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Information Division, Ministry of Culture, City Hall, Singapore 0617 - TEL: 3378191 ext. 352, 353, 354 / 3362207 / 3362271

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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR AT THE SINGAPORE INSTITUTE OF  
PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT ANNUAL DINNER AT HILTON HOTEL BALLROOM ON  
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ON MOTIVATORS, NON-MOTIVATORS AND DE-MOTIVATORS

The briefs I received from your organisation were informative and well-written, but they did not tell me anything which you and I do not already know. It was rather like re-reading an old and well-thumbed textbook. Very useful for revision, and at least by way of helping me to decide what not to say.

An overview of the total terrain of a subject, from a sufficient height - of the forests, rapids, streams, hills, muds and flats which we will have to negotiate and deal with, can make all the difference between success and failure.

The Prime Minister presented such an overview to the nation as a whole in his National Day Rally speech. In his recently published essay on "How we can put the economic recession to good use", Dr Tony Tan provides an overview of the economic milieu in which we find ourselves. These two overviews provide the parameters and terms of reference within which we have to operate in order to realise desirable goals for our people. It would be superfluous to repeat them here. I will content myself with some perceptions and insights on the equation between motivation and performance on the one hand, and the quality of the results obtained on the other.

Since assuming office as President of the Republic, I have been able to make 85 separate visits to schools, other educational institutions, plants, factories, defence establishments, statutory boards, and so on.

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I took care not to do all this in a blaze of publicity. With the media present, it would not have been possible to engage in frank and informal discussions with students, teachers, workers, supervisors, managers, civil servants, and officers from all ranks of the police, armed forces, prison and fire brigade. And it proved to be highly worth while. There were difficulties, of course, because there were occasions when I sensed that a special performance was being put on for my benefit. But my experience as a teacher, and my years of public speaking, have helped to develop a kind of sixth sense. You instinctively know whether your audience is interested in what you are saying, or is bored to death. You know whether you are registering with them, or whether they think that you are an unrelieved pain-in-the-neck. You also learn to develop a "feel" about the atmosphere of a school or a place of work, and whether people relate to each other positively, negatively or indifferently. And this same sixth sense sends warning signals when somebody attempts to take you for a ride.

After such visits, which I expect to continue, I am convinced that the potential of our workers is much higher than most people think. Indeed, their capacity for responsive co-operation with intelligent managements is under-estimated and under-utilised.

I am also satisfied that our school system is slowly but steadily being transformed. Principals and teachers no longer feel deluged, as they once did, by floods of heavy-handed circulars, penned by faceless and sometimes mindless bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education. On the contrary, they are being actively encouraged to be independent and innovative in regard to teaching methods and in the effective application of educational technology. Our depersonalised Government schools are gradually becoming re-personalised, with each school being encouraged to develop its own unique style and character.

I have met many fine men and women, possessed of wholly admirable dedication and commitment to the children in their charge. They are modest, and attempt to hide their lights under bushels. I am glad to learn that the Ministry of Education is considering public recognition of such outstanding teachers.

So much for the pluses. And one should always begin with the pluses. The minuses are inevitable, but they can be diminished or transformed, if not altogether eliminated.

Whether in our schools, Government ministries, factories, or elsewhere, teachers, doctors, engineers, managers, supervisors and factory floor workers may be classified as follows. There are the highly motivated types, and they are the salt of our society. Next come the non-motivated types. These are persons who do just enough to ensure that they will receive their pay cheques at the end of the month. They don't do harm. But they don't do any good either. I believe they can be salvaged. The human spirit can be pauperised. It can also be enriched and energised. Given the right leadership in schools and factories, these persons can be transformed into good team-players and better achievers.

The group which constitutes the real difficulty are what may be called the de-motivators. These are persons who pour scorn on those who make that extra effort to excel, to do better. And they attempt to demoralise the better types with jibes and jeers. They should not be allowed to succeed.

To give but one example. I know a number of teachers, some of whom have recently graduated from the Institute of Education, who are bubbling over with ideas about how best to apply the latest educational technology available; but they became the subject of jibes by less enthusiastic and less motivated colleagues. Fortunately, they had strength of character. They did not succumb, and demonstrated by example what can and ought to be done for the better instruction of our children.

We all know of de-motivators in places of employment who jeer at the better workers as "management stooges", or use other uncomplimentary epithets.

Fortunately for Singapore, all the reports indicate that the tripartite promotion of the team-spirit by Government, employers and unions is beginning to bear fruit. The message has been grasped by the great majority of our managers, executives and workers, and the de-motivators are much fewer today than they were some ten or fifteen years ago.

A major hurdle to clear, and you in the Singapore Institute of Personnel Management can help us to clear it, is that a good number of our managers suffer from mental blocks. There are line managers, heads of departments and executives, who believe that the motivation of workers is the exclusive concern of the Personnel Department. If employees in their department have grievances of any kind, or are unhappy for any reason, these managers and executives pass the buck to the Personnel Department. But in a successful modern enterprise, every manager's portfolio includes the motivation and management of the men and women who work for and with him. Every manager and executive must relate to his employees in a positive and personal way. Team spirit will remain pie-in-the-sky until all our managers learn to accept this elementary truth. By and large, our workers are decent human beings. They will respond positively, if they are approached and treated rightly.

Take SIA pilots for example. Nothing wrong with them. They pilot one of the finest air fleets in the world. But because of a breakdown in communication between cockpit crew management and cabin crew management, the pilots had felt no responsibility in the past for the cabin crew. Naturally, relations between cockpit crew and cabin crew were sometimes strained. Things have changed for the better now. At least I hope so. I had recommended a performance appraisal system for pilots which would include, among other things, an assessment of how a pilot relates to his cabin crew, and to his passengers as well. There is therefore now an incentive for pilots to relate in a friendly, beneficent and positive way with the entire flight crew. The Chief pilot in the cockpit is commander of the whole flight, and must feel responsible for everyone in his plane, cabin crew and passengers included.

I do not suggest that personnel managers should be made redundant. On the contrary, as is the practice in a number of American and Japanese enterprises I know of, the head of the personnel department is a super co-ordinator of other personnel motivators in the enterprise. His primary role is the motivation of motivators. Like all really good teachers, a really good personnel manager is a rare and extremely valuable digit.

Successful examples of excellent labour-management teamwork in Singapore do exist. I have been impressed by what I saw of some American and Japanese enterprises in Singapore. They have long practised what some of us have only recently begun to preach. I would like to commend these enterprises to all our local home-grown managers as examples for them to emulate.

One final word. The Prime Minister has already painted, in vivid fashion, the most daunting challenge Singapore faces today. A recession, more or less prolonged, will soon be upon us. And as Dr Tony Tan pointed out, this is no occasion for the wringing of hands, and for moans and groans. Every tribulation must be accepted as a challenge to be met, an opportunity to be seized. For we live in a cruel and competitive world. We must use the two or three lean years ahead to prepare some 600,000-odd workers, who have not made the PSLE grade, for the coming age of higher technology. A basic minimum of literacy and numeracy must be imparted to them. We can and must do it. They are our fellow citizens, and we cannot let them down. They must also belong, and have a stake in the Singapore of tomorrow. This is crucial. If 600,000-odd Singaporeans do not belong, do not have a stake, we will not be able to make it into the technological age.

We must deal, of course, with the inevitable crop of "nay-sayers". We also have to deal with inertia on the part of some of the workers themselves. But our people must get used to the idea of the importance of continuing education in a technological age.

As technological advances take place, old skills and jobs will be rendered obsolete. New skills must be acquired. Fresh training programmes are therefore constantly being instituted in all the high technology undertakings in America, Western Europe, Japan and elsewhere.

It is not merely workers who require continuing education, retraining programmes and refresher courses. Managers and production line supervisors also require to keep pace with the demands of new technology. Some months ago, our Members of Parliament, including some Ministers, did not consider it beneath them to attend briefing sessions on computers. For it is important that those who lead us should know what they are talking about.

Our teachers, doctors, engineers, defence officers and others are also obliged to keep abreast of the latest developments in education, medicine, engineering, and military technology, theories and doctrines.

The "nay-sayers" notwithstanding, I am confident that the young Singaporeans of today will not be found less wanting, in the face of the challenge of survival, than their parents were before them. Modern Singapore is a living testimony of the motivated efforts of the industrious and responsible population which constituted the founding generation of Singaporeans.

Our children will find even more exciting challenges in the future than we did. I envy them, for I belong to a diminishing and disappearing generation. But they will be tempered, as we were in our time, by the problems and difficulties they will have to tackle. The recession and slower growth-rates we will experience, will provide the first test of adversity they have had. Given honest leadership, our people will weather the storms ahead, as long as we do not lose our heads and our nerves.

If the Singapore Institute of Personnel Management gets its priorities right, you can make a significant contribution to the creation of the Singapore of tomorrow.

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