

SPEECH BY MR LIEW MUN LEONG, CHAIRMAN, CHANGI AIRPORT GROUP & SURBANA JURONG GROUP AT THE ACCREDITATION OF PROJECT MANAGERS OFFICIAL LAUNCH & SEMINAR ORGANISED BY THE SOCIETY OF PROJECT MANAGERS ON TUESDAY 6 JUNE 2017 AT 10 AM AT THE GRAND COPTHORNE WATERFRONT HOTEL

Let me first thank the Society of Project Managers for inviting me to address you this morning.

I will speak on three points on Project Management in Singapore. First is to trace the origin of project management and how it was the management tool used to construct the largest building project in Singapore more than 30 years ago. Second is to acknowledge how project management has largely influenced my professional career. And third is to discuss why we should endorse accreditation of project managers in Singapore.

Project Management is a relatively new profession in the development industry. About thirty years ago, architects, engineers and quantity surveyors were the only key professionals working in both public and private sector development projects in Singapore. The architect, as the design professional who conceives and designs the project would normally be favoured with the highest fees. By default, he would play the role of the “big brother” to coordinate and implement his creation. Back then, it seemed fair enough and we conventionally accepted that.

But projects are now much larger, and many with more complex innovative systems. They involve a myriad of other professional parties. The demand of project leadership has gone beyond just creativity and aesthetics. It has to be multi-skills. The job scope has now outgrown the designer's ability to play the lead role of managing the project.

In 1985, I was tasked by the Public Works Department to lead the construction of Changi Airport's Terminal 2 project. With the construction area of more than 3 million sq ft and a price tag exceeding \$700 million, it was then by far Singapore's largest project in terms of scale and cost. As an international airport terminal with all its latest integrated airport systems and M&E works it was then the largest and the most intricate project in the country. For example, the critical path network consisted of 11,000 one month duration activities.

It dawned on me that we would need computerised project management techniques to analyse the 11,000 activities in the network. It also required a wide variety of multi-skill sets including strong people management for the project leadership to be effective. I concluded that the Terminal 2 project could not be managed in the traditional way of the design architect leading the engineers, QS, contractors and other related professionals.

The supervision organisation was designed with a new project management model unprecedented in Singapore at that time. The architects, engineers and Qs would continue in their respective functional professional roles but a team of project managers supplemented them in managing three main success criteria namely “Time, Cost and Quality”. Instead of bestowing myself with some high sounding functional title, I designated myself as the “Chief Airport Project

Manager or CAPM". Our experiment worked well and we successfully completed the mammoth project within the planned cost, time and the quality. Interestingly Terminal 2 has flourished and my office is still there.

Following the successful completion of T2, our project management structure soon became the model for other mega projects in PWD. The private sector gradually also adopted that model, though sometimes in different forms. I am therefore please to say that project management which we pioneered for large scale project originated in Changi Airport 30 years ago. That has become the norm in Singapore development industry today.

But as with all things, the criteria for successful project management continues to be broadened and has become increasingly demanding. We now include safety, sustainability, productivity and innovation aspects as required targets to be under the care of project management. I think it is the right direction to go.

I brought along the project management skills I learned in Terminal 2 to my subsequent careers. I adopted project management techniques to turn around a very difficult engineering firm called L&M, and used project management principles in the founding and building up of CapitaLand into a significant real estate company. Currently I have oversight in the development of Changi Airport's next phase of expansion and am concurrently guiding Surbana Jurong's transformation into an Asian consultancy powerhouse. Effective project management is again the main spine of our management and growth strategy.

I believe that the management and leadership skill sets I learned from my project management days can similarly be adopted in corporate management and leadership in any company or organisation. Specific technical skills to focus on managing time, cost and quality are important for project management. To me, what is even more important is the ability to co-ordinate activities, work with, motivate and influence people, resolve conflicts and lead teams harmoniously.

Such responsibilities and skills are no different in corporate management and leadership except that the latter is on a longer term basis. I often say that project management, much like corporate management and leadership, is more an art than a science. And I often remind my project managers now working with me that I too was one of them before - a project manager. Similarly, they too can further progress along their careers as I did, on to corporate leadership, and to become President, CEO or Chairman of an organisation.

Let me say a few words about the accreditation of project managers. I have been working with project managers for a long while. At Changi Airport and Surbana Jurong we are easily the biggest employers of project managers in Singapore. We will need hundreds of project managers more. The question is where to find the right ones. And how do we ensure that the right project manager with the right qualifications and experience are employed to drive our project? In the first place, how should Project Managers, in general, be qualified?

In my opinion, as an employer of project managers in the building industry, any qualified professional in related industries can be accepted as a project manager. They can be trained architects, engineers, quantity surveyors, building or estate management graduates. But they must possess adequate hands on practical experience in managing projects.

I compare project managers to General Practitioners, or GPs, in the medical industry. A GP does not need to specialise in any particular medical field. As long as he qualifies as a doctor, he is able to perform as a generalist to look after the welfare of his patients. If you think about it, GPs can actually be viewed as specialists in caring for the overall health condition of patients. Likewise, project managers are specialists who are responsible for the overall management of the projects placed under their charge.

The proposed accreditation of project managers by the Society of Project Managers is in the right direction to assure us that they have, at least, received some basic suitable qualification. It is akin to the accreditation of registered professional engineers to practice engineering in Singapore.

In the early 80s when I was an engineer building Changi Airport, I doubled up as the Registrar of the Professional Engineers Board. In the enforcement of the Professional Engineers Act, I had to ensure that only registered engineers with the approved accreditation were allowed to practise in Singapore.

There were some lobbies for inclusion of institutions and Universities that were not already in our approved list. We were accused of limiting the pool of professional engineers in Singapore to serve the vested interests of those who were already registered. We stood our ground, and did not change our position unless we were absolutely convinced that the proposed additional universities and their degrees met our criteria for accreditation.

My main argument was that if we lowered the standard of qualification for professional engineers' registration, we might inadvertently grant the under qualified person a "license to kill". Although project management registration might not be the equivalent of a "license to kill", an ill qualified project manager might cause serious economic losses and time delays for our projects. Accreditation should reduce that risk though not in its entirety.

In conclusion, I applaud this effort by the Society of Project Managers to initiate the accreditation of Project Managers in Singapore. It is in the interest of our building and construction industry that our country's projects are served and led by the rightly qualified and trained project managers. The Society of Project Managers is in effect conducting human resource screening for us in our recruitment programme.

My last comment is that in the long run we should ambitiously extend our project managers' scope of work to include other industries and not just be limited to the building industry alone. A project manager building an oil rig, an aircraft carrier or a rocket programme is still a project manager by definition. But that is a call to be made by the Society of Project Managers.