

**IPS Corporate Associates Breakfast:
Lessons on Leadership from Mr Lim Siong Guan
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By Zhou Rongchen
IPS Research Assistant

When Mr Lim Siong Guan retired from the Singapore civil service in 2006, friends and associates encouraged him to author a book on public sector leadership. Seven years later, Mr Lim, who served as Head of the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary in several of Singapore's ministries, published *The Leader, The Teacher And You: Leadership Through A Third Generation*.

Speaking at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Corporate Associates Breakfast Dialogue in March, Mr Lim described how he was appointed chairman of the Economic Development Board after retiring from the civil service, and then invited to join GIC Private Limited.

In documenting his ideas on leadership, he therefore wanted to ensure that these principles worked beyond the civil service and could be translated to the private sector. His daughter, Ms Joanne Lim, also helped co-author the book in 2013, "lessening my burden and improving its quality," he said.

Here are some highlights of the session, including a question-and-answer segment:

Dr Goh Keng Swee as Role Model

Mr Lim credits former deputy prime minister Dr Goh Keng Swee as his role model for leadership. He recounted an anecdote involving the procurement of a military truck. Dr Goh had insisted that Mr Lim put forth his personal recommendation in a paper to be submitted to the Cabinet, where Dr Goh would add his own opposing opinion. Dr Goh believed that staff should champion and justify their own views. Constantly abiding by those of supervisors would undermine the integrity of an organisation, and the staff would not gain the independence they need to become leaders.

The Role of Values and Principles

Mr Lim broadly defined leadership as "making good things happen". Using the global financial crisis as an example, he said that leadership must recognise values and principles, and understand the fundamental idea of what is good and bad. Specifically, values form the compass for organisations entering into unknown territories.

However, perhaps due to Singapore's small size and relative ease of disseminating information, such ideas, principles and values are often orally transmitted, resulting in inadequate documentation. He believes that the information has to be codified in some way in order to be passed on.

Stages and Dimensions to Leading by Example

He also championed leaders who play the role of mentor and adviser to guide others around them. He described several stages to this, i.e. "leading from the front" to "leading from the side" to "leading from behind", and finally to "leading from within". At the last stage, he said, "we inspire others with our thoughts and behaviours." The ultimate aim of leaders is to "lead from within", he said, noting that this would also quell concerns over leadership succession.

Q&A Segment

Chairing the dialogue with Mr Lim, IPS Special Research Adviser Arun Mahizhnan asked Mr Lim about the idea behind having a permanent secretary serve no more than 10 years. Mr Lim explained that this is meant to "open up positions at the top" of the civil service to encourage the flow of talent. This extends to the government more room to allocate talent, and critically, it creates new openings for new leadership. Each generation has different experiences, and brings with them fresh perspectives on what needs to be changed.

Singapore 50 years on?

An audience member asked Mr Lim for his assessment of the current leadership under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, where things are more decentralised and cracks could be seen in this type of leadership. The audience member further expressed pessimism about Singapore's future, with its small and limited domestic market, and asked Mr Lim for his vision 50 years from now as well as the possibility of Singapore entering a union with its neighbours.

Mr Lim said it would not be fair for him to comment on the current leadership and policies. It is easy to criticise from the outside, but because he is not in the flow of things, Mr Lim does not know the imperatives and impediments faced. On the outlook in 50 years, he said it is too far into the future for a good answer, quoting the Arab saying, "He who knows the future lies even if he tells the truth." He believes that the key does not lie in anticipating that future; rather, it lies in the spirit of the people and the leadership, by looking out for the populace, being concerned, and having self-confidence and courage.

Regarding the question of whether Singapore would join a regional economic union, Mr Lim thinks that it is "totally possible", but stated that the union would only work if the members are on the same level, because "a union of unequals invariably does not work", citing the European Union as an example.

Influencing the Young

An audience member asked if organisations, whether public or private, could aim to shape the values of younger staff members. Or should employers adopt stringent screening to identify those with good values?

Mr Lim feels that young people are more idealistic today, which works to the advantage of organisations. “When we talk about values, we talk about doing what is good and right, which appeals to human beings,” he said, adding that he felt young people could be moved by that.

He stressed the need for leaders to communicate well with their people. His preference for instance, was to “bypass the command chain”, and go directly to staff members if he had a message to relay or wanted to hear their thoughts on an issue. He agreed that it was more “difficult” to satisfy today’s younger employees but was hopeful that they could be moved by their ideals.

The Need for Diversity

Asked about the importance of diversity and talent within the top leadership of the government, Mr Lim said that it was crucial but the question was how to achieve that diversity of perspectives. Diversity, he said, has to be a conscious, deliberate effort. Policymakers need to go out and meet a variety of people, find out what they think of issues, and how they respond to the various proposals.

A Moving Tribute

Mr Mahizhnan directed the last question at Mr Lim’s daughter, the book’s co-author Ms Joanne Lim.

Ms Lim said that it was easy co-writing with her father because she is very clear about his thoughts, convictions and values. She said: “He is probably the best father that any daughter can ever ask for,” adding that he was an equally good husband, and that his public persona is a reflection of what he is like in private. The book, she said, truly contains his convictions. “It is a privilege to work with my father, and the contents of the book are consistent with both his private and public life,” she said.

The Leader, The Teacher And You was published in January 2014 and is available at major bookstores in Singapore.

Established in 1992, the IPS Corporate Associates is a network of business leaders who provide insights towards policymaking from a wide range of viewpoints. For more information on becoming an IPS Corporate Associate, visit <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/corporate-associates>.

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