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SPEECH BY DR WONG KWEI CHEONG, MINISTER OF STATE (LABOUR) AND
CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY BOARD AT THE SINGAPORE INSTITUTE
OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT ANNUAL DINNER AT THE MANDARIN HOTEL
ON SATURDAY, 18 JULY 1981 AT 7.30 PM

Much has been said about our workers lately. Some touch on their attitudes, while others touch on their training and preparation for jobs. This is what it should be as they are our only natural resources. Not much, however, has been said of how we should manage these resources. This aspect is indeed crucial if we are to get the best of these human resources for productivity growth.

We have reached full employment in our labour market. While this is an achievement it also brings along problems. Personnel practitioners nowadays seem to be swamped with issues concerning recruitment and routine functions like salary administration, leave matters and grievances. Their preoccupation with such day-to-day problems leave them little time to deal with their more important role of human management like the training and development of employees and measures for motivation of employees.

I have been told that many local companies, particularly the medium-sized manufacturing and commercial enterprises, do not have definite personnel policies. The owner or management of these enterprises regard capital and equipment as the only assets. They pay great attention to production output and profitability. Manpower is regarded as something necessary but not crucial. It can be bought and used like the raw material. For them there is no such thing as personnel planning and management. People performing the personnel functions are often relegated to positions of little authority. They function like an electric switch ready to be put on when electricity is needed. No thought is given to how this is produced and conserved. Personnel people are not given the necessary

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support and training. They are therefore unable to advise the top management on matters affecting manpower resources and their effective utilisation.

This negative attitude of the top management towards personnel management, needless to say, has to be changed and changed fast. We cannot afford to allow this to continue as we are faced with manpower shortages. Any proprietor or managing director who continues to give priority to short-term profits and cost reduction measures at the expense of developing his human assets, will ultimately suffer the consequences of his action.

In quite a number of cases of job-hopping, for example, the management is as much to blame as the workers. Simply pointing the finger at an employee's "poor work attitude" does not eliminate the problem. It is management's prerogative to take the initiative to find out why employees do not stay. From these they should devise and implement measures to retain good workers. Personnel executives, by the very nature of their job, are the best people to assist top management in formulating and implementing such policies. However, they need top management support and trust.

In the eighties, effective management of our human resources must go hand-in-hand with our economic restructuring. There must be a pool of qualified and skilled workers and managers to meet the needs of the high-technology, capital intensive companies set up in Singapore. A prerequisite to our success is to invest money, time and effort on training and developing our workers, supervisory and management personnel.

The Government, through the tertiary institutions, the Economic Development Board, the Vocational and Industrial Training Board and the National Productivity Board, offers various training programmes for different levels of the workforce, ranging from skilled workers to managers. Such training programmes can only be effective if both management and employees regard training as an investment. We have all heard of cases where companies are reluctant to sponsor their employees for training or even to allow them time off to attend training. Likewise, employees who are fortunate to be selected for training, either do not take their training seriously or leave the company shortly after having

got the opportunity to upgrade their skills. Such a selfish and short-sighted approach has repercussions on the long-term growth of the company and ultimately our economy.

Another factor which personnel practitioners must deal with is the rising level of education and the higher expectations of the Singapore workers. Authoritarian management styles will become less and less effective as our workers become better educated and more skilful. Managers must learn new leadership styles and adopt new strategies, such as motivational skills and human relations. It is in this area of industrial relations that the various employers, trade unions and government organisations should concentrate their efforts in the eighties.

I am therefore happy to note that the SIMW has established an Industrial Relations and Personnel Administration Committee and one of its tasks is to monitor trends and identify the obstacles facing personnel managers and industrial relations specialists. Hopefully, it will also be able to assist members to eliminate some of these obstacles and resolve their problems. In addition, the series of training programmes planned by the Institute for the year should help to inject greater professionalism among personnel practitioners in Singapore.

The Ministry of Labour on its part has taken a number of measures to improve its system of monitoring of the industrial relations situation and defusing industrial disputes before they develop into industrial conflicts and its conciliation services. The Labour Relations Division has been strengthened with additional staff. Companies (including their unions) have been identified for monitoring and preventive mediation. Labour Officers will not be office bound but will be required to go out to establish rapport with personnel managers, industrial relations officers and union officials of such companies. Through such rapport, they will know the industrial climate at the enterprise level and assist unions and employers to resolve problems before they develop into disputes. The professionalism of conciliation officers will improve with their specialisation in certain industries and as they are given appropriate training. In this way, they will be better able to settle problems and disputes referred to them by unions and employers.

Complementing the Labour Ministry's moves, the National Productivity Board is ready to assist companies to improve their personnel practices and labour-management relations. Managements interested in joint consultation can seek advice and assistance from the NPB. The Board also renders consulting services and conducts training programmes to upgrade the skills of supervisors and managers.

It is only through the concerted efforts of the government, the trade unions, employers organisations and professional institutes that we can succeed in building a more co-operative form of industrial relations. Such a climate will make it more attractive for foreign investors to come to Singapore and set up capital intensive and high technology factories, the types of industries which are so necessary for our continued economic growth and prosperity.
