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10-2022

Leading by example

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Citation

YEO, Whee Jim. Leading by example. (2022). *Asian Management Insights (Singapore Management University)*. 9, (2), 66-71.

Available at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/ami/198>

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LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Leadership lessons from Singapore's pioneer civil servants.

by Yeo Whee Jim

He was the understated *Undercover Boss*, way before the American reality series even hit TV screens. At 30,000 feet up in the air, J. Y. Pillay was quietly walking the ground.

The founding chairman of Singapore Airlines (SIA) had an intriguing reputation for posing as a regular passenger walking the length of the aircraft. From inspecting the seats to checking out the passengers' mood, nothing escaped Pillay's eagle eyes. He would even politely ask to visit the cockpit to speak with the pilots. On one of his rounds, he was dismissed by the crew as a wandering drunk.

But nothing was going to stop the man on a mission, to see for himself if the in-flight services met the exacting standards that SIA had set for itself.

This determination to walk the ground allowed Pillay to pick up the smallest of details. On one flight, he noticed that the cabin crew were mishandling catering equipment such as trays and cutlery. He ran a quick check and found that this was costing the airline S\$20,000 every day. Aghast, he wrote a blistering note in the company's in-house newsletter, insisting that the issue be addressed. Such a move not only helped the airline's bottom line but also raised its in-flight service standards.

Pillay's roll-up-your-sleeves, do-it-yourself approach helped transform SIA into one of the world's leading airlines during his tenure from 1972 to 1996. Armed with a razor-sharp mind, a visionary outlook, and the guts to make bold decisions, yet having the humility to walk the ground, Pillay helped SIA navigate through its turbulent early years. Despite the lack of a domestic market, SIA not only prevailed, it thrived.

Pillay's courageous determination to take Singapore's flag carrier to greater heights is chronicled in *The Last Fools: The Eight Immortals of Lee Kuan Yew*.¹ The book showcases the accomplishments of eight lesser-known pioneer senior civil servants who supported Singapore's first prime minister, the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, and his band of Old Guard leaders who transformed Singapore and built its national institutions into what they are today.²

Besides Pillay, the other seven are George Bogaars, Andrew Chew, Hon Sui Sen, Howe Yoon Chong, Lee Ek Tieng, Ngiam Tong Dow, and Sim Kee Boon. From healthcare and housing to transport and talent, these eight officials made countless wide-ranging contributions to the Republic.

We can glean many leadership lessons from them; each of these individuals' accomplishments is a masterclass in leadership and management.

What made it possible for them to build national institutions from scratch? Why did they succeed beyond our wildest imagination when there were so many naysayers around them? How did they accomplish so much despite not having the resources that many are accustomed to getting today?

In this article, we explore and discuss six key lessons from the book that leaders can draw from to take their organisations and teams forward.

LEADING WITH INTEGRITY

In the 1970s, then-permanent secretary of the communications ministry, Sim Kee Boon, set out to make Changi Airport the best in the world.³ This was despite a global oil crisis that had prompted an austerity drive in government spending.

Believing that Changi was critical for Singapore's survival, Sim spared no expense in securing the best for Singapore's airport of the future. From luxurious toilets to Italian marble slabs for the airport's interiors, he splurged to propel the airport to the top. Shrewdly, of course. For example, he negotiated with suppliers of TV screens—a luxury in those days—so that passengers could be entertained between flights. In return, the suppliers received free advertisements.

Such expenses were only made possible when the business dealings were conducted with integrity. As the Singapore public service had already established a well-known ethos of zero tolerance for corruption, this created a deep reservoir of trust with the people. Sim was known to have told his subordinates, "If you had put just \$1 in your pocket illegally, I would have gone after you."⁴

Integrity should be inseparable from leadership. It is about doing the right thing, when no one is looking, *and* especially when everyone is looking yet thinking otherwise. This was the case in the high-profile Changi Airport project where there would have been many occasions that presented temptation for misconduct for those charged to deliver it.

It is easy to lead when things are going smoothly. But it is when leaders set the right example and lead with integrity when times are tough that subordinates sit up and take notice. The impact of such actions trickles downwards, thus building greater trust with and among employees. It strengthens the organisation's credibility with partners and external parties, enlarging the space for it to aim higher and move ahead of its competition.

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Integrity is a key, intangible currency for all businesses. As American political scientist Francis Fukuyama argues, only those societies with a high degree of social trust will be able to create the flexible, large-scale business organisations that are needed to compete in the new global economy.⁵

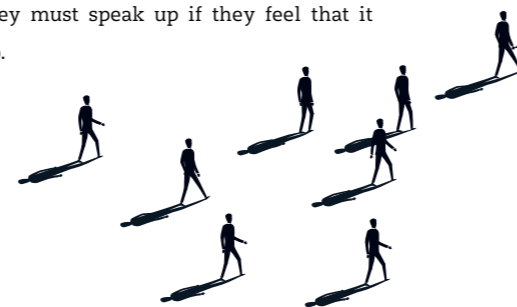
SPEAKING UP WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

There is another dimension to leadership and integrity. A good leader speaks up for what is right. Indeed, many of the eight men were known for their candour when it came to matters of national interest. They were by no means yes-men. Instead, they spoke up without fear or favour and often acted against the grain of the wisdom of the day.

The late veteran civil servant Ngiam Tong Dow in particular was known for his honest opinion on issues that ranged from government scholarship recipients to taxes. For instance, he lamented that government scholars were only deployed in the public sector upon the completion of their university education. The business and social sectors, on the other hand, were being deprived of such talent.

In 2003, he spoke up against the Government's decision to raise the Goods and Services Tax. "Why tax the lower income, then return it to them in an aid package? It demeans human dignity and creates a growing supplicant class who habitually hold out their palms," he said.

While he might have stepped on many toes through the manner in which he put forth his views, his outspokenness stemmed from the fact that he cared for Singapore and his fellow Singaporeans. There was an innate desire to do the right thing in the right manner. This is a value that all leaders must hold. They must speak up if they feel that it is the right thing to do.



At the same time, leaders have a responsibility to develop and maintain a culture in which people feel it is safe enough to voice their opinions, regardless of their ranks. Closing the power distance and creating space for employees to speak up and challenge one another's perspectives bring many benefits.

Such a safe culture strengthens organisations by stress-testing decisions before they are finalised, thus helping them secure the best possible outcomes. This also promotes an inclusive workplace that allows employees to feel more invested and engaged in their jobs, fellow colleagues, and the organisation.

MAKING DECISIONS BOLDLY

Decision-making is an important skill for every leader. The eight bureaucrats were exemplary decision-makers. Clarity of thought and purpose allowed them to act quickly and fearlessly when making major decisions.

In 1978, Pillay and his SIA team decided to buy up to 19 Boeing jets for US\$900 million, which was then the largest ever purchase made by any airline in the world. Some media described it as "the sale of the century".⁶ Pillay dismissed such lofty headlines. For him, it was simply about making the right decision. SIA needed better aircraft to grow and overcome the lack of a domestic market. "You don't get responsible organisations placing orders with an eye towards the history books," he said.

Leadership is most certainly not a popularity contest. It is about having the courage to make unpopular choices for the greater good. Then-permanent secretary of the Ministry of the Environment Lee Ek Tieng demonstrated this approach. When he was tasked with what was conceived

to be an impossible mission of cleaning up the Singapore River in 1977, he had to make the difficult call of shutting down industries that were polluting the waters downstream, such as pig farming and textile manufacturing. Residents living by the river also had to be relocated.

This caused plenty of friction among government agencies as some fought to keep the industries alive. Many residents were forced to move. Some even lost their livelihoods. But the job had to be done, and such hard choices eventually resulted in a pristine river and a clean environment for Singapore.

The late Howe Yoon Chong literally bulldozed his way through slums to build public housing when he was the chief executive at the Housing and Development Board (HDB). At a time when most residents preferred to live on the ground, he pressed ahead with high-rise buildings to solve land-scarce Singapore's housing problems, creating a nation of homeowners. When flat-building was at its peak, it was said that a flat was completed every 36 minutes.

LOOKING AHEAD COURAGEOUSLY

Foresight is a vital but often overlooked leadership quality. However, more often than not, leaders find themselves bogged down by the day-to-day running of their organisations. Organisations that are in it for the long haul need their leaders to keep an eye on the future.

Howe was perhaps the best 'fortune-teller' among the 'eight immortals'. He not only had an uncanny ability to anticipate mega global trends, but also a relentless work ethic to ensure that he and his team acted on the 'predictions'. At a time when Singapore was debating whether to keep its overworked airport in Paya Lebar, he knew that the country needed far bigger space to cope with the future of travel-aviation.

Howe fought to build Changi Airport and in 1981, he proclaimed boldly, "Singapore is up in the heart of ASEAN, the fastest growing economic grouping in the world. The potentials for further expansion of trade, industry, tourism, banking, and finance are enormous. For as long as wide-bodied jets continue to be used, Changi Airport will attract more aircraft and passenger traffic and more air cargo. The real growth is yet to come." He was proven right. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Changi was the world's seventh busiest airport in terms of passenger traffic⁷ and had won 'Best Airport in the World' award 27 times between 1991 and 2020.⁸

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In the 1970s, Howe had found himself in the thick of another national transport challenge. There was a big debate within the Singapore government on whether to retain the all-bus public transport system or invest in a new subway, known as the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT). Of the two, he believed that the MRT was the better option, since the trains could maximise the use of Singapore's limited land by going under and above the ground. While it would come at a huge financial cost to the government, it would boost long-term investor confidence, decentralise economic activities from the congested city-centre, and effectively reduce traffic jams.

Another key 'immortal' was George Bogaars. When Singapore achieved self-government in 1959, he was only in his early 30s and carving out a career at the Treasury Department. Despite not having any experience dealing with internal security issues, Bogaars boldly answered the call to be Singapore's first local to head and subsequently revamp the Special Branch.⁹ It is the courage and foresight of Bogaars and others like him that paved the way for the safe and secure environment that Singapore enjoys today.

LEADING NIMBLY

It would be hard to find an organisation advocating good governance that does not have structures, processes, and systems in place to clearly define responsibilities and proper communication channels. But while adhering to proper procedure is undoubtedly important, organisations need leaders to display astute nimbleness when the situation calls for it.

This flexible approach is even more pertinent in today's unpredictable world fraught with complex issues like wars, supply chain disruptions, and economic crises. Critically, leaders must learn how to modify their methods in response to unforeseen challenges and adapt accordingly.

Dr Andrew Chew, the former permanent secretary at the Ministry of Health, was one who displayed such flexibility. Singapore used to have two ambulance services. At one point, it could take as long as 25 minutes for critical help to arrive. Assessing that it was too slow and inefficient, Chew overhauled the entire structure by implementing a nationwide system. Ambulances were to transport cases from certain districts to hospitals in a particular zone. It was a move that massively improved the speed and efficacy of Singapore's medical services.

But in his haste, Chew had forgotten to put together the necessary Cabinet papers to inform the ministers about the plan. Instead of navigating the bureaucracy, he thought that

saving lives was more important. He only informed his political leaders when he had to issue a press release about the revamped national ambulance service. Ultimately, it was a move that paid off, as he eventually received the green light to proceed. To this day, all ambulances in Singapore are still following the system that Chew implemented more than 50 years ago.

Why many Singapore streets remain relatively unflooded after heavy downpours is again the result of another leader not letting red tape get in the way. Back in the early 1970s, the HDB was building homes in record time to house squatters and the drainage system could not keep up. The floods were so severe that they sometimes reached chest-level.

As permanent secretary of the Ministry of the Environment, Lee Ek Tieng knew he had to act fast and so an urgent paper was written, requesting for the roll-out of a S\$100-million five-year drainage programme. He could not afford to let bureaucracy slow things down, so he bypassed the Finance Ministry and went straight to the Cabinet. The unit got the money swiftly and the flooding problem was solved.

These examples illustrate how leaders need to discern when to depart from protocols and take swift, decisive action whenever it is necessary. While it should be a key competency of any leader worth his salt, this is clearly not for the faint-hearted.

NURTURING TALENT TIRELESSLY

Talent is what differentiates one organisation from another. Few organisations will argue that talented and dedicated employees are a valuable resource who can improve their competitiveness, increase their productivity, and secure their long-term prospects.

According to McKinsey, high performers are four times more productive than average ones.¹⁰ In more complex jobs, this doubles to eight times. The message is clear: the more difficult the task, the greater the need for high-performance workers. This is why leaders must surround themselves with the right people who are motivated by the right reasons.

As the first chairman of the Economic Development Board (EDB), Hon Sui Sen was well aware of the importance of developing a culture of grooming talent so that he could leave the organisation stronger than when he found it. In the list of capable officers that he pulled to join him at EDB were Pillay, Ngiam, and S. Dhanabalan. Dhanabalan would go on to become a key member of Singapore's second-generation political leadership.



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Together, Hon and his young group of EDB officers kickstarted Singapore's industrial revolution in the 1960s. At breakneck speed, they transformed the region of Jurong—then a barren swampland in the western part of Singapore—into an important industrial area. In just seven years, over 200 factories set up shop in Jurong, with a workforce of over 20,000 people.

Successful leaders make it a point to develop others. Besides having an eye for potential, Hon was also a master at talent management. He reportedly once told Ngiam, "When I look at you, I never think of your weak points. I always think of your strong points, and I use your strong points to do my work for me rather than spend day and night on your weak points."

Hon was never afraid to tap the people around him. For example, as finance minister in 1970, he tasked then-senior minister of state for finance, Goh Chok Tong, to deliver the government's Budget in Parliament. It was an unprecedented move. The finance minister had always made the Budget speech. Goh, on the other hand, was a junior minister.

There was a strategic calculation behind that audacious move: it was a shrewd test of Goh's credentials as a politician. Hon's approach would eventually be validated, as Goh would later go on to become Singapore's second prime minister.

Today, we are facing a global talent crunch. Employment agency ManpowerGroup's 2022 study found that global talent shortage is at a 16-year-high, with three in four employers finding it difficult to secure the talent they need.¹¹ This makes it even more crucial that leaders develop an eye for talent and invest in grooming promising employees.

LEADERSHIP SETS THE FOUNDATION

The six leadership qualities displayed by these eight outstanding former public servants enabled them to transform

Singapore, turning the island city-state into a success story. The qualities and lessons that we distil from them are not specific to the civil service and can be readily applicable for top-management executives in any organisation. They can become a foundation for executives to further hone and develop their leadership skills, nurture teams, and ultimately leave organisations far stronger than when they found it. [AMU](#)

Yeo Whee Jim

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Endnotes

- ¹ The "Last Fools" phrase was inspired by what Howe, a former civil service head, was reported to have said in a speech: "Singapore's success was built by fools, and I was one of them." He was wondering aloud whether younger generations of Singaporeans would continue to take on the challenges of public service. Additionally, 'Eight Immortals' is a reference to a group of eight powerful figures in Chinese Taoist mythology.
- ² Peh Shing Huei, Sue-Ann Chia, Aaron Low, et al., "The Last Fools: The Eight Immortals of Lee Kuan Yew", Singapore: The Nutgraf Books, 2022.
- ³ In the Singapore Civil Service, a permanent secretary is the most senior-ranking civil servant of a department or ministry who is responsible for running its day-to-day activities.
- ⁴ Unless otherwise stated, all quotes in this article were taken from "The Last Fools: The Eight Immortals of Lee Kuan Yew".
- ⁵ Francis Fukuyama, "Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity", Free Press, 1995.
- ⁶ Sitragandi Arunasalam, "J. Y. Pillay", Singapore Infopedia, 2005.
- ⁷ Hariz Baharudin, "Parliament: Changi Drops from 7th to 58th on Busiest Airport List, Now Serving 1.5% of Usual Passenger Volume", The Straits Times, October 6, 2020.
- ⁸ Changi Airport Group, "Our Pride".
- ⁹ The Special Branch was the predecessor of the Internal Security Department, which is under the Ministry of Home Affairs.
- ¹⁰ Scott Keller, "Attracting and Retaining the Right Talent", McKinsey, November 24, 2017.
- ¹¹ ManpowerGroup, "The Talent Shortage", 2022.