

FOCUS enterprise

Be courageous and test the limits of rules

Singapore suffers from the problem of over-valuing obedience, **Kenneth Lim** learns

MOST entrepreneurs don't follow rules well, and Singapore must stop over-valuing obedience if it wants to foster an innovative society, says the newest president of the Asian-Pacific division of organisational psychology firm SHL Group.

"I believe there's an over-emphasis on rule compliance, processes and also an orientation to do the safe thing," says Tan Suee Chieh.

And he should know about rules — having broken quite a few of them. About two years ago, Mr Tan, now 44, stepped back from conventional wisdom and resigned from a high-status job as regional managing director of Prudential Corporation Asia to go back to school.

"In every phase of my career at Prudential I was involved in creating things, innovating things," he recalls. "But over the last couple of years (at Prudential) I was not doing so much of those. I was more supervising, teaching people to do the right things. And the dotcom boom was taking place, so there was a great degree of restlessness as well."

He was nudged along the path of career change when he looked in the newspaper one day and saw he had been labelled an "insurance veteran".

"I said 'I'm 41. What is my next 20 years going to be about?'" he remembers. "Am I going to do this for another 20 years? I'd go to a meeting or make a speech to agents and I would feel like I was playing a similar tape over and over again."

So he left Prudential for Columbia University to study what he says had always been a passion — organisational psychology. Organisational and occupational psychology look at the behaviour and motivation of people at work and in groups, and are one of the foundations of applications such as psychometric testing.

After receiving his master's degree, Mr Tan was hired by SHL this



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year to head its Asian-Pacific operations. SHL is one of the largest British-based private employer of psychologists and its services are used by many large corporations, including DHL International and Sony Electronics.

Mr Tan says his current task is to increase the region's contribution to the company's performance through several strategies, which include targeting small and medium enterprises and raising corporate awareness of psychological tools.

For instance, he has invited leading SHL psychologist Professor Rick Jacobs to speak about the latest advances in the field at a September seminar in Singapore.

One of SHL's core products is a set of 32 qualities used to assess the attributes of a person. Companies use those 32 attribute scales to come up with a profile of an individual's skills and personality, and that profile can be used to help determine

whether the person is right for the job.

Based on the 32 qualities, Mr Tan identifies 10 traits he says are stronger in entrepreneurs, and two that he says are not strongly expressed.

According to him, entrepreneurs have an orientation towards change. They are good with concepts, they are innovative and they tend to be optimistic in their outlook. They are competitive, have a strong desire to achieve and will vigorously pursue their objectives. They are also decisive, independent-minded and tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty.

And the two traits not strongly exhibited by entrepreneurs? They are not good at complying with rules and, while they are aware of data, they are not too affected by data analysis — a "can-do" attitude.

These traits form a simple snapshot of a typical entrepreneur, Mr Tan says. They are not completely

predictive and they do not guarantee success, which is influenced more by the kind of risks that a person takes.

Mr Tan says that while entrepreneurs such as Sim Wong Hoo have emerged from Singapore, on the whole, "as an entrepreneurial culture, it is not obvious that we stand as tall as we do, say, in other fields like civil service efficiency, academic brilliance and competitiveness in the sciences".

The problem is that Singaporean society has developed to place too much emphasis on rule compliance, Mr Tan says.

"We are very good in formulating processes, rules, regulations and principles. We are less good in testing limits, being creative and courageous. In fact, this is sometimes explicitly discouraged in order to be conservative and safe."

The recommendations of the Economic Review Committee, such as empowering individuals and removing barriers to creativity, are a step in the right direction, he believes.

However, it will take some time before "entrepreneurs populate Singapore's society as prominently and frequently as professional managers and scholars in the civil service".

"We are rewarded for being obedient at home and at school and we are highly structured and linear in our approach to problem solving," he says. "We cannot suddenly become creative, innovative and radical at the stroke of a governmental pronouncement."

Need to make good local KM practice more visible

By **Patrick Lambe**

ON Aug 12, *The Business Times* carried a story about a KM enthusiast, Darren Soo, who is trying to introduce a KM certification programme into Singapore from the US, despite the cautious response of "KM practitioners" here. The two practitioners quoted were consultants — neither were Singaporean.

It makes a great story — the individual who just wants to get something done, against the incumbents, who warn against moving too quickly.

But great stories are not always good journalism. Nowhere in the article was there mention of the Information and Knowledge Management Society (IKMS), Singapore's only professional society for knowledge managers.

IKMS has been established for three years, has around 180 members, publishes one of the very few peer-reviewed knowledge management journals (in which, by the way, the work of Singaporean knowledge managers gets global exposure), collaborates with other regional KM societies, is organising a major international KM conference in Singapore in 2004 and has around 800 Singaporeans interested in its activities, with whom it regularly communicates.

Nor did the article mention the MSc in Knowledge Management (as strong a certification programme as you could wish for) being run by Nanyang Technological University, the University of Melbourne's Master in KM programme currently admitting students through the Singapore Institute of Management, or the KM module being delivered as part of SMU's BSc in Information Systems Management.

And not one working Singaporean knowledge manager was cited. Certainly there are plenty of Singaporean knowledge managers to go around. KM has been happening in Singapore for about four years now and there is considerable experience on the ground — if we care to acknowledge it. Straits Knowledge recently examined 36 KM projects in Singapore, 14 of them in depth. And that was without looking particularly hard.

And yet the Singaporean experience of KM remains resolutely invisible — to both the media and enthusiasts like Mr Soo.

When people look for KM expertise and guidance, they seem first to look outside Singapore. Why so? Perhaps this works at the technology systems level — but if you also think of KM as people processing knowledge collaboratively, then you can't

just take a methodology or approach from outside and apply it, without understanding how people work around knowledge in the unique context of Singapore.

At one level, it's probably the syndrome of not recognising the prophets from your own country.

If you look at the biggest KM event in the calendar, Ark Group's KM Asia, you'll see the fondness for bringing in the big-name gurus from the United States. In the programme for this year's event, there are only two Singaporean speakers — and only one of them is a practitioner.

The Civil Service College's foundation workshop introducing KM principles to the government service is run by a British KM expert who is flown in for the purpose.

But if Nanyang Technological University can deliver a Master's programme in KM, and if there are so many KM practitioners out there, working the hard earth of change in their organisations, shouldn't Singapore be able to deliver more of a local diet to supplement this rich foreign fare?

Economics alone should encourage this. Overseas trainers, however good they are, add to the cost — and therefore accessibility — of sound training in KM skills and competencies.

It's not just the fancy that overseas training is better, however, that predominates. There's also a decided lack of self-confidence in the local practitioner market.

Why this should be is mysterious. In in-depth interviews we recently conducted, we found all the same rich insights into KM that you'll find in any KM project leader the world over. If you work the KM earth, you gather experience and gain expertise.

It's difficult not to. The shyness of Singaporean knowledge managers is largely encouraged by their lack of awareness of what other people are doing. Hence the uncertainty about whether they are themselves doing it "right". That's why the work of organisations like the Information and Knowledge Management Society is so important, in making good local practice more visible.

Mr Soo's global quest for KM certification, and the invisibility of knowledge managers in Singapore, should serve as a wake up call to IKMS and to the practitioner community here. Will the real knowledge managers please stand up?

Patrick Lambe is president of the Information and Knowledge Management Society (www.ikms.org)

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