

## IPS Corporate Associates Breakfast: The Value of Compassion in the Workplace

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A pioneer at Internet giant Google and *New York Times* bestselling author, Mr Tan Chade-Meng, spoke at a Corporate Associates Breakfast event on 21 June about harnessing emotional intelligence to be successful in the workplace. The event was chaired by IPS Senior Research Fellow Tan Tarn How.

Mr Tan Chade Meng, better known as “Meng”, was the first Singaporean to join Google, retiring in 2015 after more than 15 years in the company. He helped build Google's first mobile search service, headed the team that kept a vigilant eye on Google's search quality and was a founding member of Google's Chinese search team. After eight years as an engineer, he moved to People Operations, creating and running a seven-week mindfulness-based emotional intelligence course called *Search Inside Yourself* (SIY). His job title was “Jolly Good Fellow (which no

one can deny)” and his job description, “Enlighten minds, open hearts, create world peace”.

Mr Tan is now a philanthropist, Chairman of the Board of the SIY Leadership Institute and an adjunct professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. He made two key points during his speech. First, happiness leads to success. Second, there is both quantitative and qualitative proof that compassionate leaders make the most effective leaders.

### **Happiness leads to success**

Contrary to popular belief, success does not usually lead to happiness, said Mr Tan. Success leads to happiness only under one circumstance — when success lifts a person out of poverty. Beyond that, research shows that an unhappy middle-income person is not likely to become happier when they become wealthier.

Happy people are more likely to become successful as research suggests that happy workers are more likely to:

- (1) perform better in sales;
- (2) be healthier and;
- (3) be more popular.

Happy workers are also more likely to be creative. So, can we be happy as and when we want? Mr Tan said this is possible. He first distinguished between joy and happiness. Happiness is a deep sense of flourishing that comes from having a healthy mind; it is an optimal state of being. Joy is an emotion; it is the feeling of pleasure in the moment. Joy is also the building block of happiness.

To create joy, one has to feel rested and relaxed. This can be done through meditation, which is an effective stress reliever. Second, one has to make constant effort to incline the mind towards happiness. This can be done through appreciating the little things in life that most of us take for granted — such as taking a sip of water to quench our feeling of thirst — which keeps the mind in a constant state of gratitude. Lastly, being kind brings joy. Mr Tan suggests that wishing for something good to happen to someone else is a way of exercising kindness. Being kind and joyful become mental habits when people practise that day after day; it is easier to be joyful and kind after repeated attempts over an extended period of time, he added.

### **Compassionate leaders are the best leaders**

To be a successful leader, being happy and kind is not enough. One also has to be compassionate. Mr Tan defined compassion as a step beyond being kind; on top of being understanding and wishing the best for others, compassion encompasses a sense of mission to want to make life better for others.

Mr Tan cited several studies. One, from the United States Navy, proves that compassionate leaders are more effective. Quantitative results suggest that combat units with compassionate commanders are more operationally ready; they need a shorter notice time before they are ready for combat. Another study published in the Harvard Business Review also reveals that great leaders have two common traits — humility and ambition for the greater good. Being compassionate drives these two traits; compassion allows one to be empathetic and be more willing to learn from others, while feeling the motivation to want to help others.

Mr Tan added that people also tend to like compassionate leaders. People work harder for likeable leaders and for leaders who they know are committed to helping them. This becomes a virtuous cycle, especially for jobs where productivity is difficult to measure; workers are motivated to deliver better results when working for compassionate leaders and the leader of a motivated team tends to deliver better results and be successful.



### **Question and Answer**

The audience was interested in why Mr Tan thought compassion and happiness were the most powerful driving force for change. One participant suggested that anger at social injustice was also a powerful driving force. Mr Tan replied that anger is judgmental and not sustainable. He raised the example of Mahatma Gandhi who drove change through inner peace and compassion. Another participant questioned if compassion conflicts with other necessary acts — such as offering constructive

criticism to colleagues or taking a firm stance on workplace discipline. Mr Tan said it does not, as one can be tough about achieving goals and meeting expectations while being compassionate at the same time.

Mr Tan went on to express his hope for Singapore to become the centre for goodness, wisdom and compassion. He said Singapore is in good position to play this role as the population is well-educated and largely middle-class. In response, citing a Gallup survey on well-being, a participant highlighted that Singaporeans seem to be unmotivated in the workplace and unhappy in general, and questioned if Singapore is truly a fertile ground for such a movement. Mr Tan answered that people being unhappy in the workplace is not a problem specific to Singapore. He suggested that this is because people have not recognised the benefits of having happy employees. Mr Tan was optimistic that more emphasis will be put into building happy and compassionate workplaces once more people realise its benefits. As for general happiness levels, Mr Tan said that public policy can do more to mitigate the rising cost of living, as this will have an effect on happiness levels.

The audience was also interested in how Mr Tan's ideas were implemented in institutions all over the world. One asked whether the SIY workshop was conducted in other companies. Mr Tan replied that many companies, such as German engineering company SAP SE, run the workshop and the SIY institute is training more instructors to meet the high demand. Another participant asked if schools should include short mediation sessions to help students alleviate stress. Mr Tan agreed that it is a good idea, especially when a short 10-minute mediation session per day is proven to reduce truancy and improve test scores.

An audience member asked for Mr Tan's view on the impact of technology on work and life. Mr Tan believes that technology has levelled the playing field. For instance, a student in India is able to access research findings from top universities worldwide. However, as there is too much information on the Internet, one has to be conscious that people run out of attention when sieving through available information. "Attention is the currency of information," he said, and unselective consumption of information can lead to short attention spans. He advised people to be smart consumers of information.

Another member of the audience asked Mr Tan why millennials seem to switch jobs so often. Mr Tan believed that the millennial generation recognise the value of being happy in life much earlier than previous generations. Hence, they gravitate towards meaningful jobs that make them happy. Mr Tan added that the current jobs available for millennials are probably not what they are looking for; there are not enough meaningful jobs around, he said. His hope is for millennials to create jobs for themselves through setting up their own companies for instance, and in the process, change the world for the better.

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