

The Leader as Coach or “Minister Mentor”

By Robert Hargrove



How can we as leaders, used to holding power in our hands, not be limited by the people we have wound up being in order to foster creativity and innovation?

A few years back, I landed in Singapore on my way to give a speech on *The Leader as Coach* to a group of political and local business leaders. My first observation: Singapore works! The evidence was everywhere. Prime Minister Lee (now known as Minister Mentor) had a vision of Singapore being hailed as an economic miracle and unabashedly micromanaged his island to make it a reality. At the heart of the matter was ease of doing business—and that started with immigration

controls, baggage retrieval, and the speed with which one could get settled downtown.

Lee, often referred to as a “big man on a small stage,” never intended to become a leader. He dared to see and hear the call to leadership when he returned to Singapore from Hong

Kong in World War II and found the then British Colony in a state of disaster with food shortages, housing shortages, and a dearth of economic prob-

lems, including no natural resources. Lee, who joined a political party which ultimately achieved independence from Britain, became the first officially elected Prime Minister of Singapore, leading from 1959 to 1990.

From Third World to First

Lee’s first act of governance was to invite his political colleagues to a meeting at the Istana Palace, the old colonial governor’s house, a gleaming white, bungalow where they engaged in dialogue about a vision of an Impossible Future for Singapore that entailed transforming Singapore from a “Third World to a First in the World.” Lee and his ministers then stood in this future 20 years out and develop a national strategy that would move them from here to there.

Lee managed this miraculous transformation in Singapore’s economy, while maintaining tight political control over the country that had teetered on the brink of chaos, sometimes bordering on the extreme. It is still illegal to chew gum in Singapore. By the mid 90’s, due to PM Lee’s vision, determination, and action, Singapore is the number one financial center, the number one industrial leader, the number one oil refiner in Asia. Further, its GDP (average household income) is number five in the world, long ago surpassing Britain, its former colonizer.

Lee points out that leading a country to an Impossible Future is only possible when leaders stay intensely focused on both the longer-term goals

and the immediate ones. Most western politicians, like most CEOs, are focused only on the immediate goals as determined by the press (Iraq, Iran, North Korea) and by the mid-term and full-term elections, or the stock market. As a result, they tend to only focus on short-term goals, and often fail to accomplish something significant.

Another factor in reaching an Impossible Future, says Lee, is leadership stability. In Western governments, according to Lee, we have “revolving door leadership.” If someone becomes President or CEO, they have to learn to lead a country from scratch and come up the learning curve almost overnight. Lee’s long term in office allowed him to both learn how to lead a country over time, accomplish what he really needed to accomplish, as well as mentoring his successors.

From Command & Control to Mentor Coach

When Lee stepped down from his Prime Minister’s job in 1990, ceding power to Goh Chok Tong, he served as a Senior Minister. He currently holds the specially created post of Minister Mentor under his son Lee Hsien Loong, who became the nation’s third Prime Minister in 2004. The shift in Lee’s role from a leader, which allowed him to take charge of a fractious island, to a coach and monitor was not just a change in form for Prime Minister Lee, but a real transformation.

Lee has had to learn to check his substantial ego at the door and focus on developing the next

generation of leaders, rather than building a nation as he did in the past. “In my current role, I cannot direct any Minister or direct any policy. I can only mentor them based on my background and years of experience.” Lee often spends evenings with his son the Prime Minister and his Deputies, coaching and mentoring them until the wee hours of the morning on reinventing Singapore once again.

Lee’s TPOV: Lead from a revolutionary vision; take evolutionary steps.

Interestingly enough, the need for Lee to transform himself as a leader occurred precisely at the time when Singapore needed to transform its economy in order to sustain the gains of the past 30 years. His number one priority is to coach and mentor the next generation of Singapore leaders to find a new act. The old one, whose signature was manufacturing and operational excellence, isn’t cutting it anymore. High GDP is driving Singapore toward a professional service firm economy and high tech from contracting and manufacturing. For example, one Singapore worker costs the same as three in Malaysia, eight in Thailand, thirteen in China, and eighteen in India.

Through Minister Mentor has many TPOVs—“Lead from a revolutionary vision; take evolutionary steps,” “Make Singapore Better By Design,”

“Leadership is how fast you act when things go wrong”—he is prone to asking provocative questions. “How can we as leaders used to holding power in our hands not be limited by the people we have wound up being, in order to foster creativity and innovation and ensure Singapore’s prosperity?” Lee also regularly mentors leaders from Beijing to Bangalore, and other capitals on how to maintain political stability while achieving rapid economic growth.



Lee’s book: From Third World to First