Prime Minister Hsien Loong at the Administrative Service Appointment and Promotion Ceremony 2022

Posted on

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Cabinet colleagues, Chairman and Members of the Public Service Commission, Head, Civil Service and Permanent Secretaries, Ladies and gentlemen. A very good afternoon to everybody. Very happy to have the whole Administrative Service in one room at long last. Because of COVID-19, PSD has been unable to hold such a physical ceremony for the last two years. I am glad that as we emerge from the pandemic, we are able once again to gather everyone here in person today.

It is a fitting occasion for us to celebrate two retired Permanent Secretaries, Ms. Yong Ying-I and Mr. Chee Wee Kiong. Ying-I retired after 36 years of distinguished service. She was constantly striving to transform the way we do things. As PS (Health), back when our healthcare workers were still using hardcopy patient records, she pressed to create a national electronic health records system – "One Patient, One Health Record". This was a major step, which enabled us to tap on medical data more effectively to enhance patient care. At PSD, she pushed for Public Sector Transformation. And most recently as PS at MCI,

her team broke new ground in our move to create a digital nation. Beyond that, Ying-I always made time for her officers, listening to their feedback and perspectives, looking out for their growth and personal development, making sure they received support to get the job done. I am glad that Ying-I will continue to share her counsel as Chairman of the CPF Board and Senior Adviser to MCI.

Next, I would like to thank Mr. Chee Wee Kiong. Wee Kiong has spent 40 years in the public service. He started off in the SAF and held many key command and staff appointments, including as Commander of the Air Defence Systems Division and Director of Joint Operations and Planning. He then served as Director SID – providing timely and strategic intelligence to support our national security and foreign policy strategy. Later, as PS (Foreign Affairs), he focussed on managing our regional and bilateral relationships, and advancing Singapore's national interests and international standing. He also oversaw several major diplomatic events, including Singapore's ASEAN Chairmanship year in 2018, the Xi-Ma and Trump-Kim Summits. Wee Kiong brought to his responsibilities his shrewd sense of the motivation and thinking of others, and the ability to look forward, plan, and provide direction for his organisation to stay ahead. Ying-I and Wee Kiong, thank you both for your dedicated service and contributions.

I would also like to congratulate the 20 newly appointed and 80 promoted Administrative Service officers. As leaders in the Public Service, you play a key role in shaping Singapore's future. I am confident that you will serve Singapore and Singaporeans to the best of your ability.

Public Service and COVID-19

We have been battling COVID-19 for over two years now. It has been the crisis of our generation. Our journey has seen many twists and turns. But at every stage, the Public Service has responded swiftly, ably, and resiliently, working closely with the political leadership, doing its best to stay on top of the situation.

I want to thank the Public Service leadership and all Public Service officers. Many of you stepped up, going above and beyond the call of duty. Some served on the frontline – working with healthcare institutions, managing quarantine facilities, organising contact tracing, running testing and vaccination operations, protecting our borders, administering Safe Management Measures. Others laboured behind the scenes – planning operations, supporting workgroups and taskforces, conveying key messages to the public, developing digital tools, rolling out fiscal and social support for businesses and Singaporeans, preparing emergency legislation or securing equipment supplies. Many more contributed in

other informal ways – covering for colleagues deployed to COVID operations, delivering essential services to Singaporeans, and keeping the lights on when things seemed dark.

As one Public Service, you mustered all our agencies and resources, and mounted a collective response to COVID-19. Your hard work and sacrifices kept our people safe and our economy resilient. Your efforts demonstrated the difference that a good Government makes. One that is capable and trusted, that performs under pressure, making decisions in the face of uncertainty and confusion, that has the integrity and resolve to press on to do the right thing by Singapore and Singaporeans, that clearly and honestly communicates to the public the gravity of difficult situations and mobilises them to solve the problems.

This crisis has severely tested our Government in multiple ways. Here are some of our key takeaways.

Takeaways

One, we must be prepared to make the tough calls, especially in the midst of uncertainty and ambiguity. We have had to make many difficult and consequential choices over the past two years. Often, without an established playbook to guide us, nor the luxury to "wait and see". We had to judge what was best at that point with incomplete information, and act on that in the fog of war. Indecision, or waiting for all the facts to come in, would have been far worse. We did not get every call right. We have had our share of challenges and setbacks these past 2 years. But the key is to keep on learning and improving; and as we discover more information, to be prepared to update, revise or even reverse our decisions.

For instance, at the start of the pandemic, when little was known of the virus, we had to make a judgement call: whether to let the outbreak burn through our population, and hope to reach safety through herd immunity, or to tighten up and keep our cases as low as possible, until we learnt how to keep our population safe. Letting the outbreak burn through carried a high risk of the virus spreading uncontrollably and causing many deaths, as happened in quite a few countries. But aiming for a "Zero COVID" strategy in a small city state with no hinterland, unable to seal our borders completely, was both hard to do and incurred heavy economic and social costs.

We determined right from the onset that we would not pay the high price in human lives. We closed our borders, implemented strict measures, and for a time imposed a Circuit Breaker. We did everything we could to prevent Singaporeans from being ravaged by the virus, and we kept ourselves safe until we could get everyone protected through vaccines and therapeutics that were then yet to be invented. Fortunately, up to now we have

managed to secure our overriding aim: to protect precious lives, and to prevent as many avoidable deaths as possible.

A year later, when the highly infectious Delta variant emerged and arrived, we had to judge when and how to pivot from this strategy. Delta's infectiousness was making "Zero-COVID" less and less tenable. We knew we had to switch strategies soon. But how? While our national vaccination programme was progressing well, a sizeable portion of our population, especially the elderly, were still not yet protected from the virus. If we opened up too quickly, they would be at great risk. We therefore decided to hold the line for a few more months until nearly everyone had been vaccinated. In the meantime, we grit our teeth and pressed hard to reach the remaining unvaccinated individuals, and prepared our systems to deal with high but hopefully not seriously ill case loads.

We also had to change public mindsets. People had grown accustomed to low daily case counts, and we had to assuage considerable public anxiety when daily cases rose after we eased up. COVID patients were also used to recovering in hospitals, and we had to urge them to recover at home. Fortunately, we executed the shift at just about the right time, and coped well with the subsequent Delta, followed by the Omicron surges. Our health care system and workers came under considerable stress, but to their great credit they held up, and enabled us to transition towards living with COVID. This was the first lesson.

The second lesson is that we must always look beyond the immediate problems, however pressing they may be, to anticipate and plan ahead. Throughout COVID we always had to think several bounds ahead, and prepare for different contingencies. At a time when we had a few dozen daily cases and were doing a few hundred PCR tests a day, we started thinking about what would happen when we had hundreds of cases and needed to do thousands of PCR tests daily. We scrambled to order test kits, stockpile medical equipment, and ramp up our healthcare capacity. Later when our hospitals were seeing hundreds of Delta cases daily, we asked ourselves: how can we cope if we have thousands of cases a day? So we simplified healthcare protocols, and built up our systems, processes, and capacity to handle a much huger scale of outbreak. These contingency plans and actions had to be made well in advance. If we had waited until cases actually surged before acting, it would have been much too late. Realistically, we can't prepare for every contingency, but we have to do the best we can. This is very hard, because we are usually already fully stretched dealing with the current fires. But being prepared and making investments early yields immense dividends, especially during a crisis. Sometimes, we had to place bets, and buy ourselves insurance and options, even at substantial cost. Like with vaccine, we knew that vaccines would be a game changer, and that there would be a scramble for them when they became available. Long before that, we moved quickly to secure advance commitments for vaccine

supplies. We took calculated risks on promising vaccine candidates, across different technologies. This cost us a tidy sum, and we accepted that not every bet would pay off. But we judged this a small price to pay to protect Singaporeans and accelerate our move to the new normal. With therapeutics too, we had to make similar judgements. I am glad that these decisions overall have turned out well for us.

As the team in charge, we need to judge: when we should count every dollar and cent, to make sure we get the best value for money, but also when it is worthwhile paying a bit more to buy insurance and options for the future, to put us in a stronger position when the crisis worsens.

The third lesson I draw is that policy is implementation. As Administrative Officers, your task is not just to come up with ideas and concepts, writing papers and pushing them through approval forums. You also have to implement and execute well: identify your priorities, and focus on the most urgent ones, break these down into specific tasks, marshal the resources, organise the responses, and get all the agencies to work closely together, to prevent any slip-up in implementation. At the same time, you must also communicate, engage the stakeholders, and get your message across to the public.

Our national vaccination programme was one such operation. It was not just about setting vaccination targets, we had to get out there to engage the public through all available communications channels: put out sound and credible medical advice, present information and facts transparently to dispel mistruths, convince the public that the vaccines were safe, get people to come forward to get jabbed. We also needed to work out the last mile logistics to actually deliver the jabs into arms, identify sites for vaccination operations, source for manpower and train them, develop SOPs and IT systems, and work through the process flow, and the different procedures for the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. It was a massive operation. At the peak, 2,000 staff were running 40 vaccination centres nationwide, administering over 2 million jabs in a month. Most people will recall a smooth experience, and not realise the scale and complexity of the operations. But thanks to these efforts, we have fully vaccinated 92.0% of our total population, and achieved one of the highest vaccination rates in the world.

During this pandemic, we have had to mount many other intensive operations, e.g. dealing with the dorm outbreak, securing essential supplies, ramping up contact tracing, managing testing and quarantine/SHN, implementing the home recovery programme, and so many more. Each one was a major undertaking. Collectively they stretched our resources to the limit. At times we had to call in the SAF for assistance. But each operation illustrated how critical good execution on the ground was.

As leaders in the Administrative Service, you are not just the brains of the public service. Together with other public service leaders, you have to take command responsibility, deal with the issues as Whole of Government, marshal resources across both public and private sectors, implement and improvise solutions, roll up your sleeves to make the whole system work, and get the job done.

We have made significant progress in our fight against COVID-19. We are getting closer to the finish line, but still we cannot be sure that we are almost arriving. The virus has surprised us many times and will surely do so again. But overall, we are in a much better position. We can be quietly confident of dealing with whatever may come, and continuing to progress towards the new normal.

Keeping Trust

Key to our handling of the crisis has also been trust in the Government – trust that the Government has the best interest of Singapore and Singaporeans at heart, and trust that the Government is competent and will make the right decisions on behalf of Singaporeans. Singaporeans displayed that trust when they accepted the government's advice and decisions, and they complied willingly with strict Safe Management Measures (SMMs), and when they came forward to get vaccinated. This trust is precious. To continue to build and nurture it, we must have a top- notch Public Service, with capable and committed officers. Possessing the right ethos and values, dedicated to serving Singaporeans responsibly and honestly, to the best of their ability. We need first-class minds, able to grasp and tackle complex, inter-connected problems, and come up with creative ideas and workable solutions. But we also need a first-class team, cohesive and mission oriented, focussed single-mindedly on getting the job done. But there is one more vital ingredient of success.

For the Public Service to be able to do its job, it needs to work hand-in-glove with the political leadership. The Ministers have to get the politics right, understand the key issues and identify our priorities, exercise their political mandate, set the direction, and chart the country's strategy. But also be hands- on to ensure that policies are well designed and implemented. Then they can carry their decisions with the public, assure the population, and lead Singapore throughout this journey. Just as importantly, the political leadership has to give public servants the political support and cover that they need, so that they can focus on their tasks, and carry out their duties professionally, and not be distracted or intimidated by political theatrics or grandstanding.

On your part, as leaders in the Public Service, you must appreciate the political context, translate overall strategy into workable policies, and implement and execute the plans. The

political leadership and Public Service must complement and support one another, and trust each other to play their respective roles, and this partnership is crucial. As both our political leadership and public service leadership renew themselves, we must also renew the trust that exists between the current generation of Ministers and senior public service officers, and extend it into subsequent generations. COVID-19 was a moment when this happened – the whole 4G team was involved one way or the other, working with their Permanent Secretaries and management teams. During the crisis, they strengthened their relationships, and deepened the shared understanding and trust. This sets the foundation for the next generation of leaders – both the Ministers and the Public Service. Because when their turn comes to assume the responsibility of leading the country, the two will need to continue to work just as closely, and deliver the same results that Singaporeans expect, and have become used to.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has been a stern test for the Government. Today I spoke about key lessons from our COVID experience: be prepared to make tough judgment calls, to anticipate and plan ahead, to realise that policy is implementation, and that trust is key. Having come through many tests and challenges during the pandemic, we must hoist in these lessons, improve the way the government organises itself and operates, and do much better next time, not only to deal with the next pandemic, which is bound to hit us sooner or later, but also to respond effectively to the many other challenges that lie ahead. At the same time, we must make the most of the changes forced on us by the crisis to improve the way we do things in the future. If we thoughtlessly revert to the status quo ante after this crisis passes, we will be throwing away valuable lessons for which we have paid dearly.

Post COVID-19, we are in a strong position to make progress in a troubled and uncertain world. We must continue to build up the reservoir of trust in our society. Find new opportunities, create new jobs, improve everyone’s lives, and strengthen our social compact. The public service must do this to the best of your ability, and do it well. Then you can sleep at night with a clear conscience that you are doing your part to bring Singapore into a brighter future.

Thank you very much.

Highlight

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and senior public service officers, and extend it into subsequent generations.