



Leading the Lee Kuan Yew's Way

By Dr Lynda Wee

The late Mr Lee Kuan Yew was a man whose achievements speak for themselves. He transformed Singapore from a sleepy colonial outpost to a first world country in less than 50 years. American President Obama called him a “true giant of history”. With high esteem for him, many global dignitaries traveled to Singapore to pay their last respects. We have been blessed with Mr Lee’s visionary and incorruptible leadership. What can we learn from his life and how can we lead with his leadership spirit to further his great work?

1. Character

Great character builds great things that last. Mr Lee ruled in the best interests of Singapore. He believed in being fair, honest, and not using one’s position for personal gain. This birthed a meritocratic and multi-racial citizenry. Everyone is given fair opportunity to excel and this draws the best from our human spirit. These values became the hallmarks of Singaporean leadership.

Mr Lee believed in setting and achieving the highest standards. By merit, he topped his cohort at Cambridge University and won the Fitzwilliam Whitlock Prize. It did not matter where he had started, but with disciplined thought and actions, he achieved world-class results. It was with this mindset that

he managed his health, family and nation with results. He taught us that we can make a difference.

2. Clarity

Mr Lee lived simply and frugally. He was purposeful in building a successful Singapore. He held himself accountable for the lives of millions. He spent every waking moment focusing on the tasks at hand. He was known for constantly asking “so?” to get to the gist of information presented to him.

In a changing world, Mr Lee never rested on his laurels. He was acutely aware of the limitations of an unchanging worldview, and was always open to new ideas and keen to learn.

3. Conviction

Faint-hearted, Mr Lee was not. He was not deterred by brutal attacks, or painful setbacks. He set a powerful vision in 1965 – “10 years from now, it will be a metropolis. Never fear” and pursued relentlessly.

Self-confidence is key to building trust with others. Mr Lee advised his team to always look at their foreign guests in their eyes – and to never look down as they are representatives of Singapore and must conduct themselves equals.

Mr Lee confronted brutal facts, explored bold ideas and did what was right, not what was popular or convenient. He did not bend to the pressures of external powers. Where things went wrong, he did not sweep them aside. He got to the root of difficulties and worked on them resolutely, undeterred by criticism.

He focused on long-term results and conducted succession planning – increasing the bench strength of his pool of political talent to ensure lasting success for Singapore.

4. Connection

To Singaporeans, he rallied a sense of togetherness to build Singapore. He tenaciously learnt to speak in different languages, and frequently spoke at different locations, to reach the widest audience that he could. Globally, he travelled all over the world, even beyond the age of eighty, beyond his call of duty, to establish and consolidate our diplomatic relationships and advocate collaboration.

“In leadership, you must learn to communicate. If you do not tell people where you are going, how would they know where to go?”

Lee Kuan Yew

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