

**THE LEADERSHIP OF SINGAPORE'S
LEE KUAN YEW AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

(Draft paper: a work in progress)

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INTRODUCTION

In 1963, in his formative stage as the leader of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew posed “Surely there must be some universal truths and principles which can emerge from a systematic comparison of the forms of authority and leadership and their relative efficacy as intelligent and tolerant forms of government.” In the same speech he went to say that the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia were struggling with a similar set of questions. “All these new nations are in a state of flux, patterns of authority and leadership are fluid, changeable and changing. It would be a valuable contribution to the problems of authority and leadership if systematic research could provide an insight into the mechanics of power which can make or break the most idealistic and well-intentioned of leadership of the new nations.”¹

Thirty five years after making the above statements, Lee Kuan Yew stepped down as Prime Minister of Singapore and became Senior Minister and wrote his memoirs. His own writings and reflections give first hand insight into the demands of leadership and authority on behalf of facilitating rapid national development. While his experience is not presented as a set of universal principles, important lessons can be derived from his insights and experience that can help leaders of developing and developed nations.

In October 2000, Minister Mentor Lee gave several lectures and interviews at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. At that time he challenged researchers to explain in clear terms any principles from the Singapore case that would assist emerging leaders in other countries and cultures.

In this paper I have attempted to extract some of those lessons and principles that come from the Harvard interviews and also from his memoirs. An important part of this challenge is to 1) consider what kind of leadership, and leadership development processes, are needed to support Singapore's continued development, and 2) explore what leadership principles might be useful to leaders in other settings – institutions or nations.

In his interviews and memoirs, Lee has described several strategic maneuvers to corner the Singapore factions to force the factions to deal personally with the economic and political realities that the factions refused to face if allowed to go their natural way. For example, can Lee's leadership strategy for making English the common language in the Singapore schools be made applicable for leadership students in other cultures and in other policy areas?

Lee used a graphic analogy of a leader as a sheep dog getting the herd of sheep into the corral. And yet, Lee's speaking and writing demonstrates a profound commitment to getting the business and political sectors to think for themselves, as individuals and as business organizations. Can Lee's distinctions between "getting the people to follow" and "getting the people to deal with reality" be generalized as useful guidelines for future leaders of Singapore and leaders of other emerging cities and states?

At times, Lee manifested a moral certainty that some considered authoritarian. But perhaps there are situations in which peoples and cultures refuse to face reality unless the strong application of authority makes them deal with reality. Leaders with a demanding moral certainty, such as Martin Luther King and Mohandas Gandhi, have been effective sometimes in producing progress. Can the basis and limits of Lee's moral certainty be stated in a form that will assist leaders elsewhere to improve the quality of life for peoples?

Lee criticized American policy analysts for focusing on the top person in nations instead of dealing with the economic and cultural realities in nations. For example, Lee stated that American policy analysts have repeatedly refused to deal with the reality of civil and human rights throughout the world. According to Lee, there are more effective means of promoting civil and human rights than the current American policies. Can

¹ Lee Kuan Yew, Speech given at opening of leadership symposium, 8 December 1963

Lee's view of civil and human rights be generalized in a way to inform a nation's policies to get more effective progress?

The Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore case may provide pointers to leaders who want to grow a culture and economy that can support an indigenous political system. His extraordinary success has led some to call his leadership approach as that of Plato's model of the philosopher-king. If that is so, then an incorruptible philosopher-king (a very wise, committed, honest and intelligent leader) may provide an appropriate initial, interim guardian for a third-world country wishing to become a self-sufficient player in international markets and politics. In such a political scheme, the philosopher-king might assume responsibility for managing the culture as the culture learns to develop its latent resources, deal with threats and compete internationally.

Accordingly, the philosopher-king might provoke the society in a strategic manner so that the society learns more effective ways to make decisions within a free market of decentralized decision-making. But the philosopher-king must also step forward to intervene whenever the decision-making in the fledgling free market are of inferior quality, such as because of dysfunctional internal competition or because of the ramifications of bad decisions made by external players such as American banks associated with the subprime lending debacle.

After all, in a similar concern over dysfunctional decision-making among the states, the American Founders formed the United States federal government to intervene in the affairs of the states. For example, the Founders gave Congress the power to intervene in the commerce among the states--whenever the decentralized decision-making in the states was unsatisfactory. And, similarly, a philosopher-king operating with an appropriate set of guidelines might intervene effectively in a fledgling nation and economy to provoke progress.

Yet the reality is that few leaders have the capacity to be a successful philosopher-king. Such leaders are born into a particular context, are shaped by their political and social surroundings, and have had a distinct set of experiences that have shaped and honed their sensitivities. Also the danger of the philosopher-king model is that it perpetuates a dependency on a single authority figure. And the reality is, given the complexity of the world we live in, that no person is that wise or intelligent to "get it right" all the time.

So, in my view, as we examine the Singapore case, we do not want to be left with the notion that Lee Kuan Yew's success is simply due to him being a philosopher king with attributes that are beyond the rest of us. The challenge is to break down his thinking and actions and formulate them as a set of principles that are relevant and accessible to current and future leaders of Singapore and other nations.

DEFINING LEADERSHIP AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

As this brief thought-paper is about developing leaders, it is important to define what I mean by leadership. Firstly, there are many competing and useful definitions for "leadership." In any case, the definition that a politician or government executive selects for "leadership" implies a series of norms and requirements for success in leadership. For example, if by definition a person has succeeded in leadership when that person gets people to follow, then training for leadership would focus on the techniques for getting people to follow, and those techniques would be applicable whether the people followed to solve their problems or followed to make their problems worse as the indicator of success is in "getting people to follow."

But if by definition a leader is someone who must get people to solve their problems, then the competencies stressed must have different detail. For example, in the Singapore case, it would be invaluable if politicians and government executives could know what indicators in the political, social, and economic environment Lee used to estimate whether the Singapore system was progressing in its abilities to solve its problems. How did he know if the government and the people were focusing on the right set of problems? What were the indicators that he used to determine what was right and what was wrong? And, by what

analytical process did Lee determine whether he should intervene or whether he should hold steady and allow the private sector or the social sector to proceed on its current course?

Accordingly, in my view, a leadership development process should consider leadership to be that activity which leaves the organization, nation, or community able to solve threatening political controversies, social dilemmas and economic deficiencies that it could not solve before the intervention. For example, Lee's activities in Singapore amounted to responsible leadership because Lee's activities left Singapore society, business, and government able to solve political feuds and economic shortages that Singapore could not solve before Lee's interventions.

Requiring leadership to expand the frontiers of problem-solving simplifies the job of developing the leadership that a discriminating market for leadership requires. In my view, a firm, community, or nation should not seek someone who gets people to follow. Rather, a discriminating firm, community, or nation should seek someone who can manipulate the components of the institution or society so that decentralized decision-makers detect when and how progress in the institution or society requires them to challenge authority rather than follow.

GETTING THE PEOPLE TO MAKE HIGH-QUALITY DECENTRALIZED DECISIONS

When Minister Mentor Lee describes his effort to establish one official language in Singapore, he demonstrates a methodology for getting the people to make high-quality decisions without being told the correct answer. That is, Lee said he felt that if he used his authority to make any one language the official language, there would be rioting in the streets. Nevertheless, Lee thought that Singapore would attract more business if most people in Singapore spoke a common language.

So, instead of telling the people to use a common language, he set out a learning experience wherein the people experienced for themselves the financial advantages of using one common language. Lee ordered each school to teach one other language in addition to the primary language of the school. Some English schools taught Chinese. Some Malay schools taught English. And some Chinese schools taught Malay.

Within a few years, the parents saw for themselves that the students from the schools teaching English got better jobs than the students from schools not teaching English. And after that learning experience, the people supported making English the official language of Singapore.

Several other interesting problems were addressed using this leadership principle: 1) getting Singapore hotels to provide modern business facilities, 2) negotiating with elements of organized labor, and 3) establishing the lending practices of Singapore's banks.

In developing leadership capacity, the question that must be wrestled with is when do you dictate the solution and when do you intervene by advancing a proposition so that the people discover for themselves an approach that provides a better outcome?

WHEN TO BE A SHEEP DOG

In his conversations at Harvard, Lee used the metaphor of a leader occasionally being like a sheep dog. When, due to the people's immaturity or irresponsibility, must the leader be like a sheep dog and get the sheep to do what is required? For example, Lee acted as a sheep dog for an extended campaign to keep people from urinating in the elevators. In that situation, there is a technical problem for which a technical solution exists. And with coercion, the people may come to accept the technical solution.

Nevertheless, Lee advocated establishing a political boundary of stable expectations within which business people and community leaders could make their decisions. Thus, much of Lee's policy operated to encourage independent thinking and entrepreneurship.

Perhaps, in Lee's leadership strategies there are two variations of sheep dog. First, the leader might establish the boundaries of a field of competition within which the people could expect stable freedoms of operation. Second, in areas where the people's decision-making did not manifest a sufficient level of maturity, the leader might, like a sheep dog, micro-manage the people's activities.

What is needed is a decision matrix as a guideline appropriate for a leader to determine when the government or the leader should treat the people like sheep and when the government or leader should treat the people like independent and capable entrepreneurs.

MORAL CERTAINTY: A STRENGTH OR A FLAW?

Does there exist a neutral standard by which a leader can assess whether the leader's certainty is more than just a personal opinion? This is an important question that has significant implications for the development of leaders. The Singapore case may provide an illustration of a leader's certainty having political and economic validity beyond a mere personal opinion. That is, at times, Minister Mentor Lee intervened with people's lives and changed cultures as if he had the right to do so. By what standard did Lee assess the quality and effectiveness of his interventions in the Singapore society?

Lee might have used any of several standards for assessing his own moral certainty. For example, Lee might have based his moral certainty on certain cultural, historical or religious precepts. Alternatively, Lee might have applied a personal set of political, social and economic indicators to justify his moral certainty.

In any case, for the development of leaders what is needed is a criteria for assessing the problem-solving in the society and the validity of one's moral certainty. Similar to the moral certainty of the doctor who asserts that a healthy body is better than a sick one, this leadership framework should begin the analysis with a point-of-view that a nation that is resolving its political and social conflicts and meeting its economic needs is better than a nation where conflict is increasing and the people cannot support themselves.

USING YOUR AUTHORITY TO FORM A "HOLDING ENVIRONMENT"

An important aspect of leadership is determining what values to promote and what values to denigrate. In promoting a set of values, the leaders must seek to exemplify those values and be held to account for compliance. The modeling of the right set of values can be a vital component of the holding environment for the problem solving associated with nation building. A holding environment is a metaphorical container that holds or orients people through the messiness of the developmental process.

Lee had to attend to the creation of a holding environment that could support Singapore's rapid development. One of the first features of the holding environment was the establishment of the value – "Our government will be completely clean and we will not tolerate corruption." This was important because when Lee came to power Singapore was rife with factional politics, communal strife, bribery and suspicion. The masses, generally, had little trust of politicians or groups that they perceived were not acting in the interests of their immediate clan or community. Lee, as a politician and prime minister had to present himself and his team as totally trustworthy, above factional influence, and be the embodiment of the highest ideals. He knew that he and his government had to be above reproach, and failure to be that would be disastrous for him and the nation.²

² Lee Kuan Yew, 2000, p.158

Lee assumed the “mantle of the ideal” in representing the values of honesty and integrity and demanded that those on his team and in government comply with these values. These values in turn formulated the holding environment that allowed the problem solving work of nation building to go on without excessive distraction or loss.

A interesting example of the importance of the holding environment and the mantle of the ideal, is when after Lee resigned as Prime Minister to take the advisory position of Senior Minister, and the Investigation Bureau received complaints from buyers of land who thought it unfair that Lee's family would receive a discount on a purchase of property from a publicly listed real-estate development company who had given early buyers at a soft launch a discount to test the market. When the Investigation Bureau found that such discounts were standard business practice to establish the accounts receivable basis for further funding of a development, a rumor started that the Investigation Bureau had given Senior Minister Lee's family an unfair benefit of the doubt.

Though the rumor of impropriety angered Lee, he publicly revealed the details of the transactions and first gave the S\$1 million in the purchase discounts to the Singapore government. When the Singapore government would not take the S\$1 million, saying that the discounts were normal proper business practice, Lee gave the S\$1 million in the purchase discounts to charity--to avoid a "perceived unfair advantage." And when the purchase discounts did not arise as an issue in the next general election, Lee concluded that his sacrifice had succeeded in keeping the people focused on the real issues in their lives (Lee 2000, pp. 170-71).

Second, the mantle of the ideal contains distortions of reality that a leader must manage. Thus, when rumors multiplied that Lee had obtained special dispensation from the Investigation Bureau, it did not matter that the purchase discount had a valid business purpose and was generally available to anyone who purchased early.

Third, perception is reality. Hence, the leader must be prepared to manage the perception as the reality. Accordingly, Lee chose to give up the S\$1 million discount as a price of managing the perception of favoritism. Alternatively Lee might have chosen to break up the public's perception of favoritism--just as he chose to break up the public's perception of corruption. In either submitting to or breaking up the public's perception, the leader is managing the perception as the reality.

In terms of leadership development, leaders must grapple with the questions of 1) what kind of holding environment is needed for the challenges I want the people to face, and 2) how must my behavior embody values and practices essential for the maintenance of the holding environment?

UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

The work of leadership is *not* to allow the perpetuation of flaws and defects in a culture because some factions protect, tolerate or encourage those flaws, but the work of leadership is to intervene to eradicate those flaws, particularly those that might be considered maladaptive in a changed context and have become “ticking time-bombs.” Therefore leaders must figure out what values and practices are worth protecting and what values and practices must be shifted if progress is to unfold. The leader must also figure out how fast can they move in generating a shift, and to what degree they can use the market place to support the shift. As a general principle, the shifting of deeply held values and beliefs must be paced, as moving too fast can overwhelm the people and lead to outright rejection of new values and practices.

Minister Mentor has explained how his sensitivity to cultural values and traditions led him to pace the work of getting people to embrace the English language. Had he foisted English on the people or compelled everyone to learn Mandarin, given cultural sensitivities, there would have been an “immediate revolt and disaster.” By offering parents the choice of having their children educated in English and their mother tongue in

whatever order they chose, a steady and acceptable shift in language learning occurred over a three decade period as people saw the benefits that came with mastery of English.

In many ways, culture is everything. It generates a context in which people make meaning out of their lives, the problems they face, and go about their daily activities. A leader must work hard to understand and appreciate the contextual reality in which the problems and challenges they face show up. For example, as Lee has pointed out, if American policy toward China were to be more effective, then the policy analysis must deal with what is really going on in China, the reality of the history and culture of China, and the realities of the values of the people of China. But according to Minister Mentor Lee, in past decades American policy analysis inappropriately focused excessively on the influence that the top person in China rather than on the cultural context. Rather than addressing a collection of individuals, Lee suggests that American policy should view China as a cultural system within which the top person is limited in action and influence. Americans also were inclined to interpret the correctness of the policies and actions of other nations, particularly China, through an ideological lens borne of their own values and history. Had American leaders better understood the flaws in their interpretative framework, they might have been able to make some adjustments that would have produced more effective cooperation between America and China at an earlier period. Also, Lee suggests, an explicit cultural model might improve Americans' understanding of the disputes and culture clashes with in the United States.

A more systematic presentation of Lee's view on the importance of understanding cultural systems might offer vital analytical tools for the development of leaders. For example, as a preliminary cultural model, a leadership framework might describe Lee's options within a system of interlocking rights and responsibilities. American analysis of civil rights frequently begins with "inalienable rights." In contrast, Lee's concept of civil rights evidently begins with a balanced view of rights deriving from responsibilities for problem-solving within the society. Because of this, it is futile, even dangerous, to impose American-style democracy or values on a country that lacks a cultural fit. American-style democracy is feasible only after the culture of a nation has amassed a sufficient inventory of persons with the requisite political maturity, education, work ethic, and technical training. Thus the Singapore case may represent a city-state in transition and the leadership work associated with facilitating a transition.

Indeed, American-style democracy should not be considered the be-all and end-all of leadership work. All systems have serious flaws for which their democratic practices might be insufficient to address. For example, Lee has spoken to what he sees as the flaws in American culture, particularly how the inviolability of the individual has turned into a dogma and allows guns, drugs, vagrancy, and unbecoming behavior in public to weaken the social fabric and jeopardize so much of the value that American society has amassed through creativity and hard work.³

This raises another important concern of leaders and that is protecting the values and traditions of one's context so that flawed values and practices from outside do not permeate the culture and erode the value that has amassed through the concerted effort of the people over decades or even centuries. Being a protector and preserver of culture is an equally important role as the agent of change. Infact, knowing what to protect, preserve and defend requires considerable courage, wisdom and sensitivity, particularly when outside influences are popular and powerful.

³ Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew. (interview by Fareed Zakaria, Foreign Affair, March/April 1994)

INTERVENING WITH POTENCY AND SENSITIVITY

Lee took great time to prepare his interventions – speeches and addresses – in order to maximize the impact on his audience. In his memoirs he describes the extent he went to in order to learn the languages and dialects of the people of Singapore so that they could appreciate his commitment, passion, and intent. He did not want his message filtered by interpreters. He clearly understood that he was a symbol and representative of values and aspirations and the mode, style and tone of his communication were all essential ingredients in generating the interest and engagement of people in the problem solving work of nation building. Enrolling people through explanation, debate, and the presentation of his reasoning was important in generating the support and engagement to make a quantum leap in the development process.

An element of what Lee sought to do was to “be” the message. His speeches and presentations had to have authenticity. He knew the importance of conveying sincerity and belief, not as a masquerade but as the expression of what he really cared about. He knew how to refine or modify that message according to the audience he was speaking to, be it taxi drivers or corporate executives.

In developing leaders, some important questions to consider are 1) what kinds of presentation methods make the biggest difference, 2) how can one present and speak in a way that carries sincerity and authenticity, and 3) how can you ensure that your interventions are not simply designed to “persuade people” of the course of action that you want but it is a “mobilization process” to getting people to face and wrestle with real problems?

KNOW WHEN TO MOVE TO THE SIDE SO OTHERS CAN DEVELOP

Lee knew when to get out of the way. Few leaders with significant power and adulation know when to move to the side and allow others to be given the opportunity to provide leadership. Lee's transition from Prime Minister to Senior Minister and then Minister Mentor, allowed him to contribute to the development of the nation without being the frontline leader. This created “the space” for others to prove themselves. It reduced the dependency on one man to “show the way” or explain what needed to be done, thus increasing the leadership capacity of the nation and ensuring that better decisions would be made.

Can Lee's role transition be a model for all leaders and serve to strengthen institutional capacity and reduce the dependency of the people on one individual? What are the indicators that a leader should use as determine when they need move to the side, reduce the group's dependency on them, and get other's to rise to the occasion?

DEVELOPING A NEW GENERATION OF LEADERS FOR SINGAPORE

There are innumerable lessons on leadership from the experiences of Lee Kuan Yew and his “old guard team”, and subsequent Singapore Prime Ministers Goh Chock Tong and Lee Hsien Loong who have also done (and continue to do) an admirable job. Through the work of these previous leaders strong and viable institutions have been established, values have been shifted, and Singapore as a nation has succeeded in facing many demanding and complex challenges. As a nation, Singapore is not beholden to personality politics or the whims and fancies of charismatic populists. Its institutions carry weight and respect and have become bigger and more significant than the people who direct them, be they politicians or government officials. This is a very healthy development. Still, it is people who keep institutions functioning and responding. It is people who must exercise leadership to mobilize others to depart from maladaptive practices and tackle new challenges for which

institutional competence alone is insufficient. Indeed, leadership capacity has been, is currently, and will always be an essential concern for running a nation.

While Singapore's old guard, under Lee Kuan Yew, was by any standard quite extraordinary they were develop in the refiner's fire produced by a world war, the breakdown of imperialism, and ideological battles of the mid-twentieth century. The new generation has not faced the trials and tribulations of the founding generation. They have not known the kind of domestic hardships and regional instability experienced by their grandparents. Given that they have been born into an "efficient and functioning system" their approach to leadership seems quite different from the previous generation.

Indeed, I must say that I am impressed by many of the leaders that I have met, which I might add is a testament to the leadership development work done by the previous leaders. They are knowledgeable, insightful, and talented. Of course, Singapore does face a challenge of attracting, developing, and retaining good people to provide leadership in government and political affairs. So developing and sustaining a solid "bench strength" so that the institutions of government and the nation as a whole remain viable, energized and responsive is what I seek to address in this paper.

Rather than accentuate the positive work that has been done in terms of leadership development, let me highlight what I see as deficiencies and possibilities. My recommendations and ideas should be considered as discussion points and not as definitive statements of fact. My ideas and insights are born of observing Singapore over the past thirty years, serving in the government as an officer in the National Productivity Board, consulting to a number of Singapore institutions, and teaching numerous Singaporeans at Harvard and on programs in Singapore. This is not a researched based paper, but merely a thought paper.

Let me begin by saying that my own observations suggest that a portion of those in government positions of authority and in politics have a strong efficiency and administrative orientation but they are not providing enough of the problem solving leadership I talk about in this paper. They lack an understanding of leadership really is, or they might lack the relational skills, psychological reflective capacity, diagnostic ability, or intervention prowess to succeed in the realm of providing superior leadership. Some of these people are what I call *one-dimensional* leaders in a world that throws up multi-dimensional problems.

Many of these people have worked hard academically and proven their intelligence, but they lack the insight and wisdom to use their power responsibly and skillfully to produce the interventions needed to keep Singapore adapting and progressing. They are more technocrats and bureaucrats, than leaders. Of course there is a place for such people and they play a vital role in keeping the system functioning, but their leadership capacity is lacking.

Having said that, I must add that there are many people who are outstanding leaders – in the cabinet, in politics and in senior government positions. Given that the world is a constant state of flux, even good leaders must further enhance their leadership capacity and display the same curiosity of the Minister Mentor who even as an octogenarian continues to ask tough questions and seeks to learn what might be missing or defective in the Singapore approach or what might be done better.

My recommendation for taking the leadership of Singapore to an even higher level of functioning is to:

1. PUT GREATER EMPHASIS ON LEADING FROM THE CREATIVE ORIENTATION

As a part of the developmental process to combat the deficiencies of an excessive bureaucratic focus, I suggest that a greater emphasis needs to put on creativity, courage and risk-taking. The creativity and risk taking associated with leadership is the willingness to challenge assumptions, try out new ideas, and experiment with novel programs and approaches so that useful discoveries can be made. Some of the weaker leaders tend to play it too safe and are unwilling to display too

much initiative or put themselves at risk. They value status and position, and the financial benefits that come from holding senior office, more than they value exercising leadership, challenging prevailing norms and patterns, and helping government and the community to produce better adaptations and responses to difficult problems.

When I suggest the need for more attention on leading from the creative orientation, I am not talking about artistic creativity like that of DaVinci or technological creativity like that of Steve Jobs. I am talking about the stimulation of imaginative capacities to address difficult challenges, build relationships, mobilize diverse resources, and to facilitate the exploration of novel perspectives to generate better solutions and more responsive public policies. I am talking about thinking beyond prevailing norms, challenging underlying assumptions, and conducting more interesting experiments so that more useful discoveries can be made in regards to what works and what does not in each respective sector.

Might I say that when Lee Kuan Yew in the fifties, sixties and seventies bucked the prevailing orthodoxy of the non-aligned nations who embraced socialism, communism, communalism or a “big man” authoritarian and indulgent notion of leadership, this was an example of leading from the creative orientation. The courage he and his team displayed in conducting their own set of experiments to discover a practical path that worked for Singapore was indeed admirable. The fact they did not succumb to regional and international pressures to comply with particular practices or appease certain groups or adopt popular political, economic and social policies is indicative of their willingness to take calculated risks on half of giving Singapore its best shot at success.

2. IN TEACHING LEADERSHIP, DISTINGUISH BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY, AND DEVELOP CAPACITIES ACCORDINGLY

The way Singaporeans talk about leadership is that it is anyone holding a position of significant authority or responsibility. Collapsing the two does not allow for dynamic leadership. Authority is a function and a role, while leadership is an activity. Being a responsible authority figure means being a symbol of essential values, protecting group resources, providing a general sense of direction, and delivering agreed upon services. Good management and administrative skill can lead to being an effective authority figure. Over the past fifty years a rich body of literature and theory has been developed on what it means to be a skilled manager and administrator, and numerous educational courses have addressed this need. But insight into leadership has been severely lacking.

With my colleagues at Harvard, we have been looking at leadership as the activity of mobilizing people to face reality, address tough problems, create what is needed to make advancements, and stimulate institutional and societal adaptations. We view leadership fundamentally as an intervention process that gets people solving problems and modifying values, habits, and mindsets in order to deal with threats and dangers and take advantage of opportunities and emerging promises.

When the responsible use of authority is applied to support leadership, then exciting work can be done in any organization, community or nation. But being able to distinguish the role and function of each, and developing capacities accordingly, is important to succeed.

In developing leadership capacity, one can begin to analyze the constraints of authority on leadership, and appreciate why so many people in authority fail to exercise much, if any, leadership. One can analyze the advantages and disadvantages of leading with and without

authority. One can develop different applications of strategy and tactics for leading with and without authority on different kinds of challenges. And, one can learn to analyze, appreciate and value the critical importance of authority relationships to social living, on their own terms.

This last point is very important. If we are to evolve more realistic expectations of authority and thus generate better social contracts, we will need much greater understanding of the functions that authority systems serve in coordinating social life, as well as the pitfalls of our current expectations. In Singapore, what other social functions, in addition to direction, protection, orientation, conflict control, and norm maintenance, are a common part of the essential responsibilities of an authority figure? How do these functions differ in different situations?

3. PLACE A GREATER EMPHASIS ON ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP AND NOT JUST TECHNICAL LEADERSHIP

It is important to distinguish between technical challenges and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges require good management or the application of pre-packaged knowledge and expertise, because the problem is clear and solution is clear. Adaptive challenges are complex as they are systemic in nature and solutions require some adjustment in people's values or habitual practices.

For an institution or society to progress, obviously effective technical work allows for efficiency in addressing routine problems. But institutions and societies must also make constant adaptations as they face non-trivial, non-routine problems. Adaptive leadership is the intervention process of stimulating adaptive work for demanding problems.

To appreciate the challenge of adaptive leadership, consider parallels with the process of evolution. While Darwin suggested that evolution unfolded in a steady series of progressions because of separation of species populations such as on the Galapagos Islands, the late Stephen Gould proposed that such was not always the case. Evolution, Gould posited, often has been punctuated by episodes that triggered giant leaps in the evolutionary process.⁴ In other words, a species may have been in a relatively stable and predictable environment for a considerable period of time and then an event that threatened its survival or eradicated its predators served as a catalyst for a dramatic change in that species.

This notion is known as "punctuated equilibrium" or a disequilibrium event. According to Gould it is in the period of intense disequilibria that the species will either die or evolve better problem-solving, opening up a whole new arena for growth and development.

That is, a certain level of disequilibrium and confusion may speed advances in problem-solving. And within modern settings, appropriate leadership can trigger the disequilibrium, confusion and creativity *before* problems become life-threatening.

Adaptive leadership deliberately provokes a system (of parts of the system), creating a dynamic experience like an episode in the evolutionary process. That is, a leader intentionally intervenes into to generate enough disequilibria (learning by the different factions) that stimulates new insights and discoveries so that new capacities or responses to the demanding predicament can emerge. That is, the exercise of leadership can, by design, disrupt the equilibrium that has stabilized in the group and led to complacency, and maneuver people to address flaws,

⁴ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*

deficiencies, and problems that threaten the system so that better adjustments and adaptations can occur.

Exercising leadership for a set of complex adaptive challenges also necessitates managing the inevitable work avoidance dynamics that the people manifest as they seek to deny the problem, scapegoat others, or protect prevailing values and traditions.

I suggest Lee and his team repeatedly provided this kind of leadership to disrupt people's equilibrium in Singapore (or the equilibrium of certain factions) and get them to face reality, tackle tough problems and do the adaptive work of advancing from a Third World island community with divisive ethnic and religious enclaves to become a competitive and unified First World nation, all over a thirty year period.

In developing adaptive leadership capacity, it is important to 1) develop diagnostic indicators that can be used to distinguish technical problems from adaptive challenges in respective policy and sectoral areas, 2) learn how to exercise leadership for both technical and adaptive challenges, and 3) develop indicators of disequilibrium that can be used to assess when the level of challenge is too low or high, i.e., beneath the threshold of learning or above the limit of tolerance and overwhelming the system's adaptive capacity.

4. DEVELOP LEADERS TO ADDRESS DIFFERENT KINDS OF ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES

A leader must be able to diagnose the specific nature of the challenge before them. Assigning a broad brush stroke or an extremely narrow judgment to a set of problems is insufficient and leads to mismatch between the leadership strategy and the contextual reality. A framework for assessing and intervening into the different kinds of challenges might include the following:

- A. **Development Challenge:** In a development challenge, the people lack the capacities, resources, and institutions to deal with dangers and threats or take advantage of emerging opportunities. The leadership work is to bring the latent resources of the people to fruition.
 - i) Ideally Singapore would continue in the development mode--bringing to fruition latent resources as they are needed to deal with the unfolding complexity of the challenges globalization presents.
 - ii) However, challenges other than the development challenge may intrude from time to time, either as threats or opportunities – as with the current global economic crisis. As other challenges intrude, a different kind of leadership approach is needed to address the challenge.
- B. **Transition Challenge:** From time to time, groups must make a significant change, or a transition. In a transition challenge, certain values and habits of the people are impeding progress. The leadership work is to shift the values and habits of the people from one set to another.
- C. **Maintenance Challenge:** In maintenance challenge, the people are faced with hard times and development is thwarted. The leadership work is to protect and preserve resources and group value until the context changes and better times come. In a maintenance challenge, small things make a big difference.
- D. **Crisis Challenge:** In a crisis challenge, a sudden change in context generates disequilibrium that threatens the value that has been amassed by the people. A panic may cloud people's minds to what the real problems are and what can be done about them. The

leadership work is to calm the people, slow things down and orchestrate a discovery process to find out why the crisis happened, what work was missed or neglected, and how to navigate the terrain to get through the crisis.

- E. **Creative Challenge:** In a creative challenge, the people have hit a wall or, to take advantage of an emerging opportunity the people must do something they have never done before. In a creative challenge, the current repertoire of processes, procedures and knowledge are insufficient to resolve the problem. Therefore leadership must generate enough creativity to produce learning and get the people to conduct novel experiments.
- F. **Activist Challenge:** In an activist challenge, the people are avoiding some aspect of reality – a threat, danger, or emerging problem. The work of leadership is to give the people a well-timed “zen slap” and awaken them to the reality of their condition and get them to deal realistically with the challenge.

5. LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTISTRY OF INTERVENTION

Intervention is the speaking process of getting and holding people's attention so that adaptive work can occur. Intervention includes the strategy of when and where to intervene, and the process and mode such as the use of symbols, stories, poise, energy, tone and mood. Leaders, through speech must learn how and when to provoke (questions and challenge) or evoke (invite and enroll). Some important learning considerations for intervention are as follows:

Building Relationships and Partnerships. All leading is really a partnering activity. Leaders therefore must work across boundaries. They must mobilize people and resources from a variety of quarters to support and contribute to the adaptive process. Building partnerships and enrolling others to support critical initiatives is an important capacity that must be done.

Generating and sustaining attention. It is not easy to get people's attention on an issue and sustain that attention long enough so that learning takes place and meaningful work gets done. Without sustained attention, people get distracted by other events and interests. Work avoidance mechanisms kick in and people flee from the essential work that needs to be done. Developing the intervention skills to keep people focused on the work that matters is essential both for short-term resolution of immediate problems and long-term progress on important development challenges.

Ripening an Issue. The problem of ripening an issue exists for any leader who feels an unshared urgency about an issue and sets off to spread the urgency. A leader needs to appreciate their options in ripening issues at the community, institutional, national and international level. They need to explore and learn about the contextual variables that will determine how an issue ripens in a given situation and culture.

Regulating Disequilibrium. In doing adaptive work generating, harnessing and regulating disequilibrium is an important activity. There are a variety of means to reduce untoward levels of disequilibrium such as the exercise of authority by reinforcing values, providing direction, shifting attention on to or away from an issue; speaking to shared orienting values, common identifications, shared history, and common enemies; providing hope; and the tactical use of work avoidance mechanisms, like displacing, shelving or denying the issue. Yet this is a rudimentary list of levers. In different contexts, the means available to regulate distress will differ. Both generic and context-specific tools have to be richly identified and studied.

Being a Lightning Rod. Many people who exercise leadership become lightning rods, for better or for worse. Sometimes they successfully manage the attention and re-direct it to the issues; at other times they "short-circuit," and engage in self-defeating behavior. In developing leaders it is important to study successes and failures of people who play this role. Especially in this technological age in which the media can instantaneously focus overwhelming attention on an individual, it is important to generate action principles for deflecting "sticky" attention from one's own person back onto the questions and issues at stake.

6. "SEED AND HARVEST" LEADERS FROM MORE DIVERSE SOURCES

While younger Singaporeans have many wonderful role models, the actual development process for Singapore leaders seems to be somewhat limited and narrow. It is based on a logic that the best and brightest academically should be nurtured, encouraged and supported so that they can gain the credentials needed to be of service to the country – in government or politics. Most seem to go to similar kinds of schools and develop a similar set of models about government and society. In fact, many seem like "peas from the same pod." Of course, on-the-job training is important and potential leaders are given plenty of opportunities to prove themselves over time. This is important work, but I think that diversity in the selection and development process might add to a broader and more creative collective leadership capacity.

Adaptation in biological species and in organizations and societies requires diversity to stimulate the creative juices that can produce better adaptations. Leadership is the activity of managing that adaptive process. If there are too many like-minded people complying with pre-ordained processes and procedures when it comes to leadership, the consequences can produce a complacency, apathy and predictability.

What is particularly important in finding and developing potential leaders is to look for the intellectually curious, people who have a passion for constant learning and making a difference.

7. PROVIDE MORE VARIETY OF DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCES FOR LEADERS

Get potential leaders exposed to different, messy and demanding predicaments that test their leadership mettle and builds leadership capacity. Many of the world's best leaders have gone through trying times and those experiences have developed their sensitivity to people's needs, contextual variations, and the subtleties and nuances of complex predicaments. The famous Harvard psychologist, more than a century ago, talked about the importance of leaders being "twice born" or having profound events in their lives that shaped and sharpened their perspective as it pertained to leadership. What such events or experiences could look like for men and women who are a product of "good times" I do not know. But more thought should be given to this challenge.

8. HOLD REGULAR (EVERY YEAR AT LEAST) LEADERSHIP LEARNING SESSIONS

In these sessions young and experienced leaders should come together for a few days to discuss their success and failures, particularly their failures. In an achievement-oriented and meritocratic culture like Singapore, there is preoccupation with success and *appearing* successful. Therefore people are inclined to cover up their failures, flaunt their wins, and not, when leadership is really required, take the requisite risks or initiative for fear of failing or being perceived as incompetent. When such is the attitude, learning is limited. My colleague at Harvard, Chris Argyris calls this fear of being perceived a failure the "brittleness syndrome" and addresses the dilemmas associated with orchestrating true learning for leaders in his classic Harvard Business Review article, *Teaching Smart People to Learn*.

Such learning sessions also serve to present complex, paradoxical problems and dilemmas to the group and have them think through what leadership might look like in addressing the challenge. The sessions can help hone diagnostic skills, interventions skills, partnering and reflective capacities.

9. ENCOURAGE AND REWARD PEOPLE FOR THEIR WILLINGNESS TO DEVELOP THEIR LEADERSHIP CAPACITIES BEYOND THE CONVENTIONAL APPROACH

Managers manage what's there, and leaders generate what's not there. Leadership by its very essence requires novelty, imagination, and initiative. Too often when people display this kind of leadership they are sent signals that they need to "get back in the box" and be a good team player.

When people take risks and seek to provide courageous leadership for novel problems, this behavior should be supported, even when they fail. The failing allows for learning. Of course I am not talking about an arbitrary or capricious approach to leadership. I am *not* advocating being foolhardy. What I am suggesting is that people must from time to time break away from the norm and display imagination, initiative, and creativity in their attempts to mobilize people and resources to address difficult leadership challenges.

10. EMPHASIZE AND FOCUS ON THE BUILDING OF LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES FOR MULTIPLE CHALLENGES AND CONTEXTS

Because the world is growing more complex, Singapore needs people with the ability to adjust their behavior on the fly, diagnose challenges more broadly and deeply, and use their diagnosis to tailor multifaceted leadership strategies to address the array of problems and challenges faced by the nation.

The key point here is that a skilled leader must be able to adapt style and approach to changing circumstance and problems. For example, the leadership required for a development challenge is different from leading for a creative challenge or a maintenance challenge or transition challenge. Usually there will be one challenge that is of higher priority than another. But when the challenge changes, the leader must shift approach. Also, the reality is that often a leader is working on two or three challenges concurrently. Therefore, leaders must have enormous flexibility in style and approach and have the ability to know in what context what kind of leadership approach is required.

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