

1-2013

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Citation

Sadasivan, Viswa. Do Efficient Outcomes Dull Resilience. (2013). *Social Space*. , 118-119. Social Space.

Available at: http://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lien_research/119

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DO EFFICIENT OUTCOMES DULL RESILIENCE?

Viswa Sadasivan challenges us to rethink our response to imperfect situations.



Viswa Sadasivan is the CEO of Strategic Moves Pte Ltd, a strategic and crisis communication training and consultancy firm. With over 27 years of television experience, Viswa is best known to the public as the face of the then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation breakthrough news and current affairs programmes such as Feedback and Talking Point. Viswa was conferred the Spirit of Enterprise Award in September 2003. He has a Master of Public Administration degree from the Kennedy School of Government and Administration, Harvard University.

Dusty roads, inching traffic, and an incessant belting of horns—this is an everyday affair during peak hours in Mumbai. Well, not for poor Singaporean me for whom being caught in slow-moving traffic for 20 minutes is unacceptable. Trapped in the almost stationary car, I was feeling sorry for myself. And it would appear I was quite alone in this mood.

In the next car was a woman combing her daughter's hair while singing to her, smile intact. The two male passengers in an auto-rickshaw were having a hearty conversation with their driver. And then, there were these kids, barely 13 years old, who were taking advantage of the stalled traffic to sell magazines and flowers to their captive audience. At first, I thought this was weird and asked myself, "Don't these people have a concept of time, and how it is being wasted?"

Then it struck me—call it a moment of humility—that they had come to accept that there was nothing much they could do about the traffic situation. So, instead of moping about it, why not work around the reality. Some may wish

to term this fatalism, but for me, it is pragmatism and a creative management of a seemingly impossible situation. Clearly, what they were doing was a lot more constructive than what I was.

This is *resilience born out of inefficient circumstances*—an attitude that you need, to find a way to deal with the problem instead of waiting for someone to solve it, or wishing it away as you curse. As they say, in a country such as Singapore, we have come to depend on the government to get things right, whereas in India, things happen right *in spite of* the government!

Don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting—not for a moment—that we, in Singapore, should emulate India or the Indians. Neither am I knocking the importance we have placed on efficiency, which has certainly contributed to the quality of life we have come to enjoy and taken for granted; to be in a comfortable-enough situation to reflect on inconvenient posers.

It is the obsession with efficiency that I am talking about—where the longer-term trade-off can be at a "cellular" level, so to speak, and can translate to serious dysfunctions.

In our quest to become a First World economy in record time—for our survival—we were forced to become intolerant of mistakes, earning us the dubious honour of being described as a "one-mistake society." This soon became an attitude that was practised at all levels—by the government, at work, in school, and at home.

While it cannot be denied that this attitude underscores many of the qualities that Singapore is admired for, that sets us apart; it has also led, inadvertently, to two negative outcomes. First, it has made us more risk-averse, and



A Mumbai street

less questioning. We have adopted a “why rock the boat?” attitude to work and life in general. It really does not pay to take the risk of challenging the status quo or suggesting radically different ways of doing things because it can be a seriously career-limiting move if we end up stepping on the toes of a powerful incumbent and, worse, if we are proved wrong. On the flipside, the system has rewarded quiet acquiescence. This has inadvertently led to a protocol that defines as constructive, ideas and suggestions that merely “tweak” what exists. Ideas that call for a radical shift in thinking are often deemed “unconstructive” or even mischievous in intent. As a result, what has evolved is a scenario where those who toe the line find rewards more easily as they are seen to be contributing to an unimpeded and efficient process that leads to the achievement of key performance indicators.

Secondly, a “caste” system of sorts has evolved where the anointed leaders (mainly chosen from the ranks of “scholars” akin to the mandarins of medieval China) are licensed to question and even recommend radical ideas, whereas the rest are to simply “follow” by giving of their best in their respective vocations (professional, clerical, skilled and unskilled). Indeed, this arrangement was the basis of the “social contract” between the leadership (political and civil service) and the people, and it has contributed to “progress and prosperity” for Singapore since the 1960s.

Unfortunately, this also means that a vast majority of the people tacitly accept their station in life and voluntarily disqualify themselves from questioning—not just verbally but even in their own minds. Credit has to be given to the government for identifying this as an area that needs to change, drastically change. Even former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew acknowledged that we could have afforded to have more “mavericks” in the system. The education system,

and the relationship between the government and civil society are poised for significant shifts that promote radical thinking. However, the results of these changes will take time to manifest. In the meantime, we do our best to manage the fallout from decades of strict adherence to efficiency.

Being unquestioning and playing it safe has left us with no experience of doing things that are sufficiently challenging, not to mention pushing the boundaries. And this in turn has meant less experience in failing, and thereby not having the instinct to manage and recover when we trip or fall. Over time, this has led to a pathological loss of confidence in dealing with adversity, which has perpetuated risk-averseness and lowered our propensity to rise above the din or achieve greatness.

This has not been a significant impediment to our growth thus far. However, the equation has changed, especially in the past decade. Look at the sheer magnitude and complexity of the challenges we have had to face, and the radical shifts in the relationship between the rulers and the ruled where knowledge flows and power has become increasingly asymmetrical. Governments are no longer in a position to credibly guarantee delivery on promises. And in Singapore’s case, the government can no longer act on the assumption that it has a monopoly on wisdom. This means that we need the people to not only emerge from the woodwork and be an active part of the solutions, but also demonstrate the ability to deal with the increasing number of situations where things don’t happen as promised and planned, or where they simply crash.

In an environment where increasingly, what’s predictable is unpredictability, more than efficiency, we need resilience. We should have started rebuilding a deep capacity for this yesterday! ■