

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

SINGAPORE INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT ANNUAL DINNER
SPEECH BY DR LEE CHIAW MENG,
MINISTER FOR SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

24 Sep 75, 8.00 pm

1 The Singapore Institute of Management, born some ten years ago, has lived through an exciting period during which Singapore recorded impressive economic growth rates, accompanied by major structural changes in the economy. The excellent economic performance could not have taken place without the availability of managerial expertise, much of which have been, by necessity, imported from foreign sources. However, for obvious reasons it is necessary, indeed vital, to build up our own pool of local expertise, and in this lies the significance of the local institutions of higher learning in their efforts towards developing their programmes in management studies.

2 Tonight I wish to share with you some of my personal thoughts as a Vice-Chancellor on issues or dilemmas related to the development of management manpower in the hope that we can jointly resolve them.

3 The first problem I have in mind centres on the need to optimise the use of a very limited pool of training resources. Over the past few years, a good number of our local citizens have been abroad to acquire more knowledge and academic qualifications. To many it would appear that the solution to staff shortage can be found by sending more personnel abroad for academic training. However, the problem is a more subtle one which does not lend itself to such a simple solution.

4 There are many complications. For example, the greatest need at the managerial level is not so much the lack of trained personnel as of people who are qualified in the sense that they have acquired a breadth and depth of experience that makes them capable of taking on top managerial responsibilities. Then again, it is lamentable, but true, that many of those entrusted with management training in the universities themselves lack operational experience as managers.

5 The second problem which needs resolution concerns the end result of training. Here I refer to the targets and objectives of training. The impression one gets is that the target of training - what areas and what sectors we should aspire to train for - is rather blurred. There are differences in viewpoint: some people advocate that we should pay attention to the traditional sector - the local firm and the family-run enterprises. Others advocate the training of human resources for the managerial requirements of the large corporations, especially the multinational enterprises. It goes without saying that the objectives of the training programme, training methodology, and content are very much determined by the sort of training target one has in mind. It is a subject that has so many considerations - not all of which are completely reconcilable, though I would like to pose some suggestions later on.

6 The third and final problem area which I wish to consider with you concerns problems of training created by cultural differences. Perhaps a simple illustration will highlight this. In a western society which is industrialised and established, executives very often have to begin their careers at the base of their organisational hierarchy. For example, many a bank manager has begun his career as a teller or customer reception clerk. However, in our own society,

people aspire to circumvent this time-tested career process by insisting on managerial positions - at the minimum the position of a junior executive - the moment they acquire a paper qualification from the university. Referring to banking again, many graduates expect to join the banking world as a bank officer or junior executive despite the fact that their previous experience in banking began and ended with the cashing of a cheque.

7 The result of these differences in cultural aspirations can often be serious. The expatriate managers at times find it hard to understand the attitude of the fresh local graduate, while the latter often believes that his organisation is not putting him to proper use at the level he considers commensurate with his training. Such misunderstandings revolving on the fundamental differences in expectations of people from different cultural backgrounds can obviously affect the efficiency and effectiveness of an enterprise. My hope is that even though the problem is posed as one of cultural differences, it can be resolved through the process of sound training - training not so much to impart information as to inculcate a healthy work attitude.

8 On this note, therefore, I would like to discuss how we can together resolve the various issues I have raised.

9 First, with regard to the shortage of staff, a closer co-ordination of training efforts and mutual involvement in this process between the universities and the private sectors in co-ordinating training efforts, could help reduce the problem. To overcome the lack of practical managerial experience among most of our academic management trainers, it would be deeply appreciated if companies could open their doors to allow

our academics to get first hand experience of the world of business. I have in mind a variety of measures, such as letting our staff work in various capacities for a period of, say, a year. Such attachments will be useful not only to the lecturer but also the company which offers him the attachment. I hope too that companies would permit academicians to do research on them so as to develop local case-studies which could be used to make management training more realistic. It would be helpful too if industry could provide the necessary feed-back on the performance of our graduates at work and advise on course development. Here may I assure you that, far from resisting such "interference", most dons would welcome such advice.

10 In return for this help, the university can provide useful services to business and industry. Certainly the academic staff can help in various management and industrial research projects. With the benefit of the practical experience that I have mentioned, they can in turn surely help business in a wide range of training and development programmes, thereby contributing their part to the development of a pool of experienced managers.

11 Second, with regard to agreement on the targets and objectives of training, there can be no perfect solution. The problem calls for the wise allocation of a particular scarce resource for different sectors with diverse needs. Perhaps here may I suggest that the multinational enterprises take an even greater lead in staff development. Surely, their message that successful growth and effective staff development go hand in hand will not be lost on the smaller firms in the traditional sector which would have to compete effectively in order to survive.

12 From the perspective of the university, one resolution of this problem of establishing training priorities that we have in mind is to produce in sufficient quantity the broad-based all-rounder who can prove his value in any enterprise, be it large or small, local or multi-national.

13 And this naturally brings us to our third problem. What are the ways open to us whereby we can train a potential pool of managerial personnel who can bridge sectorial differences and cultural variances, and still be an effective contributor in any organisation?

14 At the university end we can only handle part of the problem through continuous curriculum reform and staff development. But an equally important part of the solution I believe lies in the pool of men with wisdom and experience available in the real world of business. Your contribution in terms of sending to the university these men of experience to interact with our staff and foster in our students a sound work ethic will go a long way in bridging cultural differences. The measures that I have suggested should help to produce a pool of potentially effective managers valuable to any organisation in our local context.

15 In the training of managers there are undoubtedly problems. But happily they are not totally insolvable. Difficulties owing to shortage of experienced managerial personnel can be largely eliminated through greater mutual training involvement. The problem of sorting out priorities in training targets and objectives can be reduced by the training of a breed of more adaptable and versatile potential managers. And finally the differences in cultural viewpoint resulting in operational difficulties can be bridged by inculcating a set of correct attitudes. It is in these fruitful and challenging areas that the universities and world of business can work hand in hand.

16 Finally, may I offer my personal
congratulations to those who are receiving their
Diplomas this evening. I wish you a very bright
future.