

**SPEECH BY HEAD, CIVIL SERVICE, MR PETER ONG  
AT THE 2017 ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE DINNER &  
PROMOTION CEREMONY  
6 APRIL 2017, GRAND COPTHORNE WATERFRONT HOTEL**

*“A Belief In Boldness”*

DPM Teo Chee Hean, DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam

Ministers

Chairman & Members of the Public Service Commission

Distinguished Guests

Friends & Colleagues, Ladies & Gentlemen

1. Good evening and welcome to the 29th Administrative Service Dinner and Promotion Ceremony.

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2. We are honoured and privileged to have Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam as our Guest-of-Honour tonight.

3. I would also like to congratulate the 83 officers who are promoted or newly appointed to the Administrative Service.

4. Minister Ong just spoke about why the Public Service needs to keep innovating. We are indeed honoured to have Minister Ong to champion innovation in the Public Service. As a former public officer, he is very familiar with our system and context, the potential pitfalls and the opportunities for improvements. The senior leadership and I will be working closely with Minister Ong to better support and encourage innovation.

5. But ensuring that the Public Service remains at the leading edge of innovation requires more than the efforts of leaders. We need the collective effort of all our officers. Last year, we ran a series of engagements for PSfuture, where public officers discussed how we can better achieve our vision of being One Trusted Public Service with Citizens at the Centre. I participated in some of the dialogues involving some 14,000 officers.

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6. From the ideas and insights, we developed five key thrusts for our Public Sector Transformation. Among these, there are two which I find particularly important. They are:

- i. To deliver seamlessly as One Public Service; and
- ii. To foster a bold and innovative Public Service.

I have spoken previously about how we can collaborate across the Service, including at this dinner last year. Minister Ong has already spoken about innovation, so let me share my thoughts on what it means to be bold in the Public Service, and why the need to be bold takes on greater significance for us going forward.

**A. A Bold Public Service**

7. This call to be bold should not be foreign to us – the Singapore Public Service had always been bold in our approach. Our pioneers demonstrated this in the way they approached key issues during the early days of our independence. Some of these approaches ran counter to the prevailing wisdom of those times, but we were guided by a fundamental belief that in order to survive and succeed as a nation, we had to be bold. We recognised then that we could not thrive on half measures, and a robust approach was often the only way to deal decisively with the many challenges that we faced.

8. One example is our strong belief in multiracialism, and the policies we adopted in line with this belief. We know, both in the 1960s and even today, that racial and religious differences can be easily

accentuated in plural societies like ours. Our early leaders did not shy away from adopting solutions they felt were right for Singapore to avoid such fractures. We implemented robust, holistic policies that ranged from bilingualism in education, to the Ethnic Integration Policy in housing. We had to overcome resistance and cynicism to these policies in order to uphold our beliefs. While we are not perfect and our policies need constant refining, our model of multiracialism has served us well in a world that has continued to struggle with the pressures of identity and tribe.

9. This boldness in approach, and the Government's subsequent ability to deliver, generated trust, as citizens could see that the Government had the interests of the people and the nation at heart. This trust in turn allowed the Government to take further bold and decisive steps. Since independence, we have generally managed to sustain this virtuous cycle, which allowed us to introduce bold measures that were not necessarily the most popular – in diverse areas like new taxes, reviews of our CPF system, and in city planning, just to name a few.

10. If this virtuous cycle of good governance, trust and public impact breaks down, it can inhibit the Public Service from trying new

ways when faced with new challenges. And it can result in dire consequences when we are unable to introduce the right policies when the time calls for them. This inability to take a bold approach will also make it difficult for us to attract and retain motivated and capable people for the Service. Nobody who is capable and driven wants to work in an organisation that is constrained in its ability to try new things; an organisation that can only deliver limited impact, and has distrusting stakeholders.

11. As a public service, we certainly do not want to be caught in this vicious cycle.

**B. *What does boldness entail today?***

12. Singapore is now at a more mature stage of governance, where systems and policy levers are more tightly coupled. As things have worked relatively well, there may be a tendency to accept rather than question shared assumptions. At the same time, we now face greater public scrutiny, and failures may generate stronger public reactions. Yet, this should not and cannot make us risk-averse. We cannot be satisfied with merely maintaining the system, and with being “just good enough”. The changes we face are neither gradual nor linear

– these include our ageing population, technology disruptions and the impact of the external environment on our economic resilience. We risk being caught in an untenable position if we do not constantly question and re-examine the way we do things.

13. So what does it mean to be bold in the context of our Public Service today? *Firstly, we need to have ambition.* Being bold means we need a vision, one that might seem a little out-of-reach, but will galvanise everyone to work towards. Let me share an example. Our colleagues at MOT and LTA have an ambitious vision for urban mobility, which is to get all Singaporeans to use public and shared transport as their main mode of travel. To achieve this vision, we are investing significant resources to expand and improve our public transport network. In recent years, we have increased the number of buses on our road, trains on our tracks, pathways for pedestrians and cyclists.

14. We are not stopping there. We are running multiple experiments to facilitate shared, on-demand and door-to-door self-driving service trials. We want to be at the leading edge so that in the not-too-distant future, these experiments can blossom into innovative mobility solutions that can get you from your doorstep to the nearest

MRT station with just a few taps on your smartphone. The goal is to instil a mind-set shift; by transforming our mobility landscape to one that is much more public transport centric and less reliant on ownership of private vehicles. MOT's bold vision to transform urban mobility pushed the system to think of solutions needing transformational changes, not incremental ones.

15. Having ambition also means having imagination, the ability to see new possibilities. It means we cannot be satisfied with the same old ways of doing things. It means we need to have the belief that somehow, there must be a better way than the status quo. As an example, several agencies worked with the Singapore Children's Society to look at factors that influence early childhood development outcomes, in particular for vulnerable children from low-income families. One of the things they tried was the use of cross-agency data sets to test hypotheses around risk factors, and improve identification of children for more timely and targeted early intervention. Building on this work, we launched the KidSTART pilot programme last year to strengthen and coordinate upstream support for vulnerable children, to help them to have a good start in life.

16. This brings me to my second point. *We need to take risks, and dare to try.* We cannot always wait for precedents, for someone else to show us that it can be done and has been done, before we decide to try. Thankfully, we continue to surpass ourselves and others in several areas. For example, by commissioning Virtual Singapore – the world’s first interactive 3D map of our city, crammed with real-time, dynamic data that can be used to simulate urban planning solutions.

17. *Thirdly, we need to accept that failure is sometimes inevitable when we dare to try.* Being bold requires us to take risks, and in doing so, we are bound to encounter some setbacks. But setbacks should not deter us from trying. We can learn valuable lessons from our failures. As leaders, it is our duty to propagate a “safe-to-fail” culture, and be encouraging to officers who have tried, and failed despite due diligence. This will, in turn, encourage them and others not to give up trying.

18. Let me share an example – many of us know of HPB’s National Steps Challenge, the world’s first national-level smart “pedometer and app-based” programme to encourage physical activity. I am quite sure that if I do a count, many of you would be participants in this programme. What few of us know is that the National Steps Challenge



took in the lessons learnt from an earlier HPB campaign, the Million KG Challenge to fight obesity by encouraging Singaporeans to get to a healthy weight. Unfortunately, that initiative missed its target, as it was not easy for people to lose weight, or change their lifestyle over a short period. But HPB officers were undeterred.

19. Through that first campaign, they learnt how to mobilise large numbers of people; they also learnt how to generate excitement for their programmes. The National Steps Challenge benefited from these lessons. It has been a huge success, exceeding its initial targets, and reaching more than 500,000 participants over two seasons. Last night, in the midst of putting the finishing touches to my speech for tonight, I accompanied my daughter to the Botanic Gardens as she clocked her ten thousand steps for the day in order to qualify for a lucky draw. So you can see the impact you have in the lives of ordinary citizens when you are prepared to learn from your mistakes and try again.

### **C. *Facilitating the Push for Bold Ideas***

20. What does this 'needing to be bold' mean for leaders? We need to provide the space and time for officers to experiment, to create channels and platforms for them to surface ideas. If we had not allowed

our officers to surface their ideas, we would not have our monthly car-free Sunday, our inclusive neighbourhood playgrounds, or HDB's flat upgrading programme for seniors.

21. Officers have often told me that it only takes one "no" in the chain of clearance to prevent change. We need to change this, and leaders must create an environment conducive for officers to innovate at the workplace. Service-wide, we have launched an open call for the Public Service Innovation Challenge in March this year. This is yet another avenue for officers to deal with "live" issues, and I hope you will encourage and support your officers in this initiative.

22. What are other reasons that can stop our officers from being bold? Typically when I ask officers this, they say two things: (1) there is little incentive to be bold, and (2) there is a perceived intolerance for failure as we have to be good stewards of public resources. I would like to address these sentiments.

23. First, on the lack of incentives. Some officers feel that our performance management system does not reward one for being bold. I agree there is no perfect performance management system, and it is especially difficult to reward appropriate risk-taking behaviour. I have

been involved in many personnel boards over the years and know that we often ask if a particular officer is simply doing what is expected of him, or if he is actually trying to make a difference and is not afraid to reach beyond. While I typically do not share in public specific cases discussed in our personnel board meetings, I will tell you of a case last year where my fellow Permanent Secretaries and I decided to give an officer a higher performance rating. The officer took risks, and approached another agency to offer possible solutions to an intractable problem, and this was done despite not being certain that those solutions can succeed. We might not be able to pick every single instance when you dare to try as there are more than 145,000 public officers, but let me assure you that we seek to recognise you when we know that you do.

24. Second, on the tolerance for failure versus being good stewards of public resources – being bold does not mean being reckless. It does not mean that you should bulldoze ahead without consultation and without accountability. There has to be a relationship of trust that is developed between supervisor and officer. The onus is on both leaders and the officers. Leaders need to have confidence that officers are making sensible forays with their ideas. This is a confidence built over time. Officers, on their part, need to have regular

conversations with their supervisors on their plans and ideas, to build that relationship of trust. This comes through doing your homework, and building expertise and credibility to put forth more robust proposals. This will help you earn the licence to try and implement your bold ideas.

25. To prepare and develop our officers, we will articulate clear expectations of what being bold and innovative means for leaders, starting with Directors. PSD is developing the competency models for Directors. They will identify the key roles Directors have in driving change and innovation. The models will help our leaders better understand their roles and expectations, and guide our efforts to prepare and support our Directors in their development. We also intend to translate these expectations for officers at all levels.

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### **D. Conclusion**

26. In conclusion, let me thank all of you for your dedication and hard work in our transformation journey so far. Over the past few years, we have worked hard to improve service delivery, ramp up infrastructure developments, and engage fellow Singaporeans. It is a continuing journey.

27. As we look ahead and deal with more frequent changes and disruptions, let us remember that for Singapore to succeed, we must not be afraid to try. Dr Goh Keng Swee once said, “The only way to avoid making mistakes is not to do anything. And that will be the ultimate mistake.” We would not have been able to achieve the progress of the past 50 years, had we not challenged assumptions and made the bold moves.

28. As leaders, we need to lead the change; show that we dare to try – experiment, seek feedback, and learn from setbacks and failures. In the process, we will uncover new beliefs like our pioneers did, and position our Service and our nation well for tomorrow.

29. Thank you very much.

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