

Interview With Mr Lim Siong Guan – Leadership In A Changing World

By Mr Lim Siong Guan | October 10, 2013

This is an exclusive interview with Mr Lim Siong Guan, the Group President of Government of Singapore Investment Corporation on the role of leaders in a changing world.

Hi Mr Lim, can you share with us how you define leadership?



Leadership to me is making things happen which on their own would not happen. That means the leader is the one who makes good things happen in an organization; things which on their own would not have happened.

If people would have changed or the organization done certain things anyway, without your being around, then you're more likely going to slow things down if you are around. But if things

would not have happened without you being around, then it shows that you have really been leading that organization.

How has the leader's role evolved in the past 5 years, and what is the current leadership trend?

As I have mentioned on my perspective of leadership, the leader must be one who thinks about the future, and so he positions the organization, he prepares the people for that kind of a future.

And if he's going to make those things, which on their own would not have happened, turn into reality, it means that he needs to be *a good leader managing change*. In today's fast changing world, the demand on the leader lies in how good he is as *a leader for the future*, and how good he is as *a change leader*.

To lead for the future means that you really need to try and anticipate the future and accept that you will be surprised; there will be things happening in ways you do not expect. Therefore, besides forecasting the future, you need to build strengths and capabilities in the organization to be able to respond to situations that are not in your favor. You try to plan and strategize as best as you can, according to what you can anticipate of the future.

What is the most important character or quality of a leader that can help him face the changing world?

If you were to ask me about just one thing that would help people become good leaders, I think they should address the question: "How can I help you do your job better?"

Can you elaborate on this question?

To me, the first 'you' is *your boss*. So you ask, "How can I help my boss do his job better?" That means you must want to or at least try to, help your boss succeed. I spoke to many people and they said their biggest problem at work is their boss. So the way to solve the problem is to change the boss. And some people work very hard at trying to get their boss into trouble. I don't think that's a very good idea.

Then how can you help your boss succeed? Why do you want your boss to succeed? I think you want your boss to succeed because you want his trust; and if you have his trust, he will then give you the freedom to think, the freedom to try things out and the freedom also to make mistakes. Because he can trust you to be trying your best. And to be always trying to do the right thing. And because he trusts you, even when you do make a mistake, he can forgive you.

The second 'you' in "How can I help you do your job better?", is your peers. In other words, "How can I help my peers do their job better?". People will say my peers are my competitors for promotion, for moving ahead in the organization, why do I want to help them?

I say there are very few things these days that we can do just on our own. Practically everything important that we want to accomplish, we have to do in collaboration, in partnership, in cooperation with other people. So helping your peers succeed, I think it's a brilliant idea. You need their goodwill. So even if they may not go out of the way to help you, at least they will not go out of the way to create trouble for you.

Then the third 'you' is the people who work under you – your subordinates. How can I help my subordinates do their job better? Of course this is probably the most important 'you'. The people are there working for you and working under you; and you need to recognize that they are not there to be your toy soldiers, to be moved around. It is your privilege to be their supervisor.

So what are you doing to help them succeed? I think you've got to ask this question all the time – how can I help my people succeed? You can train them, you can encourage them, you can guide them along the way, or you can teach them things. But the most important thing is, how do you help them grow in self-confidence, grow in their own convictions, in their own self-belief.

So what do you think is the biggest leadership challenge?

Let me try to answer this question by asking you another question: "Where do trees come from?"

Where do trees come from? Very often when I ask this question people think it's a trick question. But it's not meant as a trick question. And as people think about it, many will say trees come from seeds.

Let me then pose this question to you – if I put the seed in a vacuum, will the seed grow? The seed won't grow, right? Because seeds need air, they need carbon dioxide; they need oxygen in order to grow.

Similarly, if I put the seed and don't water it, will it grow? And again people when they think about it, will say no, it won't. Not when everything is dry, it needs water to grow.

What is a tree chemically? It is hydrocarbon. And straight away you understand it means that it needs to have hydrogen, it needs to have oxygen and to have carbon; carbon dioxide. Mostly that's the way. In addition to that, a seed needs nutrients in the ground. That's why you need to put it in fertile soil.

So think about it. You say the tree comes from a seed, but quite obviously if you just put the seed there on its own, in a vacuum or with no water, it will not grow.

Actually, the tree comes from the environment, it is the oxygen, the water, the fertilizer that you give, that's where the tree comes from. Then people will ask, "Then what is the seed for?" The seed is the genetic imprint. The seed tells you what kind of a tree it is, how tall it can grow, how will its root system be like, how the leaves will look like, what the shape of the tree will be, that's what the seed does.

The seed tells you what is possible. But whether the tree achieves its full height, or its full shape, depends on whether the condition is right. So I would say, nurturing people actually is the privilege of a leader. Look at all the people that you have as seeds given to you, everyone comes with potential – to grow to a certain height, a certain extent and potential to be able to do certain things. What are you doing about creating an environment which allows them to achieve their potential? At the end of the day, while I would say that leadership is about making things happen which on their own would not happen, the critical part of that is, how do you get the people that you have working with you, how do you create an environment in which they can function at their maximum potential? So that all of them working together will be able to give you the best possible results according to their potential. That is the challenge of leadership.

About the author

Mr Lim has been the Group President of Government of Singapore Investment Corporation since 2007. Before this role, he was the Head of the Singapore Civil Service, Permanent Secretary of some key ministries, and Director of various government corporations. He is also an adjunct Professor of the prestigious Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in the National University of Singapore.

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