

FOCUS

Small but Agile - Good Governance for Excellence

Interview with Ms Sabrina Ho, Chairman of The Child Development Centre

Ms Sabrina Ho, Chairman of The Child Development Centre (CDC), was awarded by The Hong Kong Institute of Directors in 2018 the Director of the Year in the category of Statutory/Non-profit-distributing Organisations. Talking about the honour of being awarded, Ms Ho humbly gave the credit to her board and staff team for their concerted dedication.

The CDC is a small-medium organization with around 40 staff members, governed by an Executive Committee (ExCo) of 11 members. Ms Ho believes that governance is of paramount importance regardless of the organization's size. The CDC has a profound and unique governance structure, with special emphasis on accountability and transparency. Ms Ho said, "The CDC must be accountable to the public, the government, parents, service users, donors and staff, and should ensure they have a clear understanding of our services and financial status." She maintains that small NGOs should be even more prudent in risk oversight. Under her leadership, the CDC has a risk management policy and staff responsible for risk and compliance. Ms Ho emphasized that it was essential to take the agency's distinctive features into account when setting up governance structure and policies. For example, as there were accountants in the CDC's Finance Committee to oversee audits, it was unnecessary to form an audit committee. In light of the difficulties for small NGOs to recruit suitable persons as board members, Ms Ho viewed that, instead of setting up different sub-committees like larger organizations do, it is more pragmatic to review if the existing board structure is adequate in fulfilling various governance functions, and to harness the strengths of existing members. Ms Ho also remarked that setting term limits for committee members would send away needed talents and might not be beneficial to the organization.

Ms Ho said that small NGOs have the advantage of their agility in taking swift action to adjust services in response to societal changes and users' needs, thus optimizing resource utilization. Furthermore, small NGOs allow closer bonding between the board and the staff. Ms Ho has discussions with staff members every week to listen to their views, understand the operation and hear users' feedback. The CDC's ExCo holds eight to ten meetings a year so that members can closely monitor the operation. The ExCo and the management team develop strategic plans together and reach consensus on future work priorities. On the division of responsibilities, the ExCo focuses on the finances so that the staff can concentrate their efforts on rendering quality services. All these qualities indicate that the board and the management team are efficiently carrying out their roles in pursuing the agency's mission.

The CDC is committed to creating social impact. Apart from providing direct services to children with special educational needs, it compiled a free guidebook and held workshops for pre-school educators, bringing the benefit to more children in the community. The CDC also reaches out to underprivileged families to promote the importance of early assessments and interventions. Parents' engagement is always an emphasis of the CDC. In March, the mobile application "CDC Connects" was launched to provide an



Ms Ho attended the launch ceremony of the CDC's first Guide for Teachers and Therapists in October 2017



Ms Ho attended the CDC Family Fun Sports Day in November 2018

interactive platform for parents to track their children's learning progress and to make service appointments easier. The CDC and the Springboard Project shared similar missions and for better use of resources, they merged in 2008. Ms Ho opined that, with the increasing number of small NGOs, it was worthwhile for the sector to consider room for more collaboration to maximize the social impact.

Ms Ho joined the CDC's ExCo as a parent representative, later took up the position of Treasurer, and then the Chairpersonship. Over the decades, she has led the organization in addressing service needs amidst social changes and building a community with quality services for pre-school children. The CDC's pursuit of mission and service excellence has undoubtedly established a role model in the field.