

Going the extra mile

Dian Gomes shared key insights on leadership at the Sri Lanka America Society's Leadership Forum for 2011, which was held recently. The sponsors of the forum were Nations Trust Bank and Softlogic Finance and the event was held at the Galle Face Hotel

By SHEZNA SHUMS

EXPRESSING his thoughts on leadership, Managing Director of MAS Intimates and Group Director MAS Holdings Dian Gomes emphasised on how he has learnt a lot from the people he leads every day, at work and elsewhere.

"These people have courage, commitment, humility and persistence and they have taught me a lot," he said.

When it comes to leadership it is best to adapt to the Sri Lankan style of thinking and working; you have to connect with people. "You cannot just put in place a textbook or Western principle and adopt it here, you have to speak and work with them the way they think and are. Leadership is a very difficult thing to speak on because there are so many concepts about leadership," he noted.

Leadership

However his speech on leadership was mostly based on another aspect of his life – boxing and his work at Pannala where he comes across many underprivileged people who in a way have leadership qualities in their life.

Here, he said, people were hungry to achieve something, to study, to win for the country and the commitment they had to get up at the crack of dawn, walk for miles or days, or day in and day out practise for hours in the boxing ring for so many years to achieve their goal. This, in its own way, is how they have inbuilt leadership qualities.

Moreover, leadership is not just for people who are running companies or corporates, but leadership is in the individual, he asserted.

Gomes recalled: "About 15 years back one of my merchandisers, Yamuna Kulaseena, came and spoke to me at MAS Holdings. Here at every level you have to be either a graduate, CIMA or Chartered, so it is a very professional set of people that we work with.

"Yamuna is a person who came to the industry very well experienced, although she did not have a professional background. One day she came and spoke to me about leadership and said, 'Dian I don't have the charisma to speak like you or lead people'.

"So I asked her one question, 'Are you a good mother?' and I knew she was a great mother because she was supporting her two kids, she lives in Negombo from where she takes the two kids for tuition in Colombo every weekend. She said 'yes'.

"I said, 'If you are a great mother, then you are a great leader,' and in the subsequent years I saw her son and daughter graduate from prestigious American universities, saw them get married and she herself did CIM and became a Chartered Marketer and a few years back retired."

The moral of the story is that everybody is a leader and sometimes you don't know what's needed to raise the benchmark.

"If you are a good father, mother or manager, then I am sure that you'll have something in you for leadership. And you have to know what is your philosophy, what is your philosophy to life?"

Five practices

Gomes highlighted there are the five practices of leadership by two of Harvard Guru's Kouzes and Posner, which in its own, which we, our families and society should adopt and practice:

1. Model the way – Have a clear leadership philosophy; follow through on promises and commands
2. Inspire a shared vision – Create a common vision/a compelling future
3. Challenge the process – Challenge the status quo to grow, learn and change
4. Enable others to act – Support others to make decisions on their own
5. Encourage the heart – Recognise others, celebrate their achievements

In Gomes's speech on leadership he stated that it was very difficult in a society like ours, because in school we are not taught to challenge; most of us have come from a very traditional society but today the world has



From left: Sri Lanka American Society President Glen Rose; Deputy Chief of Mission Guest of Honour Valerie Fowler; Chairperson Kalyani Ranasinghe; Chief Guest/Managing Director of MAS Intimates and Group Director MAS Holdings Dian Gomes; and Co Chair Tissa de Alwis – Pic by Krishantha Ranasinghe

changed.

"When I see my Royal College teachers I still stand to attention, when I still meet my first boss at KPMG, when he calls, I still get up and answer 'Good morning Sir.'"

"This is because I come from a traditional society... most of us come from a traditional society, but the world has changed and today I need to sit at a meeting with a 24-year-old Harvard graduate who will tell me 'Dian, this is rubbish, this doesn't work.' This is the world today, the world is changing and what people were taught years ago is outdated and people who are graduating now have that new knowledge.

"So we need to understand that you need to challenge the process, because if you do not challenge the process, and if you think that for the last 25 years you did it right, the 26th year it is not going to work because the world is changing much faster than we can change."

"The things that I learnt at CIMA or my graduate days are no longer viable, it is outdated. What we have all learnt is outdated now," he claimed.

"The young graduate from the best business school, you have to understand is much smarter than you and I, but the thing we have is our experience. Adding that all of us know these concepts, but do we practise it?"

Boxing perspective

Into his speech on leadership Gomes brought in his role in boxing, noting that in leadership, whether it is sports, the corporate world or public service, it is the same principles, the same ball game.

"I started this journey in my life in sports in boxing and the first thing I wanted to do is represent Sri Lanka and at 17 I took part in the national trial to represent my country at the 1977 Asian games, at the second round I fought against H.S. Kaldera and I saw the canvas on ring, the third round, I lost the fight."

Kaldera went to represent Sri Lanka and won the bronze medal at the Asian games in 1978 and some time back he had said that he met this chap Dian, 'he is a very good boxer but he was fighting for the glory of the sport. For me it was a matter of life and death and I didn't want anyone standing in my way,' Kaldera came from an underprivileged background to represent the country.

So as life went on, Gomes forgot about boxing and became an accountant. In 1999 Colonel Jagath Jayasuriya who is now Lieutenant General Jagath Jayasuriya was a Commander in the Army and he was also Gomes' boxing mate at Royal College. Jayasuriya invited him to the SAF Games in Nepal.

"I was a young observer and I was Chief Executive at Slimline, MAS's flagship plant at Pannala, and I went in Katmandu and was the corner man. At this match there were two school boys – Manju Wanniarachchi and Anurudda Ratnayake – they were 17 and 18 year old kids and there was also Sumith Prassanna, a Sri Lanka Army Corporal, who went on to win the gold medal for Sri Lanka, the last time we won a gold.

"We were proud, we sang the national anthem with tears in our eyes and when he got down the first thing that he did was put the gold medal on me and then he worshipped me. I was stunned, I was humbled."

"I asked him why, as I had no rela-



Chief Guest/Managing Director of MAS Intimates and Group Director MAS Holdings Dian Gomes

tionship to this man and he said two things: 'Sir, somebody like you does not have to tie my shoelace, put my headgear and put on my gloves. I knew your standing in society, and I was humbled by that. The only thing I can do to reciprocate is to put the medal on you and worship you.'

Gomes added: "I was humbled and wondered why I had to go all the way to SAF Games in 1999 to understand that people at that level have more humility and humanity than a guy who was Western educated... because when it came to putting my head down to Anton Obeysekera who was my coach, it was on his death that I did it and not when he was living. When I recalled that, I was ashamed of myself."

Aiming for the Olympics

In the meantime Colonel Jayasuriya and Hemasiri Fernando who at that time was the Chairman of the National Olympic Committee said that since Gomes runs a large corporate and if he put his focus, energy and vision for Sri Lankan boxing, within eight years we could get a boxer qualified to box at the Olympics.

"I really didn't know what it takes to get a man to the Olympics because like football, all 205 countries take part. It was a daunting dream, but I took the responsibility."

The last boxer who qualified was in 1968 at the Mexico Olympics and Sri Lanka has not won a medal for the last 40 years.

"So the first thing you need to do for leadership, whether in the Army, school or corporate sector, is to have a structure, a boss, people delegated with responsibility and find them accountable and give them what we call key performance indicators, like in the private sector; if you do not perform you are fired."

"Because you need to have a structured organisation to do anything to achieve your visions, you can have a vision for the next 10 years but when it comes to execution, how are you

going about it?" he questioned.

Getting started

When it came to boxing, the first thing they found out was that the two countries with the best track record of winning boxing medals were Russia and Cuba. "So we met with and convinced the Cuban Ambassador to give us a development coach from Cuba, which we got. Following this we put the right technology into the game, technology wins everything whether it is corporate or IT system, new techniques are important. Whatever you do, if you are outdated, you are not going to be world class," maintained Gomes.

"Then we broke things down to administration, selection, development and coaching, so each one was independent and there was no interference, we had a very clear structure, clear guidelines and from there we started."

Gomes then recruited six school boys – Manju Wanniarachchi, Anurudda Ratnayake and others from the Kandy region who at that time were dominating Sri Lanka school boxing. "The best young talent, and if they are from the underprivileged background, they would be hungry to take part and have that endurance, that's the beginning of the story."

While working towards the Olympics, these boys won the National Championships, beating the Sri Lanka Army which had been winning it for 25 years.

"With the six boxers, we beat the Army, Air Force and Navy, and the reason we did so was because we had the focus, the right mental push, the right coach, and a rigorous daily workout for the boxers. Look at our odds, Russia has one million boxers with 30,000 boxing clubs. In 2003 we went to the Commonwealth Championships in Kula Lumpur and lost by one point, but it was a clear win for us."

"During the match, as the corner man, I have only 30 seconds to motivate a boxer to fight for his country and victory and take the fear out of the boy. It is such a daunting experience when you see the crowds, the lights and the ring and you have a boxer from another country coming at you to knock you down," he asserted.

Beijing Olympics

Gomes went on to talk about the Beijing Olympics, "I was the team's Chef de Mission, and at the Olympics, the captain of the Olympic team was Susanthika Jayasinghe, who carried our country's flag and walked first."

He recalled that at the previous Commonwealth Championships, he carried the flag as the Chef de Mission and his two boxers walked behind him.

"The first time I was given the flag, I was very proud and honoured. But five feet before we hit the arena, the country in front of us, Swaziland whose manager was carrying the Swaziland flag gave the flag to the boxer and told me he was the guy who was going to fight for the country and he would carry the country's flag, challenging the process. This was true. It was not me who was going to fight so I immediately gave the flag to Wanniarachchi who was astonished. So I realised your country must come first before you."

Travails and tears

During his travels all over the world with the boxing team there were times Gomes was brought to tears. "Sometimes we make it to the quarter finals and I had to return and at the transit I get a SMS saying we lost those matches. Then there were times I arrived for a match to see us lose, so I take the next flight back," said Gomes, who travelled with the boxing teams even at the risk of losing his career: "I run a US\$ 300 million institute making lingerie for Victoria's Secret and Marks and Spencer," he noted.

"So at such times what can you do?" he says, "go home for two days and on Monday morning start practise again. This went on and on and on and everything we did was from private funding. Sometimes when returning, the people at the Customs, at Immigration or even at checkpoints ask me whether we can win a gold, and this is what keeps me going," he professed.

2007 World Championships

During the 2007 World Championships, 133 countries and a total of 600 boxers were taking part to fight for eight players to be selected to the Olympics. "We were trying to send three boys, what are the chances... but I said, 'No, we Sri Lankans can and we are going,' Security Forces Commander for Wannai at the time Major General Jagath Jayasuriya and I stood for this, we believed 'Sri Lanka can,' and we had to get private funding to raise US\$ 15,000 for this trip," he said.

"Again I was given the task of carrying the flag, 133 countries, in Chicago streets, USA, we carried our flag, I carried the flag and gave it to the captain Manjula Wanniarachchi. He carried the flag all the way to the arena, but just before the arena I said to give the flag to Ratnayake.

"Its' like telling Sangakari in a spin wicket to let Murali lead the team today, such was a decision and again this is challenging the process and I knew that Ratnayake had the edge over Wanniarachchi to get to the Olympics and I realised that this was like giving him the leadership, giving him the accountability and responsibility to go beyond to qualify," he said. "I had to make that call and I don't regret it," Gomes noted.

"I had to leave and Ratnayake came to me and said, 'Sir by the time you go to Colombo I will be going through for the Olympics.' Just imagine the man's mentality of determination to say he would qualify," explained Gomes.

Ratnayaka's first fight was against an Australian; he finished that fight in the second round, hitting the Australian boy so much that the referee stopped the match, the second fight was against Ecuador, this too Ratnayake won in a 10 point lead. The third fight, quarter finals was against an Italian; Ratnayake lost by three points but had qualified for the Olympics.

"So we have one boy qualified for the Olympics 2008," continued Gomes. "The most important thing is to take the fear out, take the fear out from your children and your colleagues, then you can make people go that extra mile," revealed Gomes.

Best in the world

"Even in school, people will say you can't do it, you can't study; this is common in Sri Lanka, the reason being you if you say someone can do it, then they may not study, but you must say you can do it, you can pass in the first try. Whether you pass or fail is immaterial it is important that you do your best," said Gomes.

"Every day I tell my people we are making lingerie, bras and panties, with the highest number of graduates, MBAs in the country, my senior team all have MBAs from the best business schools in the world, but we are making bras and panties. You don't need to go to Harvard to make them for Victoria's Secret, so if we are making them, we have to be the best in the world," asserted Gomes.

"If we are not the best in the world we don't need to be making bras and panties; otherwise I can get some people from college to run this organisation," pointed out Gomes.

Another fact Gomes spoke about was that Sri Lankans hate to take people better than them, "Learn to take people who are better than you, Sri Lankans hate to do this, but get people better than you so that you can do better and do more," he revealed.

Even with his work Gomes says that it is important to be able to sit and have tea even with a janitor, greet the people who work

FT Quotes

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Give people pride, leadership is giving people pride in their work. If we can change things now we can make a better future for our society, and the people must trust you, then they will do anything. In Sri Lanka we have to talk to their emotions; that's the attitude to adopt in the Sri Lankan environment. Talk to them like that, not straight from the book or apply a textbook principle. We have to adapt our business to suit the Sri Lankan business environment and its people

with you, who open the door, who do the smaller work and find out what they think, how they are, that's how you make organisations from the grassroots level, learn from them," he said.

During the boxing match Ratnayaka had told Gomes that he had a big debt and that he wanted to win this medal and put it on Gomes' head, having seen him spending his money and time and put everything at stake for boxing.

"I said even 20 years from now you will take your team and the day somebody puts a medal on your head, we will call it quits," observed Gomes.

"So I want to talk about the leadership of boys like him, who are much humbler, much stronger than most of us to have sacrificed so many years of his life to win something for Sri Lanka," he said, adding that he himself may not have done such a thing although he would have gladly been a facilitator.

"Meeting people like that, I am humbled by all these experiences, about people, their priorities, and their commitment; we come from an elite society but I learn leadership from them," concluded Gomes.

"I have lost more things in life than I have won. These are the personal experiences that show me that an extra smile, perseverance and not finding fault with circumstances can take a person a long way."

Life and reality

Gomes said that being in Pannala opened his eyes to life and reality: "I understood life when I went to Pannala to see people, workers' children who get up at 3 a.m. and walk for miles to university. After that I started teaching English. I changed my philosophy and understood leadership from people like them."

He has over 15,000 people under him. "About 60 per cent of the time I walk and ask how we can improve our work and improve efficiency or we have to move this plant away. If a plant in Tokyo can achieve high efficiency, why can't we?"

"Why can't we improve higher, if we improve from 55 percent to 65 per cent I get five million dollars on the bottom line, so what are we talking of saving electricity or transport? We need to challenge the process."

"In our 15-acre plant we don't even have a single thread on the floor; give people pride, leadership is giving people pride in their work. If we can change things now we can make a better future for our society, and the people must trust you, then they will do anything."

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