
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Non-Profit Organization's Fight against Discrimination of AIDS Inflicted Families

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ABSTRACT

Chi Heng Foundation (CHF) is a Hong Kong-based Non-profit Organization (NPO) founded by To Chung, a graduate of Columbia University and Harvard University who quit a Wall Street investment bank career and dedicated himself full-time to sponsoring education opportunities to "left-behind children" who were faced with social stigmatization. In the mid-1990s, in rural China, parents of these children sold their own blood; as a result, they contracted HIV, died, and left many orphans, some of whom also contracted the virus. In an effort to raise money to help save them, Chung founded the Chi Heng Foundation in Hong Kong in 1998. In 2005, Chung asked Bill Clinton for help, and the Clinton Foundation gave 200 sets of highly specialized antiretroviral medication to the Chinese government, which specially allocated 86 sets to him. However, Chung eventually realized that saving lives and changing misconceptions about people living with HIV were not enough. In his quest to continue to thrive, aside from devoting most of his personal funds to helping those in need, Chung oversaw a transition process that lasted for two decades. The outcome was that the beneficiaries emerged from the shadows of being discriminated against, regained confidence and self-esteem, and reciprocated the charity by acting as role models for their younger peers. Chung, the "responsible leader", nurtures like-minded youngsters to pass down the baton.

KEYWORDS

Non-profit organizations, discrimination, traumatic change, responsible leadership.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the leadership role played by non-profit organizations (NPO) in terms of public influence (Russell and Padfield, 2023). Ospina and Foldy (2010), Perkins et al. (2007) and Schein (2017), who have extensively re-viewed many case studies in psychology for change and leadership, pointed out that future research must establish efficient "intervention methods to help non-profits create new structures, processes, and cultures for the learning, development, and empowerment of members and clients, or the organization as a whole, and of the community it serves" (Perkins et al., 2007). This article focuses on NPO founder-chairman To Chung's intervention in creating new structures to foster a culture of nurture and empowerment of baton carriers.

According to Lim et al. (2022) and Saks (2023), only a few researches have been conducted on leadership in non-profit settings, particularly on those key persons who lead change in philanthropic organizations with a global impact and vision (Lee, 2023; Lim et al., 2022; Saks, 2023). The attention paid to the personality, character and personal experience of the non-profit figurehead or leader is still insufficient.

Detailed case reports of value-based leadership in non-profit organizations are currently attracting a great deal of attention from business historians like Jones (2023). It is argued that his approach to examining how the leadership of non-profit organizations facilitates collective action and influences social change will fill gaps in the existing literature. Therefore, this paper uses a case

study approach to present to the readers the history and milestones of the charity foundation in question. For the NPO Chi Heng Foundation (CHF), leadership development will be considered the major tool used by its founder and chairman, To Chung, who is pivotal in shaping its vision and sustaining its momentum for upbeat change while delivering impact for the populations in the communities it serves. This article will concentrate on analyzing the vision held by To Chung as well as personal change processes that have taken place over the last two decades as a result of the chairman consistently revisiting his personal calling and CHF continually expanding its programs and its aids to the needy.

2. Chi Heng Foundation (CHF)

To begin with, this section presents the background and history of the Hong Kong NPO Chi Heng Foundation, the life experiences of its Chairman, Mr To Chung and how he came up with the idea of helping victims and orphans of HIV infected blood sellers and fighting discrimination in remote parts of China.

To Chung was born in Hong Kong, and at the age of 14, he moved to the United States and completed his high school education there. Thereafter, Chung relocated to New York and graduated from Columbia University with a bachelor's degree. His career as an investment banker in corporate finance then began at the Lehman Brothers New York headquarters after he graduated from Harvard University with a master's degree in East Asian Regional Studies. Subsequently, he joined the corporate finance/M&A division of UBS New York in 1993. He became a vice president of a French bank at the age of twenty-nine. At that time, his firm had several private jets which he could use for routine and business trips. Chung bought his New York condo apartment during his first year on the job, and whether it was on business trips to the airport or commuting between work and home, a luxurious chauffeured limousine was always waiting for him. He recalled that at that time, he and the people around him on Wall Street saw such a shower of perks and benefits as a hallmark of personal success. According to Chung's 2018 TED talk, he and his peers saw themselves as "gifted" and "exceptionally privileged" individuals back in the late 1990s because they had access to a wealth of opportunities to make "a lot of money for their clients and for themselves by relying on their own intellect and shrewdness, human skills and financial knowledge, business acumen and personal insights." All these things seemed undisputed and "just so natural". After living in the United States for thirteen years, Chung was transferred by his firm to Hong Kong, partly because he was an indigenous Chinese. Whilst he would never guess what the future holds for him, we know in hindsight that To Chung's homecoming to Hong Kong shall change his life forever.

The thirteen years he lived in the U.S. corresponded to the stages that American society underwent, from the beginning of the AIDS epidemic to its peak in terms of the number of cases. Chung saw numerous individuals struggle with stress, anxiety, and fear as a result of a lack of understanding of this illness. The social stigmatization that infected individuals experienced in their communities was particularly unjust, and this can be attributed to the dearth of knowledge about AIDS at that early stage of the disease's history. Chung's closest encounter with AIDS came around the time one of his favourite high school teachers sadly died of the disease. A psychological void as a result of that loss left an indelible imprint in his mind. This personal experience ignited his subsequent attention to the cure of HIV-positive patients as well as his eventual, life-long personal dedication to the aims of educating the public about anti-discrimination, fighting against social stigma, and helping those people who were affected to come out of the shadows of self-doubt, guilt, and psychological suffering in order to regain dignity and to carry on living.

Whilst residing in Hong Kong, Chung worked with numerous banking institutions on structured finance projects involved in sourcing capital funding to build express highways and construct power plants in China. To carry out long-term financing and feasibility studies, he often had to travel to remote parts of China, such as Guizhu, Hunan, Hubei and Shandong, where he and his colleagues conducted research on channels and options for financing these infrastructural projects for bank clients. Following a purely accidental interaction between Chung and two strangers in the late 1990s, the charity Chi Heng Foundation's founding concept was conceived. Chung and his colleagues, who happened to be on a business trip to Beijing, came across a father and son trying to seek medical treatment at a local hospital. Chung discovered that the two came from a remote Chinese village, and they were both infected with AIDS as a result of their exposure to un-hygienic and widespread blood-selling practices in many impoverished villages in rural China at that time. Speaking to them at length, Chung was shocked to learn from them that blood selling was common for those extremely poor and utterly deprived village folks to try to obtain some money to subsidize their meager livelihood. Due to unhygienic and malpractice, such as the reuse of needles in obtaining blood at illegal "blood stations" in many villages, a lot of the "sellers" were infected with HIV AIDS.

Since the visit to Beijing, this revelation has put Chung into deep thought, trying to find answers to unfathomable questions about human suffering. Chung was very motivated to understand the problems more deeply and look for ways to help people and fundamentally solve all related problems. He travelled to numerous so-called AIDS villages in the province of Henan with four other like-minded men in order to have a better understanding of the true circumstances. He paid home visits to those households in the villages. For example, in one household, he met a grandmother with two infected orphans whose parents died of AIDS already. The very old woman sitting on her sofa and with her eyes staring emptily at a non-existent point in front of her told Chung:

“...when these two little ones are gone, perhaps then it will be about time that I should leave too”. He met a mother sitting on her bed sobbing helplessly. On the floor next to her bedside were lain several gunny sack bags, and lying on top of those bags was her half naked, withered and dying young son whose body frame was already reduced by the disease into a sheer skeletal frame.

Many adults who were infected eventually died due to lack of medical attention and treatment, and Chung saw tombs after tombs in those villages visited. Some of the off-spring were infected by their parents, and some others were HIV-free. Besides hunger and poverty, the daily lives of orphans were adversely affected as a result of discrimination by fellow village folks who unwittingly held misconceptions about the unknown disease which could sap out one’s life so quickly. The social stigma of AIDS among Chinese villagers was associated with taboos, omens and even curses of invisible evil forces which befell their victims. The personal tragedies which happened to these so-called “left-behind children” whose parents died of AIDS were enshrouded in animosity, hostility, segregation and desertion from other fellow human beings. In some of the worst scenarios, they were considered as ominous creatures and even treated as evil reincarnations. Alongside the negative effect of discrimination, the pejorative term “left behind children” begot biases, injustice and inequality within these closed communities. Social and psychological problems were numerous. Some of the orphans suffered from traumas and aftermaths of bullying at school and even abandonment by close relatives.

What Chung felt was a deep sense of profound sadness and immense helplessness. He considered that there was something he could do to help these poor people, and a sense of purpose and responsibility began to take root in his mind. They eventually became the vision of the Chi Heng Foundation, which was established about a year after his visits. Firstly, Chung was very concerned about the psychological health of these children. Victims of discrimination often underwent self-denial and the self-punishing ordeal of ostracism. Secondly, hatred was another sentiment among the youngsters. Chung learned that vengeance against the figureheads of illegal blood stations is one way that resentment can be aimed at other people. The amount of visible harm and hidden injuries was so huge as to create suffocating agony and impenetrable despair among everyone involved.

Another crucial turning point in his journeys was an infected mother he encountered in one of the homes he visited. The woman, who was approaching death, pleaded with Chung inconsolably to save her son, but the youngster was also on the verge of passing away from an infection. According to Chung, he began to wonder what he could do for this woman who was facing such a dire and hopeless situation. By the time Chung returned to see the unfortunate mother again, he had already made an important decision. Chung made a solemn promise to do everything possible to take care of the surviving young daughter by sponsoring her to school, ensuring that she receives an education, thrives and then changes her own destiny. He and his supporters began helping as many people as they could, and Chung invested his own time and funds to carry out philanthropic projects with those around him on a part-time basis.

After a while, Chung realized that their efforts alone would not be sufficient to overcome the obstacles and difficulties that would arise during actual operations. In several places, when he offered to help, he was rejected. Heads of villages tailed him, and police officers detained and questioned him because they could not imagine someone would carry on these altruistic and self-punishing acts out of mere selfless motive! In his own words, all this charitable help given to the orphans so far could not wait, and much more assistance had to be provided quickly. The man-made obstacles and the humanitarian crises he saw all turned into solid grounds and rationale for Chung to devote himself whole-heartedly to this noble cause. Another significant turning point was when, after much soul-searching, he finally saw his true calling as a “values-driven change agent” and agreed to take on the “deep responsibility” of helping all of these individuals at once (Jones, 2023; Lee, 2023). He decided to put his investment bank ambitions on hold. In 1998, Chung established Chi Heng Foundation, a registered charity in Hong Kong with like-minded fellow founders. At this juncture, Chung finally decided to relinquish his attractive career entirely and dedicated his mind and energy completely to helping the AIDS impacted orphans.

Despite challenges in managing changes over two decades, Chung’s relentless purpose suffices to keep his team’s spirit up where it belongs, and he remains Chairman to date. Currently, Chi Heng finances the education and care of 9,000 children in eight Chinese provinces whose parents have died from or are dying of AIDS. The NPO has offices in Toronto, Taipei, and Singapore. It completed registration in 2017 and opened a representative office in the province of Henan to serve regions of the country, including Yunnan, Guangxi, Anhui, and Shandong. CHF focuses on supporting AIDS-impacted children and has also extended its service to other students who have endured poverty, sickness in the family, or discrimination. Its mission is “to create a harmonious, equal and healthy society through projects to provide education sponsorship and promote AIDS prevention, care and anti-discrimination”. Considered by many to be a best-practice NPO model of its kind, the programs run by CHF are considered the largest non-governmental effort in China focused on helping young people directly and indirectly affected by AIDS.

3. Discussion

The literature on non-profit leaders by Counts (2019), Jones (2023), Lee (2023), Maurrasse (2020), and Schein (2017) noted that frequently, the leaders or founders themselves had encountered unusual or special life-changing "challenging," or "disorienting" experiences when they were young or at different stages of their careers. These encounters and experiences shape their personal worldview and sometimes produce so-called "epiphanies" with spiritual overtones. The outcome can be depicted or characterized as a "re-vision" of one's own responsibility, meanings and purpose in life. The psychic momentum of an internal psychological redirection in personal purpose pivots at a turning point and triggers the leader to embrace change. As we see in the result, which ties closely to Chung's deep purpose and calling, our change leader here chose to abandon an admirable Wall Street lifestyle and made a dramatic decision to change lanes to devote himself to a noble cause.

Chung's visits to AIDS villages in Henan Province and his testimony of the dying mother and son were so vivid that he could not sleep well and almost became depressed. This intense sore point was initially embedded in his psyche as a defense mechanism. Chung experienced shock when he met the father and son in a Beijing hospital. Here followed his experience of the emotions of denial, frustration, and depression. He reflected that he had been living in a comfortable environment with a stable job working with high-flying elites and wealthy clients on Wall Street. Chung believed that both he and the poor peasants had been working very hard all their lives to make a living. He found it hard to believe and accept the latter's predicament merely because they lived in a different country and lived a life impacted by misfortune. Chung's next stage of coping with change was inner soul-searching, which eventually led to a reconciliation with reality, and he tried to engage with the new situation. Chung received a guide to understand his internal conflict, which ranged from doubt to denial to acceptance and integration of change. In accepting and embracing change, Chung became humbler and more positive in his decision to persevere and commit himself to remaining steadfast and socially responsible. Chung was guided by his own inner compass that helped him sharpen "ethical clarity" in providing service and showing love and kindness to the needy. His wholehearted embrace of and integration with change became a pillar and principal tenet of "mission leadership" (Howieson, 2023). The unpleasant experiences of To Chung have helped him develop a sincere motivation for the benefit of others.

Chung and his co-founders first concentrated on raising funds by asking for donations, which they used to pursue two simultaneous goals: saving lives and eliminating discrimination. CHF emphasized that one of its main goals is to ensure the psychological well-being of those affected by social stigma through its service. In villages that were closed communities, young orphans and children from AIDS afflicted families endured discrimination or bullying at school. An example was Kam, who became infected with HIV in 2000, and his mother died of AIDS in 2002. He had shingles at the time and was in critical condition. People in his immediate vicinity showed severe discrimination and called him a "toad". Kam had once made his dying wish to CHF as he could barely stand the pain from the illness and the discrimination: a tractor for his father to earn a living after he died. Although Kam received financial support from CHF, he continued his studies intermittently due to poor health. He eventually had to give up his studies due to poor performance, but he learned to operate excavators with the help of CHF. After he acquired the skills and experience, Kam began running his own business, got married and raised a family with two children with his wife, whom he met at an event organized by CHF. By adopting measures to avoid mother-to-child HIV transmission, their children were not HIV positive.

The CHF team had learned from similar cases of stigmatization at an early age that it was crucial to maintain the continued delivery of recognized professional techniques to ameliorate hidden injuries in a reliable yet scalable manner. Chung emphasized the significance of "healing the hearts" of the orphans affected by HIV. Without parental love, orphans experience inferiority complexes and extremely poor self-esteem. This situation was exacerbated for orphans affected by AIDS, as they were often discriminated against even though they were not HIV-positive themselves. They were bullied at school, abandoned by their relatives except for their own grandparents and had to live as an outcast in their own communities, growing up feeling unloved and unwanted. Do we provide them a new home, adopt them as children of surrogate parents, or place them in a special orphanage where they may live in safety and receive education? These were some critical questions faced by CHF in the early years after its inception. Chung had observed perceptively the usefulness of launching psychosocial programs, including art therapy, summer camps, and home visits that could help orphans overcome the childhood trauma of losing their parent(s). The programs, particularly art therapy, were designed to release their inner tension, anxiety, and fear. Expressing oneself with art forms and employing "healing imagination" have been shown to bolster self-esteem and self-confidence, hence enabling the orphans to regain the feeling of being wanted and loved. Another major objective of CHF service was to promote anti-discrimination (Glouberman, 2022). Chi Heng Foundation has held more than 200 seminars on HIV/AIDS education and prevention in its first five years with the goal of disseminating unbiased knowledge about the condition and its prevention. CHF played a crucial role in significantly increasing awareness of AIDS among the Chinese population by organizing exhibitions, launching media campaigns and giving lectures at universities.

As a non-profit organization devoid of hierarchy, CHF initially improvised and experimented with various operational arrangements, organizational setups, and governance structures that were adaptable to beneficiary-centered service. For example,

staff members and case handlers attempted to meet each orphan and review their cases to address their specific situations. Chung and his co-founders believed that by taking the time to get to know each person, they were better able to respond to the orphans' actual needs and unique circumstances. In this way, CHF could tailor the substantive content of the services or financial support to the beneficiaries on a case-by-case basis. During this initial phase, CHF did not want to rely on a fixed template of ser-vice-bundles designed in a one-size-fit-all manner. At the same time, CHF staff and volunteers nevertheless learnt that there was a delicate need to address the expectations of some of the donors. At a relatively early stage of its establishment, CHF had to convince donors that they should reconsider their decision to fund the construction of a special school where orphans might be housed and protected. The organization managed to persuade their benefactors to change their planned approach to using their funds. CHF mobilized other volunteers and empowered stakeholders within indigenous communities to care for HIV impacted children and arrange financial support and appropriate accommodations so that they could attend school normally with other children. The reason was that hoarding them together, even in safe havens, only perpetuated social stigma and could not solve the nagging issue of how to let them return to a life that resembled a sense of normalcy in the long run.

In its seventh year, the co-founders learned from trial and error experience and decided that new changes in directions and emphasis were suitable to meet the purpose and objectives of CHF. At this stage, the organizational changes included the redeployment of very rare and valuable resources, such as specialized AIDS medications and the re-mobilization of manpower, such as medical attention and expertise. This time, it was about Chung asking Bill Clinton directly for help. In the early 2000s, the introduction of antiretroviral treatment to combat HIV infection in the United States began to gain ground. It provided a tremendous deal of hope for the medical communities worldwide, especially for the sick. Given its rarity and costliness, the supply and availability were very limited. Prior to the request by the Chinese government, Chung convinced Bill Clinton about the purpose and the work of CHF, and the Clinton Foundation promised to donate two hundred sets of antiretroviral drugs to the Chinese government for use by children mainly in Henan, Shanxi, and Yunnan provinces. CHF specially received 86 sets out of this batch and used them on 86 HIV-infected children. CHF hired medical professionals to pay regular visits to the HIV-infected children's homes and to monitor special protocols in its administration. Follow-up or monitoring of side effects and on-site staff trained in administering the drugs to patients were critical to the outcome and recovery of those affected.

This episode was an important lesson for CHF. Chung realized that CHF could only save a few proportions of HIV-positive children due to the low antiretroviral medication supply he had at the time. This is in addition to the challenges of meeting the high cost of hiring front line medical professionals or providing training to the surviving parent or care personnel of the HIV-infected children on how to use the equipment and the drug. Although Chi Heng has retained an enviable amount of financial resources and voluntary support from donors, Chung was concerned at that time about the issue of a limited supply of AIDS medications at that stage of the history of the disease. He decided that providing one-time medical help might not be an effective option to help and save HIV-infected children in the long run. A turn around in the CHF mission was needed. According to Lim et al. (2022), all NPOs need to have a specific social mission that defines the *raison d'être* of their existence, and this social mission has to be consistent and continual as a result of succession planning and development of future torch bearers (Lim et al., 2022). In order to fulfill its objective and maintain a clear range of services, CHF realized in 2006 that the time had come to switch from a "custodial model" to a longer-term "leadership development model," which Chung called "Star Fish".

The network created in the "Star Fish" program consists of "big brothers and big sisters" who are fellow-beneficiaries and returnee-mentors of CHF. Chung's intent is to influence the collective minds within the community and mobilize them into a cyclical network of reciprocal self-help known in CHF as "One helps three, three help nine". The Chairman's foresight corresponds to a well-known Chinese proverb by the ancient philosopher Lao Tsu, who thus remarked: "Give a person a fish, and you feed her for a day; teach a person to fish, and you feed her for a lifetime." One of the most well-known examples of "teaching a person to fish" is the tale of Ke, who benefited from a 5-year financial aid. The sponsorship was not to alleviate her household hardship because of an HIV-infected parent but to ensure that she could continue with her studies and graduate with a degree from a university. Since graduation, she has been working very hard in one of the world's top 500 foreign companies. Besides an outstanding career, Ke established her own humanitarian organization in Zhengzhou to further spread the spirit of CHF's "One helps three, three help nine." Another inspirational story is You, who gained admission into a prestigious university in Beijing with exceptional public exam results. He has experience working for Chinese tech companies Baidu and Huawei, and he has a bright future ahead of him. You's father died of AIDS, his mentally ill mother disappeared, and he has a brother who dropped out of school due to poverty and became a prisoner. At some point, you were about to drop out of his studies. However, instead of receiving direct financial aid from CHF, he made a commitment to use their support to obtain high school and tertiary qualifications. With education and not just money to carry on, he thrives in a wonderful second life and is always ready to repay the foundation as one of its forever grateful homecoming volunteers.

In other words, receiving a one-time financial hardship grant from a charity cannot be compared with having someone commit herself to a "self-help" mentality with a moral obligation to complete a proper education. The rationale is that by enabling people to stand up for themselves and take control of their own destinies rather than by saving them from their sorrow, lifelong chances

can be opened up. There are many more examples of children from these AIDS inflicted families in China who received the love and kindness of CHF and To Chung. Dr. Alei, a former student-beneficiary supported by CHF, was at the front line in Wuhan during the Covid-19 lockdown, working day and night in Huoshenshan Hospital to save lives. The selfless tradition of "showing empathy and giving help to the needy" has taken root in the hearts and minds of every CHF or-phan-beneficiary. Therefore, it is likely that the search for candidates will not be particularly difficult as future leaders who are highly educated, professional, and successful young people in their respective disciplines or chosen careers will be among them in an-other ten years. By developing potential leaders under the direct auspices of Chung, the Chairman has a better chance of successfully addressing succession challenges. Given a pool of loyal and capable successor-candidates with the drive, intellect, and a clearly proven motif to reciprocate and carry the CHF baton passed to them, future leader-successors will emerge effortlessly and in a self-sufficient manner for the long term.

4. Conclusion

This article demonstrates how non-profit leaders make a change and nurture custodians to create long-term impact. The likelihood of success of an NPO correlates with the existence of a founder who can use positive incremental changes (Lee, 2023). CHF was founded as an NPO to save the lives of AIDS inflicted orphans and to educate the public about non-discriminatory attitudes towards the disease and the social and psychological problems it has caused. Chi Heng does not stop there; CHF has expanded its services to assist underprivileged children who are in need, not simply HIV-affected or-phans but also a large group of disenfranchised young adults whose right to an education has been denied. They consist of people who have dropped out of school because of their family situation (e.g., parents' death, sickness, disability or imprisonment). Another example is that during the pandemic, offering teaching programs was very challenging for the Chi Heng Foundation. The charity initiatives of CHF have survived the lockdown through digitization. Its volunteer tutors in Hong Kong have been providing online classes to children in mainland China for more than three years during the pandemic. The examples in our case study (see p.2) illustrate how our values-driven change leader is using education as a tool to fight negative discrimination in times of inequality (Jones, 2023; Maurrasse, 2020; Saks, 2023). The limitation of this study would be lacking quantitative data to extend the discussion of NPOs' operation strategies under uncertain conditions. Future research focus can be placed on investigating strategy-oriented factors of NPOs operating under an unstable environment. For foundations, donors, and beneficiaries alike, the new normal is infused with uncertainty and instability due to geopolitical unrest, global financial crisis, and health hazards. Unpredictability in an unstable external environment requires ethical leaders to manage changes outside in a proactive and foresighted manner.

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