

**SPEECH BY MR ONG YE KUNG, MINISTER FOR  
EDUCATION AT THE TRI-SECTOR FORUM  
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AT SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY**

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. I am happy to join you today at the Tri-Sector Forum. I want to first congratulate the students on your graduation, and hope you have an exciting career and work awaiting you.

2. I also want to congratulate SMU for staying at the forefront of innovation, and always anticipating new demands for knowledge and skills in the real world. The Tri-Sector programme is one example, reflecting SMU's belief in multidisciplinary teaching, in the importance of different people, different talent and knowledge coming together to solve important problems. Also, this spirit of SMU is evident through other signature initiatives such as SMU-X, which I support very strongly.

3. You are also a great believer in real life learning, and have made overseas exposure a condition for graduation. Today, DPM Tharman and I visited SUSS and realised that they, too, have followed in your footsteps. These are bold moves, and the higher education system in Singapore will continue to need trailblazers like you.

4. It is no wonder that SMU graduates have very strong employment outcomes. It will be SMU's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year, and I hope you will

continue to stay young and vibrant. You have a relatively new President in Professor Lily Kong, who is not here today, whom I know has a strong heart for students and a strong head to make the institution succeed, and I wish you and your team all the best.

## **High Line and Tripartism**

5. The theme of today's forum is "Collaborating amidst Complexity". You had one whole year of studying this so the last thing I want to do is to say something different from what you have learned! Nevertheless, I shall try to give my take on it. Let me first share two examples of multi-disciplinary collaboration. I chose these two because of their slightly different nature. One is a bit more light-hearted than the other.

6. One is a project that I have always been very impressed with and whenever I am in New York City, I will visit this place, which is the High Line. It is a beautiful, quirky and creative elevated park built around an abandoned freight railway track.

7. The idea to convert a railway track into a park was mooted by two residents of the neighbourhood through which the track runs, Joshua David and Robert Hammond. They advocated for the preservation of the area because the whole railway track was going to be dismantled and demolished, and over time, they gained the support of the local government as well as businesses.

8. While their dogged determination was crucial, what I think made the project a success was the stage on which it was developed. I visited it as a tourist, but I knew the community embraced the project as they were

yearning for community rejuvenation, which the project represented. As you visit the High Line, you can tell that the architect had a free hand in designing the whole concept, the artists had a lot of leeway to populate every nook and corner with their creations, and the landscaping team had their imprint on all the wonderful plants around it.

9. Beyond the park, businesses revitalised the area through the building of hotels, restaurants, and other services. Others donated to the project. Using the fund, the park continues to be maintained by Friends of the High Line, a non-profit organisation started by David and Hammond.

10. High Line's success led to many replications in other cities, but not everyone succeeded. High Line was the perfect crucible where different stakeholders could come together and create something quite special. No wonder CNN described the creators of High Line as the Steve Jobs of urban planning.

11. The second example is closer to home, which is how we created Tripartism in Singapore - the model where businesses, workers and the Government work together to make our economy competitive, job market vibrant, and our workers employed.

12. This took years of effort for each partner to settle down to fulfil their part of the bargain. The Government implements policies that attract long-term investments to Singapore, create jobs for Singaporeans, and also protect the welfare of their workers; businesses operate here profitably, train their workers well and if they do well, share the fruits of their labour with workers through pay increases, staff welfare and bonuses; and workers form unions that support the pro-business policies of the

Government and contribute towards the success of businesses. Each one fulfils their part of the bargain.

13. And when times are bad, everyone switches to defence mode. Each one then fulfils their side of the bargain again, like when we had the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Employers lead by example to reduce pay, and cut unnecessary expenses to minimise job losses and retrenchments. Workers tighten their belts, accept pay reduction or CPF cuts. The Government implements cost reduction packages or training initiatives so that workers can use the downtime to upgrade their skills. When times are good again, workers can get back to work, and with some new skills that they can use.

14. The model in Singapore is actually quite unusual. Too often we see these three partners at loggerheads, particularly businesses and workers fighting over their share of the pie. We have somehow managed to reframe the problem as three partners working together to enlarge the pie.

15. Both examples have one thing in common, which is the conditions were right for various parties to come together with a shared mission, the right co-operative mindset, and work together. But how did these conditions come about? What are the pre-requisites to create these conditions?

## **Leaders**

16. If I were to put these questions to the floor, I may hear answers such as 'We must first have trust', 'There must be a spirit of collaboration', 'There must be shared objectives and common goals.' But I think these are not the right answers. They are the outcomes, not the prescription.

These are not the pre-conditions. Let me attempt to identify the basic ingredients for successful collaboration.

17. The first, and most critical pre-requisite, is leadership. Leaders have the power and authority to make things happen. High Line succeeded because someone – maybe the Mayor of New York City - bought into David and Hammond’s idea, and recognised the desire of the community. So he created a special zone for the project, suspended or created rules that helped others work together to produce results. The credit goes to all the contributors, but the leader made it possible to contribute.

18. For Tripartism in Singapore, those who had read our history would know that this was a gladiatorial battle for the hearts and minds of workers. Singapore’s first Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his team fought difficult political battles, risked their lives, and showed people and businesses a new way of working together. It took many years of painstaking hard work to build up the working relationship and trust we have today between the three parties.

19. So it is not just leaders, but leaders with long-term vision and the conviction to overcome obstacles to carry out their plans. I had breakfast with a retired CEO recently who told me how he brought about change in his company.

20. He said that in pushing for change as a leader, communications to the employees is key. What he said, when he said it, are of course important. But what is more important is developing a suitable ‘aura’ around the leader for communications, so that people already sort of expect what you would say before you say it. They know where you are

coming from, what your long-term plan is for the company, what change you are pushing for, and how they fit in. They must identify with your personal values and convictions. That 'aura' is created through years of hard work, walking the talk, and consistency in ideas and conviction.

21. With the right aura, what a leader says is trusted, empowering, and an invitation to everyone to participate in his endeavour. In a company, once the trust spans across all departments of the organisation, from design to engineering to production, HR and admin, you get multi-disciplinary collaboration. In a country, it means government departments, businesses, unions, academia and other NGOs have a good chance of joining hands and working together.

## **Followers**

22. If leaders are one side of the coin, the other side, which is the second basic ingredient, is the people who follow the leaders. To bring about change, we need both leaders and followers. An organisation or a country is not made up of its leaders, but by its people. If they somehow cannot work together, even the best leaders will find it impossible to motivate them.

23. We have seen how the quality and mentality of people make or break a company. The founding generation of a company may have demonstrated can-do spirit to build up the business. Years later, a subsequent generation who cares more about their individual self-interest may fail to anticipate disruption and competition, and fail their company. I think that is really where Jack Ma and other founding entrepreneurs are coming from when they supported the virtue of a 9-9-6 culture. Many

people don't agree with him, but he knows that businesses go down without the fighting spirit of the people.

24. My point is probably well illustrated by football teams. We have seen how teams with supposedly mediocre players perform beyond expectations, and how the converse is true of a team of famous Prima Donnas. I am now a suffering Manchester United fan. I don't think any manager can turn it around until the players decide to play for the team rather than for themselves.

25. It is even more important when we are talking about a country. Once the people lose sight of their history and identity, start to navel gaze and turn inwards, or are overtaken by complacency and hubris, the downfall starts. Singapore has done well so far because we have a few generations of stout-hearted Singaporeans. We now give them accolades called Pioneer Generation and now Merdeka Generation.

## **Conclusion**

26. I have talked about two examples of multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral collaboration – High Line and Tripartism in Singapore. I have also argued that there are two important basic ingredients to collaboration – the leaders, and the people. Both are of critical importance, for we need leaders with vision and capability, to show the way ahead, embrace people of all talents and aptitudes. More importantly, we need people with spirit and verve, who put community and society above self, to have a sense of right and wrong, and then put the leader's vision into concrete action and outcomes.

27. Get these two basic ingredients in order, and I think we have the chance to have an active, collaborative ecosystem of teamwork and mutual help across sectors, across disciplines.

28. But getting this right is far more complicated than you think. We live in very complex societies held together by culture, religion, a sense of nationhood, economic policies, fiscal policies, law and order, the media, governance systems from liberal democracy to communism, party rule...So when we go to work, with our colleagues of different ethnicities, nationalities and disciplines, we do not realise how much human history has gone in to make that happen.

29. That entire system is, of course, being blocked by technology now. Just like videotapes, taxis, newspapers and CDs can get disrupted. One clear aspect that is being disrupted is, like what my retired CEO friend mentioned, the communications between leaders and people. Communications build trust and understanding and hold leaders and people together. In the past, a leader can communicate with his people simply by putting a big magnificent statue of himself in the middle of a town square, doing a proclamation from time to time and then he has 'aura'.

30. That changed with mass media, starting with the written word and then newspapers, radio and TV. Today, with the advent of social media, that relationship is further altered fundamentally. You cannot manufacture an 'aura' of a leader anymore. You can only try to expose your authentic self through social media to the people and hope people like you, can have a relationship click, and you build credibility over time.



31. But leaders and people have to build that relationship amidst very significant and distortive noise of the social media. Hence, CEOs have to send Sunday emails to staff and share management stories. Politicians have to tweet, post, tell Insta-stories – the success rates are patchy, for various reasons, but occasionally you see brilliant successes of leaders who somehow have figured out how to thrive in this new communications environment. The examples are not many but a few did, and they represent the next phase of evolution of leaders.

32. Suffice to say, preserving effectiveness of communications between leader and people is a core challenge today. When there's a relationship between leader and people, you create an arena for different stakeholders to participate and solve complex problems. We have to make sure to continue to hold complex societies together.

33. So, I end with a question rather than an answer. My question is: how do we solve this? This is a core challenge today. But I will end here with that question to ponder. Congratulations once again to our graduates, and I look forward to our discussion.