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## RESPONSIBILITIES OF PROFESSIONALS AS LEADERS AND THINK TANKS IN THE COMMUNITY

The word professional derives from the word profession which has religious connotation in its origin. You will find in most dictionaries one of the basic meaning of the word profession is "declaration of belief in a religion". Therefore the original functions of most professions must have been a sacred one. Members of the Bar in ancient days of England were supposed to work for nothing. The barrister's bar gown still has a fiddle-shaped piece of stuff attached on the left shoulder and hangs down the back of the garment. This piece of stuff which was called lapel now resembles an upside down wallet<sup>was</sup>/designed to provide grateful clients with a means of presenting an honorarium when the lawyer was not looking and without ruffling the susceptibilities or offending the dignity of learned counsel. Nowadays although the bar gown is still being worn with the lapel attached to remind lawyers of their sacred origin, things are not quite the same anymore in respect of payments of fees for services rendered. The same applies to other professions which initially upheld lofty ideals but gradually became more and more materialistic minded in rendering their services.

The nature of this Seminar suggests that there is an urgent need to remind the professionals of their sacred duties and to re-kindle their interest in the social aspects of their functions apart from earning their daily bread. It is understandable that in the present day commodity-minded society where most things including the services of professionals are commercialised, it is not easy for one to tap the energies of the professionals for the

welfare and development of society. The temptation of materialistic gain and comfort and the rat race for status and position which money brings with it conspire to make many professionals miserly with their time and energies for social services because time and energy means more money and commodity. The tendency today is for a professional to equate the meaning of work simply with how much money it can fetch in order to buy the commodities he and his family desire to consume. The profit making motive becomes even more glaring as wealth and possession are identified as the criteria for symbol of his worth, status and position.

A person's consciousness of himself as a citizen of a particular national society is shaped by his understanding of what the society is. His sense of self and his sense of nation or society are intertwined. There is a constant inner contradiction between the two. The interaction of this contradiction produces two different types of personalities. When the sense of self prevails, we get the egocentric type who believes in the survival of the fittest. He is interested only in his own survival without any feeling for others. When the sense of society pricks his conscience, we get the public-spirited type who realises that he has a sense of responsibility towards society and therefore willing to spend more of his time and energy for public affairs. He belongs to one of those who believe in the theory of symbiosis mutualis that human beings should help each other, that the rich should help the poor and the strong, the weak. Professionals, or for that matter, all human beings or nations can generally be classified into these two groups, one believing in the survival of the fittest and the other in the theory and practice of symbiosis mutualis. Is it not the case of the survival of the fittest when developed countries take protectionist measures against developing countries?

The egocentric professionals work purely for money, status and position. He feels that he owes nothing to society and that so long as he has the means, he can buy the trappings of status symbol - an ostentatious automobile, an ultra-modern bungalow with all the pomp and finery of high society living. He minds his own business and develops a distorted view of the meaning of pride, self-respect and sense of achievement. His motto is to sell his services to the highest bidder. He does not believe in giving less

expensive not to mention free services to the poor and needy for he thinks that it is Government's business. Time is money are therefore too precious to waste on social work. The meaning of friendship is simply "What can I get out of him". Leisure hours are meant for him and his family to relax and enjoy the pleasures and luxuries of things they can afford. Since his whole purpose in life is himself and his family, he has the tendency to look for safer and greener pastures, when his sense of security is threatened. He owes no loyalty to any nation.

The public-spirited type of professionals however realises that it is the society that has nurtured him and provided him with the opportunity to receive his education, professionalism as well as security and comfort and that he should do something in return for its welfare and development. He is aware of how his society came to be, where it is going, and what its dominant values are and should be. He feels a sense of belonging and kinship and shares a sense of common past and common stake in the fate of the society or nation. Since he believes in the interdependence of human beings in society, he is willing to spare some of his time and energy to give a helping hand to the less fortunate. He regards his profession not merely as a means to earn a living but also as a means to serve society. He is prepared to help mould society. He has a sense of loyalty to the nation.

Man moulds society as well as being moulded by it. When a society becomes too money oriented and regards the accumulation of wealth as the yardstick of success and achievement, it will produce a predominance of self-centred citizens including professionals. An abundance of such personalities will further perpetuate a social ethos which encourages the rat race for money and status. Such an ethos stifles the social conscience of the professionals, their sense of responsibilities, their feelings and sympathy for their fellow human beings and their sense of belonging to society and nation. A society of this character resembles a sand castle. It cannot withstand the mildest impact of the ripple of the sea wave. Its components are after all a mass of solitary sand with no common element to bind them together as a cohesive entity. It is not a community of persons bound by a common sense of belonging, sharing a common purpose and destiny. A society or a nation can only last if its members particularly the professionals who are the

intelligentsia realise that they have a stake in its survival and are prepared to play a role. So long as the professionals and intelligentsia remain selfish, aloof and passive, the decadent ethos will continue to shape the quality of life of the people. The society will continue to deteriorate until some forces emerge to effect a dramatic change. Recent historical events in nearby countries have shown how professionals and the intelligentsia have been overtaken by events and become victims of dramatic social changes because they took no interest in shaping the society which ultimately began to shape their lives. Only the limited minority among the professionals in such cases, managed to escape the tragedy. The green pastures which they had put their hopes on turned out to be not so green after all. Historical evidences indicate that in most cases, it was the selfish and apathetic attitude of the intelligentsia towards society and their couldn't care less attitude towards the welfare of the less fortunate that led to their own downfall. When a new social order of "dictatorship of the proletariat" or whatever name the new rulers may give to the regime takes over, the usefulness of the services of the professionals and the intelligentsia will be based on different norms and sense of value. The services of some professionals may not even worth half a cent, if a more fanatic group of rulers believing in the purity of thought takes over. A qualified engineer with long years of experience may be given a pad to top mosquitoes and flies in the street as a punishment for his decadent and reactionary thoughts. Under these circumstances, the expertise of professionals becomes less important than the contents of their thought. The professionals will have no role to play as a think tank and a Seminar of this nature we are conducting today will be superfluous. That will be the fate of professionals when most of them take no interest in society.

The fact that we are holding this Seminar shows that the society we are in provides room for professionals to play a role. It is also gratifying to see that so many professionals are taking a keen interest in this Seminar organised by the Singapore Professional Centre. The title of the subject I am asked to speak on suggests that the role of professionals intends to play in society is that of a think tank. According to the dictionary think tank means "a person or a group of people usually expert in some field regarded as a source of ideas and solutions to problems," in

other words, providing only the brains and not the muscles. The title may give one a wrong impression, that the professionals are only willing to sit back on their arm chairs and think of ideas which they can solve all problems. I hope this is not the idea behind this exercise. It is necessary to put matters in proper perspective before we begin our discussion. I would like to stress that professionals should not be merely a think tank but also implementers of their ideas. Good ideas and solutions can come about through closer observation and understanding of the problems involved and through personal experience at grass root level. Practical ideas do not grow in air-conditioned rooms, nor will workable solutions fall from Heaven. Ivory tower solutions may not cure the complicated earthly social problems. If professionals are interested to play a role, they must, first of all, be prepared to get down from their ivory towers and mingle with the people. They have to know them, understand their problems before they can find the right solutions. Being professionals who are after all the elite, their role would naturally be that of leaders. One must remember that success in leadership amongst the people must be earned. It does not come automatically by virtue of one's professional status. I take it that professionals are prepared to play a role in society as think tank as well as implementers. Once this basic factor is established, there is an unlimited scope in what they can do to help improve the quality of life of our people.

There are 3 aspects to the role of professionals. One concerns the mental attitude and approach to work. The second, the introduction of new knowledge to the respective professions and their applications to solutions of social problems and the third involves extra time and effort outside one's normal duties. On the first aspect, the Professional Centre can organise a campaign to put right the mental attitude of all professionals covering all walks of life. One can see a sign of sloppiness in the services rendered in many walks of life. There is a general complaint that nowadays we rarely find people serious in their work. Taking pride in a job well done has become a rare virtue. People think more in terms of a quick buck with less work. They job hop the moment someone offers a few more dollars. Work becomes boring and a drudgery for those who no more experience a sense of satisfaction or a sense of fulfilment which well-accomplished jobs would give

to the doers. This sloppy attitude towards one's work and profession can have an adverse and far-reaching effect on the healthy growth and development of our society affecting its very fabric. There is an urgent need for professionals to take the lead to instil in our work-force a sense of self-respect and pride in their profession, whatever it may be. They should regain a respect for the self in terms of feeling that they serve a useful function apart from earning a living. They should be made to realise the intrinsic value of their work and the contribution each and everyone can do towards the transformation of the material environment and development of society. If the working population of the city think only in terms of money and take no interest or pride in their work, it will suffer a setback in its development and will become stagnant and unstable. A nation can become stable and strong when every citizen takes his job seriously, feels a sense of pride in his work and has the right mental attitude towards his profession. The amazingly rapid economic recovery of Japan and West Germany after their devastating defeat at the 2nd World War was to a large extent attributable to the proper mental approach of their people towards work. One of the most difficult but vital task in social transformation is to bring about a change in the social ethos - a pattern of behaviour which has become inherent in the habit or culture of the people. The Professional Centre can play an important role to promote the welfare of our society if it helps to spread the virtue of pride and respect for work.

The second aspect of the role of professionals concerns the introduction of new knowledge into their respective professions. The professionals are carriers of applied knowledge. They are the brokers between every tower of discovery of knowledge and the world of practical experience and application. Institutions need new knowledge to solve new problems. The professionals can play a useful role as their vehicles for innovation. They can contribute to increasing the capability of institutions towards problem solving. They should strive to maintain and improve the standard of the profession whether they are for personal betterment or academic progress.

The third aspect is that of redefining the social role of professions in the development of society so that it is not narrowly

confined to that of earning a living. The professionals should spare some of their time and energies to make life easier and less painful for the less fortunate section of the population. Never in the history of Singapore has such a major transplantation of population taking place as a result of massive housing development programme and urban renewal. It means not only a change in our skyline but involves a breaking up of family system and drastic adjustment to new ways of life in new surroundings. Coupled with the rapid industrialization, new social problems affecting a large part of our population have cropped up. The impact of high rise living on the resettled city sleekers or farmers is something requiring careful study and research. Can anything be done to assist the new flat dwellers to adapt to their new surroundings? Urban renewal means massive movements of thousands of families from one locality to another, creating the need to adjust their old habits to new ones. The constant exposure of young minds to crime and permissiveness through the mass media and TV must have an adverse impact. The milder one is a lack of dialogue between parents and children and the more serious one presents the society with problems of drugs and delinquency. SANA Officials will tell you that they need more helping hands particularly professionals to help rehabilitate some thousands of drug addicts. Since high rise living has become a fashion of the day, how can the constructive energies of the youth be tapped so that the inadequate space at home will not push them into loitering at corridors or the street corners. What the society intends to do with the large numbers of aged who find themselves useless, unwanted and a burden to their family and society. These are some of the problems which should capture the imagination of any professional who is alert to the changes taking place around him. There are plenty of opportunities for those who have a social conscience and willing to play a role as think tank as well as implementers to social problems. Those interested in community work can find ample opportunities for their initiative and professional expertise in the 170 community centres throughout the island. As you know, the People's Association is in the process of scouting for new blood and talents to cope with the demand of our rapidly expanding society with its new problems. It will soon launch a scheme to register volunteers for community service. The professionals are most welcome to register. With their educational background,

experience and expertise, I am sure they can play an important role. The volunteers will be asked to state the nature of the services they are prepared to render and the time they can spare and place of their choice. They will be offered two categories of services, one is the project-oriented and of adhoc nature, and the other longer term attachment to a community centre management committee. This scheme I hope will provide the professionals and others interested in the community development of our society an easier access to opportunities to contact grass root leaders and to understand real social problems. Since our professionals are interested in the role they can play in society, I am sure the centre will also like to see that there is good response to the scheme. Frankly speaking, the percentage of professionals at grass-root level is rather low. Sad to say, the older generation of non-professionals are still holding the fort.

With the rise in the living standard and educational level, the people also expect an improvement in the quality of leadership. Professionals who have made up their minds to serve can fill the role. I am sure their participation will enrich their personal experience and enlarge the horizon of their perspective in life. The opportunities provided by the People's Association is only one of the many avenues of community services which are open to professionals.

Professionals can help mould society and be moulded by it once they take interest in community work. By so doing, they are also helping themselves and their families, for a more stable society with more happier homes will ensure more lasting happiness and security for all. Those who have done social work will agree with me that the sense of satisfaction one gets in solving problems for others and helping to shape society is something which no amount of money can buy.