

5 THINGS WE LEARNT ABOUT LEADERSHIP & INNOVATION

From Mr Lim Chuan Poh, Chairman, Singapore Food Agency (SFA)



Mr Lim Chuan Poh (L) chats with A/Prof Wong Hon Tym

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Mr Lim Chuan Poh is a well-known leader who has effectively helmed several sectors in his distinguished career. From a bright career in the military with the Singapore Armed Forces, to taking on leadership at the Ministry of Education, then working with the country's leading scientists as Chairman of A*Star, he is now trailblazing the path to food sustainability as Chairman to SFA.

A/Prof Wong Hon Tym, Clinical Director for the Centre for Healthcare Innovation chats with Mr Lim, as he looks back at some of Singapore's major innovations and provides personal insights on how they emerged, the important aspects of leadership, and how we might apply these experiences in our battle against COVID-19.

For Those in a Hurry...

- 1. We are our own innovation***
- 2. To be self-sufficient in food supply, we will need 18 more Singapore(s)! Innovation is a must***
- 3. History will repeat itself!***
- 4. Learn from the past, apply swiftly today, be prepared for tomorrow***
- 5. To be an effective leader, listen to your people***





1. WE ARE OUR OWN INNOVATION

"The notion that innovation must meet fundamental needs is particularly important against the backdrop of a crisis."

The fundamental way in which Singaporeans value innovation, is if it meets societal needs or demands.

Going beyond citing his own personal experience, Mr Lim makes the bold statement of "Singapore itself is an innovation". In the short 55 years since independence, driven by a fundamental need of existentialism and hope of a brighter future, Singapore has created economic value that has made the island nation one of the highest per capita globally.

Other than the economic aspect, Singapore has also innovated the entire socio-economic model, resulting in the high per capita GDP, with other countries studying Singapore's governance and policy with the purpose of adopting it in their home country.

At the same time, Singapore has created institutions that are among the most capable and credible in the world, such as public housing, water, transportation and healthcare.

The notion that innovation must meet fundamental needs is particularly important against the backdrop of a crisis, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, because a crisis and challenge is the biggest catalyst for one to innovate.

In fact, should the new normal post COVID be one that is focused on de-globalisation, Singapore which has thrived on connectivity and globalisation would have to re-innovate to keep up, and as how it was for the last 55 years, innovations would also have to be aspirational to be sustainable.





2. TO BE SELF-SUFFICIENT IN FOOD SUPPLY, WE WILL NEED 18 MORE SINGAPORE(S)!

COVID has reminded us the importance of food security and how it can be easily be disrupted. One might say to be completely secure is to produce our own food, but that is not something Singapore can do, given its small land area. Singapore Food Agency (SFA) is tasked to ensure the country's food security, and innovative and diverse strategies, leveraging on science and technology is a necessity.

Increased Population, Environmental Changes and Zoonotic Diseases

In the last decade, there have been some profound global changes and trends that have driven the importance of food security for Singapore. Based on the UN projection, the world's population will be almost 10 billion by the year 2050, about 2 billion more than where we are today.

This means that a lot of human activities will be generated just to meet the demands resulting from this increase in population. Sea levels will also rise and the amount of land suitable for food production will be reduced.

The intensification of modern farming and environmental changes to meet the needs of an expanding population will increasingly bring humans and livestock in close proximity to wildlife, thereby increasing the risk of zoonotic diseases.

Based on this global trend, Singapore will need to rethink its food security strategy and if it is still adequate for Singapore. As such, the creation of the SFA a year ago, was to ensure food security from Farm to Fork.

"30 by 30": Innovating to produce 30% of our own food by 2030

Singapore's strategy for food import and supply diversification has worked well for many years. "We want to retain that, but the question is, how can we enhance that, how can we make it more robust?" exclaims Mr Lim.

He shares that a bold target has been set for Singapore, the "30 by 30", where Singapore will produce 30 percent of its own food by 2030. For a country which currently uses only 0.5 percent of the land to grow its own food, it will be a stretch.

Mr Lim chuckles, "If Singapore chooses to produce food the same way that Germany does today, and they produce 90 percent of their food and supplemented by some imports, we will need 18 more Singapore!"

To achieve the 30 by 30 ambition, different approaches and innovation leveraging on science and technology will need to be implemented.

COVID-19: A Textbook Food Security Disruption

Reflecting on SFA's strategies during pandemic, Mr Lim alludes to the food security challenges that SFA has been preparing for played out during COVID-19, as some governments' first instinct, sensibly so, is to keep food and medical supplies to themselves as first priority.

Fortunately, SFA's food diversification strategy ensures that Singapore is able to obtain supplies from various other sources. The momentary disruption in food supply is more so due to the disruption to the supply chain as borders closed, making transport of cargo challenging.



However, due to active management by SFA working closely with Ministry of Trade & Industry, Ministry of Transport, and the other agencies, the transport of food resumed within a short time.

"But clearly the pandemic is a major food disruption to our food diversification strategy. And because of active management, we were able to stockpile a lot of our staples for a meaningful period, so we can deal with food security in such a way that we do not cause any discomfort to the population," reassures Mr Lim.



3. HISTORY WILL REPEAT ITSELF!

"If everyone behaves appropriately, we are not expected to have a crisis, but we are a human society, and we are vulnerable," laments Mr Lim. He goes on to share his personal observations on the impact that the pandemic has had on different countries, the factors that might have helped keep numbers down, and the issues that have caused spikes in these countries.

He observes that the countries with the greatest number of infections per million population are Qatar, Bahrain, Chile, Kuwait, US and Singapore[1].

Mr Lim points out that by observation you will notice that migrant workers make up a large part of these countries infected, and this is an issue that needs to be addressed. He notes that Singapore is already attempting to address the issue of reasons that have made migrant workers susceptible to infections.

The greatest number of deaths per million due to the pandemic are Belgium, UK, Spain, Sweden, France, and the US. There are a lot of questions that need to be answered especially because these countries are considered to be leading advanced economies, with deep research capabilities.

"These are all countries that understand infectious disease. Given the years of knowing what this pandemic can cause, how did they end up with this set of outcomes?" implores Mr Lim. While each country would be different, Mr Lim strongly urges for a study into this peculiarity to prevent it from happening again in the future.

The different outcomes in the numbers highlight the importance of learning from the past in order to prepare for the future, an important aspect of leadership and innovation for crisis.

For example, the key highlights in all publications on the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic are the same intense issues that we currently face during this COVID-19 pandemic. One that stands out is the use of facemasks, where it is widely adopted in the East but abhorred in other parts of the world, and the debate on the effectiveness of facemasks.

With an abundance of information and literature on previous pandemics, there is a treasure trove of knowledge to learn from, and to avoid making similar errors.

[1] Source: Worldometer, as at 30 June 2020





4. LEARN FROM THE PAST, APPLY SWIFTLY TODAY, BE PREPARED FOR TOMORROW

“Leadership in Crisis, and Leadership FOR Crisis are on the same continuum, however, the accentuated urgency (for leadership in crisis) is because people are dying, and you have to do something fast and intelligent, and be seen doing it with urgency. Unfortunately, you will be operating in an environment where there is so much uncertainty, because you don’t exactly know what this virus is,” said Mr Lim, explaining the difference between “leadership in crisis” and “leadership for crisis”.

Earn Trust and Confidence

Whether in crisis or for crisis, the crucial aspect of effective leadership is the ability to build confidence and gain the trust of people.

There will be gaps, but you will want them to trust you and have confidence in your solutions, and be patient in allowing the right solutions to emerge.

To sustain this trust and confidence, a leader must be upfront with uncertainties, but not be seen as lying or not speaking based on evidence, else you will lose your credibility or make situations worse.

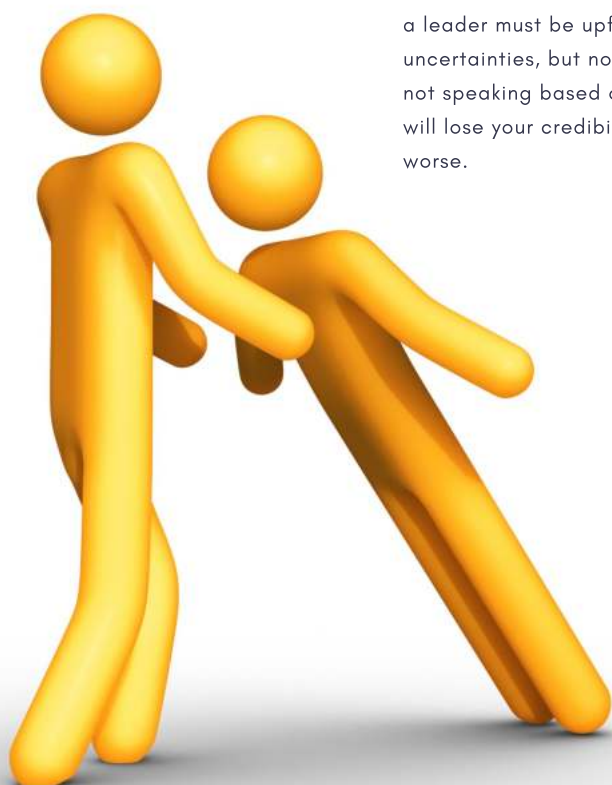
Keep an Open Mindset

The big challenge in responding to a crisis is allowing your own mindset to be challenged, and to be prepared to change your own paradigm.

Be Present and Visible

The people who have to face the greatest risk, get really motivated and have a sustained morale when leadership is present. The human element to leadership, would be where the people know that as a leader, you care and value what they are doing.

As a leader, you need to show that you have the people’s interests at heart, value the work, and that they can count on you to give them any support they need.





5. TO BE AN EFFECTIVE LEADER, LISTEN TO YOUR PEOPLE

Leadership is about influencing people to undertake a task which they would otherwise not do. To be more effective, one needs to take into account the cultural context of an organisation.

Through his career from SAF, MOE, A*STAR and SFA, Mr Lim has experienced the cultural differences arising from the nature of each organisation, adding that understanding organisational culture is key to effective leadership.

Connection and Engagement

Having spent many years in the military, and describing the nature of work as one that focused on command and control, mission oriented, with quick execution, Mr Lim recounted that when he transitioned to the education sector, he invested a lot of time to learn about the culture, by making trips to the schools, and having face to face conversations with the teachers and students.

It was during such personal interactions where one can pick up the nuances, and truly understand what people valued and the culture of the entire set-up. It was not merely communication that mattered, but connection.

Understand What Resonates

When Mr Lim transitioned to A*Star, he muses that the one thing that the researchers and scientists almost instinctively had a reaction against was regimentation, and so he was cautioned by a senior colleague that his military background might not make him very welcomed.

As he was aware of this, he made an effort to familiarise himself with what resonates with the scientists, and he knew that he had been accepted by them when a leading scientist proudly introduced his military background.

The New Normal

While many of us have reached that stage in this pandemic where we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel, we are also looking to adapt to a new normal and with it, innovations to move ahead and leadership to navigate us.

Mr Lim's valuable sharing on his leadership experiences would no doubt be beneficial in both peacetime and crisis. **End**

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