LESSONS FROM THE FIRST 10

In a speech to mark the launch of the National Library Board’s book, Singapore: The First 10 Years of Independence, last week, Mr Ho Kwon Ping, chairman of the Singapore Management University Board and Mediacorp, touched on the issue of leadership. Below are excerpts from his speech.

LEADERSHIP is, according to this one definition: “The ability to secure the willing commitment of people to the achievement of specific objectives.” There are four concepts here: “willing commitment,” “people,” “specific objectives” and “ability.” This book, Singapore: The First 10 Years, shows us not just how effective our leaders were in the midst of an uncertain future, but how they managed to elicit a high level of willing commitment from those working for them. The first 10 years demonstrated the quality of the relationship that Singaporeans had with their leaders.

This relationship was grounded in our leaders’ strong self-belief — not conceit — which was in turn rooted in open, realistic acknowledgement of their individual strengths and weaknesses. The so-called “First 10” members of the first Cabinet, had a hard-earned view of their own abilities and shortcomings, and in the face of crisis, never descended into grandstanding, bitter wrangling. Each had his own contribution to make as part of a team: • Dr Goh Keng Swee in education, economy and defence • Dr Toh Chin Chye in party organisation, health and social services • Mr S Rajaratnam in culture and foreign affairs • Mr Ong Pang Boon in labour, environment and home affairs • Mr Jek Yeun Thong in labour, culture and technology • Mr Yung Nyuk Lan in education and health • Mr Eddie Barker in law, labour and Foreign Affairs • Mr Lim Kim San in national development, finance and environment • Mr Othman Wok in social affairs, sports and culture

Mr Lee Kuan Yew as first among equals, or process inter partes, provided the vision, direction and organisational discipline. The First 10, devoid of the jargon, change management, blame and the usual bickering that faces every team, were able to perform magnificently. As the word “ability” suggested, leaders take practice, feedback and support to become effective. Apart from their innate intelligence and skills, they also demonstrated essential attributes of leadership at the personal level.

First, leadership is not just a management or political technique but a natural consequence of one’s integrity or “character,” which is beyond the sum total of one’s experience and values. Singapore’s first Cabinet comprised not the largely-honoured, highly voted-in President Scholars and civil servants who now populate Parliament. They were a mixed bunch of people from all walks of life, thrown together by the call of history. Second, leadership is both aspirational and inspirational in that it enables both the leader and the led to touch the better part of their own souls. A good leader not only does things done but enables us, in the doing, to transcend oneself, to become better versions of our selves. Leadership requires the courage to follow convictions contrary to prevailing views and even one’s own inclinations and from the ability to have been honest with oneself, by narrating and sharing the story to the voice within oneself.

By definition, leadership implies being different from the rest. It is not the academic review and evaluation of facts, like what a doctor or scientist might do — nor is it the listing of pluses and cons, leading to the passive critique of the armchair intellectual. Instead, it is the making of a decision, which is based, at best, on imperfect knowledge and may be grounded more on principle than rationality, intuition rather than facts.

What is the key lesson from observing our first generation leaders? In confronting the command challenge, then the fragility of independence and the uncertainty of economic growth, our first leaders never had the luxury of hindsight, knowledge that they would become spectacularly successful. They faced failure every day, but giving up was simply not an option. I believe leadership begins by listening to the voice within you, to be true to your own deeper self against all other countervailing forces, and to act on it. And by recollecting, and reflecting, on the occasions when you have listened to and acted according to your inner voice, you are in fact preparing for the time when your inner resolve will be tested at its limits.

Third, leadership requires a very pragmatic, multi-dimensional politics across the Causeway — but at the same time, to retain critical magnetism, the “First 10” forcefully taught themselves the ability to transcend national boundaries and make us all a part of one. As the word “ability” suggested, leaders take practice, feedback and support to become effective. Apart from their innate intelligence and skills, they also demonstrated essential attributes of leadership at the personal level.

Singapore’s First 10 were comprised not only of the Prime Minister’s team: • Poh, since his speech. • For this reason, I believe leadership begins by listening to the voice within you, to be true to your own deeper self against all other countervailing forces, and to act on it. And by recollecting, and reflecting, on the occasions when you have listened to and acted according to your inner voice, you are in fact preparing for the time when your inner resolve will be tested at its limits.

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Fear and hope are after all, the two primal human emotions, which define us and form the world around us — fear of what we are capable of accomplishing and hope of what we can become instead. The transformation of this fear to hope is the leader’s task.

The transformational role of leadership was exhibited every day by our first generation of leaders. They faced failure every day, but giving up was simply not an option. As the word “ability” suggested, leaders take practice, feedback and support to become effective. Apart from their innate intelligence and skills, they also demonstrated essential attributes of leadership at the personal level.

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