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J. Y. Pillay [Singapore, Civil Service]

Joseph Yuvaraj Pillay

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Interviewee: **JY PILLAY**
Interviewer: Viswa Sadasivan
Date: 29 June 2015
Location: Singapore

0:00:20

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

Mr Pillay, I consider this a privilege to have the opportunity to interview you, and for you to agree to this interview, because it is important for the generations to come to understand the complexities of leadership. Because a lot of people make it seem like if you follow some of the dicta, you just need to execute it. It's not as simple as that because you're dealing, not with widgets, but with people.

Now one of the people you have always admired, and you had the pleasure of serving with him for twenty-four years, I believe, in the civil service, was Hon Sui Sen, the then Finance Minister. In the Civil Service College speech, you highlighted three aspects of leadership that he sorts of emulated. Firstly, it was about integrity. Secondly, it was the ability to trust and delegate without micromanaging. Thirdly, stimulating ideas, eliciting ideas from the ground. All three are easier said than done. Let's start with the whole question of integrity. It's an often-used word, in leadership circles, sometimes mis-abused, but what exactly is leadership?

0:01:45

[JY Pillay](#)

Leadership... it's strange. I observe qualities in leaders, and I try to identify what makes them successful, or why they slip up from time to time. I haven't done so much of psychoanalysis of myself to figure it out, because I never considered myself an outstanding leader. They talk about leaders, John Wayne, leading in front, and others who are at the back pushing their flock forward. Yet others go hand in hand, very affiliative types. I never know where I stand. But you're right about Hon Sui Sen, he's one of the outstanding people I know. I had two outstanding bosses - Hon Sui Sen and Goh Keng Swee. Now, there were other ministers whom I had great respect for. Lee Kuan Yew no doubt, Toh Chin Chye, Rajaratnam, (Lim) Kim San. Those were men of great competence.

0:03:027

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

They were giants.

0:03:09

[JY Pillay](#)

They were giants, yes. We were standing on, you may say, their shoulders. Now, Hon Sui Sen and Goh Keng Swee had many qualities in common, but their styles were different. In terms of intrinsic qualities, I don't think there was that much difference between Dr Goh and Mr Hon. Both had strong sense of compassion, not just for the people reporting to them, but for society at large, very important factor if you want to be a leader. But when it came to relationships between each of them and their subordinates, there were differences. Both were extremely loyal, but Hon Sui Sen was a perfect gentleman. No matter what the circumstances may be, whether he woke up on the right side of the bed or not, it didn't matter at all.

0:04:28

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

Some people say that leaders should be charismatic, and charisma is often associated with a certain amount of turbulence, fluctuation of moods, and it can be quite exciting, or extremely tense. On the other hand, there are quiet leaders, whose quality predominantly is equanimity. There is a certain predictability. How would you say that in terms of leadership, the two styles... here you talk about Goh Keng Swee, and you talk about Hon Sui Sen. Hon Sui Sen, equanimity, a certain predictability, but yet not without being exacting, right? On the other hand, you have someone like Goh Keng Swee, who also was known to inspire fear in people - fear of repercussions. If you could comment on these two styles, what are the pros and cons of these two styles?

0:05:30

[JY Pillay](#)

Personally, I don't know whether that's so terribly important. It's a function of behaviour and subordinates adjust to it. Let me put it this way. We used to practise a form of job evaluation in the civil service. I can't quite remember all the paraphernalia of the assessments, but at the end of the day you place them into action-oriented people and thinkers. Thinkers were a quieter type, not so John Wayne-ish... [Laugh] Most leaders were in that category. If you go through the literature, you'll find they had the most sustainable record. Very reflective, deep thinkers, those are the qualities you need in the leader. That's necessary but not a sufficient condition. You need all these other factors of consistency, and everything else, integrity. But that was the dominant thing, and further down you go in the hierarchy, this is quite common knowledge, the action-oriented people, the foreman, the supervisor, the lower management, they have got to deliver the goods. The widgets have to be produced, and sometimes they have to use the rod. As you move up, the demands veer towards the thinking, that means a quieter type of activity. If your managers, your middle level managers tend to retain those attributes that they exercised when they were at a lower level, there's always trouble in the organisation.

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[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

That's one of the criticisms levelled against several people in leadership positions, that people are moved up too fast. Because from what you have said so far, there is a certain time needed for that transition from the action-oriented to the thinker, right? You can't pressure cook that. Because of the exigencies of time and space today, there seems to be a truncation of that process. People are forced to move from the action-oriented to the thinker very fast. What are the challenges and what are the dysfunctions as the result of that?

0:08:21

[JY Pillay](#)

I would always look at why that situation is developing. What has caused it? Was there some rupture in the organisation, or was it, more likely, the captain being asleep? Not knowing what was going on until there was an eruption. In Japan, accountability is very harsh. Anything wrong in the organisation, the train, there's an accident, the Minister of Transport commits *harakiri* (Ritual suicide).

0:09:00

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

These days he just bows.

0:09:01

[JY Pillay](#)

He bows, and he takes it, and he resigns. I'm not suggesting we should follow that system but that's the ultimate. You recognise that accountability, you can delegate authority and the appropriate accountability but... if you're a leader, you do not wash your hands-off accountability. You are accountable for your subordinates' accountabilities.

0:09:30

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

When you were Chairman of SIA (Singapore Airlines), quite a few of your colleagues, at various levels, have highlighted that you are a good listener. Decisive, but a good listener. Quite often I come across people citing the two as contradictions - that a decisive person doesn't consult. I would put it to you that actually a person can be decisive if he consults continuously. How would you respond to that?

0:10:08

[JY Pillay](#)

The worst thing is to shirk the responsibility of making a decision. Subordinates find that most annoying. It has no leadership. Please make a decision, doesn't matter if it is not the correct decision. But there is a decision we'll proceed, and if it doesn't lead there, you find some way. You're the leader, you find some way of rectifying it. Incidentally, I don't believe there is anything such as a perfect decision. Every option has pros and cons, and that's your

job as the leader when it comes to the crunch, to decide which you think is the best option. Your subordinates may not think that is best option, but they will follow you if you give decisive leadership.

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[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

But why would they follow you?

0:11:04

[JY Pillay](#)

They follow you because that's their responsibility to accept the decision the leader takes. They have given their views, he has decided, everybody in the organisation must follow. Otherwise, there's going to be dysfunction. Subordinates not accepting the decision wholeheartedly. At worst they try sabotage. At best it's grudging. Anyway, you do what you do. You may not give it everything that you have got, but you comply. That should not be the case. The leader probably did not listen enough, or the subordinate is not... should not be where he is.

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[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

But you... if you listen enough, you'd be able to see, to ascertain whether a subordinate should be where he is.

0:12:02

[JY Pillay](#)

Exactly, exactly.

0:12:03

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

Is that one of the challenges organisations are facing, that leaders are not listening enough, or sensing enough?

0:12:19

[JY Pillay](#)

Yes of course, it happens all the time everywhere, because we are not perfect. I'm sure I have been guilty of it myself in both directions, downwards and upwards. Not being fully supportive of decisions that I didn't think much of, or sometimes even worse, you may say, didn't think much of the individual.

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[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

How do you deal with that?

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[JY Pillay](#)

With great humility which... very difficult to muster.

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[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

Wasn't that one of the things that you really respected about Hon Sui Sen, that when it came to battles that you can't win or compromise on, he had the gumption, and he stood the ground. He knew the battles to fight. He chose them well.

0:13:04

[JY Pillay](#)

He chose them well, yes. He was not always right, mind you. He was a human being.

0:13:10

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

But he had to make a call.

0:13:12

[JY Pillay](#)

He had to make a call, and eventually he recognised he was chasing the wrong hare.

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[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

Let's maybe go down to a particular decision that gained quite a lot of press, your decision in the first couple of years as Chairman of SIA, where you made the bold, calculated albeit move to buy nineteen Boeing aircraft, right? The famous "Sale of the Century" accolade that was announced. It was a huge amount of money at that point in time. Could you share with us what went through your mind, and what was the process that led to this decision?

0:14:00

[JY Pillay](#)

We had an earlier decision, which was even more, I would say, controversial, within upper reaches of the Government. It was the decision to buy the Boeing 747 Aircraft. We made that decision in the board. It required a heck of a lot of money, and we did need a

government guarantee to the Exim Bank of Washington DC. It was a lot of money for us in those days, a small company. Singapore didn't have the billions that it now has. So, the Cabinet got a bit queasy, and they quizzed us. Hon Sui Sen was the Finance Minister. They didn't summon me to the Cabinet to explain, thank goodness. We sent them a stack of documents that we used to do our evaluation, and to make an assessment of our financial condition, of our financial forecast. After that, we never heard from Cabinet. No veto, so we went ahead. This was in the early 70s. But the second decision towards the end of the 1970s for I don't know how many aircraft, 19, amounting to 900 million US dollars, which was the biggest at that time ever placed by any carrier. So that's why we attracted world attention. That wasn't such a ground-breaking decision from our perspective. The company, the board, or for that matter, the Cabinet. By that time the Cabinet was quite relaxed, it didn't put any query in our direction at all.

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[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

Because you'd already built a track record.

0:16:00

[JY Pillay](#)

Exactly. There was a track record. It was interesting how SIA developed in the 1970s. We were the only airline in Asia that had the gumption to do these, to think big. Nothing to do with me, I must confess, it all came from management. We supported them. I could see it, I must say, I had the responsibility of course. Supporting management when they brought these proposals to the board, not rejecting it. When I said no, it would have been no. But I had confidence in management, I knew them well. I saw their record, and I noticed that all the carriers around us were so pusillanimous. Most of them were government-owned. No big ambitions, they just wanted a soft life.

0:17:00

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

So, what made us different?

0:17:04

[JY Pillay](#)

The Government told us, you guys you're on your own, no subsidy. It would have been against our pride to accept any subsidy from the Government. We didn't want it. We said we could do our own thing, and we defied the big powers, the IATA (International Air Transport Association), which laid down strict conditions about how much you can charge for a ticket, and what you can serve on board, and things like that. To hell with you, go away, we're not members of IATA. All that needed a bit of iconoclasm. They were iconoclasts.

0:17:43

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

How much of self-efficacy, gumption, would one have to have, when you know that you're not going to get very much of financial support if things should go wrong? Your head, as well as your management's head, would be on the chopping block. Therefore, you are accountable to them as well, right? If you make the wrong decision, right? The easier option would have been to go the way that the others have gone. You would have kept your job, they would have kept their jobs, why risk it?

0:18:32

[JY Pillay](#)

Maybe, we didn't have all those risk control tools that you find now [Laugh], so we were not so conscious, honestly, of the penalties of error. I don't think at any time within the board, or discussions with management, the question... this issue arose, what's going to happen to us if we failed? We all felt, yes, terrible things could happen, but we never expressed them [Laugh]. But at the same time, we had done our calculations quite thoroughly, and we had confidence. We had confidence because we had registered some successes. They're still very confident chaps in SIA. They don't have such a big lead now over the other carriers, but they are very confident of their ability to maintain a lead.

I must tell you something about leadership. There was a German general between the wars. He must have been a Prussian, he rejoiced in the name of General Baron Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord. Now, he was the equivalent of our CDF (Chief of Defence Force). Hitler was building up his army. He, for some reason fell out with Hitler, and so Hitler bundled him out in 1934. But he was recorded as having said, "I categorise my people, into four boxes." He said, "My people, I divide them into four categories. Each of them I measure against two dimensions. One is intelligence, and the other is industriousness." He said the guys who are intelligent and industrious, what you find at the top right-hand box, excellent people, I put them in my general staff. My general staff, that's where you'd expect civil service. Ultimately, the staff controls everything. He said, "The lazy and the stupid, the fourth category, they have their uses in certain conditions - this is the army cannon fodder, things like that. The third category, the industrious and the stupid. They are the most dangerous of people, get rid of them. It applies even in civilian life. He said, "The fourth [second] category, bright guys, but slothful, lazy, they are your leaders. They have the clarity of mind, and the self-discipline to be able to make the right decision, at the right time, very, very interesting. I don't know how many of our top leaders know about this General. He did exist, he's not a yarn, it's true.

0:22:09

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

No, no, I can see that because it's about perspective, isn't it? That comes with distance, right? That's what you're talking about. If you're in the trenches, you can't lead. The question here is, does distance and the perspective that comes with distance necessarily translate to being disconnected? Because sometimes that happens too, right? You gain perspective

from distance, but that distance then translates to a certain emotional and, even a logical disconnect, with the people you're serving.

0:22:49

[JY Pillay](#)

That means you're not intelligent enough. It also means that you're withdrawing from the day-to-day strife, and you're reflecting on it. You appear to be lazy, not to be doing too much, but you're thinking. You look at some of our *towkays* (bosses), how did they ... reach the top in the old days at least, they were all traders. They were constantly observing, thinking, figuring out where to go, whom to... how to do this, and that's how they rose. They were not maybe... the brightest of the brightest, but sufficiently bright, and sufficiently relaxe, and detached.

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[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

The one thing that you are most clearly associated with - focus. You are obsessed, as a leader, with focus and the clarity that comes with focus. I remember, I don't know whether you recall, in SINDA (Singapore Indian Development Association), you had asked me to write a paper sometime back. You were President of SINDA, I was an exco...

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[JY Pillay](#)

I had the temerity to ask you to write a paper.

0:24:10

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

Yes, you did. So, I did. I went out there, and I spoke to people who had written papers for you. I checked these papers, and all of them... some of them had three objectives. So, I came and presented the paper to you with three objectives. In your own, in your usual urbane style, you know what you told me? You told me, with that half smile, you said, you told me "You are intellectually lazy". That's the exact words you used. You told me that I was intellectually lazy. Because I did not spend time to come up with one objective, I was happy to just mention three. You told me that I should go back and think deeper and come up with one objective. But I told myself it's impossible, because there were three objectives. You didn't give me a choice. But I went back, and I did come up with one objective. Why this obsession?

0:25:11

[JY Pillay](#)

Because I have had so many instances in the past where people come along and said, "You know we didn't achieve that objective, but we achieved the other one." But to me, that first objective was the more important, and why didn't you focus on that? There must be absolute

focus, now that comes from the Gita. I learnt that also the Jesuits, because I went to a Jesuit school. Whatever the objective is, you have got to decide for yourself. It may be right, it may not be right, but that's it. Don't be distracted. Of course, if you find, in the fullness of time, that you are chasing the will-o-wisp, then you stop, and do something else. But while you are pursuing that objective, just focus on it, whatever it is.

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[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

But being focused, clear about one particular objective, does it necessarily lead to you not having enough peripheral vision, looking at the spectrum of other issues that are related to the problem on hand?

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[JY Pillay](#)

Just because you focus on an issue doesn't mean you wear blinkers. You're aware of what's going on around you, and if it's not going well, you begin to consider the options. What are the options? Then it's a question of how soon you react. Sometimes you just persist doggedly and find that you have dug a deeper and deeper hole. Then you say stop, something has forced your hand, you have to stop.

0:26:54

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

Last question. Could you share with us, in one paragraph, pithy, what kind of leadership is most needed and necessary in today's Singapore? Without necessarily making any reference to people, but what do you think is the most important? Where do you think is the unmet need in terms of leadership, the style of leadership in Singapore today?

0:27:26

[JY Pillay](#)

I don't think it's a function of various attributes of leadership. What I would like to see among leaders in Singapore is greater awareness of the uncertainties before us. To realise that there's no such thing as a right decision, they have got to be humble enough to recognise that. To be always conscious of other strands of opinion, and the other constituencies. I'm not suggesting that leadership in Singapore is deficient, not at all. In fact, they're trying very hard. Leaders in every walk of life in Singapore trying very hard to take this into account without necessarily rationalising it. They do it, it comes, you may say subliminally. Not naturally, but subliminally because they're conscious of what's going on around them, not just in Singapore, but in the world.

0:28:49

[Viswa Sadasivan](#)

Thank you very much.

0:28:51

[JY Pillay](#)

You're welcome.