



Some of the drivers of economic success, such as ever-increasing free trade, are rapidly reversing, and Singapore needs workers who have the guts to take on new initiatives and develop business models that may work in this new environment, says the writer. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Sometimes it is okay not to ask the boss for permission

We need people who dare to take calculated risks, but those at the top need to have their backs too.

Arnoud De Meyer

I was puzzled by Transport Minister Chee Hong Tat's recent comments in his Lunch With Sumiko interview about how, as an undergraduate in the United States on a Public Service Commission scholarship, he took the initiative of doing a double degree without seeking permission. He only told the PSC on his return to Singapore, and was scolded, although they eventually came round.

Mr Chee said: "If you believe that something is right and you want to make a change, take a calculated risk and do it. Don't be afraid, don't keep asking for permission because, sometimes, people may not give you the permission because what you're pushing for is a change from the status quo. Provided, of course, it's something that is not legally or ethically wrong."

What puzzled me was the fact that this needed emphasising. I thought such an attitude should be the normal operating mode for any young and ambitious member of any type of organisation, be it business, non-profit or government.

Isn't it the right thing to do, to go beyond the call of duty, develop entrepreneurial behaviour, take risks, commit to change, deploy your talents, and prove yourself? Frankly, the Singapore economy needs the people who can do so. Some of the drivers of our economic success, such as ever-increasing free trade, the open sharing of technology and a stable geopolitical environment, are rapidly reversing, and we need the workers who have the guts to take on new initiatives and develop the business models that may work in this new environment.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that we may have created all kinds of hurdles for young people to take risks and engage in change.

Friends and colleagues argue that this may be rooted in

Singapore culture. Yes, we respect hierarchy and act often in a disciplined way. Young employees know they are expected to execute what their seniors require of them and to work hard to implement tasks. And, admittedly, there are those who are not free from an inappropriate level of complacency and entitlement.

But there may be many other, more universal reasons. For example, some industries may lend themselves more to risk-taking. I started as an engineer in the petrochemical industry, where it is essential to follow standard operating procedures and respect all safety regulations. A creative interpretation of such procedures is not what you want from a young employee. That is, of course, different from hi-tech sectors where creative problem-solving and out-of-the-box thinking are essential.

FROM CREATIVE TO CONSERVATIVE

Young employees often work long hours and may have little time or energy to take on new initiatives.

As a former president of a university, I often observed that the creative and hard-working graduates, who at university did not shy away from taking on challenging and sometimes risky projects, lost that creativity and appetite for risk when they moved into the working environment or the corporate world.

It is not that they change. It is the context that changes. In their first professional roles, they often carry out routine tasks that do not require the knowledge they learnt at university. It may well take years and a first promotion before they can even tap that.

I remember a bright business graduate who had been a student leader and had done four or five internships in Singapore, the US and Shanghai. On graduating, he was ready to take on a challenging job, and was offered a contract at one of our Singapore financial institutions. I met him at an alumni event six months after graduation and asked him how he was doing and whether he had the feeling that he had created value for his company.

Hesitantly, he admitted that he had been attending many meetings on the second row, had

written multiple minutes of these meetings, but hadn't been asked to do any value-creating projects. His bosses probably thought they gave him the opportunity to learn from them. But he felt discouraged and left for another job with an MNC a few months later.

These first years in a professional environment are often also a time of significant social changes. An individual might get married, start a family, or move out from their parents' home. Why take on more risks in the job and go beyond what is expected from you? Doing what your seniors ask you to do as well as possible will get you that promotion. By the time you are promoted, you may be used to doing that and have lost all appetite for taking risks and pursuing change in a world where you are taken care of from cradle to grave.

THE WAY TO GET AHEAD

Yet, this is not the way to get ahead of the pack. There is overwhelming evidence supported by research that success in professional life is the result of a combination of five types of effort.

The first is that you need to

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perform well, consistently deliver high-quality work and exceed targets and objectives. Second, you need to continuously develop yourself, staying updated with the latest insights and technology developments. Third, you need to ensure that your efforts create real value for the organisation and society – which requires you to align yourself with the goals of the organisation. You also need to communicate well about your achievements and aspirations. Finally, you need to build strong relationships both internally in your organisation and with stakeholders outside it.

But these are necessary conditions, not sufficient to get ahead and make a difference. Real success will require you to take the initiative on novel projects, think outside the box and engage in change activities that may surprise your peers. You also must show your ability to entice others to join you in what are often informal teams and to motivate and encourage your peers to embark on novel projects together with you.

But to take on such new initiatives requires the organisation and your seniors to create the space where younger employees dare to take risks. How do you do that?

You create a culture where success is recognised and rewarded, and where "good" failure is not punished. What do I mean by good failure?

When employees pursue interesting projects and dare to implement change or to innovate, but fail due to factors beyond their control, they shouldn't be punished for it. My own research has shown that recognition is actually more important than rewards. Acknowledgement and celebration of achievements, both big and small, are of utmost importance.

The seniors need to provide constructive and useful feedback on progress, challenges and aspirations. That only works when there is already a culture of open communication. You need to avoid feedback being perceived as judgment or a performance evaluation. Feedback is about guiding professional growth and improvement.

A PLACE FOR EXPERIMENTATION

You also need to foster a sense of

purpose. To be effective, creativity needs to be aligned with the vision, mission and values of the organisation. Ensure that young employees understand very well what the broad domain is where they can experiment, try out new ideas and implement new projects.

Research on the evolution of professionals suggests that having a mentor who is not part of your immediate hierarchy can be very beneficial. Such mentors can provide coaching to develop the younger employees' potential, help them navigate their careers and suggest how to overcome challenges.

And you need to provide the resources. The most important resource is time. A completely overloaded employee will not have the time or the appetite to engage in additional ventures.

Of course, implementing this will create uncertainty both for seniors and juniors in the organisation. Seniors risk losing control. I can imagine that quite a few Singapore managers will put up some resistance and will hesitate to commit to creating an environment in which juniors can challenge them. And for the juniors, there is obviously the fear of failure. But I am convinced that we have no other option.

Singapore's economy and society face significant challenges. After decades of a favourable environment where geopolitical tensions were limited, and growing globalisation was positive to our open economy, we will need to invent new models of development for our Singapore employees and encourage them to dare to implement change.

The new geopolitical and economic environment will require us to change the status quo and take the initiative without being asked. If we don't, our young workers may lose out to hungry overseas employees who have the gumption to do so.

We need people who are prepared to take calculated risks, as Mr Chee said. This requires that seniors also play their role. We need to encourage young Singaporeans to become change masters and create the space where they can be so.

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