

5 WAYS TO RALLY A COMMUNITY IN A PANDEMIC

*Interview with Dr Maliki Osman, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office,
Second Minister for Education and Foreign Affairs*



WRITTEN BY EDWIN ZHANG, CHI

On day two of the CHI INNOVATE 2020 webinar, we were treated to an up-close and personal conversation with Dr Maliki Osman, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, Second Minister for Education and Foreign Affairs. Among his many portfolios, Dr Maliki is also the Mayor of the South East District since 2011 and champions interfaith engagement and appreciation through various innovative programmes.

Joining Dr Maliki were Mr David Dhevarajulu, Executive Director, Centre for Healthcare Innovation (CHI) and Ms Koh Huey Bing, Director Organisation Development, Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

Dr Maliki shared with us the critical role of community leadership and keeping the population resilient and engaged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. People from all walks of life are hard hit by the COVID-19 crisis. In times of pandemic, hospitals are not the first line of defense; but the community is. Community resilience and heartening stories of the public rallying together in a concerted effort against COVID-19 have inspired and uplifted many around the globe. We gleaned 5 key pointers from the interview.

For Those in a Hurry...

- 1. Harness Grassroots energy**
- 2. Fight 'misinfodemic' through relationships**
- 3. Engage seniors in the digital world**
- 4. Pay attention to community mental health**
- 5. Habits and behaviours must change**



1. HARNESS GRASSROOTS ENERGY...TO CUT THE GRASS!

Initiatives from the Grassroots

Dr Maliki vividly recounts some surprising feedback he received from an online engagement. There was concern that the long grass had not been cut and trees had not been pruned. But even as his team deliberated on their response to this, volunteers stepped forward and offered to cut the grass themselves.

Singaporeans' deep desire to build a support network for one another is insatiable.

For example, there were volunteers who wanted to be part of the masks distribution exercise. These collective responses to COVID-19 are exemplary illustrations of how the community is activated and want to be part of the solution.

Grassroots Leadership to the Fore

A silver lining in this pandemic is how leadership with different interests worked together to guide their respective communities during this pandemic.

One example is how different religious leaders advocated in one voice; giving practical adaptive advice, to keep their congregations safe while allowing the practice of faith to continue.

Having a firm, yet empathetic leadership comes across as a relatable approach to guide others in difficult times, as Dr Maliki points out: "We know what you are experiencing as we are experiencing it too."





2. FIGHT THE "MISINFODEMIC" THROUGH STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Information, technology and people must come together in building resilience during a pandemic.

But with overwhelming information and a plethora of platforms, one major challenge poses; the need to decide what information is critical and truthful.

Dr Maliki alluded that disseminating targeted and trusted information to the community is crucial. COVID-19 has not stopped his house visits with the residents, but he has also found innovative approaches to connect with them virtually.

Building Capabilities and Relationships in Peace Time

We look to leaders for guidance during a crisis. But in reality, building capabilities and relationships during **peace time** is paramount for leaders to effectively activate the community.

Dr Maliki shared his experience at the South East District, where grassroots leaders have successfully built micro-communities.

In the micro-communities, there are leaders identified as 'kepalas' or 'village heads'. The role of a 'kepala' is to build relationships and maintain connectivity with small clusters of residents and households. This has proven to be the best asset as the kepalas disseminate relevant information in a timely manner to provide trusted and authenticated information to their micro-communities during COVID-19.





3. ENGAGE SENIORS IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Going digital is more than being IT savvy, it is also about bridging the digital gap between the seniors and the digital space, and between the younger generation and the seniors.

Partnering with Businesses

IMDA has identified 1,000 digital ambassadors to engage up to 100,000 seniors each year, to ramp up efforts to equip vulnerable individuals and businesses in the new social and economic environment post COVID-19.

There are digital clinics at the communities, supported by public-private-partnerships where corporations like IBM and Citibank collaborate with IMDA to train seniors on the basics of digital tools and skills.

Embrace Digitalisation

Dr Maliki was encouraged that seniors have been making steady progress in adopting technology in their daily lives. While most are comfortable with simple features on their smart phones, engaging digital services with government agencies remains a challenge.

He emphasised that a whole-of-nation movement is needed to make the transition easier for seniors so that they will be comfortable with the language interface and technology, and not feel alienated. With these proactive initiatives, seniors are beginning to feel that technology is a catalyst, and not an inhibitor.

During COVID-19, they have continued to leverage on technology to connect with their peers for group activities such as Zumba classes and Cantonese singing which is important to enhanced their sense of well-being.





4. PAY ATTENTION TO COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH

Dr Maliki acknowledged that the fault lines that run in all societies become more evident during crises.

There will be vulnerable population groups requiring support that is not easily accessible and the situation is exacerbated by COVID-19, but leaders need to find opportunities to reach out to them as much as possible.

Mental Health Matters

One fault line identified was the mental health and well-being of Singaporeans dealing with an unprecedented crisis.

Mental health issues are among the most misunderstood and can have a devastating impact on a person's quality of life.

COVID-19 is a different kind of crisis compared to SARS; particularly in the socio-psychological aspect. Previously in SARS, measures such as safe distancing and social isolation was not necessary.

Two months of circuit breaker also took a toll on households. Families found themselves living together for 24 hours in confined spaces which caused increased stress and strife.

People responded to these challenging times in different ways. It involves self-awareness and mental resilience to cope with the stress and the ability to bounce back when faced with difficult situations.

As an individual, there is a need to deal with one's mental health; starting with the ability to recognise one's own psychological changes as stress levels goes up. COVID-19 highlighted the importance of keeping mental health and well-being high on the national agenda at all times. Dr Maliki conceded that much more work was needed on this front.





5. HABITS AND BEHAVIOURS MUST CHANGE

Singapore has thrived on global connectivity, and COVID-19 exposed this as our vulnerability, when travel bans and trade slowdowns occurred

Navigating the New Normal

Along with the broader global and national shifts, individuals need to become nimbler and have realistic expectations. The economy will have to be responsive and be able to quickly create new jobs.

Acquiring new skills to fill evolving jobs will become more pertinent in the new paradigm. Habits and behaviors must change according to context of the crisis.

Dr Maliki urged everyone not to be complacent. There was a worrying observation during Phase 2, as many were seen talking loudly when dining out, without being mindful of the situation. "We cannot assume that things will take care of itself, unless we take care of it ourselves."

Leadership must step forward to effect sustained changes in behaviour and attitudes.

Strengthening the Social Support Networks

Part of building resilience in societies is the continuous engagement to strengthen the community networks which have supported us well in COVID-19. Dr Maliki iterates "We will continue to support each other and explore how we can work effectively with volunteers and micro-communities, moving forward. In a crisis, these micro communities will stand firm and not collapse."

APPRECIATION TO THE HEALTHCARE COMMUNITY

Dr Maliki emphasised the collective role which everyone plays in fighting this pandemic and extended his deep gratitude to healthcare workers. "The Health of every Singaporean is the combined responsibility of all communities, not solely the effort of healthcare workers. There is much we can do together."

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