought out and implemented.”

So how are you going to go about changing the mindset of Singaporeans to gear them towards smart giving? I ask. She says she will continue to encourage effective giving through her network of corporate head honchos and family foundations in her mainstream work. She will also continue to help ACSEP build capacity, and complement her academic team mates in the centre by bridging research and practitioners with corporates and foundations.
With that, the philanthropy evangelist stood up as her next appointment had arrived. She gave me a firm handshake and told me to eat my breakfast before it turns cold.