

When family can slow Singapore's efforts to build culture of innovation: Lim Siong Guan

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SINGAPORE - Speaking to a young adult in a local start-up recently, former head of civil service Lim Siong Guan asked what was the biggest problem the person faced.

The answer was unexpected: "My mother."

The mother could not understand why her child, who had done well in school, did not opt for a stable, well-paying job, and chose instead to join a start-up, Mr Lim recounted.

Mothers in Israel would think that way too - 20 years ago, he said.

On a recent trip to Israel, he asked what mothers wanted these days. He was told they wanted their kids to be chief executive officers of start-ups.

Mr Lim told this anecdote and others during a lecture on Tuesday night (Nov 14) to stress the need for Singapore to build "a culture of innovation, excellence and outwardness" if the tiny city-state is to avoid mediocrity.

It was his third and last lecture as the Institute of Policy Studies' SR Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

He warned that as Singapore is both a city and a state, it should not be contented with 1 to 3 per cent growth. This may be the norm for large developed economies, but the cities Singapore competes with grow faster: Jakarta at 10 per cent, Ho Chi Minh City at 8 per cent and Kuala Lumpur at 6 per cent.

Higher growth rates would give Singapore more options in dealing with its social challenges, like a "super-ageing" population, he said.

But to grow at such rates requires productivity increases which, in turn, require a different culture - one that celebrates trying one's best and trying new things, he added.

"If we want people to be innovative... to try more and to learn from failure, we have to recognise people for their effort and not only for their success," he said.

The question becomes, have they tried their best to exercise their talents and abilities and not whether they got a gold medal, he pointed out.

Trying new things includes being willing to work abroad and in less familiar places, he said, speaking of a large company here where, if a new opportunity came up in a less well-trodden country, the expats would say, "When do you want me to go?"

But the Singaporeans in the company say: "Let me consult my wife."

The wife "is more than likely to say, 'Too dangerous, don't go,'" said Mr Lim, to laughter.

"There is nothing wrong with the Singaporean's decision to not go... but the Singaporean must then also be prepared to accept that his economic value to the firm is not as high as the expat's," he said.

Whether working in Singapore or abroad, workers here should also overcome a prevailing attitude of just seeking satisfactory results.

In this regard, an overemphasis on work-life balance may be counterproductive. "The call... for work-life balance is understandable, but regrettable if it is a call to be allowed to not be excellent."

In its path to innovation and excellence, Singapore should look to Finland, which has the highest per capita number of unicorns - or start-ups worth more than US\$1 billion (S\$1.36 billion).

He said: "Singapore must find our own way to promote a culture of innovation so that it is life for us - what we are and not just something we do."