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SPEECH BY DR WAN SOON BEE, MINISTER OF STATE,  
AT THE SINGAPORE INSTITUTE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT'S  
ANNUAL DINNER AND DANCE AT THE PHOENIX GRAND BALLROOM,  
HOTEL NEW OTANI, ON SATURDAY, 6 OCTOBER 1984 AT 8 PM

There was a time when managers thought it unthinkable, and workers regarded it as heretical, for a trade unionist to address a gathering of personnel managers at their gala function, such as the annual dinner and dance that all of us are attending tonight. There was also a time when workers shuddered at words like productivity, and went through all means to avoid any contact or association with it. If one were to journey into the past, not necessarily as long as 25 years ago, but just five years ago, it would not be difficult to understand the mind-set and actions of our managers and workers in view of the prevailing circumstances then.

According to official records, efforts to launch a credible productivity movement in Singapore started as early as 1965 when Employer and Trade Union organisations jointly organised a joint consultation seminar. Then, came two other more visible attempts in 1972 and in 1975. Those present tonight who lived through that era would well remember how the pioneer Works Councils and Productivity Committees floundered, and failed to take root at the enterprises where it was intended to help improve the competitiveness and quality of the company's services and products. Despite many earnest attempts by the NPB, these early meeting sessions between management and union often degenerated into grievance sessions for

unionists, and lecture sessions for management. Workers at that time interpreted work improvement teams as subtle attempts by the management to overload them with work, in order to extract every ounce of their energy for the wages they were paid. Managers after attending a few of these sessions, would wring their hands in despair, label them as being most unproductive, and allow these group activities to die a natural death. Today, all these sound like an extract from the archives. The NPB and Straits Times' surveys over the last few years show a distinctive switch in the attitude of our workers towards productivity. Way back in 1982, the NPB survey revealed that 70 per cent of our workers questioned whether productivity would benefit them. Last year, the NPB survey showed that those surveyed no longer doubted the benefits of productivity, nor whom productivity was supposed to benefit. The issue was on how to translate productivity concepts into action at the workplace.

I am extremely heartened to note this revolution which has taken place in the minds of our workers. Outward manifestations of this change for the better are a six-fold increase in the number of QC circles registered by the NPB, from 350 circles in 1982 to over 2300 circles by August 1984 involving over 17,000 employees. The number of conciliation cases handled by the Ministry of Labour has also dropped drastically. The number of joint labour-management working groups has also increased substantially. All these figures augur well, for they are clear indications that our workers are willing to do their part to improve the quality and competitiveness of the company's goods and services.

While our workers and unions have responded enthusiastically to the call to be productive, not all managements have taken full advantage of the supportive attitude and understanding of union leaders to form

quality control circles and work excellence committees, whatever labels one wishes to attach to other small group activities. There is much benefit to be gained if managements muster the support of workers and harness their workers energies and ideas for improvement.

What are some of the factors which hinder managers from pushing productivity to the hilt? An examination of the industrial ownership profile reveals that we have employers of all nationalities in Singapore. Many of such employers already harbour pre-conceived notions of productivity, as well as how the workforce would respond to suggestions to increase work effectiveness and efficiency. Some of these pre-conceived ideas have been ingrained as a result of many years of experience gained in other countries. This makes it extremely difficult for some managers to be receptive to new techniques and new ideas which can improve the performance of their enterprise, or even to believe that productivity efforts will pay-off in Singapore.

Our rapid industrialisation has led many of our young professionals to assume high positions of responsibility in a very short span of time. Naturally, it will be difficult for such persons to command the same respect, and also possess the same ability to motivate the workforce as they would be able to had they been given adequate time to nurture their managerial abilities.

The low priority that is sometimes accorded to personnel functions does not help matters. Some managements seem to treat their personnel managers as errand boys who do the dirty work. Our workers are no fools, for they can see and know whether the decision makers in their companies are fully committed to improving the productivity of their company, and they will respond accordingly.

Recently, many employers' associations such as the ABC, SNEF, SICC etc. in their submissions to the NPB, have echoed that our managers need more training, and that they would be better off and better able to manage their workers if they were better trained.

Everyone ultimately must realise that good workers cannot make managements better, but that good managements can help all workers to become better. Efforts to improve productivity are most assured if there is commitment from managers especially the chief executive officers. This is because managers have at their disposal, authority to change work procedures, ideas for new strategies and are therefore in a better position to implement plans which can help them to enlarge the markets and profits. In any enterprise, the quality of management is ultimately what counts. Geneen, the former ITT boss used to remark that managers must manage. It is my hope that not only will all our managers manage, but that they do it well.

I have made these remarks not to criticise, but in the hope that more can and will be done to help our managers manage not only well, but better. I am happy to note that the SIPM has taken steps to upgrade its members' professionalism by conducting a course for some of your members who do not have the pre-requisite qualifications to attend courses conducted by the NUS, or the NPB or even the SIM. This attempt of self-help by your members is commendable and my wish is that other associations of similar calling will emulate what you have done for your members.

On this note, may I wish you an enjoyable evening as you celebrate your annual dinner and dance.

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