

# Nail problems without hammering people

Former civil service chief Lim Siong Guan offers answers to life's hardest questions in his book

**The Leader, The Teacher And You: Leadership Through A Third Generation**  
By Lim Siong Guan and Joanne H. Lim  
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By **CHEONG SUK-WAI**  
SENIOR WRITER

IN 1980, high-flying civil servant Lim Siong Guan met a Singaporean manager who had studied and worked so well in Japan that even the Japanese mistook him for a countryman.

Mr Lim, who was at that time principal private secretary to then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, asked the man what the difference between Japanese and Singaporean children was.

The latter replied that if a Japanese father wanted to hang a picture and asked his son for a hammer, his son would bring him a hammer. But then the father would ask him, "So where's the nail?" and the child would say, "I'm sorry, of course I should have brought you a nail too."

But, the manager continued, if a Singaporean father asked his son for the tool and then demanded why the latter had not given him a nail too, the Singaporean son would have likely said: "If you wanted a nail, you should have told me to bring one."

In a recent interview, Mr Lim recalled: "He said the Japanese child has been taught from a young age to think about the purpose of anything; that is, see the bigger picture."

"Therefore you must think not only of what or how to do something, but why. And he said maybe not so many Singaporean children are brought up with that frame of mind of asking why, because if you don't understand why something is (the way it is), you wouldn't know how to improve."

Time has, of course, marched on since Mr Lim's encounter with that manager, but it is among the anecdotes Mr Lim includes in his debut book, titled *The Leader, The Teacher And You*.

The golden thread running through it is how to find, and live, a life of purpose because that really is the way to be happy.

His punchy, smarts-packed book, to be launched next Wednesday, has been written with the help of his daughter Joanne, who is a Princeton University alumna in her 30s and managing director of public relations consultancy *The Right Perspective*.

His daughter, who declined to be interviewed on the book because "the ideas and concepts are my father's, and I am merely a facilitator", helped with the con-



Mr Lim makes it clear that he means for this book to be read by all, be they stay-at-home mothers, emergency room nurses or secondary school students, and he takes the tone of a benevolent uncle. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

cept and design, putting in subtle yet significant details to hold the reader's attention.

So every page of their narrative is flanked by a page of key learning points in bold, as well as the occasional quote from such thinkers as Machiavelli, Mr Dee Hock, founder and former CEO of America's Visa credit card association (now known as just Visa), and former deputy prime minister Goh Keng Swee, who Mr Lim considers one of his two "master teachers" in Singapore, the other

being former prime minister Lee.

The only segment that sags somewhat is Chapter Five – in which Mr Lim recounts the mission and vision of PS21, or the Singapore Civil Service's bid to transform itself from being sometimes preoccupied and plodding to being more agile and responsive to others – which reflects not on the service but the subject matter being written about.

Mr Lim's approach is refreshing because, contrary to the popular view of the average worker as a sometime shirker, he believes that almost everyone takes pride in everything he or she does, almost always wants to give his or her best to others and does not want to look stupid.

For those who buck that belief, Mr Lim highlights the cautionary tale of a soon-to-retire carpenter asked by his boss to build one last

house. Miffed at such a latecoming job, Mr Lim notes, the carpenter delivers a shabby result – only to be told by his boss that the house was a retirement present for him.

The Lims have divided their book into three parts. The first, covering six chapters, is about Mr Lim's own life experiences. He does not dwell overly much on these, but still engages and inspires the reader deeply, not least because he is the son of a taxi driver and teacher who went from working in a sewage treatment plant to becoming one of Singapore's most trusted men.

The second part of his book has four chapters, which all focus on what leadership should be. He suggests that the best leader is one so unobtrusive yet effective that his followers wind up thinking that they achieved success on their own steam.

Mr Lim makes it clear at the outset that he means for this book to be read by all, be they stay-at-home mothers, emergency room nurses or secondary school students. He more than makes good on that promise, taking the tone of a benevolent uncle who has his reader's best interests in mind.

For example, he asks: When is the only time you should be angry at yourself? Answer: When you are not the best that you can be, he suggests.

What to him is failure then? Not learning from the past, not adapting to the present and not anticipating the future, he muses.

How could you best avoid crises? "Change in good times so that you change in good time," he says. Got a bad boss? Learn what not to do from him, and make sure you do not behave to others as your boss behaves towards you, he reasons.

Don't know how to write an appealing press release? Say what you mean from the heart, say the authors, and proceed to show you how.

Keen to pursue your passion? Then beware, he argues, because you may learn nothing new when you focus on what you already know and like.

Each of his points is very hard to practise, and so this book is not for wimps. As he advises in the book, one should take the escalator instead of the stairs, but then walk up the escalator because that would save the most time.

For good measure, he has included 12 challenges to you to make the most of your talents and circumstances. For instance, would you stop what you are doing to console others? Or turn the other cheek to detractors? Or give others a second chance? He would, and has, as many among his former colleagues will tell you. Above all, Mr Lim would ask them: "How can I help you do your job better?"

Which neatly underscores his philosophy of nailing problems without hammering those who have to deal with them.

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