

**SPEECH BY MR ONG YE KUNG, MINISTER FOR
EDUCATION (HIGHER EDUCATION AND SKILLS),
PMO HEAD, COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY 2018, 1
MARCH 2018**

1. Mr Chairman, every industry is undergoing transformation and disruption. The Public Service and its 145,000 employees are no exception.

2. Transformation is not new to the Public Service. From computerisation in the 1980s, the PS21 Movement in the 1990's, the Service has pushed itself to change with the times. Today, as DPM Teo mentioned, we will need to find opportunities amidst challenges of technological disruption and slowing workforce growth.

3. The question is: what areas should we focus on?

A Public Service Working For the People

4. To answer that question let me first talk about the state of the Public Service today. It is generally healthy – it continues to uphold the values of honesty and integrity, strives to serve the public better, and we are able to attract our fair share of talent. These are the critical aspects of a functioning and effective Public Service.

5. Today, Ministers and the Public Service work closely together, to continue to deliver public housing, healthcare, education, transport, maintain law and order, keep Singapore safe and secure, attract investments, regulate various sectors, ensure social mobility etc.

6. So to Ms Chia Yong Yong's question, on whether public officers have buy-in to Government policies, I would say, by and large, public officers are committed to policies set by the elected Government. It does not happen that way in every country, and it did not happen here just because public officers are yes men or yes women. In fact, Ms Chia is correctly worried – we don't want buy-in to be weakened over time. What she has said is actually the opposite of Mr Louis Ng's concern – that public officers are not speaking up and opposing the government's policy.

7. This system works today because of the mutual trust and respect between Ministers and public officers, which have been built up through years of working together. Public officers know that national policies are developed in the long term interest of Singapore and Singaporeans. Ministers have confidence that when they set the policy direction, or make a policy speech, the Public Service will back them up with diligent implementation.

8. But public officers are not public figures, so Ministers understand that they have to do the heavy lifting in engaging the populace, and speak up for public officers when they are unfairly criticised. This is something that we must continue to work on, and not let it be weakened.

9. Citizen engagement, including co-creation with the public, has been a major focus since Public Sector Transformation started in 2012. So on Ms Chia Yong Yong's question where she asked whether public officers understand ground sentiments, and whether sufficient efforts have been put in to engage the ground, the Public Service over the years has expanded both digital and community outreach channels. For example, People's Association has a Kopi Talks series, and MCI's REACH

Listening Points and Facebook Live Chats enable agencies to engage broader segments of society and understand people's sentiments.

10. We have also been growing our citizen engagement capabilities. For example, the Citizen Engagement Seed Fund was set up in 2016 to encourage agencies to trial innovative engagement approaches. This fund has supported 16 projects by various agencies which have created new opportunities for citizen participation. These projects include MOH's Citizens' Jury on Diabetes, and Singapore Tourism Board's envisioning exercise for Chinatown and Little India.

11. To Ms Sylvia Lim's question, it has become the norm for agencies to do public consultations on legislative amendments. Over the past one year, Ministries have done consultation over a wide range of Bills. And these are very useful exercises, to solicit the concerns the public may have on the Bills, or suggestions that can improve both the policy thinking, as well as the policy implementation.

12. The extent of, the approach to, and the duration of consultation, however, is determined by each Ministry, depending on factors such as the nature of the legislative amendment, impact of the changes and also the level of public interest. In certain circumstances, such as when the Bills are time sensitive or revisions are routine, a Ministry may decide not to conduct a public consultation exercise. Ms Sylvia Lim also mentioned that Bills can be better presented, and Second Reading speeches can also be improved. We take note of that, and as always, we are always striving to improve.

The Twin Challenges

13. Another way which the Public Service is continuously improving on, is the last mile of service delivery and the touch point with the public.

14. The basic nature of Public Service is that it serves the masses, so the first challenge is that service delivery can be impersonal. Further, because the system must work for the masses, consistency in application of rules is critical. Otherwise, you get invidious comparison between citizen A and citizen B. So the second challenge is that the system can be inflexible and does not cater sufficiently to exceptions.

15. Associate Professor Fatimah Lateef, Mr Cedric Foo, Mr Seah Kian Peng and Mr Patrick Tay asked how the Public Service is innovating, and raising productivity, especially in the context of technological advancement. I think tackling these two challenges is a good, down to earth start.

16. To tackle impersonality we can leverage technology. Today, our smart phones and apps can communicate with us in an individualised way even though they are automated systems. So the Health Promotion Board's Health365 App is like a fitness buddy to us.

17. CPF Board has launched a CPF Retirement Planning Service, where frontline officers use technology to transform citizens' data into personalised infographics to provide citizens with personalised advice on CPF matters. As a result, the conversations between the CPF officers and the public became richer and more meaningful. SMS Janil will speak more about the efforts we are taking to fully leverage technology to deliver public service.

18. The second challenge of inflexibility is much harder to overcome. It involves tempering a system that is consistent and six sigma reliable by design, with the recognition that there are exceptions, rules are not perfect, and human judgement and discretion is needed from time to time.

19. In the Public Service, my view is that the key innovation is not so much driven by technology, but by our humanistic instincts – to make a sound judgement, to take a bit of risk, to take responsibility for our decisions. And we need to empower middle management, even ground officers to be able to do that, while ensuring that the integrity of the system not to give special favours remains intact.

20. Making this change pervasive will truly transform the delivery of public services, to be even better in meeting citizens' needs. To bring about a change in human behaviour, we need to make changes to the system that influences it most – which is the human resource system.

Doing Our Part for a Better Public Service

21. This brings me to Mr Louis Ng's question. In fact, during the budget debate, Mr Ng expressed concern that there is a culture of compliance, public officers dare not speak up for fear of getting into trouble, and they gave up trying to improve things because such efforts would be in vain, therefore some of them say, "let's stop caring".

22. Mr Ng may not be aware, but the Public Service is undergoing a major transformation, an exercise that started in 2012, in order to serve the public better and be ready for the future. And it is self-initiated –

demonstrating the longstanding ethos of serving with heart and commitment, and always striving to do better for Singapore.

23. The Head of Civil Service has called on public officers to have a 'constructive discontent', dissatisfied with the status quo and wanting to do better. I have urged the Service to be bold – 'think big, start small, act fast'.

24. This deep change cannot happen if the Public Service does not welcome ideas from its own officers. As Mr Ng has acknowledged, many Permanent Secretaries and CEOs engage staff directly to hear them out. And I agree with him, that this ought to be the practice across the board. In fact, all agencies today conduct regular employee engagement surveys, and many carry out other organisational development initiatives. One of which is a regular 360 degree feedback, to better develop our public service leaders.

25. We have also put in place a system, such as the Public Sector Transformation Awards, to recognise officers who display constructive discontent, and make the effort to effect transformative change. We have also recently incorporated into the bonus system a mechanism for agencies to specifically recognise officers for their innovation and enterprise.

26. Notwithstanding all these efforts, like all big and complex organizations, when there is a change, there will be those driving it, those supporting it, those worried about it, those wanting change in a totally different direction, and some resisting it. It is not just the Public Service, this happens in every organization.

27. We are determined to succeed in this exercise, and overcome the challenges and obstacles. The main obstacle is ourselves – Mr Ng and Mr Kok Heng Leun quoted me on this in their speeches during the Budget Debate. Thank you for that. If you accept that the biggest obstacle is ourselves, then the next question is: who does ‘ourselves’ refer to? The answer really is: It starts with me.

28. And so for me as the Minister I constantly have to ask myself –, am I giving policy directions that are bold enough, clear enough, and empowering enough for my staff. For a Permanent Secretary or CEO, he will ask if he has built an effective organization with the right forward-looking culture that can embrace change. For a Director he will ask if within his area of responsibility, he has sufficiently made improvements, made Public Service more effective, served the public better, and empowered, motivated and rallied his troops, – the people reporting to him. For an individual officer, he will ask whether he has acquired the skills to do the job better, and serve the public better.

29. If the starting point is that everyone else is an obstacle except yourself, then I say you need to care more about doing your work and doing your part, recognising that there are pros and cons to every proposed change, and that effecting change involves patience, persistence, and a hard slog.

30. Mr Louis Ng, although not a public officer, as an MP and a public figure, you can do your part too. If some civil servants tell you they dare not speak up, you can assure them that from your own experience, you have always spoken up and have never gotten into trouble.

31. If they feel that the system does not allow them to make a difference, ask them what they want to change. If it is a philosophical shift in Government policy like selling land to pay for healthcare costs, then you have to explain to them that this is not the policy of this current Government. If it is something that makes things better but their immediate supervisor is not supportive, then inform their Permanent Secretary or the Head of Civil Service; or even have a word with me, and I will see to it.

32. Where the Public Service has fallen short, it will address the problem. But when generalisations that tar the entire service with the same brush are made in public, and worse, further spread through the media, it does not do justice to our officers, it discourages and undermines improvement efforts. So I say to Mr Louis Ng – be part of the change. Be part of the change. Work with and encourage the Public Service, as it strives to transform itself to build a better future Singapore.

Changes to the Human Resource System

33. Assoc Prof Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim, Mr Louis Ng and Mr Patrick Tay asked a very pertinent question - how the Public Service can look beyond paper qualifications, to recognise skills and competencies. I believe Dr Teo Ho Pin asked that question too.

34. This has important relevance to the SkillsFuture Movement. We want to encourage Singaporeans to uncover their passions and aptitudes in a diverse range of skills, and master them through lifelong learning. We want a meritocracy of deep skills, not one of past academic results. The behaviour of employers play a big part to engender this culture.

35. Hence, the appraisal system in the Public Service is based on performance, and demonstration of skills and competencies. A public officer is recognized based on his contribution and delivery of results, with past academic results having no bearing.

36. But what I think the Public Service can continue to improve on is recruitment criteria, how schemes are structured, and how people are placed onto the schemes. For certain schemes, where officers analyze data, develop policies or even help lead large complex organizations, we do need to look out for applicants with high cognitive skills, where academic results are one proxy to measure that.

37. However, for work that is vocational or skills-based in nature, and there are plenty in the Public Service, there is much less need to sort or select based on academic results, or structure diploma and degree holders into different schemes with different salary scales and structures. Instead, we should continue to recruit based on the applicant's passion, skills and aptitudes for the specific vocation.

38. Hence, one change that we can implement for such skills-based jobs, is to merge existing schemes for diploma and degree holders. And beyond the point of recruitment, it is on-the-job performance that determines the officer's progression. If we don't do this, we can have a situation where someone without a degree, but has mastered the craft after many years of experience and on the job training, is pegged below a fresh degree graduate, doing the same job. This does not do justice to mastery and craftsmanship.

39. PSD has done this merger for the generic Management Executive Scheme in the Civil Service in 2015. As Assoc Prof Muhammad Faishal

mentioned, MOE has also done this, so diploma and degree graduates now all come under the same Education Scheme. There are many other examples.

40. One most recent example is the Air Traffic Control Officer Scheme (ATCO Scheme). Changi Airport is one of the busiest airports in the world. To keep our skies safe and secure, we need highly skilled and competent ATCOs to plan, guide, and direct air traffic in and out of Changi Airport. The Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS) prepares ATCOs for the job through a very rigorous skills-based training program.

41. Since July 2017, all ATCOs, regardless of their academic qualifications, will be emplaced to the same grade and receive the same salaries once they are assessed and found to have the skills required for the job.

42. PSD will work with other public agencies to identify other areas and other schemes where we can implement this.

43. There are, however, situations where the profession or the industry feels that a separation of schemes between diploma and degrees is necessary. In those cases, we will establish a clear, performance-based pathway for an officer to upgrade from the diploma scheme to the degree scheme.

44. This is what MSF will do for the Social Work profession. Today, certified social workers need to be social work degree holders. As such, those who hold relevant diplomas, for example the Social Work diploma from Nanyang Polytechnic, can enter the sector as social work associates or SWAs, playing a supporting role to the degree-holding social workers.

45. To enable more Diploma holders to become social workers, MSF has endorsed a new pathway. From the second half of this year, SkillsFuture Singapore, the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) and Nanyang Polytechnic, will introduce a new work-learn programme for SWAs.

46. Through this programme, diploma graduates and promising SWAs with work experience will be able to undergo social work training with suitable employers, while attending classes at SUSS. This is a work-learn pathway, recognising that social work is really a craft, and is skills-based in nature. At the end of the three-year program, the trainees will attain a Bachelor of Social Work and be certified a social worker. Minister Desmond Lee will speak more about this at the COS for MSF.

Conclusion

47. Mr Chairman, I will conclude by talking about an agency that has made a successful leap in changing its mindset and operating model.

48. One public agency that is really doing this, is the National Parks Board, or NParks. Its vision has evolved over the years from creating a Garden City to having a City in a Garden.

49. This reimagining of its mission led to innovative projects that integrated nature with our urban landscape, such as Gardens by the Bay, a garden built on prime, reclaimed land, for an extended CBD, which is now a popular destination for locals, and a must-see for tourists. There is

also the Botanic Gardens – a national park within the city centre, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a source of pride for Singaporeans.

50. In my dealings with NParks, I found that they put our citizens' interests at the centre of whatever they do. From just providing a park near where we live, they are linking all the parks through an island wide Park Connector Network – so that they become one big park accessible to all.

51. In recent years, NParks has integrated into parks, public facilities such as the Woodlands Integrated Healthcare Cluster, SAFRA Clubhouse at Chua Chu Kang, and the Singapore Institute of Technology Campus in Punggol. In Sembawang, it stepped forward to undertake the sprucing up of the only hot spring in Singapore, into a Hot Spring Park for the public to enjoy.

52. NParks also uses technology to help officers work better and more productively. For example, information of trees are now captured in a digitalized platform, accessible on officers' mobile devices. And sensors are now being trialed and installed to detect tilt in trees, so that mitigating measures can be taken early by NParks officers.

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53. NParks' people are valued for their skills and passion in this field. All officers are hired into the same Management Executive Scheme. About one third of them hold certifications in arboriculture, horticulture and park management. Our City in a Garden is the best place for these officers to polish their craft.

54. The Public Service never leads in terms of remuneration and benefits – this is our operating philosophy. We see what the industries are

offering, and try our best to be competitive so that we have our share of talent.

55. But where it concerns defining our missions, adopting of new technologies or human resource practices in response to emerging opportunities or national challenges, we must be prepared to be pioneer implementers, and make that demonstrative impact. This is our role in Singapore's transformation journey, to continuously improve our service to the public and build a better Singapore.

56. Mr Chairman, I beg to move.

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