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Only the best for her

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FOR Professor Datuk Dr Sharifah Hapsah Shahabudin, the measure of success is when she is on par with her peers and colleagues in the same field throughout the world. "Until and unless you have attained that status, you will drive yourself to excel," she said.

In Dr Sharifah Hapsah's case, the field is medical education and higher education management and development.

Presently professor and director at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Centre for Academic Development, she said that her measure of success is international recognition in the form of invitations to be a consultant for international-level projects or a speaker at meetings or conferences.

"I am quite happy with my international standing. In fact, sometimes I feel I am more known for my expertise and knowledge outside the country as I am often invited to become a panel member for many projects for the United Nations, United Nations Development Programme and World Health Organisation," she said.

One of her recent stints for WHO saw her assuming a two-month consultancy in human resource development at the WHO office for the Western Pacific in Manila, the Philippines. She helped to lay the framework for open and distance continuing learning for health professionals in the region and developed a strategic plan for improving the quality of medical education in member countries.

Although she first trained as a doctor, her interest was to change early in life. "One is often faced with crossroads at several junctures of one's life. It is at this time that you make decisions that may change your life. I believe that once you have made that decision, you must do your best to pursue your goals and that is how I came to the field of teaching and research," she said.

After practising as a doctor for several years, she went on to do her master's in health personnel education and later, a doctorate in medicine. "I wanted to work in an area where I could look at how doctors could learn to improve themselves and what the ideal facilities and environment were in order to give them the best avenue to continue their learning process. I believe this is what the k-economy is all about," she said, adding that this was also her way of improving herself professionally.

Describing herself as a "teacher" with 26 years' experience, her present position sees her developing all aspects of education. She is responsible for the strategic planning and development of the university, helps to restructure the faculties and is involved in the orientation and training of young academics in the university.

"When young academics come in, we have to make them understand the aspirations of the university. We have to try to determine where they see themselves in the future and what they hope to do, that they understand the pitfalls and so forth," she said.

The centre also looks into the management and planning of higher education in order to contribute towards nation-building. Because quality assurance is important, it has also developed quality procedures for auditing academic programmes at the university and has conducted academic audits on all faculties. "These are the areas that are occupying my time as I get older," she said.

While her work may be stressful, Dr Sharifah Hapsah said she has "mellowed" with time. "In fact, I wish I could organise courses on stress

management. Age seems to help you to deal with things better. I have become less snappy, perhaps because I have learnt that you have to wait for people to catch up with you. If you bear in mind that different people may approach their work in a way that is not similar to yours, it becomes less stressful. While I have always found it difficult to tolerate people who cannot meet deadlines, I have learnt to give people a little more leeway," she said.

"I don't think that women deserve the label of being tyrants as bosses. I believe in being nice but that does not mean I accept lackadaisical attitudes. I have had staff work with me for many years. My secretary has been with me for 21 years and the people who work for me generally stay. They usually leave only if they have been promoted and if this is the case, I encourage them to head for greener pastures even if it means I have lost a valuable worker," she said.

But she was quick to point out that learning tolerance does not mean she is a pushover as a boss. "I do not suffer fools lightly. I reprimand people who need disciplinary action because I do not believe that transferring them solves the problem. When I have a problem with someone, I face it squarely," she said.

A natural question for all women who have made a success of their careers is to ask if they have been faced with obstacles in their climb to the top. "I don't think the area of professional competence is a gender issue. The problem surfaces when there is an opening for a job. While it may not always be gender-related, there are some small minds that cannot associate positions of power with women," she said.

Despite this, Dr Sharifah Hapsah believes that women have made great strides in the area of professional development. She says that we owe our easier path to our predecessors who paved the way for us. "We must never forget that our mothers fought for us. It is because of them that we have equal pay and the same opportunities as our male colleagues. A lot of people do not know this and see these advances as their birthright. Because of this, they do not see the big picture and progress will stop here," she said.

She added that we must continue to question the status quo. "As John F. Kennedy said in his inaugural address, 'Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country'. This applies to women as well."

Dr Sharifah Hapsah has several role models, among them Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. "I especially admire his vision, single-mindedness and discipline in work," she said.

"The advice I hope to impart to women professionally is that they should not regret the decisions they have made. A lot of people want to work in 'glamorous' jobs and regret the fact that they have chosen one that is far from it. I believe that it is up to you to make your line of work glamorous. I also feel that it is important that you define your own niche and do your best to be good at it," she said.

A mother of two children, aged 24 and 22, she said it was important that women made time for their families. "Communication and understanding must be nurtured. Your children have minds of their own and you cannot make them like you. You must do your best to make them and your spouse happy."

She also believes that women should become active in other areas to develop as well-rounded people. Her involvement in many associations, among them the National Council of Women's Organisations (of which she has been deputy president since 1982) and the National Advisory Council for the Integration of Women in Development, has been beneficial to her own personal development.

"I first became involved in a very small way but through the years I

have learnt that even the smallest contributions mean a lot. You may never realise your full potential if you never make an attempt to contribute to different causes.

"You also stand to gain a repertoire of skills that you may never have learnt if you had stayed away. I see involvement in groups like this as a win-win situation," she said, describing her involvement with NCWO as exhilarating.

However, she said that while one must do one's best to excel in life, one should always do it in the best possible way. "Always have faith in God and do good to people. That is my philosophy in life."

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