

# Empowering Leaders: Transformational Leadership Training in Nepal

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## ABSTRACT

In November 2023, the Psychiatrists' Association of Nepal conducted a leadership course for psychiatrists for the first time in Nepal. Leadership program holds great value among psychiatrists, especially in their early careers, from around the world. Many of the participants who attended it described it as a life-changing experience. We aim to provide a brief narrative and highlight the importance of conducting such courses.

## BACKGROUND

Leadership refers to managerial decision-making. Such decisions must be correct as a leader's decision is expected to protect the team's reputation and follow the goals and objectives.<sup>1, 2</sup> The good leader is the one who can make impactful communication, choosing the correct time for specific actions.<sup>3, 4</sup>

Leadership and professional skills are increasingly recognized as essential competencies for early career psychiatrists (ECPs). This is particularly of importance in low- and middle-income countries, where clinicians are required to assume leadership roles early in their professional lives. Effective leadership contributes to informed decision-making, ethical practice, program development, and the advancement of health services. Despite this growing need, structured leadership training opportunities for psychiatrists remain limited in many

countries. Some courses might be promoted, but these lack contextual relevance, experienced faculty, or evidence of long-term impact.<sup>5, 6</sup>

The course led by Professor Norman Sartorius is highly regarded among psychiatrists.<sup>7, 8</sup> Previous reports from South Africa and India have highlighted the effectiveness of this course in enhancing leadership competencies, professional communication, and collaborative skills among participants.<sup>9, 10</sup> Professor Sartorius has organized and conducted numerous educational activities addressing the educational needs of psychiatrists in different parts of the world. By far the most popular one is the Course on Leadership and Professional Skills for Early Career Psychiatrists.

The Leadership Project was initiated in 1994 by Professor Sartorius. Since then The Association for the Improvement of Mental Health Programs, Geneva (AIMHP) presided by Professor Sartorius have enrolled more than 3000 young psychiatrists in around 200 courses in the past 20 years throughout the world.<sup>7</sup> The course also provides an opportunity to gain inspiration from other outstanding professionals involved as co-leaders, such as Professors David Goldberg, Graham Thornicroft, Mohan Isaac, and Hanfried Helmchen.

During the course, Professor Sartorius transmits much

more than leadership skills. He successfully displays that young psychiatrists can work together, regardless of their background and differences, by creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and co-operation. As a result, a series of valuable international and national research projects have emerged. Because of his unique style of teaching, most of the participants who have taken part in this course describe their experience as once in a lifetime opportunity to scale up professional development, be it in clinical practice, academics or research.<sup>9, 10</sup>

### Description of Nepal course

The Leadership and Professional Skills Training Course was conducted in Kathmandu, Nepal, from 4–6 November 2023. The course was co-organized by the Association for the Improvement of Mental Health Programmes (ACTION), the SAARC Psychiatric Federation (SPF), the Psychiatrists' Association of Nepal (PAN), and the Department of Psychiatry, Institute of Medicine, Tribhuvan University. The course preceded the 14<sup>th</sup> SAARC International Psychiatric Conference held from 7–8 November 2023. The course was directed by Professor Sartorius, along with Professor Mohan Isaac from University of Western Australia. Having attended the course, we decided to write a brief narrative to describe our experience and the impact this course had.

## METHODS

### Participant Selection and Eligibility-

The application opened in September 2023, and Early Career Psychiatrists (ECPs) from the South East Asian countries were selected based on their curriculum vitae (CV) and letter of motivation. The applicants were screened by a panel of members of PAN. A total of 35 applicants for the leadership course were received, including from India and Pakistan.

The requirement for enrolment in the course was that the applicants had to possess a strong command of the English language and be in the advanced stages of postgraduate training or have graduated within the last 5 years. The candidate list was then sent to Professor Sartorius who made the final selection after discussion with the faculty members. The total number of shortlisted participants was 16. Among them, 14 participants were from Nepal, followed by one each from India and Pakistan. As per Professor Sartorius, persistence and a genuine passion for the subject might have been the factor to getting selected in the course.<sup>4</sup>

### Course content and Activities

This was a three-day course. The training started at 8:00 am and spanned over long hours till evening. The focus of the program would be on various collaborative activities, role playing and brainstorming. The program aimed to enhance participants' skills in various areas including:

1. Conducting needs assessments.
2. Delivering effective professional presentations both verbally and in writing. Critically assessing resource requirements for research and implementing outcomes in the mental health system.
3. Developing mental health programs.
4. Formulating career pathways and presenting oneself through a Curriculum vitae.
5. Chairing meetings and advancing leadership capabilities.

Other than that other topics that were included were: Points to keep in mind while introducing oneself and others, how to be elected, the elevator test, presenting a proposal, how to prepare an agenda and to chair a session, writing an event report, and professionally dealing with difficult personalities. The participants also had to make a brief (8 minutes) presentation of a subject of their choice and bring along a poster on the same or other topic. This not only helped in understanding the skills better, but the active emotional involvement allowed the participants to remember the intricacies much better.

A major focus of the training was to hone better skills of delivering a talk either using a poster or a PowerPoint presentation. Correct usage of font style, font size, colors, tables and smart arts were shown and various tips were points that were discussed in much details. The poster and an oral presentation on any topic were analysed on different aspects. After each presentation, a feedback was given not only by the faculty, but also the other participants.

On the second day, when the participants got to know that the best poster and presentation would be awarded after careful analysis by the faculty and the participants themselves, the enthusiasm really went high up. Maybe this was one ways developed by the organizing team to keep the participants involved throughout the course duration. Also, answering questions regarding any topic in a professional setting or a news media reporting was taught with numerous examples. This was thought to be an

interesting and useful topic an especially in the current times of social media and digital boom. Techniques as to how to answer them precisely with brevity and not offend anyone were also discussed.

One of the highlights of this training was the task of convincing a mock funding committee to provide a grant for a project worth millions. It was a witty competition between three teams, which allowed the groups to bond with each other, work together and figure out the best approach towards pitching a proposal for grant that was even continued on the third day. The overall mood remained stimulating and lively due to the interactive teaching style.

### Outcomes and Reflections

All participants were granted a certificate of attendance, along with a comprehensive set of materials that were presented throughout the duration of the course. The intensive schedule was perceived as engaging and manageable, not only because of the interesting academic endeavours but also the faculty's engaging teaching style. Overall, participants reported high satisfaction scores (predominantly 4–5/5) across all domains, indicating that the course was effective in enhancing leadership awareness, communication skills, and professional confidence.

By taking part in the course, we strongly feel that one establishes strong links with peers and joins the bigger group of Sartorius's course's alumni from all over the world. Professor Isaac also shared teaching responsibilities across sessions and contributed significantly to group discussions, interactive exercises, and feedback on participant presentations. His extensive experience in academic psychiatry and leadership training enriched the learning environment and complemented the course's core objectives. Participants particularly benefited from his practical insights, balanced perspectives during collaborative activities, which enhanced the overall depth and effectiveness of the training.

Following the course, after discussing with Professor Sartorius, Early Career Psychiatrists' section of PAN was formed for the first time where president and general secretary were chosen by the PAN and executive committee was formed later, comprising of five members from their early professional days after a careful evaluation of their CV and letter of motivation.

## DISCUSSION

The key distinction that made this course stand out among other short educational programs in medicine is its focus on enhancing essential soft skills for leadership, rather than simply building knowledge. Its structure and content were aligned with the framework described by Lane.<sup>8</sup>

As Professor Norman Sartorius aptly states, "Not all those trained will become leaders, but those with leadership potential will be much better equipped to lead and achieve their goals. For those who do not take on leadership roles, the skills they have learned will still be valuable, as they will be better able to assess whom to follow".<sup>11, 12</sup> To advance the fields of psychiatry and medicine, it is crucial to cultivate young professionals with these skills who are motivated to embrace leadership roles. This will better prepare them to address the challenges that come with progress in any field. It is vital for low- and middle-income countries like Nepal to continue organizing such training programs so that not only psychiatrists but other medical professionals can also acquire these skills, ultimately making a meaningful impact on the healthcare system of the country.

## LIMITATIONS

The course did not include an alumni meet that was previously done in other courses. We also missed the level of interaction and collaboration that could have been there if more participants were from other countries. We would have liked to know a bit more on topics like how to choose and approach a mentor, micromanagement skills, breaking bad news, etc.

We also felt that interaction with the faculty was limited. As most of the time span was in the course itself, we got very less time to talk to them about other issues in the course. Yet, most of the doubts were cleared in the course itself and in between break. However, adding another day to the course could have eased the schedule.

## CONCLUSION

The successful implementation of the Leadership and Professional Skills Training Course in Nepal demonstrates the feasibility and value of structured leadership development programs for early career psychiatrists in low- and middle-income countries. Such initiatives can play a crucial role in strengthening professional capacity,

fostering collaboration, and preparing future leaders in mental health. Expansion of similar programs with formal evaluation frameworks is strongly recommended.

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