

# When family can impede culture of innovation

**Elgin Toh**

When he spoke to a young adult from a local start-up recently, former civil service head Lim Siong Guan asked what was the biggest problem the person faced.

The answer was unexpected: "My mother." The mother could not understand why her child, who had done well in school, did not opt for a stable, well-paying job and instead chose to join a start-up, said Mr Lim.

Mothers in Israel would think that way too – 20 years ago, he said.

On a recent trip to Israel, he asked what mothers wanted, and was told they wanted their children to be chief executives of start-ups.

Mr Lim related this anecdote and others at a lecture last night to stress the need for Singapore to build "a culture of innovation, excellence and outwardness", if the tiny city-state is to avoid mediocrity. It was

his third and last lecture as the Institute of Policy Studies' S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

He warned that as Singapore is both a city and a state, it should not be content with 1 to 3 per cent growth. This may be the norm for large developed economies, but the cities that Singapore competes with grow faster: Jakarta at 10 per cent, Ho Chi Minh City at 8 per cent and Kuala Lumpur at 6 per cent.

Higher growth rates would give Singapore more options in dealing with its social challenges, such as a "super-ageing" population, he said.

But to grow at such rates requires productivity increases that, in turn, require a different culture – one that celebrates trying one's best and trying new things, he said.

"If we want people to be innovative... to try more and to learn from failure, we have to recognise people for their effort and not only for their success," he said.



Mr Lim Siong Guan said there is a need for Singapore to build "a culture of innovation, excellence and outwardness".

The question becomes, have they tried their best to exercise their talents and abilities, and not whether they got a gold medal, he added.

Trying new things includes being willing to work abroad and in less familiar places, he said, speaking of a large company here where, if a new opportunity came up in a less well-trodden country, the expatriates would say: "When do you want me to go?"

But the Singaporeans in the company say: "Let me consult my wife."

The wife "is more than likely to say, 'Too dangerous, don't go'", said Mr Lim, to laughter.

"There is nothing wrong... but the Singaporean must then also be prepared to accept that his economic value to the firm is not as high as the expat's."

Whether working in Singapore or abroad, workers here should also overcome a prevailing attitude of just seeking satisfactory results.

In this regard, an overemphasis on work-life balance may be counterproductive. He said: "The call... for work-life balance is understandable, but regrettable if it is a call to be allowed to not be excellent."

Singapore should look to Finland, which has the highest per capita number of unicorns – or start-ups worth over US\$1 billion (S\$1.4 billion). He said: "Singapore must find our own way to promote a culture of innovation so that it is life for us – what we are and not just something we do."

elgintoh@sph.com.sg

## 'Politics will have to involve people more'

In an age of diminishing trust in governments, Singapore may have to move from politics of conviction to politics of involvement, said former civil service head Lim Siong Guan.

He was speaking after his IPS-Nathan lecture last night, when he was asked if innovation should be initiated by the Government or the people.

His reply touched on the evolution of politics here. He noted that the People's Action Party Government has avoided a "politics of expedience".

"They don't do stuff simply because it's popular... but (are) prepared to do stuff which is very important for Singapore's survival and the success for the generations to come," he said.

This path – the politics of conviction – requires explaining to the people why the more difficult path is necessary, he noted.

But this form of politics may have been overtaken by the lower trust people have in governments generally, he said.

"The level of intrinsic trust has been somewhat diminished, not necessarily because of what the Government in Singapore itself has done, but I think this change is all over the world... where the population has a diminished trust in government."

He added: "It is not a case of no trust. It is a case of, we'd like very much to be able to trust, but the Government cannot simply say, 'This is my explanation.'"

This new era calls for politics of involvement, he said, adding: "We need to involve people in the process because people want to feel that they are shaping the future, or at least they've got a major part in influencing the future. This is a lot tougher."

**Elgin Toh**