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Singapore

17 AUG 1981
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SPEECH BY MR EUGENE YAP, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (LABOUR),
AT THE NATIONAL DAY OBSERVANCE CEREMONY AT THE HITACHI
CHEMICAL (S) PTE LTD ON TUESDAY, AUGUST 11, 1981, AT 8 A.M.

The employment situation of Singapore in the 1960s was such that workers found themselves in a position where they could not be as choosy as they are today. They were therefore more willing to work in most jobs because there was a real threat of unemployment. The present situation is one of full employment which we attained since 1977. Since then, we witnessed various new problems typical of such a state. Because jobs were easy to come by and the labour market was rather tight, job hopping became the headache of various industries. Productivity suffered a decline.

The situation required correction, so the government introduced the high wage policy in a bid to spur employers on to mechanize in order to increase productivity. Employers took the cue and productivity doubled. However, this increase in productivity was brought about largely by mechanization. But productivity can also be further increased through improving existing work attitudes. Hence the current drive to improve management/labour relationship and the Singaporean's work attitude.

Generally however, Singapore workers do have a reasonably good attitude towards work. But, like many other phenomena, there must be improvement in one or two areas such as a lack of willingness to do shift work or overtime and a lack of stamina to do a job well.

A recent survey carried out by the Ministry of Labour covered, among other things, the willingness of Singaporeans to do shift work. The survey showed that out of 5,000 workers interviewed, 60.6 per cent indicated that they were not willing to do shift work or continue to do shift work. From talking with employers, it was found that the unwillingness to do shift work increases proportionately with the level of employment in the firm, i.e. a supervisor would be more unwilling to do shift work than a worker. There was a case recently of a technician who threatened to beat up his supervisor for putting him to work on shift.

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In another situation, a man was reported to be very apprehensive about sending his car to the workshop for repair or service. He learnt from experience that the car usually came back with more faults than before the car went in for servicing. There were occasions when the car was returned with grease marks all over the car body. There was another incident where a faulty brake mechanism was fitted into the car resulting in a near accident situation for the driver. These appear to indicate sloppiness and irresponsibility in the attitude of some workers. We are fortunate, however, that these failings in character are not widespread. They certainly can be eliminated.

In order to eliminate these weaknesses in work attitude, we can study the strength and weaknesses of workers and managers from various countries against our own. The common sense thing to do is to discard the weaknesses of others and to pick up the good points with modification, perhaps, for our own use. I believe we should be on the lookout for good ideas from any source. By so doing, we are certainly not converting ourselves into Germans, Japanese or British; it is but a logical approach to perfect our human resource. This should form the very foundation of our industrialization programme.

We should be able to improve our work situation if top management and those in charge were more understanding. They should start analysing themselves and their contribution towards the performance of workers. They must be honest with themselves and ask frankly whether they have helped or hindered workers by their management styles. It is worthwhile to remember that there are values besides monetary rewards that will give workers a boost in their morale: understanding of workers' needs, appreciating what they have done and, above all, showing a respect of workers as human beings. We must work towards a more enlightened approach and show a more genuine concern for the welfare of workers. Workers should work better if they know that their bosses really care about them in the performance of their work and in their personal welfare. This is one sure step of winning the cooperation of workers. However, those in charge must aim to avoid giving just avowals in words and ensure that workers can see concrete proof of their care and concern - some tangible forms like improved health benefits, housing loans, birthday presents, marriage presents, compassionate allowances and greater consultation through such channels as QC circles in every department of the company should help.

On the other hand, when work is done well, everyone should benefit. Top management should not be shortsighted by grabbing the lion share of profits from work well done or through good sales and leave only the crumbs to the workers. Everyone will benefit when there is satisfaction and harmony on the part of workers. Workers are now more knowledgeable and more highly educated. Gone are the days when management can hope to hoodwink them. Do not underestimate the capability of our workers because, properly motivated, they and the management can work together as a team to produce surprising results.

On this National Day therefore, let us resolve to put the horse before the cart - let us concentrate on return on individuals instead of merely on return on investments. Therefore, let us aim to increase productivity through better cooperation between management and labour and let us take pride in whatever we do. Let us set ourselves up as a shining example of good work ethics for others to follow.
