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AT THE MINISTRY OF LABOUR (MOL) WITS PRESENTATION CEREMONY
AT THE CIVIL SERVICE INSTITUTE AUDITORIUM
ON SATURDAY, 27 OCTOBER 1984 AT 9.30 AM**

Jobs that were once done by people with lesser education are now in the hands of those with higher education. Against this background, I wonder what it would be like if there weren't any WITs or other small group activities in our workplace today. I think that our workers today would very likely be unmotivated and unproductive if they were treated like the workforce of say four or five decades ago. Present-day workers possess different aspirations and goals with regard to their work and their attitude towards their jobs is also different. They must be managed differently.

Four decades ago, when Singapore was essentially a trading nation with a few industries, the work environment, often determined by the economic and social milieu of the time was an example of a 'low-discretion model' of the workplace. In those days, the workplace was one that sought to increase output by minimizing the need for creativity and autonomy on the part of individual workers. In those days, discretion, initiative or responsibility was not called for. The focus was on downgrading and simplifying jobs. Targets were set, rules were dictated and workers were expected to perform as mechanically as possible to increase work. Such a workforce fitted well into the economic and social conditions of those times. Being mainly migrant workers, survival was foremost in their minds. They looked upon a job as a privilege, never a right.

Today, the nature of the workforce is different. With their higher levels of education and the security of relative economic well-being, the present-day jobholders insist on more freedom over how to do their jobs. They expect their jobs to provide them with a means of self-expression as well as an outlet for self-development. A job is their right. But for the job they get, they want to give of their best, though no longer for the survival motive. Why? A worker in Singapore is cushioned against unemployment with a full employment situation; nor is he in fear of any threat to his livelihood or survival. He lives securely cocooned in a politically and economically stable and prospering society, a situation which somewhat reduces the potent force of the traditional 'carrot and stick' reward system. Under such circumstances, what then will the jobholder work for? There is a need for a revision, a re-definition of what it means to have a job.

People nowadays seem to be controlled by two obligatory contracts where working life is concerned - an economic one and a psychic one. The economic contract holds a jobholder to his work from 8.30 to 5. But once at work, he is governed by a different set of expectations and obligations which determines how hard he really works and what the quality of his work will be. This psychic need is rather significant. It is an inner urge to perform as best as he can, regardless of pay. But this urge can only be triggered off by a good leader. Instead of holding the same values as their parents or the previous generation, present-day workers place a great emphasis on the values of expressivism. Consequently, the present-day workplace has become a 'high-discretion model'.

Jobs therefore will have to become more challenging and more autonomous, allowing for greater discretion. People should be encouraged to work smartly like the story of Abe. Abe was an itinerant salesman selling beef stock extract. To increase his sales and productivity, he could visit more customers. He didn't. Instead, he stationed

himself full-time at the office, sending out specially-designed brochures to selected prospective customers. The brochures explained the benefits of beef stock extract and did the selling for him. His sales improved so much that he was promoted.

In the case of the Civil Service, you should accept that not every aspect of your work is determined by the head of the department. You have considerable control about organising your duties. If your predecessor had performed his duties one way, you do not have to rigidly follow that way. Exercise your initiative and make improvements to the organisation of your work.

Talking about initiative, initiative can also be exercised in other ways. For instance, when the volume of your work drops because of changes in procedures or trends, you could inform the head so that duties could be reassigned and staffing adjusted. We should remember that the Civil Service generally does not retrench people. There are still vacancies and you could fit into one of them. Your morale could then become higher.

Another way of working smarter is to make suggestions for increasing productivity. Such suggestions can be as wide-ranging as proposals for reorganisation of a particular unit to something as specific as a letter-opener. The objective is to increase productivity so that there is need for fewer staff or the staff strength can be maintained in the face of increasing volume of work.

This all sounds very simple - easier said than done. But is it? Actually workers want to get involved in their work, they want to be more effective. Strangely however, there is an apparent discrepancy between a worker's willingness to do his best and his actual performance on the job. What is preventing that inner need to give of one's best from blossoming? Perhaps the most obvious cause is the undercutting of the link which should exist between a job-holder's pay and his performance. Workers do genuinely want

to give of their best, but the workplace sometimes does not reward people who put in extra effort. Furthermore, the failure on the part of leaders to motivate people to perform effectively, causes people to work below their capacity and potential. Here leaders could step up their expectations of workplace performance.

Setting and enforcing the highest possible standards of work are an essential precondition for mobilizing the work ethic. Nothing corrodes the work ethic more than the suspicion that leaders are indifferent to how their workers work. But workers would be convinced if they see their leaders willingly work with them and make sacrifices for the sake of doing a good day's work. If we want WITs to flourish, the captain must also be seen to play the game. Slogan-shouting at the sidelines does not help, neither does financial rewards. Restructuring of work so that it provides greater psychic rewards would be a morale booster. So also the more interesting or challenging a job is. Upgrading the character of a job contributes too, in gaining higher levels of commitment to the job. Another motivating feature to add to the list is a flat organisation chart marked by status differences that are not invidious: they don't shout the message, "Leaders are a class apart."

This morning, I am very proud to learn that five WITs are presenting their completed projects to the Ministry, with two, APT and Crystal, being triple gold medallists for two years running. The Ministry, I am told, outshines all others in a 100 per cent sweep of the top awards by all participating teams for three consecutive years. You certainly do us proud! I hope their success will spur others on to adopt WITs as a tool towards self-development as well as increase productivity.

On this note, I have great pleasure in declaring the WITs presentation open.

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