Let’s motivate by trust instead of fear

I WAS walking towards City Hall MRT station last week when I saw a gruesome sight. It was one of the new anti-smoking advertisements plastered at a bus stop shelter.

It was so gross that I dare not describe it. It was common to see people scurrying past that billboard at the sight of the advertisement.

A small child started wailing when he saw the advertisement, and his mother embraced him.

I wonder why advertisers resort to such repulsive means to deliver a message. Then again, fear is a tried and tested deterrent.

I rushed to the train platform, only to realise that I had just missed the train home. The display screen read: “Jurong East: 11 minutes.”

Before I could take my eyes off the screen, I saw the second ghastly image of the day: dead bodies strewn all over a train platform.

I was too far to hear what the man on the screen was saying, but the subtitles read, “Mumbai Blasts – July 2006”. The image soon transitioned to train bombings in Madrid and London.

The message? To be vigilant on trains here. The method? Fear, once again.

Throughout the train ride, the images kept flashing in my mind.

I couldn’t even concentrate on the book I was reading. This made me wonder: How far is too far, when it comes to using fear as a deterrent?

When a nation or an organisation is young, it is important to instil discipline in its citizens. Singapore has done extremely well in this regard, and owes much of its success to its disciplined population. But just like any medicine, there are side effects.

Fear often has the effect of restricting people’s behaviour. A fine for walking on the grass may prevent environmental degradation, but it also won’t allow a person to even attempt to find a short cut to his home. He will be too conditioned to walk the same paved path every day to try anything different.

This can be applied to the workplace. Managers tightly define the scope of their employees’ jobs and often frown on those who step out of line. Paradoxically, employees are encouraged to think out of the box.

How is that possible if the box is so strictly defined and any deviation is punished?

I saw a Ministry of Defence advertisement on the train recently. It read: “Minds, once broadened, cannot retain their initial confines.” But what we must realise is that confines (or fears) have to be done away to broaden the mind at all.

I’m sure we all agree that Singapore has matured as a society. The high levels of education speak for themselves. But we need to evolve beyond managing by fear.

How about managing by trust instead? What about focusing on the positives in a situation, rather than the glaring negatives?

Instead of showing the negative effects of not quitting smoking, why not show the positive effects of quitting? Featuring real-life people who have successfully quit smoking and are living their lives well would go a long way in communicating the message.

As it is, there are grotesque pictures on cigarette boxes, seen by the smokers themselves. So why subject the general public to such images, the majority of whom are non-smokers?

As for promoting vigilance in trains, how about sharing stories of how vigilant people saved the day, rather than bloody bodies strewn all over the platform. In fact, the video showing steps for identifying a stray bag is much more effective.

The best bosses do not shout and scream their orders but collectively convince their workers to cooperate – by getting them to understand and trusting them to do what they need to get the job done.

Management by trust is the way to go.

The writer is a final-year student at the School of Information Systems at SMU.