

# Championing People-Oriented Leadership

## With Mr Jen Kwong Hwa, Former MD, Micron, Angel Investor and Business Advisor to Start-ups & SMEs

*By Lim Teck Heng, IEL Student Writer*

To get the audience acquainted with him as a person, Mr Jen Kwong Hwa began by speaking briefly about his early years. Mr Jen's passion for all things hands-on was palpable as he recounted his teenage days spent scouring the Sungei Road market for electrical components to feed into his hobby of assembling speakers. Even at that age, he already knew that he was going to pursue a career in electrical engineering. After his graduation from university, Mr Jen, like many starry-eyed undergraduates, wanted to do something great. Of the companies that he interviewed for, he found some of them underwhelming and unable to satisfy his appetite for a challenge. Eventually, he opted to join Texas Instruments. The opportunity to be part of a massive production line appealed to him: he saw the production line as 'one big playground' where he was afforded room for innovation and creativity.

However, as Mr Jen highlighted, merely being good at your job may not be enough. For one, you also need to be able to communicate effectively. As a junior engineer, he witnessed first-hand how acrimonious throughput meetings could turn out to be. Suffocated by production quotas and deadlines, managers from different departments started pointing fingers at one another when things went awry. According to Mr Jen, these managers thought that their jobs were secured by defending their turfs, but he did not agree with this mentality. Instead, he believed in the importance of communication and cooperation between departments and had often stepped up to be the mediator. This earned him the trust of his colleagues and superiors, and his first promotion.

Moreover, as someone close to Mr Jen once remarked, 'doing your best is not good enough; you need to do what is required'. Mr Jen could not understand the significance of this quote until he had accumulated more experience in management. He came to believe that a leader has failed if his people do not show results even when they have done their best: that simply means that the leader has failed to provide enough tools for their people to work with or has failed in his forward preparation.

After his first promotion, Mr Jen oversaw a small team of 5 engineers, and this was when he better understood his leadership style. To deliver results, he pushed his team to their limits, not hesitating to make them work overtime. In the end, he did manage to solve the problem he was assigned, but at a heavy cost: 3 of his engineers resigned in quick succession due to burnout. This episode in his career sparked in him a lifelong curiosity of people; it made him more sensitive to the needs of the people that he led. It also taught him that good leadership is about being brutally frank in acknowledging weaknesses. He candidly admitted that people management does not come naturally to him. However, he had resolved to pick it up over the years because he would hate to let down the people who depended on him.

Mr Jen emphasised the importance of continuous improvement. According to him, there are bound to be blind spots even in large organisations staffed with smart people.

He told the story of how the Headquarters of Texas Instruments once sent people down to review whether to shut down the Singapore plant. This was a wakeup call for the Singapore management to improve their processes and move away from the status quo. It took 10 years of revamping and eventually their work was recognised with the Singapore Quality Award in 1995.

On a related note, Mr Jen also raised the importance of building capabilities, especially in the area of human capital. The work done in the semiconductor industry requires niche expertise since it sustains on bleeding edge technology. As such, the industry is always on the lookout to recruit those who take pride in being specialists in their domain and relish challenges. Part of building capabilities is also helping those people who have become obsolete as a result of technological change transit into a new work environment, by growing both their soft and hard skills.



*Q&A facilitated by Professor CC Hang, Executive Director, IEL (left)*

In recapitulation, Mr Jen reaffirmed his core belief that people are a leader's most important asset; he said that it is necessary for leaders to create a work environment that engages people and to help them keep up with the frenetic pace of change in technology. He added that the development journey of a leader is a personal one, and what you become as a leader is all bound up in your personality, strengths, and weaknesses. Therefore, he urged aspiring leaders to work on self-awareness.

Since Mr Jen had been involved in angel investing post-retirement, he also offered a few thoughts about entrepreneurship after his main sharing. In his view, the most important skill for aspiring entrepreneurs is selling: how to convince customers to pay you and convince backers to finance your idea. He called on young people to focus on creating original ideas as a means to transit Singapore into the next stage of economic development because all this while, multinational corporations had not taught us how to create and grow new businesses from the ground-up.