



THE HEADLESS CHICKEN

AND THE SPARK

A journey of learning and
growing on the run

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CCA FATIMA
A. MARIA

ANGELINA
GURUNATHAN

AEDREENA
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ALVIN
UNG

and all the wonderful 'MITI Sparks' who made this book possible



THE HEADLESS CHICKEN AND THE SPARK

The strategic goal of MITI's Human Resource Management Division (Human Capital Development Unit) is to grow MITI people into future leaders. The HR staff played a key part in the support, writing and publication of this book.





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**A journey of learning
and growing on the run**

REBECCA FATIMA STA. MARIA
ANGELINA GURUNATHAN
AEDREENA REEZA ALWI
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MINISTRY

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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ISTRY



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

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A U T H O R S

REBECCA FATIMA STA. MARIA, Ph.D., is the Secretary General of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). She began her career in the Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service in 1981 and served in various capacities in the then Ministry of Trade and Industry. She had a brief stint as the Chief Administration and Procurement Officer of the ASEAN Plant Quarantine and Training Centre, and contributed to human capital development at the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN). On the regional front, she chairs the ASEAN High Level Task Force for Economic Integration. She also serves on several Boards including: MyKasih, an NGO that focuses on alleviating urban poverty; the Emmaus Counselling Centre; and the Asian Women's Leadership University.







ANGELINA GURUNATHAN is Principal Assistant Director at MITI. She joined MITI in January 2005 and has served in the Sectoral Policy and Strategic Planning Divisions. Her present work on international trade security at the Strategic Trade Secretariat both challenges and excites her. She values the knowledge gained from her BSc (UM) and MSc (USM) in microbiology, but she is also glad that she now works in unsterile environments. Angelina benchmarks herself against her mother who served with exceptional dedication and unwavering integrity as a teacher.

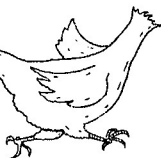
AEDREENA REEZA ALWI is Senior Principal Assistant Director at MITI. She joined MITI in 2009 after completing her Masters programme at the Berlin School of Economics & Law, Berlin, Germany. Prior to that, she was attached to the International Section of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industries. Her experiences include representing both Ministries in trade agreement negotiating teams and more recently, as the Secretariat to the Special Task Force to Facilitate Business (PEMUDAH). She enjoys reading, and spending time with her family at Malaysia's beautiful islands and beaches.

ALVIN UNG is an author, facilitator and student of leadership who helps people embrace their calling. He is a Fellow at Khazanah Nasional. His insights have been published in the bestselling *Barefoot Leadership* and *Taking Your Soul to Work*, as well as in *The Star*, *The Edge*, *BBC* and *CNN*. He has delivered keynote addresses, and coached senior executives from multinationals, government ministries and religious groups in three continents. He serves on the faculty of Eagles Communications in Singapore. He was an accidental founder of two social enterprises that spur leadership and literacy among the rural poor, and was conferred the Walter C. Wright Leadership Award by Regent College for mentoring community leaders. Alvin co-created and facilitated the Barefoot Leadership Circles (BLC) at MITI.



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T H A N K Y O U

*"I must do something" always solves more problems than
"Something must be done."*

Anonymous

The Headless Chicken. The Spark.

These two metaphors, which make up the book's title, seem unrelated. But they make sense when we tell you the MITI story.

At MITI, we sometimes find ourselves going from crisis to crisis, fighting fire after fire that flare up from external pressures and organisational challenges. Caught in the flurry of activity, we move from deadline to deadline with little time to stop; we do not question whether there is a more effective way to get things done, to improve, and to focus on the more important aspects of strategy and policy. In this state of flux, exacerbated by a sense of helplessness, it's easy for relationships to fray at the seams.

That was where we found ourselves in 2011: we felt like headless chickens. And we told ourselves that this situation could not – must not – continue. We were looking for that spark.

We needed a creative spark to make meaning of what we were doing. This spark would bring back the fire in our bellies. Give us renewed energy. Rebuild the frayed bonds. And above all, help each of us rekindle meaning and purpose in our work. Our desire resonates with the words of Jim Collins, author of the bestseller,

Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't:
“It is impossible to have a great life unless it is a meaningful life. And it is very difficult to have a meaningful life without meaningful work.”

As we share with you our MITI story, we hope you'll see how we are learning and growing ... on the run. We are each moving from being headless chickens to becoming sparks of change – right here, right now.

And I'm convinced that our discoveries are worth sharing in this book. It captures our learning journey as we try to confront our limitations, and make meaning of our work. This is a narration of our learning through false starts, hits and misses. This is also the story of people's willingness to commit for the greater good of the organisation. As Peter Senge puts it: “You cannot force commitment. What you can do is ... you nudge a little here, inspire a little there, and provide a role model. Your primary influence is the environment you create.”

This book is our collective labour of love. It became a reality thanks to the untiring work of a number of folks who I want to acknowledge:

- My co-authors, Angelina, Aedreena and Alvin (the 3A's), wrote and rewrote countless drafts as they juggled numerous competing demands;
- Zainal supported us with cheer through the whole process;
- Wan Suraya gave the book a rigorous read-through;
- The MITIans who were part of the “thermometer committee” took the time to provide feedback and comments;
- Kevin Thomas, the graphic designer, gave lots of creative input and livened the book with illustrations;
- Huey Fern managed the book project team from conception to layout, and also proofread the manuscript.

THANK YOU

Each of you invested many hours to get this done. For that I am grateful.

I must also thank the members of our Barefoot Leadership Circles (BLC 1.0 and 2.0) who provided the sparks we needed on our journey to build bonds and create a better MITI. These individuals got the fire started by generously sharing their stories, their trials and their crucibles. They shared their stories so others may learn from them.

And a big thank you to all the MITians who enriched this book with their thoughts, tips and memories of how they have served, thrived and grew as vital members of this organisation.

I can't thank you all enough!

Rebecca Fatima Sta. Maria

Secretary General, MITI



I N T R O D U C T I O N

“Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value.”

Albert Einstein

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

One January afternoon in 2012, Rebecca Fatima Sta. Maria walked briskly into a large hall and sat down at a round table. There were 10 people already there, looking decidedly nervous, self-conscious or perhaps even full of anticipation.

Without any preamble, the Secretary General of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), kicked off the unusual book discussion held on the 16th floor of MITI’s HQ off Jalan Duta. “From reading this book, who are the leaders who have inspired you?” she asked.

There was an awkward pause. Her question prompted half the people on the table to thumb through their personal copies of *Bare-foot Leadership*, as if they were looking through the book for the first time. Seated in the outer circle were at least 100 other MITI staff – looking on with curiosity at the 10 people at the table. Rebecca resembled a lecturer conducting a seminar in English Literature.

Finally a middle manager broke the silence.

“I was struck by Tan Sri Dr. Jemilah Mahmood, the founder of MERCY Malaysia. I was inspired by her courage. She rallied doctors in Malaysia to build a global humanitarian agency. Her medical team was attacked by gunfire in Iraq. She took care of her colleague for several days even though a bullet was lodged in her hip. But most of all, I admired how she had the courage to step down – and relinquish control of the organisation that she founded,” the manager said.

The manager’s comments freed up other people to share about other inspiring stories from the book. They talked about how a village boy in the highlands of Sarawak rose the ranks to eventually rescue an ailing airline. They highlighted a homemaker who founded an award-winning school for impoverished children. They marveled at how an entrepreneur trained indigenous staff in the heart of Borneo to read English as he developed one of the world’s best eco-lodges.

Rebecca then guided the discussion to focus on the 10 principles of *Barefoot Leadership*. “Which leadership principles do you think are particularly relevant for MITians?” she asked. “Courage,” responded someone. “Embrace your calling,” suggested another. The book discussion eventually became a free-flow conversation on leadership.

Soon it was time for lunch. Alvin Ung, the author, who had been invited to observe the proceedings, was asked to respond briefly to what he heard.

“Barefoot Leaders are ordinary people who can achieve extraordinary results with surprisingly few resources. Such leaders are able to persuade and motivate their peers – without use of formal authority or power – to go that extra mile with them. Anyone of us can do it,” he said. With that, Rebecca thanked everyone for coming. That marked the end of the knowledge-sharing session.

But unknown to everyone, something new was just beginning.

As Rebecca led the book discussion on *Barefoot Leadership*, the seed of a big idea was sprouting in her mind. In recent months, she had been reflecting on a leadership vacuum facing MITI. By 2017, most of MITI's senior officers would be retiring en masse. This was a matter of great concern for her. As people left the hall, Rebecca pulled Alvin aside. "It would be irresponsible for any leader to leave the organisation without preparing a smooth transition for the next echelon of leadership to take over," she said.

"What's your strategy for growing leaders at MITI?" Alvin asked.

"I want MITI's managers to think and act like the Barefoot Leaders. Can you help me do that?" she asked.

That question caught Alvin off-guard. It would be audacious, to say the least, to help people behave like Barefoot Leaders. In his book, they were described as courageous and humble people who knew how to let go of control and embrace their calling. Barefoot Leaders persisted in honing their expertise and effectiveness. They behaved like social entrepreneurs. Above all, Barefoot Leaders treated people with extraordinary respect, regardless of rank, religion or race. These leaders emerged in times of pressure, uncertainty, and even material and spiritual poverty. They were strong and sometimes stubborn when faced with opposition; yet they were honest and compassionate. Would it be possible to grow such Barefoot Leaders within a government ministry? The task seemed daunting.

Alvin needed to understand what Rebecca's request entailed. He asked: "What are your biggest leadership challenges? And why do you think the principles of Barefoot Leadership can help make a difference?"

Rebecca immediately reeled off four main challenges facing her and her managers. It was obvious she had been thinking about it for a long, long time.

- **Challenge #1: Top-down leadership.** Because of their busyness, supervisors at MITI usually issued commands like *“Go do it lah.”* They could be skilled, experienced and honest people but many did not give clear instructions or carve out time to coach their staff. A study by an external consultant revealed that MITI posted low scores for mentoring, Rebecca said. As a result, that created ...
- **Challenge #2: Culture of compliance.** In response to the top-down style of leadership, the subordinates ended up saying *“Ya ... OK lah.”* They could be thoughtful people with creative ideas for doing things differently. But because these supervisors expected them to follow orders, the default mode was to carry out instructions without finding ways to add value or raise concerns. Unfortunately saying *“Yes”* in a compliant manner led to ...
- **Challenge #3: Perpetual busyness.** Because nearly everyone at MITI found it difficult to say *“No”* to top-down requests, they felt pulled apart by competing demands, ad hoc requests and last-minute instructions. Ironically it was the dedicated and conscientious staff who struggled the most. They would often run around feeling like *“headless chickens.”* It was hard to focus on strategic priorities. Not surprisingly, that resulted in ...
- **Challenge #4: Negative mindset.** With so many good people feeling overwhelmed, one way of coping with stress was to think to themselves, *“No ... cannot be done.”* Rather than explore possible wins, their gut instinct was to focus on problems and past precedents of failure. The lack of proactive responses would inevitably frustrate supervisors who might just tell the staff to *“Go do it lah”* (see challenge #1 again). And this would trigger off another downward spiral.

As Alvin glanced at his scribbled notes, it was evident that the four core challenges were not endemic to MITI. He had interviewed numerous CEOs and staff in public and private companies throughout Malaysia. These were universal challenges faced by many people in most companies, he told Rebecca.

Rebecca added: “If you had to sum up all our challenges, we feel like headless chickens. We really need time to reflect, learn and change. We’re looking for that spark of inspiration.”

Alvin was disarmed by Rebecca’s candor and courage. Instead of living in self-deception or pretending everything was okay, she chose to speak plainly. And she had also set the direction for the way forward. The goal of growing leaders at MITI was to create sparks of change – no matter how small – that would lead to bigger change. The changes had to be tangible, and felt by others at MITI. The journey would be daunting. But it would be exciting as well.

“I’d love to help,” Alvin said.

That 10-minute exchange marked the beginning of a long-term leadership experiment at MITI. Together with Zainal Shahrir Ahmad, the training manager, Alvin and Rebecca began designing a leadership development programme.

We (Alvin and Rebecca) immediately knew what we did not want. We did not want a leadership programme that has nothing to do with MITI’s real work. For example, in a team building programme, you can hike up a mountain or paddle on boats. But these activities have nothing to do with MITI’s vision to become the preferred investment destination and among the most globally competitive trading nations by 2020. Our leadership programme needed to contribute, directly and indirectly, to MITI’s core business. We also did not want leadership theories taught in a classroom. We did not want the typical motivational, feel-good talks that could not be translated into the daily challenges of work.

Knowing what we did not want gave us greater clarity on what we really wanted. We wanted to integrate leadership development

into the work itself. We wanted to build bonds among capable managers so that they would design on-the-job projects that tackled big challenges at MITI. Over a series of meetings in Rebecca's office, the both of us, together with Zainal, developed guidelines for MITI's inaugural leadership development programme for senior managers. The programme would be:

- *A marathon, not a sprint.* Unlike other single-event workshops, growing leaders has to be a journey because deep changes take time. Participants have to come together to connect with each other regularly, several times a month, for one year.
- *Held in the HQ, not in the highlands.* Unlike most workshops that are conducted in beautiful locations on the mountains or by the sea, we felt that the 'no-frills' sessions should be located at the HQ of MITI. Here, we do real work.
- *Voluntary, not compulsory.* The journey had no 'stick' tied to it. There were no KPIs or certification or promotion opportunities for people who 'graduated' from the programme. Participants had to volunteer to tackle ambitious projects that did not benefit them personally.
- *Create a rhythm of action and reflection.* The group projects required participants to identify and execute on real initiatives that would make a difference at MITI. They have to take action. They also have to learn how to reflect. The process of action and reflection was critical for growing leaders with emotional strength and learning agility.

And so we designed a one-year leadership journey called Barefoot Leadership Circles (BLC). Over the next two years, we witnessed and experienced the following at BLC:

- Intense and heartfelt conversations
- Struggles, failures and conflict

- Friendships
- Personal and team breakthroughs
- Personal loss and setbacks, and
- Small and big wins that went beyond our wildest expectations.

This book, *The Headless Chicken and The Spark*, is our attempt to share with you the experiences, turning points and lessons we learnt on this ever-unfolding journey.

WHY READ THIS BOOK

Besides sharing the lessons learnt from the BLC journey, there are many more reasons why this book is special.

- It captures the stories, lessons, aspirations and voices of nearly 100 people at MITI. Inside this book, you will find quotes from secretaries, junior officers and senior managers. We believe that everyone at any level in the organisation has the potential to make a difference.
- While MITI is focused on strengthening trade and growing industry, you will see that there are other things that MITI officers are passionate about, such as climbing mountains, or tending a small herb garden, or starting an ambitious project to beautify a flyover, or pioneering a new way to help people work flexibly at MITI, or creating an inclusive workplace for people with physical disabilities.
- Our book is not a typical leadership book written by wise old people reminiscing about the past. It is about the present, and how we can impact the future when we do small things with great love. The journey of learning and growing is unpredictable. So we have written about the real stuff – including the failures and struggles we experienced.

- Above all, this book shares the inside story about what happens in MITI when a small group of people decide to connect with one another and experiment with new ways of working together for the greater good of the organisation.

Four people wrote this book: a Secretary General (Rebecca), two middle managers (Angelina and Aedreena) and a leadership facilitator (Alvin). We did the heavy lifting together. We are a mix of male and female who represent the racial diversity of Malaysia. We are both insiders and outsiders working across hierarchical ranks and organisational boundaries. Because we all think so differently, we have learnt a great deal from one another. None of us could have written this book by ourselves. And that's the beauty of it: we all need one another.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

You can read this book in three ways:

- *Cover to cover.* You will first learn about the four core challenges and how that impacts the way we lead ourselves, and lead our teams. Then you will discover the eight strategies that you can use to address these challenges.
- *Random.* If you are too busy, just flip to any chapter that grabs your attention. Each chapter can be read by itself. Every chapter contains stories, tips and ideas to help you work more effectively by yourself and with others.
- *Together.* Most of all, we want you to read this book together with your colleagues. If you are a supervisor, read this book with your team. If you are a subordinate, you can read it with your friends (from other divisions) or suggest that everyone in the division read this book together. If you decide to do this, do meet regularly to discuss what you are learning. Put into practice any tips or strategies you find useful. That is the most effective way to start growing as a leader.

Every organisation needs starters. We hope you can be one too. There are many ways you can see yourself as a starter. You can be a self-starter to address any challenges that you see. You can start something new.

Or maybe you have never seen yourself as a leader before; so we invite you to be a 'starter.' A starter is like a beginner. On the journey of leadership, we are all beginners. As we seek to make a difference in the lives of others, we will inevitably make mistakes, and that offers us the opportunity to start anew.

We can all be starters.

For centuries, traditional bread-makers started the leavening process with a small batch of yeast and flour. That small batch, called a 'starter,' is then added to a much larger amount of flour to continue the leavening process. Over time, the dough would continue to improve before the bread is good to go into the oven.

"The BLC is like that starter for the dough," said Rebecca, as she reflected on the leadership at MITI.

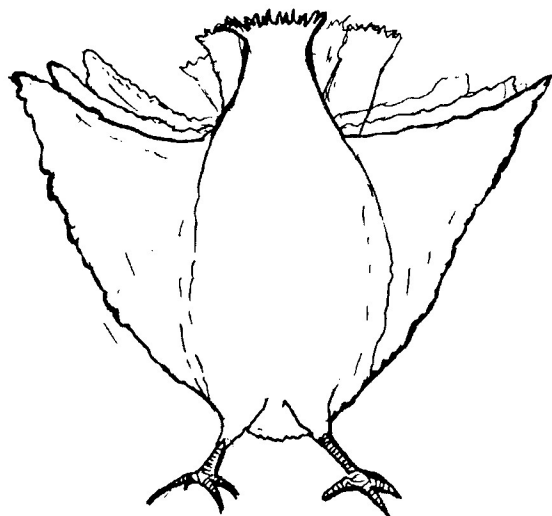
"We began the journey of change by inviting a small group of people to meet once every fortnight to share their lives, personal vision and aspirations for MITI. Our conversations quickly resulted in us coming together to brainstorm and plan activities that would help make MITI a better place to work. We talked honestly about the challenges we faced. But our ultimate aim, always, was to find solutions and strategies to improve the organisation."

This book seeks to capture the stories and lessons that we are still learning on the journey.

"Start embracing the life that is calling you. Find your calling — know what sparks the light in you so that you, in your own way, can illuminate the world."

Oprah Winfrey

Help.
I've lost my head!



Hmm....
You've got a
problem there.



4

CHALLENGES

Go Do It Lah

No ... Cannot Be Done

Headless Chicken

Ya ... OK Lah

Are you becoming like a ...



HEADLESS CHICKEN

You are busy running around and getting things done. Yet you feel like you're doing the same old things the same old way. No time to think. No time to stop. No time to really connect with people. No time to read this book....

Or are you becoming like a ...



BRIGHT SPARK

You wake up each day energised to do the things that matter the most to you and your organisation. You feel grateful to be where you are today. And you believe you can learn something from this book that will help you ignite energy in others....

In this book we share how it's possible for anyone to move from being a headless chicken to become a creative spark.

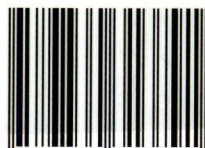
Here are the stories of ordinary people at MITI who go beyond their job description to walk together as "barefoot" leaders:

- Build bonds of trust and friendship with one another
- Act together to address challenges at MITI
- Reflect on their actions in order to lead more effectively
- Engage and mobilise others to go that extra mile.

Sometimes we cannot help feeling like headless chickens. But we can become that creative spark by learning and growing on the run.

Who do you want to become today?

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