

## A Matchmaker for Public-Private Partnerships



By **Manuel Sosa** , INSEAD

**Collaborations between dissimilar organisations can benefit from the involvement of neutral third parties.**

Walking the wards of Singapore’s KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital (KKH), you’re sure to notice one room in particular. Its entrance bears a painted legend that reads “The Amazing Room”, beside a large horizontal window depicting an illustrated scene from the world of Winnie the Pooh, complete with a golden pot marked “Hunny”. Inside, a playroom atmosphere prevails, with bean bags, a flat-screen television and a shelf full of children’s books. A few pieces of medical equipment are the sole clue to the room’s more sober-minded purpose as a setting for treatments and therapy. “The Amazing Room” is clearly designed to remind patients on the ward that they are also kids.

The space was created in collaboration with Disney, a brand world-renowned for crystallising childhood. It was part of a wider push towards community outreach in markets where Disney does business, says Seshasaye Kanthamraju, Executive Director – Corporate Communications and Citizenship, Disney Southeast Asia & India. He estimates that over the last ten years, he has managed 75 similar healthcare collaborations throughout Asia. “Wherever children are going into hospital, we want to make it happier, brighter, a distraction for children so they take the medication more easily and, more importantly, they’re not scared of this place called a hospital”, he says. In some cases, sprinkling Disney dust on a hospital has even involved renaming areas so that kids encounter friendly, familiar words like “princess” instead of potentially frightening medical terms.

The setting up of “The Amazing Room” makes an interesting tale in itself. It was when a third party – INSEAD – entered the picture that the Disney/KKH collaboration really took off. In a world where public-private partnerships are playing an increasingly important role, the convergence of these three players may hold valuable lessons – small-scale though it may be, for now.



*"The Amazing Room" at Singapore's KK Women's and Children's Hospital*

## Design as catalyst

For well over a decade, Manuel Sosa, INSEAD Associate Professor of Technology and Operations Management, has taught an elective-course series bringing together INSEAD MBA candidates and visiting students from the [ArtCenter College of Design](#) in Pasadena, California. Students from both schools team up to tackle project-based challenges [posed by real companies](#). In 2015, for example, Disney tasked student teams with developing innovative products for various Southeast Asian markets. At least one of the proposed product concepts struck so strong a chord that Disney expressed interest in buying it. One of Sosa's course assignments for 2016 was to expand the imaginative parameters of Disney's past work with hospitals, with KKH volunteering to participate.

In developed countries such as Singapore, public hospitals are driven to innovate at an even greater rate than their private competitors, according to Associate Professor Tan Thiam Chye, Dr Dirk De Korne and John Wong (whose focus is on care transformation and patient experience in KKH). So they participated in Sosa's course in search of inspiration and new ideas that would help them meet the growing demands of their patient base. Despite mutual enthusiasm and earnest intentions, collaboration between a public hospital and a commercially focused entertainment company was not easy. Indeed, Disney and KKH had been in conversations before the course commenced. However, given the wide spectrum of possibilities in which an entertainment company could contribute to a public hospital (from financial aid to creating new patient experiences), initial conversations were in stand-by mode. Misalignment in protocol resulted in uncertainty on both sides as to how to move forward.

The course assignments ended up being an ideal catalyst for fruitful conversation between Disney and KKH. Though the student proposals were mostly too ambitious to be immediately implemented, they provoked necessary dialogue about how to enhance the KKH patient experience, activating a shared sense of common purpose between Disney and KKH. As Sosa says, "INSEAD changed the protocol of communication into something that was more tangible, something that showed the key inputs both parties could bring to the table."

Eventually, the decision was made to launch a small-scale yet high-impact experiment confined to one of KKH's busiest treatment spaces – which is how

“The Amazing Room” came about.

## **Collaborative lessons**

Sosa says he wasn’t surprised that INSEAD was able to give a boost to the KKH/Disney South Asia alliance. When two dissimilar organisations attempt a partnership, there is a good chance that progress will stall, serious commitment on both sides notwithstanding. That’s when the presence of a neutral third-party broker, such as an academic institution or an NGO, can resolve sticking points for both partners.

Another example of an academic broker is the ArtCenter’s [Designmatters](#) department. Under the departmental aegis, corporate donors fund social innovation projects carried out by ArtCenter students in partnership with NGOs and government bodies. Using design to bridge gaps between disparate stakeholders, the department achieves real-world social impact while fulfilling its own educational mandate. What’s key is that the broker mustn’t be beholden to either partner, according to Sosa. “When you have an impartial third party, there is no hidden agenda. We push a neutral goal forward, like helping and learning. Sometimes, large organisations don’t know how to channel their resources and their willingness. That’s why they should be open to these types of third-party connectors”, he says.

The Disney/KKH collaboration proceeds apace, with the next phase set to debut later this year. As with “The Amazing Room”, part of the goal is to provide a warmer, domestic feel without detracting from therapeutic outcomes. The collaborators envision a concept that reduces physical distance between doctors and patients, mitigates anxiety by distracting the child and helps in creating an ‘ouch-less’ hospital.

Kanthamraju says that for him and his Singapore-based team, the stakes in this partnership are quite personal. “Our guys are not interested in putting a brand name on there. What we care about is our own children and families that are using the hospital. Our own kids go there; why can’t they be in the best places?”

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