

THE  
**HEADLESS  
CHICKEN**  
**AND THE SPARK**

A journey of learning and  
growing on the run

REBECCA FATIMA  
STA. MARIA

ANGELINA  
GURUNATHAN

AEDREENA  
REEZA ALWI

ALVIN  
UNG

and all the wonderful 'MITI Sparks' who made this book possible



# THE HEADLESS CHICKEN AND THE SPARK

The strategic goal of MITI's Human Resource Management Division (Human Capital Development Unit) is to grow MITI people into future leaders. The HR staff played a key part in the support, writing and publication of this book.



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REBECCA FATIMA STA. MARIA  
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## A U T H O R S

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**ANGELINA GURUNATHAN** is Principal Assistant Director at MITI. She joined MITI in January 2005 and has served in the Sectoral Policy and Strategic Planning Divisions. Her present work on international trade security at the Strategic Trade Secretariat both challenges and excites her. She values the knowledge gained from her BSc (UM) and MSc (USM) in microbiology, but she is also glad that she now works in unsterile environments. Angelina benchmarks herself against her mother who served with exceptional dedication and unwavering integrity as a teacher.

**AEDREENA REEZA ALWI** is Senior Principal Assistant Director at MITI. She joined MITI in 2009 after completing her Masters programme at the Berlin School of Economics & Law, Berlin, Germany. Prior to that, she was attached to the International Section of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industries. Her experiences include representing both Ministries in trade agreement negotiating teams and more recently, as the Secretariat to the Special Task Force to Facilitate Business (PEMUDAH). She enjoys reading, and spending time with her family at Malaysia's beautiful islands and beaches.

**ALVIN UNG** is an author, facilitator and student of leadership who helps people embrace their calling. He is a Fellow at Khazanah Nasional. His insights have been published in the bestselling *Barefoot Leadership* and *Taking Your Soul to Work*, as well as in *The Star*, *The Edge*, *BBC* and *CNN*. He has delivered keynote addresses, and coached senior executives from multinationals, government ministries and religious groups in three continents. He serves on the faculty of Eagles Communications in Singapore. He was an accidental founder of two social enterprises that spur leadership and literacy among the rural poor, and was conferred the Walter C. Wright Leadership Award by Regent College for mentoring community leaders. Alvin co-created and facilitated the Barefoot Leadership Circles (BLC) at MITI.



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# T H A N K   Y O U

*"I must do something" always solves more problems than  
"Something must be done."*

**Anonymous**

**T**he Headless Chicken. The Spark.

These two metaphors, which make up the book's title, seem unrelated. But they make sense when we tell you the MITI story.

At MITI, we sometimes find ourselves going from crisis to crisis, fighting fire after fire that flare up from external pressures and organisational challenges. Caught in the flurry of activity, we move from deadline to deadline with little time to stop; we do not question whether there is a more effective way to get things done, to improve, and to focus on the more important aspects of strategy and policy. In this state of flux, exacerbated by a sense of helplessness, it's easy for relationships to fray at the seams.

That was where we found ourselves in 2011: we felt like headless chickens. And we told ourselves that this situation could not – must not – continue. We were looking for that spark.

We needed a creative spark to make meaning of what we were doing. This spark would bring back the fire in our bellies. Give us renewed energy. Rebuild the frayed bonds. And above all, help each of us rekindle meaning and purpose in our work. Our desire resonates with the words of Jim Collins, author of the bestseller,

*Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't:*  
“It is impossible to have a great life unless it is a meaningful life. And it is very difficult to have a meaningful life without meaningful work.”

As we share with you our MITI story, we hope you'll see how we are learning and growing ... on the run. We are each moving from being headless chickens to becoming sparks of change – right here, right now.

And I'm convinced that our discoveries are worth sharing in this book. It captures our learning journey as we try to confront our limitations, and make meaning of our work. This is a narration of our learning through false starts, hits and misses. This is also the story of people's willingness to commit for the greater good of the organisation. As Peter Senge puts it: “You cannot force commitment. What you can do is ... you nudge a little here, inspire a little there, and provide a role model. Your primary influence is the environment you create.”

This book is our collective labour of love. It became a reality thanks to the untiring work of a number of folks who I want to acknowledge:

- My co-authors, Angelina, Aedreena and Alvin (the 3A's), wrote and rewrote countless drafts as they juggled numerous competing demands;
- Zainal supported us with cheer through the whole process;
- Wan Suraya gave the book a rigorous read-through;
- The MITians who were part of the “thermometer committee” took the time to provide feedback and comments;
- Kevin Thomas, the graphic designer, gave lots of creative input and livened the book with illustrations;
- Huey Fern managed the book project team from conception to layout, and also proofread the manuscript.

## THANK YOU

Each of you invested many hours to get this done. For that I am grateful.

I must also thank the members of our Barefoot Leadership Circles (BLC 1.0 and 2.0) who provided the sparks we needed on our journey to build bonds and create a better MITI. These individuals got the fire started by generously sharing their stories, their trials and their crucibles. They shared their stories so others may learn from them.

And a big thank you to all the MITIans who enriched this book with their thoughts, tips and memories of how they have served, thrived and grew as vital members of this organisation.

I can't thank you all enough!

**Rebecca Fatima Sta. Maria**

*Secretary General, MITI*



# I N T R O D U C T I O N

*“Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value.”*

**Albert Einstein**

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”*

**Margaret Mead**

**O**ne January afternoon in 2012, Rebecca Fatima Sta. Maria walked briskly into a large hall and sat down at a round table. There were 10 people already there, looking decidedly nervous, self-conscious or perhaps even full of anticipation.

Without any preamble, the Secretary General of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), kicked off the unusual book discussion held on the 16th floor of MITI’s HQ off Jalan Duta. “From reading this book, who are the leaders who have inspired you?” she asked.

There was an awkward pause. Her question prompted half the people on the table to thumb through their personal copies of *Bare-foot Leadership*, as if they were looking through the book for the first time. Seated in the outer circle were at least 100 other MITI staff – looking on with curiosity at the 10 people at the table. Rebecca resembled a lecturer conducting a seminar in English Literature.

Finally a middle manager broke the silence.

“I was struck by Tan Sri Dr. Jemilah Mahmood, the founder of MERCY Malaysia. I was inspired by her courage. She rallied doctors in Malaysia to build a global humanitarian agency. Her medical team was attacked by gunfire in Iraq. She took care of her colleague for several days even though a bullet was lodged in her hip. But most of all, I admired how she had the courage to step down – and relinquish control of the organisation that she founded,” the manager said.

The manager’s comments freed up other people to share about other inspiring stories from the book. They talked about how a village boy in the highlands of Sarawak rose the ranks to eventually rescue an ailing airline. They highlighted a homemaker who founded an award-winning school for impoverished children. They marveled at how an entrepreneur trained indigenous staff in the heart of Borneo to read English as he developed one of the world’s best eco-lodges.

Rebecca then guided the discussion to focus on the 10 principles of *Barefoot Leadership*. “Which leadership principles do you think are particularly relevant for MITians?” she asked. “Courage,” responded someone. “Embrace your calling,” suggested another. The book discussion eventually became a free-flow conversation on leadership.

Soon it was time for lunch. Alvin Ung, the author, who had been invited to observe the proceedings, was asked to respond briefly to what he heard.

“Barefoot Leaders are ordinary people who can achieve extraordinary results with surprisingly few resources. Such leaders are able to persuade and motivate their peers – without use of formal authority or power – to go that extra mile with them. Anyone of us can do it,” he said. With that, Rebecca thanked everyone for coming. That marked the end of the knowledge-sharing session.

But unknown to everyone, something new was just beginning.

## INTRODUCTION

As Rebecca led the book discussion on *Barefoot Leadership*, the seed of a big idea was sprouting in her mind. In recent months, she had been reflecting on a leadership vacuum facing MITI. By 2017, most of MITI's senior officers would be retiring en masse. This was a matter of great concern for her. As people left the hall, Rebecca pulled Alvin aside. "It would be irresponsible for any leader to leave the organisation without preparing a smooth transition for the next echelon of leadership to take over," she said.

"What's your strategy for growing leaders at MITI?" Alvin asked.

"I want MITI's managers to think and act like the Barefoot Leaders. Can you help me do that?" she asked.

That question caught Alvin off-guard. It would be audacious, to say the least, to help people behave like Barefoot Leaders. In his book, they were described as courageous and humble people who knew how to let go of control and embrace their calling. Barefoot Leaders persisted in honing their expertise and effectiveness. They behaved like social entrepreneurs. Above all, Barefoot Leaders treated people with extraordinary respect, regardless of rank, religion or race. These leaders emerged in times of pressure, uncertainty, and even material and spiritual poverty. They were strong and sometimes stubborn when faced with opposition; yet they were honest and compassionate. Would it be possible to grow such Barefoot Leaders within a government ministry? The task seemed daunting.

Alvin needed to understand what Rebecca's request entailed. He asked: "What are your biggest leadership challenges? And why do you think the principles of Barefoot Leadership can help make a difference?"

Rebecca immediately reeled off four main challenges facing her and her managers. It was obvious she had been thinking about it for a long, long time.

- **Challenge #1: Top-down leadership.** Because of their busyness, supervisors at MITI usually issued commands like *“Go do it lah.”* They could be skilled, experienced and honest people but many did not give clear instructions or carve out time to coach their staff. A study by an external consultant revealed that MITI posted low scores for mentoring, Rebecca said. As a result, that created ...
- **Challenge #2: Culture of compliance.** In response to the top-down style of leadership, the subordinates ended up saying *“Ya ... OK lah.”* They could be thoughtful people with creative ideas for doing things differently. But because these supervisors expected them to follow orders, the default mode was to carry out instructions without finding ways to add value or raise concerns. Unfortunately saying *“Yes”* in a compliant manner led to ...
- **Challenge #3: Perpetual busyness.** Because nearly everyone at MITI found it difficult to say *“No”* to top-down requests, they felt pulled apart by competing demands, ad hoc requests and last-minute instructions. Ironically it was the dedicated and conscientious staff who struggled the most. They would often run around feeling like *“headless chickens.”* It was hard to focus on strategic priorities. Not surprisingly, that resulted in ...
- **Challenge #4: Negative mindset.** With so many good people feeling overwhelmed, one way of coping with stress was to think to themselves, *“No ... cannot be done.”* Rather than explore possible wins, their gut instinct was to focus on problems and past precedents of failure. The lack of proactive responses would inevitably frustrate supervisors who might just tell the staff to *“Go do it lah”* (see challenge #1 again). And this would trigger off another downward spiral.

## INTRODUCTION

As Alvin glanced at his scribbled notes, it was evident that the four core challenges were not endemic to MITI. He had interviewed numerous CEOs and staff in public and private companies throughout Malaysia. These were universal challenges faced by many people in most companies, he told Rebecca.

Rebecca added: “If you had to sum up all our challenges, we feel like headless chickens. We really need time to reflect, learn and change. We’re looking for that spark of inspiration.”

Alvin was disarmed by Rebecca’s candor and courage. Instead of living in self-deception or pretending everything was okay, she chose to speak plainly. And she had also set the direction for the way forward. The goal of growing leaders at MITI was to create sparks of change – no matter how small – that would lead to bigger change. The changes had to be tangible, and felt by others at MITI. The journey would be daunting. But it would be exciting as well.

“I’d love to help,” Alvin said.

That 10-minute exchange marked the beginning of a long-term leadership experiment at MITI. Together with Zainal Shahrir Ahmad, the training manager, Alvin and Rebecca began designing a leadership development programme.

We (Alvin and Rebecca) immediately knew what we did not want. We did not want a leadership programme that has nothing to do with MITI’s real work. For example, in a team building programme, you can hike up a mountain or paddle on boats. But these activities have nothing to do with MITI’s vision to become the preferred investment destination and among the most globally competitive trading nations by 2020. Our leadership programme needed to contribute, directly and indirectly, to MITI’s core business. We also did not want leadership theories taught in a classroom. We did not want the typical motivational, feel-good talks that could not be translated into the daily challenges of work.

Knowing what we did not want gave us greater clarity on what we really wanted. We wanted to integrate leadership development

into the work itself. We wanted to build bonds among capable managers so that they would design on-the-job projects that tackled big challenges at MITI. Over a series of meetings in Rebecca's office, the both of us, together with Zainal, developed guidelines for MITI's inaugural leadership development programme for senior managers. The programme would be:

- *A marathon, not a sprint.* Unlike other single-event workshops, growing leaders has to be a journey because deep changes take time. Participants have to come together to connect with each other regularly, several times a month, for one year.
- *Held in the HQ, not in the highlands.* Unlike most workshops that are conducted in beautiful locations on the mountains or by the sea, we felt that the 'no-frills' sessions should be located at the HQ of MITI. Here, we do real work.
- *Voluntary, not compulsory.* The journey had no 'stick' tied to it. There were no KPIs or certification or promotion opportunities for people who 'graduated' from the programme. Participants had to volunteer to tackle ambitious projects that did not benefit them personally.
- *Create a rhythm of action and reflection.* The group projects required participants to identify and execute on real initiatives that would make a difference at MITI. They have to take action. They also have to learn how to reflect. The process of action and reflection was critical for growing leaders with emotional strength and learning agility.

And so we designed a one-year leadership journey called Bare-foot Leadership Circles (BLC). Over the next two years, we witnessed and experienced the following at BLC:

- Intense and heartfelt conversations
- Struggles, failures and conflict

## INTRODUCTION

- Friendships
- Personal and team breakthroughs
- Personal loss and setbacks, and
- Small and big wins that went beyond our wildest expectations.

This book, *The Headless Chicken and The Spark*, is our attempt to share with you the experiences, turning points and lessons we learnt on this ever-unfolding journey.

### **WHY READ THIS BOOK**

Besides sharing the lessons learnt from the BLC journey, there are many more reasons why this book is special.

- It captures the stories, lessons, aspirations and voices of nearly 100 people at MITI. Inside this book, you will find quotes from secretaries, junior officers and senior managers. We believe that everyone at any level in the organisation has the potential to make a difference.
- While MITI is focused on strengthening trade and growing industry, you will see that there are other things that MITI officers are passionate about, such as climbing mountains, or tending a small herb garden, or starting an ambitious project to beautify a flyover, or pioneering a new way to help people work flexibly at MITI, or creating an inclusive workplace for people with physical disabilities.
- Our book is not a typical leadership book written by wise old people reminiscing about the past. It is about the present, and how we can impact the future when we do small things with great love. The journey of learning and growing is unpredictable. So we have written about the real stuff – including the failures and struggles we experienced.

- Above all, this book shares the inside story about what happens in MITI when a small group of people decide to connect with one another and experiment with new ways of working together for the greater good of the organisation.

Four people wrote this book: a Secretary General (Rebecca), two middle managers (Angelina and Aedreena) and a leadership facilitator (Alvin). We did the heavy lifting together. We are a mix of male and female who represent the racial diversity of Malaysia. We are both insiders and outsiders working across hierarchical ranks and organisational boundaries. Because we all think so differently, we have learnt a great deal from one another. None of us could have written this book by ourselves. And that's the beauty of it: we all need one another.

### HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

You can read this book in three ways:

- *Cover to cover.* You will first learn about the four core challenges and how that impacts the way we lead ourselves, and lead our teams. Then you will discover the eight strategies that you can use to address these challenges.
- *Random.* If you are too busy, just flip to any chapter that grabs your attention. Each chapter can be read by itself. Every chapter contains stories, tips and ideas to help you work more effectively by yourself and with others.
- *Together.* Most of all, we want you to read this book together with your colleagues. If you are a supervisor, read this book with your team. If you are a subordinate, you can read it with your friends (from other divisions) or suggest that everyone in the division read this book together. If you decide to do this, do meet regularly to discuss what you are learning. Put into practice any tips or strategies you find useful. That is the most effective way to start growing as a leader.

## INTRODUCTION

Every organisation needs starters. We hope you can be one too. There are many ways you can see yourself as a starter. You can be a self-starter to address any challenges that you see. You can start something new.

Or maybe you have never seen yourself as a leader before; so we invite you to be a 'starter.' A starter is like a beginner. On the journey of leadership, we are all beginners. As we seek to make a difference in the lives of others, we will inevitably make mistakes, and that offers us the opportunity to start anew.

We can all be starters.

For centuries, traditional bread-makers started the leavening process with a small batch of yeast and flour. That small batch, called a 'starter,' is then added to a much larger amount of flour to continue the leavening process. Over time, the dough would continue to improve before the bread is good to go into the oven.

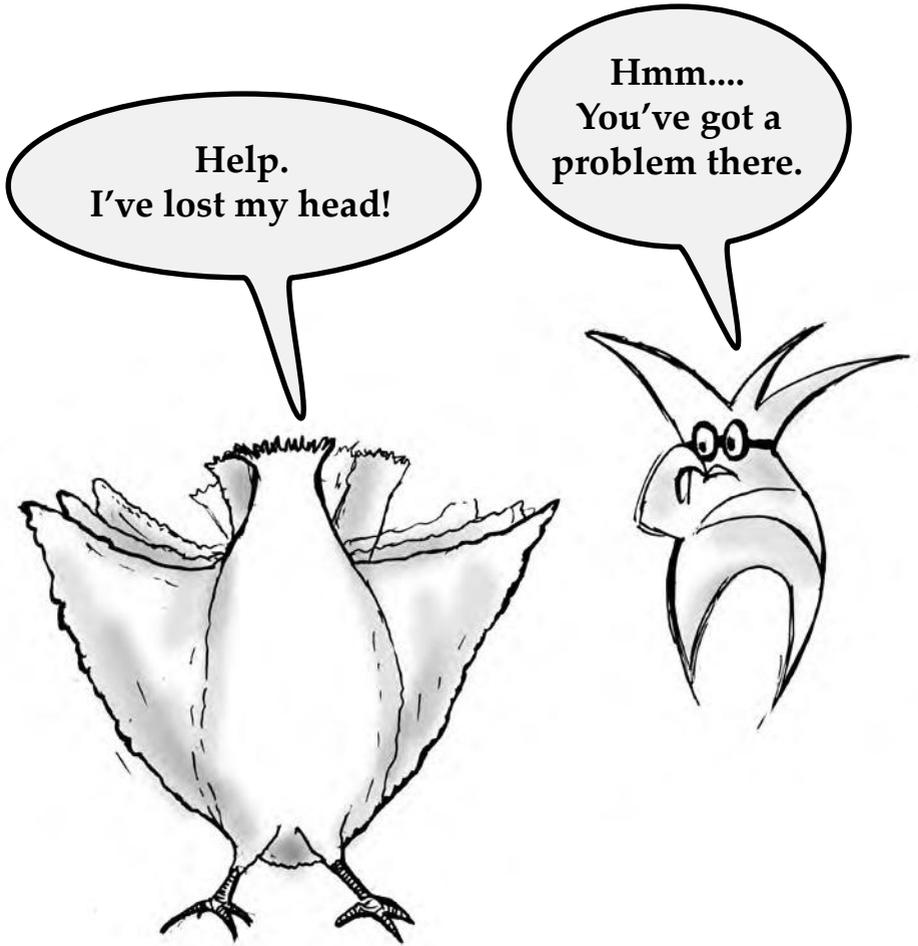
"The BLC is like that starter for the dough," said Rebecca, as she reflected on the leadership at MITI.

"We began the journey of change by inviting a small group of people to meet once every fortnight to share their lives, personal vision and aspirations for MITI. Our conversations quickly resulted in us coming together to brainstorm and plan activities that would help make MITI a better place to work. We talked honestly about the challenges we faced. But our ultimate aim, always, was to find solutions and strategies to improve the organisation."

This book seeks to capture the stories and lessons that we are still learning on the journey.

*"Start embracing the life that is calling you. Find your calling — know what sparks the light in you so that you, in your own way, can illuminate the world."*

**Oprah Winfrey**



**4**

**CHALLENGES**

Go Do It Lah

No ... Cannot Be Done

Headless Chicken

Ya ... OK Lah

## CHAPTER 1

# Go Do It Lah

## Challenge # 1



**T**raditionally, a top-down and hierarchical structure is required to govern large organisations. In such settings, the boss basically issues instructions and tells the staff: “Go do it lah.”

But such a top-down leadership style does not always work in today’s complex and fast-paced working environment, especially in a ministry such as the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), whose officers interact with so many international trade players and local industry stakeholders. Effective managers of 21<sup>st</sup> century organisations must use different styles of leadership besides just giving instructions.

Here's an example of how not to do it.

During a Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) 2.0 session, Che Mazni Che Wook, Director of FTA Policy and Negotiations Coordination, recollected how, as a junior officer, she was assigned to a new department (not at MITI). One day, her new boss met up with her. He did not give any background on the work. Neither did he give any guidance or instructions. He certainly did not give any coaching tips. Instead he gave her an assignment and handed over a two-inch-thick file.

"What should I do with the file?" Mazni asked.

"Talk to the file," he said, and then got up and left. Mazni was expected to wade through all the paper and figure out what to do next. But what was the problem? Files don't talk.

If you were in Mazni's shoes, how would you feel? You would feel bewildered. You might read through the thick file and still not know what was required. After a while, feeling frustrated, you might shrug your shoulders and do the bare minimum. You would certainly not know how to relate your work with the work done by other departments. You would end up working in a silo.

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The top-down style of leadership is most common in traditional organisations like the civil service. Why is that so?

Short answer: The bosses learnt this approach from their bosses, and their bosses learnt it from theirs. Many bosses actually want to be coaches and mentors, but because time is short and they are short-staffed, they resort to giving instructions.

Long answer: This style is prevalent because it is part of our cultural history. Malaysia has the highest score on the Power-Distance Index (PDI) among all countries. The PDI indicates how less powerful people in any organisation or society accept and expect power to be distributed unequally. The PDI was developed by Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede.

“In very high power distance cultures, the lower level person will unfailingly defer to the higher level person, and feel relatively ok with that.... The higher level person accepts this truth as well,” said Kate Sweetman, Director of Research at Iclif Centre for Leadership and Governance in Kuala Lumpur, as she explained Malaysia’s high PDI score.<sup>1</sup>

Admittedly, it is frustrating for subordinates to deal with autocratic bosses. And it is also frustrating for the bosses.

One day, at a meeting that Nora (not her real name) attended, the chairman got annoyed seeing the huge number of people at the meeting.

“Why are there so many of you here?” growled the chairman. “I want only senior directors leading the working groups to be present. They should be able to provide the relevant updates. As for the rest, kindly leave,” he said, with a sweep of the hand.

As Nora walked out, she saw a colleague also walking out. He was specifically instructed by his senior director – who was abroad – to represent him and update the meeting on his working group.

“Hey, who will be updating for your group then, if you walk out?” Nora asked her colleague.

“I don’t know, the chairman said the meeting was only for senior directors. I am not a senior director so I leave-lah,” he said, grinning away.

As far as Nora’s colleague was concerned, he was carrying out instructions – literally. But was he serving the best interests of his boss? Probably not.

In this true-to-life story above, the chairman used only a top-down approach, which gave opportunity for a subordinate to resort to blind obedience. Blind obedience is not necessarily a sign of respect. It can conceal fear or silent defiance. In the short term, the senior director of Nora’s colleague will end up ignorant of what went on during the meeting or any follow-up action to be

taken. In the long run, such compliance will make organisations less effective in decision-making and strategic thinking.

“We need to move from saying, ‘I know how this is done because I’ve been doing this for the last 20 years’ to ‘Let’s hear from you how we can do things differently,’” says Rebecca Fatima Sta. Maria, Secretary General of MITI.

## Tales from Within

### INNOVATION OASIS (IO)

Innovation Oasis was a project conceived for MITI’s young officers to get together, think out of the box, address challenges, and chart the future of MITI. IO was based on similar set-ups in the private sector where engineers or product development specialists would come together for inspiration.

At the beginning, top-down instructions were issued: all divisions were instructed to nominate at least two officers to be IO members. Meetings were held on a weekly basis. At first there were many officers who boldly gave their views. Discussions were lively and spirited. It was nice to be able to meet up and share common issues. Suggestions and proposals were given, in anticipation of changes.

But after a few months, the discussions lacked the crunch and kick of the *kacang* and *teh tarik* served. Attendance dwindled. Senior directors were told to encourage their junior officers to participate. The IO room was given a new coat of paint and new furniture. Nevertheless, the IO project died a slow death. What happened?

Here are comments made at the *mamak* stall by participants who were instructed to attend IO:

- “I was forced to be a member. But I really couldn’t spare two hours every Friday talking about things that did not matter to me.”
- “We had discussed almost everything under the sun! But it was a talk-shop, nothing more.”
- “Although we were briefed on the purpose of IO, for the life of me I could not see the end-game!”

A cadre of process facilitators need to be trained to encourage people to brainstorm without feeling judged.

### **Lessons learnt from the IO experiment**

In general, participants felt that IO’s demise was a consequence of a top-down culture: instructions were issued, participants had no say on whether they wanted to participate, and so commitment was low. For innovation to flourish, there must be opportunity for people to volunteer. The goals should be clearly stated. A cadre of process facilitators need to be trained to encourage people to brainstorm without feeling judged. There should also be key turning points when ideas are prioritised and then turned into action plans endorsed by senior management. The lessons learnt from IO were not wasted. A year later, these design principles were incorporated into the scope and structure of how Barefoot Leadership Circles (BLC) were conducted at MITI.

## E- FORUM

The E-Forum was an idea mooted by Rebecca. One of MITI's agencies had successfully implemented a forum where members could share ideas frankly with one another on topics concerning the agency. Why not try it at MITI?

The E-Forum's purpose was for MITIans to engage in lively discussions about MITI. It was a way to reach out to Gen Y employees who loved chatting, blogging and posting their status on Facebook. Best of all: comments could be posted anonymously. That would make it safe for people to share what they truly think.

At the launch of the E-Forum, some topics generated buzz. Many people weighed in to discuss the new MITI logo. But after the initial burst of chatter, everything died down. Nobody seemed interested to discuss subjects related to national policies on trade and industry. There were more lurkers than participants posting comments on the forum. Ironically, one year after it was started, the decision to discontinue the E-Forum was made during an Innovation Oasis session.

At the *mamak* stall:

- "How can I be assured that there will be no repercussions when I post something? Who would dare comment on policies or even internal decisions?"
- "Online chats are supposed to be more casual, but E-Forum was on serious matters related to MITI. We want to chat online to relieve stress, not to get stressed!"
- "Even if I gave my comments what will come of it? What is the point?"

### Lessons learnt from the E-Forum experiment

People did not feel 'safe' to speak up or participate in both the online and face-to-face groups. Nor did they feel emotionally invested in an initiative that came from senior management. This led Rebecca to a new realisation: "The intention of E-Forum was to relate with Gen Y and get them involved in making MITI better. We thought this was one way to connect with Gen Y. But it didn't work. We can't always second guess how Gen Y think. They want to do it in their own time, and in their own way."

Yet this does not mean that top-down initiatives will always fail. Nor does it mean that management should give up on engaging staff.

Currently, a small group of middle managers have volunteered to create an 'Orange Zone' for creative thinking and brainstorming. On their own initiative, without prompting from senior management, these managers have visited other organisations to learn more about knowledge management and how to spur creative thinking. Perhaps this bottom-up approach – carried out with the blessings of senior management – will one day have more sustainability because the initiative came from the managers themselves.

We can't always second guess how Gen Y think. They want to do it in their own time, and in their own way.



**TIPS**

Here's how to begin to change your leadership style:

1. *All of us including bosses are only human.* Changing our leadership style is difficult. This is a fact. But we must not settle for status quo. We must first believe that it is possible to lead people in new ways.
2. *Seek feedback.* Ask colleagues, staff and friends to give feedback on how you behave in times of crisis, and in times of calm. Invite them to lunch. And then ask them to tell you what they really, really think of how you behave. Resist the tendency to become defensive. At the end, say "Thank you."
3. *Create opportunities that encourage other people to speak up.* For example, a BLC session usually kicks off with participants being paired up to share about their highs and lows of the past week. The process only takes five minutes. And by doing this, participants are primed to speak up for the rest of the meeting when important agenda items are discussed, deliberated and decided upon.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How important is it for you to first understand how your staff thinks? Do you a) primarily tell your staff what to do, or b) primarily listen to your staff's suggestions on how things can be done?

2. Which phrases come most naturally to you when you relate with people in meetings?

- “Do what I tell you” (coercive style)
- “Come with me” (authoritarian style)
- “People come first” (affiliative style)
- “What do you think?” (democratic style)
- “Do as I do, now” (pacesetting style)
- “Try this” (coaching style)

We all need a mix of these styles. To learn more, see “Leadership that Gets Results” by Daniel Goleman ([hbr.org](http://hbr.org)).<sup>2</sup>

To learn strategies on how to address the “Go Do It Lah” syndrome, go to:

- > Leading self: Care to Dare Yourself (p. 49)
- > Leading teams: Dare to Care Together (p. 61)

## CHAPTER 2

# No ... Cannot Be Done

## Challenge # 2



**A** few years ago, when Che Rohana Che Omar arrived at MITI to assume her post as head librarian, she was told that the library was not being used by MITI staff and no one was publicising the library services. It was disheartening news for a librarian.

The library, located on the 11th floor of Block 10 in MITI's HQ, was sedate. Most days, you won't see anybody reading the newest periodicals, browsing the stacks or checking out any books. So Che Rohana began to investigate why so few people were using the library services.

Too busy. That was the answer. People were too busy traveling. Too busy writing reports. And of course, too busy attending meetings. It was a fact: library services was not a strategic part of trade or industry. So it was not surprising that few people stepped into the elevator and pressed “11.”

“Physically, there is nothing special about our library. So it is really challenging to get people to borrow books,” Che Rohana said in her office decorated with reading campaign posters. “Traditionally, the library system is not part of the core function of MITI. And people generally don’t really make time to frequent the library and read these days.”

At that point it would have been excusable for anyone to shrug and say, “No ... cannot be done. MITI people don’t care about going to the library. That’s life. What to do lah?”

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In life, there are many (often valid) reasons why we conclude that things cannot be done. It could be that we have tried to do something before, and we failed, so when somebody suggests a similar idea, we say, “No ... cannot be done.” It could be that some ideas and suggestions are just too wacky, flighty or flaky. Cannot be done. Some of us are more analytical, and like any good accountant or risk manager, we assess the problems first. Or perhaps we lack the tools, resources, people or experience to get things done. Or maybe we are convinced that the status quo is okay for now. So we say: “No ... cannot be done.”

A MITI director hypothesised that one reason why MITI staff might not be open to new ideas is, ironically, because of past successes.

“We have been doing things our way for soooo long that we become so defensive when some other people suggest new ways of doing things,” she wrote in an email. “We always believe that

our way is the best way. What we want is just a confirmation of how we think. As a result, any other approach just doesn't carry enough weight."

Daniel Kahnemann, a Nobel Prize laureate and father of behavioural economics, has observed that we have a tendency to interpret information in a way that confirms our preconceptions. We are also unwilling to consider alternative opinions. He calls this "confirmation bias."

It is our mind that causes us to think this way, reflexively. So it takes a great deal of self-awareness to realise when we have fallen prey to worry, anxiety, cynicism or other negative thought patterns.

For example, in 2011, Angelina was roped in to attend a regular forum where folks from various divisions were asked to brainstorm ideas that would make a difference at MITI. Although initially excited, she found herself losing steam and enthusiasm as the sessions went by. "This will not work," she thought to herself, as she heard an idea being suggested. Angelina recalled herself 'tuning out' when unusual ideas were proposed. Other thoughts that popped up included: "How typical," "How naïve," and "Who will champion this?" Angelina's debacle is a universal one. We are all besieged with negative thought patterns. The key is whether we realise it or not.

**It takes a great deal of self-awareness to realise when we have fallen prey to worry, anxiety, cynicism or other negative thought patterns.**

As Angelina reflected on her past mindset, she realised: "I may have missed out on a very good idea because I was too busy

entertaining my own thoughts. I only believed in things that could ‘work.’ I thought I was being pragmatic.” The confession and awareness of how her mind works has helped Angelina become more effective in engaging people with empathy, and to be more open to people’s opinions. In a high-conflict situation held during a Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) session, Angelina turned out to be the only person in the room who could effectively summarise the opposing views of another middle manager – a very difficult thing to do.

Similarly, in 2013, Aedreana volunteered to take on a stretch project to mobilise middle managers at MITI to make a difference for future managers. She was more comfortable doing the thinking and planning work by herself. It turned out to be way more difficult to effectively engage her busy peers – who were pulled by so many competing demands. The thought that kept on playing in her mind was: “I’ve got no pulling factor.” And yet when she committed herself to the task, she was able to pull along three people, simply by asking for their help. And eventually the four of them pulled along 12 others. And the 12 people were able to facilitate breakout groups and in-depth discussions for 50-plus managers during a retreat.

I believe in facilitating others and not frustrating them by denying their requests without even checking alternative ways to do it

“At first, I wanted so much to give up the leadership role,” Aedreana said, as she reflected on the early challenges of organising the retreat for middle managers. “But eventually I realised that even though I had no *crowd-pulling* factor, I still had *some kind* of pulling factor. I had just enough to pull together a small team. And it turned out that one

of the team members was good at talking, and so he had the 'crowd-puller' factor for us to achieve what we set out to do."

In contrast to saying "No ... it cannot be done," Hanibah Ab Wahab, Senior Director of Management Services, has learnt to *first* explore possibilities before saying "No." "I believe in facilitating others and not frustrating them by denying their requests without even checking alternative ways to do it," she said.

"This is not about saying "Yes" blindly. To explore possibilities, one has to first understand the concerns, the regulations and how these policies are carried out in real life. Only then you are in the position to advise them accordingly," Hanibah added.

## Tales from Within

### BOOKS ON WHEELS

A few years ago, Rohana was informed that the library was not effective in engaging MITI staff. People were too busy. The library was not on people's radar. Instead of flinging her arms in surrender, Rohana prepared for battle. "I took it as a challenge to get MITI people to read," she said.

And within two years, Rohana launched three path-breaking initiatives that won the department two awards. In 2010 and 2011, The National Library awarded MITI as the "most active library for inculcating reading habits" among government ministries (*Anugerah Perpustakaan Paling Aktif Melaksanakan Program Galakan Membaca*).

What did Rohana do to achieve the breakthroughs?

Her first big idea was a 'Door to Door Service.' Since people were too busy to go to the library, she brought the

library to their doorstep. “We go to all the divisions in MITI. Once a month, we push a trolley full of books specially chosen for the staff of selected divisions,” she said.

For example, one Friday afternoon in October 2013, four library staff loaded up their trolley with novels (including Romance Lit), magazines, CDs and business books for

It's our passion and willingness to challenge ourselves that help us find new ways to get things done.

MITI staff working in Block 8. They went to six divisions from the 11th to the 15th floor. As MITI folk browsed the books, one staff recorded down the borrowers' details while another staff asked borrowers to fill in a simple survey to understand readers' preferences.

“We found there is a marked increase in people borrowing books because of this programme. We

don't sit and wait for people to come. Instead they sit and wait for us to come,” Rohana said. To further encourage reading, Rohana has continued a book review programme where MITI staff – usually new or junior officers, as well as middle managers – are rostered to review their favourite books to MITI colleagues once a month.

The library's biggest highlight is an annual reading campaign. The librarians collaborate with book suppliers and the National Library to bring in celebrities and successful icons who come to MITI to share about their life stories and their

favourite books. Azhar Sulaiman, an architect, talked about how books helped to bring him from poverty to success, while actress celebrity Wardina Saffiyah urged the audience of 100-plus MITI staff and friends to read more.

Rohana has also initiated library hunts to encourage staff to use the library database to access their collection of 67,000 books, periodicals, journals and CDs, albums and photographs.

"It's our passion and willingness to challenge ourselves that help us find new ways to get things done," said Rohana. "Whatever is assigned to us, we will carry it out wholeheartedly and deliver it to our best ability."



## TIPS

### EXPLORE YES TOGETHER

It is common for staff to say that their supervisor is 'unapproachable' or 'too busy' to change the way things are done. It is also common for supervisors to lament about how their subordinates do not raise issues more proactively. How do we start a genuine dialogue between both sides to get things done?

1. *Test the waters.* If you are nervous about giving direct feedback to your supervisor, try testing the waters by talking it out with other colleagues. They might feel the same way. Together, you can brainstorm a few solutions for change, and present these together in a joint proposal to the supervisor.
2. *Invite feedback.* If you are a supervisor, you can ask your team to discuss issues on how to change and work better, and invite them to present these proposals as a team. At the end of a team

meeting, reserve five minutes to brainstorm this question: “Is there anything we could do differently in our next meeting?” Then write down every suggestion on the whiteboard. Your receptiveness will give your team courage to speak up.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

For every question, keep track on whether you answered “Yes” to the first part of the question vs. the second part of the question. When you show up at work:

1. Do you work quickly ... or do you work slowly and deliberately?
2. Do you consider lots of alternatives ... or do you tend to be accurate?
3. Are you open to new opportunities ... or are you prepared for the worst?
4. Are you an optimist ... or are you stressed by short deadlines?
5. Do you plan only for best-case scenarios ... or do you stick to tried-and-true ways of doing things?
6. Do you seek positive feedback (and lose steam without it) or are you uncomfortable with praise or optimism?
7. Do you feel dejected when things go wrong ... or do you feel worried when things go wrong?

If you answered “Yes” to the first part of the question, you are a promotion-focused person.

If you answered “Yes” to the second part of the question, you are a prevention-focused person.

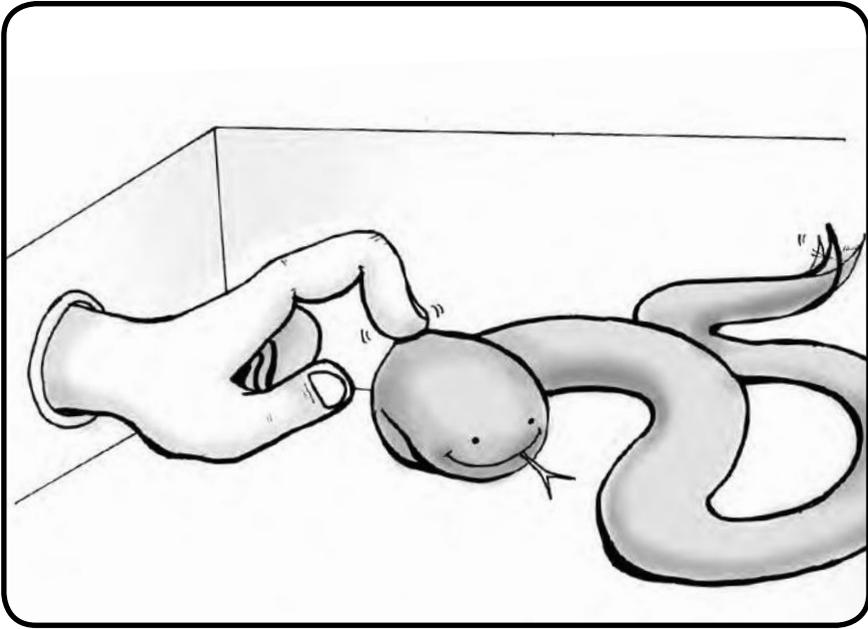
Promotion-focused people play to win. They are comfortable taking chances. They like to work quickly, dream big and think creatively. Unfortunately, these individuals are more prone to error, less likely to think things through, and usually unprepared with a plan B if things go wrong.

Prevention-focused people play not to lose. They concentrate on staying safe. They work meticulously, and produce thorough and analytical work. However, they are not usually the most creative thinkers. They are risk-averse and prefer to maintain status quo.<sup>1</sup>

The questions and excerpts above were adapted from “Do You Play to Win—or to Not Lose?” (Harvard Business Review) by Heidi Grant Halvorson and E. Tory Higgins. Their research shows that promotion-focused and prevention-focused people are crucial for every organisation’s success, despite the potential for infighting and poor communication. Businesses and teams need to excel at innovation while maintaining accuracy, and that requires both types of people to work together.

Follow this link to learn how to understand, and bring out the best in each other’s differences in personality types:

*<http://hbr.org/2013/03/do-you-play-to-win-or-to-not-lose/ar/pr>*



How do we stop saying “No ... cannot be done”?

Negative thought patterns are extremely difficult to overcome. Yet we know that it is possible for people to overcome their most deep-seated fears.

Albert Bandura, a world-renowned psychologist and Stanford professor, helped people conquer lifelong snake phobias. What did he do? He walked people through a series of increasingly demanding interactions called ‘guided mastery.’

They would start by watching a snake through a two-way mirror. Once comfortable with that, they would progress to observing it through an open door, then to watching someone else touch the snake, then to touching it themselves through a heavy leather glove, and, finally, in a few hours, to touching it with their own bare hands. Bandura helped people experience one small success after another.

## NO ... CANNOT BE DONE

The people who overcame their snake phobia also had less anxiety and more success in other parts of their lives. They took up new and potentially frightening activities like public speaking. They tried harder, persevered longer, and had more resilience in the face of failure. They had gained a new confidence in their ability to attain what they set out to do.<sup>2</sup>

To learn strategies on how to address the “No ... Cannot Be Done” syndrome, go to:

- > Leading self: Commit and Get Going Yourself (p. 74)
- > Leading teams: Travel Far and Take Off Together (p. 81)

## CHAPTER 3

# Headless Chicken

## Challenge # 3



**A**t the beginning of 2011, MITI was beset by challenges. The fishermen in Kuala Langat blockaded the river, which prevented barges from transporting goods from the Kuala Langat industrial area to Port Klang. Meanwhile, the controversy around the Lynas Advanced Material Plant raged unabated. There was also a series of issues associated with the automotive policy, the iron and steel policy, and the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement. In one short year, MITI staff found themselves in ‘firefighting’ mode,

jumping from one urgent issue to another. They were dealing with fishermen, journalists and lobby groups – sometimes all on the same day!

This makes life exciting. But something is seriously wrong if we live like headless chickens all the time. True story: there was once a chicken named Mike that lived, crowed and pecked for food – with its head cut off. The headless chicken lived for 18 months. We can do this to ourselves too, if we are not careful.

Here's a common scenario that goes on at MITI.

One morning, Kevin (not his real name) entered the office lift. Moments later, a director rushed in and pressed the elevator button. After exchanging good mornings, the director mumbled something about how he was in a rush.

"What's the hurry?" Kevin asked.

"My boss wants to see the report this morning. I worked till late last night plugging in every imaginable fact and figure," the director said.

"I suppose it's better to prepare a good brief at the first go rather than to keep going back and forth for additional data," Kevin said agreeably.

This director sighed.

"One answer will lead to another question, which leads to more answers required, so all information must be in the report," the director said, as the doors opened, and he strode out.

Now, take a step back and reflect. Is it possible to ask the boss what is the most important information that is needed in the report, and to prepare exactly for that? Could the report be structured differently, and prioritised accordingly? Without reflection, things will be done in the same old way, day in and out – in this case, preparing answers for a slew of contingency questions that might never crop up.

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The headless chicken syndrome can affect all ranks of MITI.

- *Senior directors* feel like they have lost their vision and perspective of leadership, as they are tugged in different directions, and called to address the ad hoc demands from diverse stakeholders.
- *Middle managers* feel overwhelmed by the unstructured work passed down to them by their bosses. They work on multiple projects all at once but are not fully engaged in any particular one. They are not able to identify the starting points, finishing lines and boundaries between work and personal life. As a result, stress levels soar, particularly for those who are instructed to make themselves reachable by phone or email anytime during the weekend.
- *Junior officers* do not see the big picture. So they go about doing their duties without feeling any connection with MITI's core mission and vision.

The biggest danger of staying in headless chicken mode is that it distracts MITI officers from focusing on the core business of working on policies and addressing strategic issues involving trade and industry. Sadly, the most time-consuming firefights are never strategic.

"Instead of focusing on reviewing industrial and trade policy for effectiveness, officers have to instead spend time and resources fighting these fires," said Rebecca. "Caught up in the whirlwind of these controversies, the officers had to go about their tasks, attempting to meet deadlines, going through the motions, doing busy work. Very little learning was taking place as they tried to get through one day at a time. There was no time for reflection, for asking why, and for true learning."

The other danger of the headless chicken syndrome is that it impacts the culture of the workplace: productive officers end up

over-stretched and over-burdened with so much to do. Quality dwindles because of the voluminous work. More often than not, the same officers are involved in various projects, only because they are so reliable that the management decides not to gamble on new officers.

“If you have a lot of things to do, you just handle what comes,” observes Dato’ Nik Rahmat Nik Taib, the Deputy Secretary General (Industry). “So there’s not much time to sit down and think about a better way to do things, how to improve the procedures, and to plan for the future. The organisation becomes static with no future improvement. But as a leader, you have to find time to do strategic thinking for the betterment of the organisation.”

“If your workplace encourages that frantic vibe of headless chicken running and constant urgency, it can feel impossible to focus on what’s important versus what’s urgent,” writes Gina Trapani, the founding editor of the personal productivity blog, [lifehacker.com](http://lifehacker.com).<sup>1</sup>

To battle against the headless chicken syndrome, in early April 2012, a small group of senior directors and directors at MITI began to meet once a fortnight, to spend time together. At the Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) 1.0 sessions, they usually took 10 minutes in silence to write down what they have learnt about themselves, and think about how they have been using their time. As they sat in a circle, the directors also shared and listened to one another’s personal lives and past crucibles.

This might seem like a total waste of time or appear to be a navel-gazing activity amid the pressing demands at MITI. But as months passed, each BLC 1.0 session was like an eye of calm in the middle of a hurricane of pressing events. During one session, the directors even paused to reflect on the type of work they do that causes them to feel like headless chickens:

- Writing emails that require a response right ... *now!*
- Responding to ad hoc requests that take up several hours of work
- Putting out fires that were started by others
- Staggering from crisis to crisis instead of digging deep to identify root issues
- Doing immediate tasks instead of focusing on long-term priorities.



In a complex environment, it is challenging not to behave like headless chickens. Here are two tips on how to restore sanity and focus on what is important:

1. Choose three important tasks to complete each day. Write them down on a piece of paper. Keep it visible throughout the day. Whenever you have any unexpected down time, focus on getting the three tasks done.
2. When you do an important task for an hour, make sure you turn off your phone, email and disconnect from the Internet.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Where are you currently in your job? (1= headless chicken; 2 = neutral mode; 3 = prioritising purposefully)
2. If your answer is headless chicken, what are the three most probable reasons why you feel like that?
3. Do you feel utterly drained at the end of the day? Do you find yourself asking, "Where did all my time go?" Talk to someone about it. Try to figure it out together (not alone).

4. How do you manage ad hoc projects? Do you have a process for prioritising your projects?



Once upon a time, there was a man who was struggling to saw down a tree. An old farmer came by, watched for a while, then quietly said, “What are you doing?”

“Can’t you see?” the man impatiently replied, “I’m sawing down this tree.”

“You look exhausted,” said the farmer. “How long have you been at it?”

“Over five hours, and I’m utterly exhausted,” replied the man. “This is hard work.”

“That saw looks pretty dull,” said the farmer. “Why don’t you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen it? I’m sure it would go a lot faster.”

“I don’t have time to sharpen the saw,” the man says emphatically. “I’m too busy sawing!”

To learn strategies on how to address the “Headless Chicken” syndrome, go to:

> Leading self: Know Yourself (p. 95)

> Leading teams: Retreat to Advance Together (p. 103)

## CHAPTER 4

# Ya ... OK Lah

## Challenge # 4



**A** workplace without conflict can be the worst thing to ever happen to an organisation. When staff toe the line all the time – when people unthinkingly say “Yes” to top-down instructions – important issues will not see the light of day. There will be no real discussion about substantive topics. Mediocrity sets in.

Saying “Ya ... OK lah” to requests all the time may seem like a harmless thing. It feels safer. Better to comply than to risk a shelling from the boss. But compliance can lead to bigger problems and unintended consequences.

Here's a true story at MITI.

One afternoon, Cheryl (not her real name) was sitting next to her boss in a meeting. They were both watching Mr. Hamdan (not his real name), their big boss, getting shelled.

"This is painful to watch. Mr. Hamdan should have just listened to me from the beginning," Cheryl whispered to her boss.

In an earlier meeting, Cheryl had suggested a different approach to Mr. Hamdan on solving a problem. But Mr. Hamdan dismissed her ideas immediately. He ordered Cheryl to follow his instructions exactly.

Cheryl's boss looked back at her expressionless. He tore a piece of paper from his notebook, scribbled something, and passed it to Cheryl. It read: "Rule No. 1: The boss is always right. Rule No. 2: If you think the boss is wrong, refer to rule No. 1."

The boss is always right. That's a common mantra in the civil service. As a result, subordinates end up agreeing with their bosses. Subordinates are unlikely to give differing opinions for fear of reprisal, even if the bosses encourage open communication.

Why is it some think it is too risky to speak up or disagree with bosses?

- *Concerns over career prospects.* "My boss does my annual performance review. I do not want to challenge him, and risk a bad review."
- *Lack of self-confidence.* "I am sure my boss knows better. Plus, I would need more time to do research. Why bother?"
- *Suspicion of boss' intentions.* "If I say 'No', he/she may take it personally and make my life a living hell at work every day."
- *There are other avenues to complain.* "Bosses don't really care what I think. So I'll just vent my frustrations over lunch, after meetings, and on Facebook."

Che Mazni Che Wook, Director of FTA Policy and Negotiations Coordination, and a member of Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC), suspects that most people do have ideas. Plenty of ideas, in fact. The main reason why these ideas are not contributed might be due to excessive caution and a 'developing country' mentality inculcated by an education system that does not encourage people to speak up and assert their opinions. "Thus when people grow up, they will carry that habit of being shy to speak or refuse to go

**We have to  
learn to trust  
each other.**

against the superior for what is right. The person might prefer to hold back before making comments for fear of looking bad or being perceived as an individualist rather than a team player," Mazni said. Furthermore there may be people who do not want to speak on the record because they do not want to be held accountable for what is said.

The problem is deep-rooted. Mazni suggested that the onus lies on bosses to encourage their junior officers to speak up. For example, during meetings, bosses should ask their subordinates: "What do you think about this-or-that?" rather than pose a close-ended question such as "any comment?" Bosses should also probe further when staff say things like, "Nothing" or "No comment." Following through with questions will condition officers to come to a meeting well-prepared to assert an opinion during the discussion.

"We need to tell the officers that we invited them to the meeting because we want to hear their thoughts and tap on their expertise. They're not attending a meeting just to drink coffee, eat *kuih* or check SMSes!" said Mazni.

"It is unusual for candid conversations to take place between bosses and subordinates," added Rebecca. "Too often, folks do as

they are told. Perhaps it is in the psyche of the civil servant not to question his or her bosses.”

The Secretary General said speaking up is crucial at MITI where directors and managers are involved in formulating and implementing policies. They play a critical role in advising broader stakeholders. “MITIans need to start asking questions like ‘Is there a better way we can do this?’ instead of just saying ‘Ya ... OK lah,’” Rebecca said.

In a study of 500-odd leaders conducted by leadership and organisational development company Linkage Asia, it was discovered that at least three out of 10 senior managers in Asia, particularly Malaysia, tend to say “Yes” but not mean what they say.<sup>1</sup> This results in stalled projects, strained relationships and a toxic workplace.

The “Ya ... OK lah” syndrome is not uncommon in the private and public sector. Even an entrepreneurial and hard-charging company like Enron can fall prey to a compliance mindset. Prior to its collapse in 2001, Enron was valued at US\$60 billion. The company folded due to artificially inflated profits and dubious accounting practices. The Enron scandal obviously involved many wrong decisions made by powerful people in the organisation that were left uncorrected. “You don’t object to anything. The whole culture at the vice president level and above just became a yes-man culture,” concluded a former Enron staff.<sup>2</sup>

“As bosses, we need to unlearn the way we interact with our young officers and give them space to express their view,” Rebecca said. “And the young officers will have to learn how to provide constructive feedback. We have to learn to trust each other.”

We want to hear all the challenges you face!

In the past two years, MITI has tried to build and establish a culture of trust among MITIans through BLC. The first circle, in 2012, involved directors and senior directors, while the second circle, in 2013, consisted of middle managers. Throughout the year, middle managers and senior management got to know one another personally, share ideas, and explore ways to collaborate that go beyond silos, divisions and positional rank.

Informal work was created as respect and trust grew. Through BLC 2.0, a group of middle managers organised a retreat for 55 fellow middle managers in October 2013. The agenda was to talk about workplace challenges. In most organisations, senior management would feel threatened by the prospect of subordinates coming together to grouse about the organisation's problems. But in MITI's case, senior management gave the blessing. "We want to hear all the challenges you face!" said a senior director.

As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the willingness of bosses to listen is a critical step in combating a yes-man culture. Bosses who listen well will encourage individuals and teams to be more courageous in respectfully speaking the truth.



Here's how to disagree successfully:

1. *Be positive.* Saying "No" is not being negative. When you say "No," suggest alternatives for getting the work done.
2. *Be objective.* Respect views that are different from yours. Focus on the issue and not the person.
3. *Be resourceful.* If you disagree, you need to explain why. And, equally important, you need to suggest 'how.' Always offer alternative solutions.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Are you able to say “No” to certain work requests from your boss? Why?
2. What are your top three priorities in your work currently? What are the things you need to say “No” in order to say a bigger “Yes” to these priorities?
3. According to the Businessweek magazine, Eike Batista, Brazil’s richest man lost a mind-blowing US\$34.5 billion in personal worth in just one year because he believed he was always right.<sup>3</sup> He only craved feedback from people who said things he wanted to hear. As a result, all his investments in offshore oil vaporised. The world’s eighth richest man is now nearly bankrupt – in the span of one tragic year – just because he was excessively optimistic, and did not like to hear about problems. If you are a manager, ask yourself: when was the last time you asked your officer for an alternative opinion? And are you able to recall exactly what that officer said?



During a planning meeting, Alvin met up with a junior officer. Alvin explained to the officer that he has been facilitating conversations among a small group of directors who have been meeting twice a month in 2012.

“What do you all talk about?” the junior officer asked.

“Quite often, the conversations at BLC 1.0 revolve around the topic of why so many people fear speaking up at MITI. Many junior officers and middle managers struggle to express their true opinions to senior management,” Alvin told the officer. The officer nodded vigorously.

“What do you think? Do you think that senior management also fear speaking up?” Alvin asked the officer.

The officer’s eyes opened wide. He gulped. There was silence for ten seconds.

Finally, the officer said, “No comment.”

To learn strategies on how to address the “Ya ... OK Lah” syndrome, go to:

> Leading self: Be A Bit Bold Yourself (p. 115)

> Leading teams: Be A Lot Bolder Together (p. 125)

"The sweat and tears should never be a heart breaking experience. It is like bitter medicine that cures sickness and makes you stronger."

**KAMARIAH YEOP ABDULLAH**  
*Trade Practices and Cooperation*

"Failing once does not mean you are a loser. Great success comes with tears in the beginning."

**MOHD REZA AZMAN**  
*Multilateral Trade Policy and Negotiations*

"Appreciate the difficult moments as one of it may become your fondest memory when you are "somebody" in the future."

**MOHD FAIZAL MD KASSIM**  
*Human Resource Management*

"At times, you may find it difficult to manage your bosses. But, it may turn out to be one of your greatest disappointments, if you give up. Brace yourself for the challenge, persevere and learn. You will be surprised!"

**SITI HARLEENA**  
**HARRIS LEE**  
*Strategic Planning*

# TIPS (FOR THRIVING IN MITI)

"Try to adapt to MITI's work culture. Do not bring negativity with you; you may not survive. Seriously!"

**NORAFIZAH MOHD RIZA**  
*Industrial Coordination and Trade Cooperation*

"Convey passion and not tension. Learn all you can, gain all you can, contribute all you can."

**WATI SINA**  
*Resource Centre*

"We must take MITI as a challenge, not a threat. We should not worry about being left behind when work is fast and furious. Try to fulfill the requirements and when you succeed you can be proud of yourself for being a MITlan."

**MAZMEN ABDUL HAMID**  
*Office of the Secretary General*

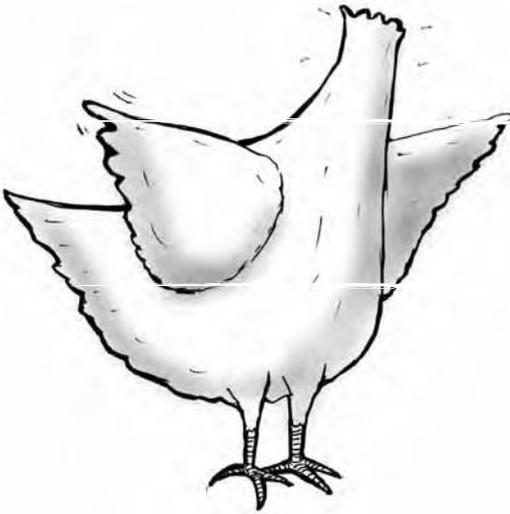
"Your time is priceless. Work efficiently, honestly and courageously."

**NASYRAH JEMALUDIN**  
*Investment Policy and Trade Facilitation*

"SMILE if your boss criticizes you because you are in her close radius. Start WORRYing if your boss does not smile back as you may be invisible in her eyes."

**NOOR SHIFRAH MD NADZRY**  
*Investment Policy and Trade Facilitation*

Now I know I've  
got a problem What  
should I do now?



You've got to  
B.A.R.E. it all!



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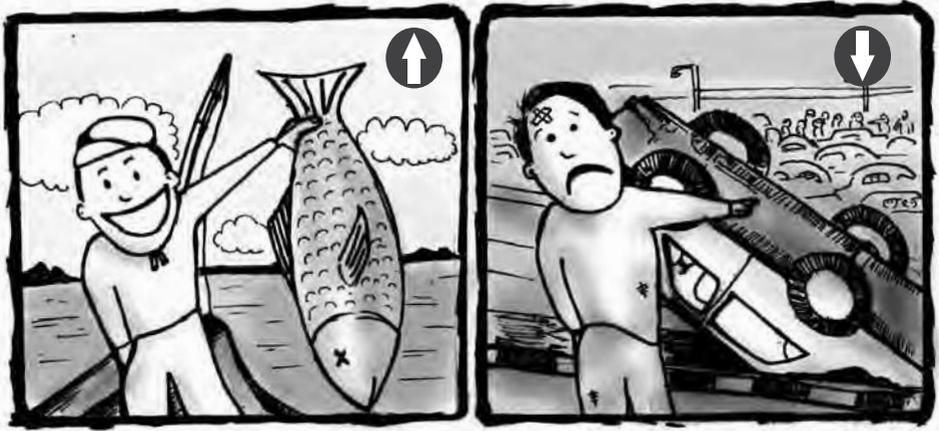
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**B**

**BUILD BONDS**

# Care to Dare Yourself



One afternoon, on Level 16 of MITI's HQ, a dozen middle managers stood in a circle. Brows were furrowed, some eyes closed. They were recollecting the key events in their lives over the past two weeks.

"Okay, everyone please pair up, and share with one another your top 5 percent and your bottom 5 percent," said Alvin Ung, the facilitator of Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC). This was the usual drill: at the start of each biweekly session, participants were invited to share their highs and lows of the past week.

“The personal finance management ‘app’ is fantastic. So far I have spent only RM30 in 10 days! I’m glad to be building saving habits. That’s my top 5 percent,” a manager said.

“Last week, I helped a *makcik* with the paper work to obtain an approved permit to import helmets. She was so grateful for my help. That was my highlight at work,” said another manager.

“My bottom 5 percent occurred last weekend. I went back to my hometown, and I really regretted losing my temper with my loved ones,” a third manager said.

The top and bottom 5 percent exercise is not a trivial one. When used in the right spirit, it serves as a powerful tool to help people care for one another, build trust and create the chemistry essential in any high-performing team. By caring, we create daring people. “You care enough to dare people to reach for their dreams,” says George Kohlrieser, in his 2012 book, called *Care to Dare: Unleashing Astonishing Potential through Secure Base Leadership*.

---

At best, bosses who practise a “Go Do It Lah” management style will achieve results in the short-term based on extrinsic motivation e.g. financial rewards, promotions, punishments etc. At worst, top-down bosses create toxic worry for staff. “This report is useless. Do it again,” a boss once emailed to a subordinate without giving clear instructions on how to make the report better.

But bosses who care to dare will inspire the troops for the long-haul based on intrinsic motivation. It will ignite their desire to learn, work with excellence, and seek new challenges. The people will fear failure less. They are more likely to achieve their full potential. And it all starts by building personal connections.

“The top and bottom 5 percent exercise was difficult at first,” said a middle manager, “but many of us got the hang of it eventually. It became a daily habit for us to be more aware and note events that could qualify as the top and bottom 5 percent. Be-

sides getting to know ourselves better, we learnt about one another's challenges and aspirations. The BLC sessions gave us opportunities to see the sides of colleagues we do not normally see when interacting at formal office meetings or functions. All it takes is five or 10 minutes. Yet there's so much impact."

What is the impact of building bonds within an organisation? Why do we need to do this?

The biggest reason is that the rise in collaboration, team work and cross-cultural diversity has increased the need for people to be authentic. By bringing our full selves to work, we gain trust and improve group performance. A personal and heartfelt story, shared appropriately and with the right people, can deepen relationships and commitment towards one another.

Building bonds is not the same as team-building. Team-building programmes are usually held off-site and require physical challenges involving ropes, boats, helmets and other exercises that have little relevance to work. Whereas building bonds is something done in the workplace, during working hours, among colleagues, within teams, and even during meetings.

People who do this skilfully "choose the substance, process, and timing of personal revelations to further the task at hand, not to promote themselves or create purely personal relationships," write Lisa Rosh and Lynn Offermann in Harvard Business Review.<sup>1</sup>

At MITI, Sharbanom Abu Bakar, Director of Delivery Management Office, knows the importance of building bonds with colleagues. When she joined MITI, she faced a big challenge: to monitor

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group performance

The more important and complex the request, the more important it is to see the person face-to-face.

the delivery of 30 key performance indicators (KPIs) at MITI. Based on Sharbanom's training as a senior executive at IBM, it was tempting for her to say exactly what she wanted to say in the first sentence e.g. "Ganesh, please get this done. We need to discuss this next week."

But at MITI, Sharbanom was just a one-person department in a multi-stakeholder environment.

She knew that a top-down approach would not sit well with others. Even more crucial, Sharbanom needed help from other people to get things done. In doing so, she needed to appreciate what others do before she could rally their support. So Sharbanom built human connections at MITI. For example, here's what she did:

1. *Meet the person physically.* The more important and complex the request, the more important it is to see the person face-to-face.
2. *Take time to get to know the person by asking questions.* "How are you doing? How long have you been in MITI? Do you like it here?" (Note: this is not *small* talk. These simple questions allowed Sharbanom to learn and understand the person's personal values, frame of mind, and how he/she will respond to her request).
3. *Devise a preamble to go with the work-related request.* For example: "Ganesh, remember, we have this project we're supposed to do together? Do you want to look at it first? Let me know when we can discuss and get it done?"

In BLC 1.0, all the participants, including Rebecca, were required to share their top and bottom 5 percent. Furthermore,

over the course of the year, each member was given 30 minutes each to share a major milestone or turning point in their lives. Initially, some members found the exercise challenging.

“At first, in a room surrounded by all my bosses, I found it so difficult to speak up. My jaw was stuck!” laughed Che Nazli Jaapar, Director of Human Resource Management, as she recollected her first experience of BLC. But along the way, the BLC members shared stories of youthful indiscretions, a family crisis, growing up in poverty, getting cheated in business, and dealing with the death of a father. They also shared stories of personal breakthroughs and triumphs. Along the way a deep bond was built among the committed participants. They became committed to one another. “It was so easy getting work done after BLC. I could just approach anyone, and we would have this mutual understanding with one another,” Che Nazli said.

Wong Seng Foo, Senior Director of Economic and Trade Relations, added: “Through sharing of personal stories you also break barriers among peers. As a result you not only learn about your peers but you also learn from them.” Wong stressed that the face-to-face element was critical to the success of BLC.

“The absence of the human moment – on an organisational scale – can wreak havoc. Coworkers slowly but surely lose their sense of cohesiveness. It starts with one person, but distrust, disrespect, and dissatisfaction on the job are like contagions,” says noted Harvard psychiatrist Edward Hallowell.<sup>2</sup>

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## Tales from Within

### **AN EMPTY POCKET, FILLED WITH HOPE**

Despite being in MITI for almost three decades and having attended various types of management courses, Wong Seng Foo was intrigued by the prospect of joining the first Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) in 2012. It was unlike any workshop he had attended at MITI. For instance, he was asked by the facilitator to share with his colleagues for 30 minutes about two or three milestones in his personal history. That was something he had never done before. But the assumption for that exercise was this: people trust genuine and authentic leaders. To be authentic is not easy, though. You have to find the courage to drop your mask. Wong, Senior Director of Economic and Trade Relations, set the tone for many others at BLC – to be honest, vulnerable and true-to-life – when he shared about how his childhood experiences influenced his work principles in MITI.

Born and schooled in Malacca, Wong continued his secondary schooling in Sungai Siput, Perak, cared for by close relatives. Both his parents died before he turned 10 years old. He grew up poor. In Standard One, he wore an ill-fitting uniform. His classmates teased him. But the boy persevered in his studies. “My teachers and headmaster nurtured my leadership qualities,” said Wong, who emerged as a top student in Form Five and finished Form Six. Later he won a JPA scholarship at the beginning of his second year at University of Malaya (UM).

“I went to UM with very little in my pocket but loads of hope and determination. I realised I had two clear mile-

stone choices: a) to stop my studies and look for a job, or b) to continue studying,” Wong said. He reckoned that finishing university would make a big difference in life. So he decided to continue studying despite the lack of finances. That decision was a leap of faith – literally.

“I was stepping into unknown territory. In desperation, I held on to God’s word: if I seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, then all the other things will be added as well. So I held on to God’s promise in my life and soldiered on in faith,” he said. To pay the bills, he worked as a substitute teacher, taught tuition and even got a temporary job counting traffic under the hot sun for a consulting firm in Kuala Lumpur which was collecting data for highway projects.

Wong graduated. And he even got a job offer before convocation day.

Within weeks of joining MITI, he was told to accompany the Minister to Bangkok on assignment. He felt timid as a junior officer yet he was actively involved in negotiating ASEAN tariff preferences in Singapore and several other places. “I had a lot of emotional baggage which I had to deal with to grow my self-esteem and confidence. I could have easily been intimidated in MITI, but thankfully I did not allow my insecurities to get the better of me,” said Wong with a big smile. “Being negative will not get you anywhere. You simply must focus on the good things and see the opportunities that are aplenty in MITI. You must not be a taker all the time but a giver of your service and time.”

His difficult childhood – and the moments of grace along the way – enabled him to work with “very fierce bosses” even though it was difficult to bond with them, Wong said. Nevertheless, Wong stressed that building bonds is a key aspect of

If we succeed in changing ourselves, we all can be agents of change, no matter where we go.

motivating Gen Y managers in the 21st century.

“One of the main goals for BLC is to address the unintentional but apparent generation gap between senior officials and their juniors,” Wong said. “Building bonds has to be done between bosses and subordinates, and it also needs to be done between peers. So it is important to be honest and not to hide behind a mask. There is nothing to be ashamed of, no matter how tough you think your past is.”

Why was it so important to learn about the personal history and the turning points of our colleagues?

Wong explained: “There is a story or a background to people that makes them behave the way they do. That is why you should not be quick to judge an officer when he or she fails at something. It is our job as their boss and as a colleague to identify the problem and assist. You can only do this if you get to know and understand the officer on a personal level.”

Many of Wong’s colleagues at BLC were visibly touched by his candor and openness. Few, if anyone, had heard about his early childhood experiences before BLC. Why did he choose to be so open?

“You simply cannot forge an organisational culture without building bonds, especially in present times,” Wong said.

“I view BLC as something that has potential to go beyond MITI. If we succeed in changing ourselves and incorporating the changes into our organisational culture, we all can be agents of change, no matter where we go.”

It can be a painful thing to recollect childhood insecurities, or to be teased by friends, or to struggle financially through university. And yet Wong felt grateful for the journey of growing and learning that has brought him to this point.

“My life has taught me that there is always hope, no matter how bad things look. It has all got to do with how you look at it and choose to look at it. I am also grateful to all my family members, relatives and friends who have been so generous towards me. Because of them and because of God’s grace, I can say that my life is truly blessed.”



## TIPS

No time to connect with people meaningfully at work? Here are two steps on how to dare to care in five minutes or less.

1. *Set aside the work you are doing.* Put down the smartphone. Stop daydreaming. Look the person in the eye.
2. *Give the person your full intellectual and emotional attention in your conversation.* When you do that, the brain releases oxytocin and vasopressin, hormones that promote trust and bonding.

That’s it. The other person will feel your focused energy, and respond in kind. “Together, you quickly create a force field of exceptional power,” says Hallowell.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What benefits in productivity and morale would you obtain if your colleagues and stakeholders saw you as person who cares to dare?
2. Who are the people you have been avoiding at work currently, and yet they are crucial to the success of the work you do? Are you willing to create human moments with them?
3. What are two or three things you appreciate the most of your colleagues? Take them out to lunch to thank them and tell them why you value them.

## Tales from Within

### A VISION FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

MITI is committed to creating an inclusive and multiracial workplace where people can achieve personal and professional goals. One day, Rebecca had an idea: would it be possible to include persons with disabilities as part of the MITI family? And would it be possible to leverage on their diverse talents to deliver results more related to MITI's core business?

With this idea in mind, the Human Resource team at MITI approached the Malaysian Association for the Blind. Conversations were sparked off. In mid-2013, four people with visual disabilities were recruited on a contract basis at MITI and posted to core departments: Anas Izah

binti Md Nor (Corporate Communications), Mohd Shah Rizal bin Abdul Rahman (Information Technology Management), Norzirah binti Othman (Human Resource Management), and Khairul Azwan bin Wahab (Strategic Planning). A couple of months later, Nurul Arshana binti Mohd Jalil, who has a physical disability, was recruited to the Human Resource Management Division.

Mohd Shah Rizal, a *Pengajian Melayu* graduate from University of Malaya, currently works at the IT Division to make the MITI portal friendlier for the visually impaired. This is his first job. After his graduation last year he dabbled into his own business which he still continues on a part-time basis.

"I did not stay home doing nothing while waiting to be employed," Shah said. Just like everyone else, Shah was anxious to start his working life, and worried about his transition from a student to a working professional.

"I was worried about projecting the proper image in a working environment such as in MITI," said Shah, who looked dapper in his striped shirt and dark pants.

Initially, he had difficulties moving around in MITI, but he accepts these as the facts of life, and he is grateful that MITI has taken steps to include people like him in an office environment.

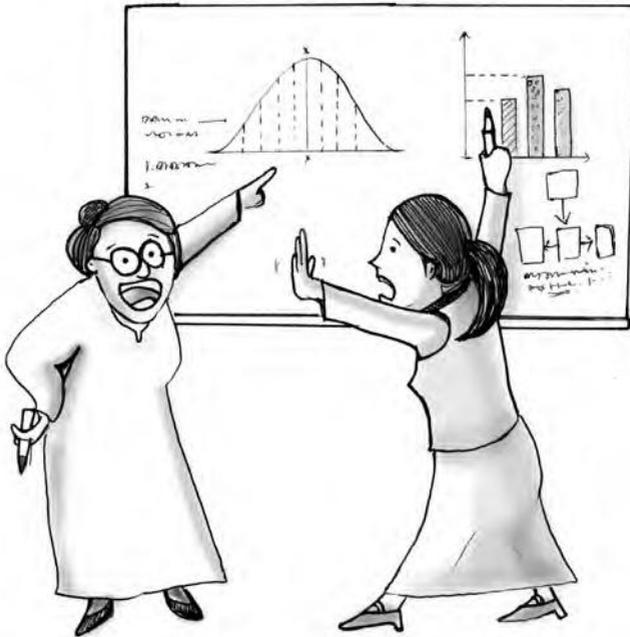
I can't see. It would be nice if people at MITI made the first move by greeting me.

Shah understands that changes cannot be made overnight, so he is happy that he is responsible for helping MITI make its facilities friendlier for the disabled. "Now that people like me are here, MITI will know what else needs to be done," he said.

Shah appreciates the few good friends he has made at MITI but he wishes that he could make more.

"I can't see. So I can't approach people to say 'Hi,'" he said. "It would be nice if people at MITI made the first move by greeting me."

# Dare to Care Together



**A**t high noon, 30 minutes after all the other senior managers had amicably left the room, the two directors were still standing there, in a tense face-off. Both held a whiteboard marker pen in their hands, like gun-slinging cowboys in a duel at OK Corral.

“No, we can’t do it *that* way!” the first one said, as she unsheathed the cap and used her pen to stab at the performance bell-curve drawn on the white board. She sketched a different diagram with boxes and lines. “It has to be done *this* way.” Round one.

Her colleague at the Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) 1.0 responded by drawing her gun – no, no – by drawing another diagram. Round two.

They were dueling over how the performance ratings of employees at MITI should be measured and evaluated across the organisation. How do you ensure fairness across the organisation when different employees are rated differently by their bosses in different departments? It was a complicated discussion given the number of variables.

As both directors fired round after round, their drawings filled the whiteboard. They spoke loudly. Their voices cracked. They held opposing views. The stakes were high: this project, when launched, would impact the career trajectory of nearly everybody at MITI for a long, long time. So they were right to debate the issue. Unfortunately, their intense argument led to a stalemate. They could not agree that day.

But the miracle was this: the duo met up *three* more times to work things through. Because of the bonds built at BLC, the two people were willing to persist through the pain of conflict. In a low-trust environment, it would have been easier for one party to walk away, engage in Cold War tactics, or stab the person in the back. That's how civil wars, political rivalries, boardroom battles, office politics and bad marriages can rage on for years, if not decades. But because the two colleagues had gotten to know one another personally, they found new courage: they dared to care ... together.

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So often when there is too much work to do, we focus only on the work itself at the expense of relationships. We claim that we are just being professional; we cannot allow things to get personal. But that's wrong. We are all emotional beings, after all. An

increasing body of research, popularised by the watershed book on *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, shows that it is important to manage professional work and emotions.

Common sense tells us that bosses who issue top-down instructions without caring about people's feelings will end up angering or alienating the staff. Less obvious but more important is this: it is only when we choose to care – especially during the rough times – that we build strong teams. The most effective managers at MITI are those who are able to lead teams using different management styles depending on who the people are.

How do we dare to care together?

One starting point for bosses to lead differently is by practising situational leadership. According to Kenneth Blanchard and Paul Hersey, leaders need to learn four styles of leadership to lead effectively. No one style is best. No leader is naturally good in all four styles. But effective leaders have learnt how to adapt themselves to the staff or team's maturity level, and the type of work required.<sup>1</sup>

Follower's Maturity Level	Most Appropriate Leadership Style
For disengaged staff with low levels of maturity, skill and desire to get things done ...	You <i>tell</i> your people what to do, how to do it, and when you need the task done. It is a one-way communication. Many managers use this top-down, "Go do it lah" approach.
For novice staff with low skills but a high willingness to learn and take responsibility for work ...	You provide information and direction, but it is a two-way communication. You <i>sell</i> the idea and provide emotional support to gain buy-in for the project. You still make the decisions.
For experienced staff who have the skills to get the work done yet they lack confidence ...	You focus more time on the relationship and <i>support</i> them with help. You provide less direction, and you ask more coaching questions. You share decision-making responsibilities.

<p>For high maturity staff who are experienced and skilled, and they feel confident about taking on new responsibilities ...</p>	<p>You <i>delegate</i> the work. While you are still involved in a few key decisions, the responsibility of running the group and making decisions has been passed on to others. You are involved to monitor the group's progress.</p>
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Situational leaders can also adapt the organisation to cater for different people's affinities and needs in life. For example, in MITI, several new initiatives were launched in 2013:

1. *Taska*. A creche was opened on 17 September 2013 to provide babysitting, childcare and basic education for children from infancy to four years old. Impact: MITI mothers (who previously had to send their children to nurseries before going to work).
2. *Kinabalu expedition*. A project was conceived to bring together staff from MITI and its agencies who would commit to train together and scale five peaks, including Mount Kinabalu, in 2013. Impact: athletic types who enjoy bonding in the outdoors.
3. *Gotong royong for a greener KL*. A team of volunteers planted 1,000 plants on a 100-meter patch of bare ground underneath a flyover along Jalan Duta. Once a month, they gather for several hours to water, weed and work to improve that area. Impact: MITI staff with green thumbs.

"Everyone has different ways of expressing themselves," said Rebecca. "We need to tap on people's creativity and passion."

In a separate conversation, Rebecca observed that capable and experienced people do not appreciate being micromanaged or to face the blunt end of an autocratic boss. "If my boss micromanaged me, I will be embarrassed! It simply means I need to pull up my socks," she said, laughing.

During BLC 1.0 sessions, Rebecca also admitted that it is extremely challenging to adapt her leadership style depending on the wildly different situations she is in – whether it is talking to a diplomat in Europe or engaging with an angry lobbyist protesting over a policy or running a Management Meeting. If possible, she prefers giving her subordinates leeway to make decisions with minimal supervision. Nevertheless, she also identified two situations when it is necessary to ‘interfere’ and do the work herself:

1. *Sub-par work that is handed in.* You have to do focused micro-management to ensure things are up to mark, and instruct the person to avoid similar mistakes in the future.
2. *Times of crisis.* You need to roll up your sleeves and get involved. “As a leader, it’s my responsibility to ensure that everything works well. When there is no leadership emerging in times of crisis, everyone starts leading and it will be a chaotic mess,” Rebecca said.

Daring to care together is never easy. It means we always have to be aware of the different types of people working in different situations. For example, in BLC 2.0, the action teams were made up of middle managers from different races, religions, family upbringing and departments at MITI. Some were self-starters. Others needed accountability. Some people valued close supervision while others preferred to be left alone to do their projects. But everyone wants to be shown care, encouragement and personal concern. Consciously or not, everyone from the BLC 2.0 became facilitators to the team members, and they had to learn how to become situational leaders towards one another.



You will need to learn the coaching and supporting style of leadership no matter what type of followers you encounter. The four-step GROW Model is one of the most common coaching tools, widely used by many coaches.<sup>2</sup> For a start, use this model to address your own challenges and issues. Then use this model to coach a colleague, friend or subordinate. You can even use this process during weekly department meetings.

**1. Goal**

Agree on a topic for discussion. Agree on the specific objectives of the session. And set a long-term goal if appropriate. Useful questions to ask:

- What would you like to achieve?
- What outcome would you like from this discussion?

**2. Reality**

Invite the person to assess his or her current reality. Avoid, or check for, assumptions. Discard irrelevant history. Useful questions:

- What is happening at the moment?
- How have you verified, or would you verify, that this is so?
- What is the perception of so-and-so of the situation?

**3. Options**

Explore a full range of options to apply. Invite suggestions from the subordinate or coachee. Offer suggestions carefully.

- What could you do to change the situation? Who could help?
- Can you rate from 1 to 10 your interest/practicality level of each option?
- Would you like suggestions from me?

#### 4. Will

Establish the will to commit to action. Identify possible obstacles. Make the next steps specific, and define deadlines.

- What are the next steps, and when will you take them?
- What might get in the way?
- What support do you need (from me), and how/when will you enlist that support?

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. As a follower in your current job, which of the four styles of leadership do you most appreciate in your boss? Use this book as a basis of discussion with him or her.
2. As a leader or manager, which style of leadership do you need most to develop? If you are not sure, ask your subordinates to give you feedback on your growth area.
3. How will you find an opportunity to apply the GROW model this week with your staff, or even your spouse or family members?

## Tales from Within

### TAKE TIME TO TALK TO THE TYPIST

Sometime between 2004 to 2006, a new Industrial Master Plan for Malaysia had to be developed. Consultants were engaged but the responsibility for transforming concepts, ideas and figures into a formal plan fell onto MITI. Dato' Abdul Hadi Othman, the then Senior Director of Strategic Planning, led MITI's effort in formulating, brainstorming, reviewing, consulting, projecting and charting the 15-year plan that would take the nation towards global competitiveness.

The stakes were high but uniquely suited for Abdul Hadi, a man with a lean frame and a strong personality. Drawing up the plan was like designing a skyscraper. He needed to get academicians, economists, industry stalwarts, consultants and Government officials to agree on foundational issues. Everyone had to debate how to build the superstructure of the plan. The design had to be worked and reworked. Being a strict, no-nonsense and meticulously organised man, Abdul Hadi managed to keep everyone engaged throughout the sprawling and high-level discussion.

In the course of the discussions, Abdul Hadi was known to spontaneously rope in junior officers to serve as 'typists.' The unsuspecting junior officer was usually told to help amend the document under review. The discussions came fast and furious. The words projected on the screen were tiny and barely visible. The economic jargon was bewildering. The stakes were high: these discussions were one among several

approaches to formulate a roadmap towards realising an industrialised nation under Vision 2020. But no matter how busy or entangled things got, Abdul Hadi always took time to 'talk' to the typist. He figured that the planning meetings formed an ideal platform for any new or seasoned MITI officer to get a feel of how the industrial plan was being formed.

"Remember that you are an officer, not a highly paid typist. You have to know what you type," Abdul Hadi would advise the clueless junior officer.

A punctilious grammarian, he would scrutinise a document and declare: "A comma is missing. Do you know the purpose of a comma?"

After a pause, and with a raised eyebrow, he might ask: "Can you think of another word for 'better'?"

Or he might say: "Please underline that word. Do you know why we underline words?"

Or: "Is this statistically significant? What is your basis for writing 'significant increase'?"

He also quizzed the 'typists' on industry matters and the latest industry developments. Junior officers who served Abdul Hadi for a stint would typically get the feel of the broad sweep of the manufacturing and services sectors of the country.

"He made sure that we were engaged the entire time. He would shoot questions at us, challenge us to think, push us out of our comfort zone, make us squirm, and wish the floor would open up and swallow us whole," said Angelina Gurunathan, now a Principal Assistant Director.

Officers recalled how Abdul Hadi would ask a question and then look at them, unblinkingly and patiently, until an answer was forthcoming.

“As a boss, Mr. Hadi was very strict and intimidating,” Angelina said. “But many will agree with me when I say that he was a boss who coached. Why? It is a given that if you have worked with him, you would have improved yourself.”

Abdul Hadi’s coaching method – while a wee bit intimidating – has left a legacy, even years after he retired. Today, there are still supervisors at MITI who follow Abdul Hadi’s method of vetting crucial documents as a team. And just like the good old days, a hapless junior officer will still be roped in as a ‘typist.’

“It is refreshing and inspiring to see senior leaders sharing their perspectives candidly. These are the early steps of transformation. It augurs well for the changes we are hoping to see.”

**WONG SENG FOO**

*Economic and Trade Relations*

“Being part of BLC has given me a sense of belonging within the MITI family through sharing of experiences and challenges. With BLC, I feel that we have the right platform for useful dialogue and action.”

**WAN SURAYA WAN MOHD. RADZI**

*MITI Singapore*

“At BLC we are building the human ware to share the vision with MITI.”

**ISHAM ISHAK**

*Strategic Planning*



**BLC 1.0**

“I was able to connect with each of the members in a personal way. Everyone comes with a story.”

**REBECCA FATIMA**

**STA. MARIA**

*Secretary General*

“BLC is not just about training. I realised that we are here together to tackle substantive issues that affect most people at MITI. At the same time, I realised I had to do a lot of reflection on my actions. When I reflect, I am able to better determine the wrong and right courses of action.”

**J. JAYASIRI**

*Strategy and Monitoring*

“When I returned from Beijing, I felt like I was pursuing many things, and that I was all over the place. BLC has given me a clearer perspective on what I want to do by redefining moments and connecting the dots.”

**SEE CHEE KONG**  
*Sectoral Policy II*

“I was mixing and mingling with people I wouldn't normally be with. I realised that people are different and I have learnt to appreciate the differences. I have also learnt that I can't change them but I can change myself.”

**WAN SYAFINAZ WAN  
ABDUL RAHMAN**  
*Strategic Planning*

“The BLC project gave me the opportunity to discover my level of perseverance as a leader.”

**AEDREENA REEZA ALWI**  
*Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation*

“I have discovered that I am able to share and contribute my ideas and thoughts without caring too much about what people might think. I have also gained insights on what I care most about in my life. It helped me in self-reflection.”

**SHAMILAH PERUMAL**  
*Economic and Trade Relations*

“I learnt that by listening to people I can gain much. If you put even a bit of effort, you can actually achieve quite a lot.”

**PETER CHEAH HEE KEONG**  
*Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation*

“I have learnt many things from my colleagues in BLC. Some of them have the potential to become Secretary General. It has been a learning process for me and I want to continue to improve myself in MITI.”

**NIK MOHD FAHIM MUHAIMIN**  
*Investment Policy and Trade Facilitation*

“I have learnt that my colleagues and I are all essentially the same. Oddly this only became clear once I accepted the differences between us.”

**ANGELINA GURUNATHAN**  
*Strategic Trade Secretariat*



# BLC 2.0

**A**

**ACT**

# Commit and Get Going Yourself



**O**ne day, Angelina opened the door to her colleague's room at MITI, and stared at the unbelievable sight before her. She saw a large desk with files, folders and stacks of paper piled up neatly on the table. The piles of documents stretched across the table surface, from edge to edge, like an organised collection of Hong Kong skyscrapers. There was no empty patch on the table – not one inch – left to write on. Angelina could not see her colleague.

“Where are you?” she called out, nervously.

“Here,” he said, peering out from the stack of papers in front of him.

Interestingly enough, he has a solid reputation for working effectively and efficiently at MITI. He knew how to get things done. Of course he could have arranged his table more like a conventional work space and less like a filing cabinet. But the main thing is that he obviously had it figured out. He knew how to show up, follow through, and stick with it. He was committed.

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The more there are committed people at MITI, the greater the ability to get things done. We all want committed people to work with us, and for us, and we all want such commitment from civil servants.

“When someone is committed, he will do things with heart and brain in sync. He will do things more effectively, require minimal supervision, and focus on results,” said Dato’ Nik Rahmat Nik Taib, Deputy Secretary General. “He will not just do things for the sake of doing things or do things like the Malay proverb – *‘melepas batuk di tangga.’* Such people will think of the team and the organisation first, rather than self.”

The decision to commit, and then get going, is the opposite of people who say, “No ... cannot be done,” and who throw up their hands in despair even as they talk, procrastinate, grumble and analyse things till they’re paralysed. Commitment is choosing to stand up and be counted rather than be a bystander. As Dato’ Nik has observed, where there’s commitment, there’s action.

So, how do we gain such commitment? It’s simple. Before we ask people for their commitment, we have to *give* commitment to them – unsolicited, and without direct hope of reward.

In early 2013, at the launch of the second round of Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC), Rebecca gave an opening speech to the middle managers who had expressed interest to join the one-year leadership journey. She saw the BLC members as a group of bright sparks to make a difference at MITI. It is for volunteers who want to start things. The journey starts with a pledge of commitment to show up and to deliver results.

“You are the future of MITI. Your commitment will show,” Rebecca said, as she addressed the BLC 2.0 members. “Be as open to one another as possible. What you put in is what you will get. I expect you to deliver some outcomes that will be implemented. It is not a place for chit chat. First, build bonds. Then come the serious outcomes. This is the group that will take MITI forward.”

Rebecca then *gave* her commitment to those who were prepared to commit to run the race till the end. She would be there to support them, and she would always show up as long as it’s humanly possible, whenever she was needed.

The fundamental mindset of anyone who chooses to be committed is “*You* are the one.” There is no one else. Rebecca’s words echo the words of Tan Sri Dr. Jemilah Mahmood, the founder of Mercy Malaysia, and the inaugural winner of the Isa Award, Bahrain’s equivalent of the Nobel Peace Prize.

“You are the country. If you think that social justice in the country should improve, you do not just ask others to do something. Instead, you ask: what have I done to make things better? What have I done to facilitate change even at the micro level? You have the right to strengthen the country yourself,” Dr. Jemilah was quoted as saying in *Barefoot Leadership: The Art and Heart of Going that Extra Mile*.<sup>1</sup>

## Tales from Within

### A LIFE-CHANGING RHYTHM

To operate at our best, we need to renew our energy at 90-minute intervals, says Tony Schwartz, the CEO of the Energy Project. According to Schwartz, sleep researcher Nathan Kleitman has discovered that human beings move through five stages of sleep and wakefulness in 90-minute intervals.

Schwartz recommends the following exercise: Do the most important thing for 90 uninterrupted minutes the first thing in the morning. After 90 minutes, take a quick rest break. Then see how much more you get done. “When we build this rhythm into our lives, it changes everything,” Schwartz says.<sup>2</sup>

During Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) 2.0, the participants were introduced the 90-minute exercise. While most people tried it for a few days, Shamilah Perumal, Principal Assistant Director of Economic and Trade Relations, practised this exercise for two straight weeks. Here’s what she discovered:

“It was a great exercise to practise Tony Schwartz’s tip on doing the most important thing for 90 minutes the first thing in the morning. I felt elevated when I managed to practise it for two whole weeks without fail.

I have tendencies to procrastinate. Even though I am fully aware of it, my indiscipline and attitude stopped me from changing. I always waited until the last minute to complete most of my tasks, both professional and personal. This habit was taking a toll on my life and I did not like it. I knew I needed to change if I wanted to achieve my goals and become a better person.

When Alvin introduced the Tony Schwartz's exercise, I was instantly drawn to it. I was determined to practise it for a week without fail.

So, on Monday morning, as soon as I stepped into my room, I switched off my mobile phone and left it in the drawer. I sat down, said my prayers and started listing down all my tasks for the week. Once done, I started prioritising it. My mind kept going back to my phone, and my fingers wanted to switch the mobile back on. I needed mammoth will power at that point to control the urge.

Then I hit my work and just kept on working on it. Without realising, it was already 10.30 am and I managed to accomplish so many tasks. I was elevated. "Wow, it was not so hard," I thought to myself.

The two weeks was the one of the best weeks I had in my working life. It gave me an enormous satisfaction achieving this. I had time to plan my work properly and completed all of it on time. And the bonus: I also had time to indulge on other things.

Through the Schwartz' exercise, I realised that I am able to execute a plan when I carry it out wholeheartedly. I discovered I am not such a sloppy person; I am a determined person."

**TIPS**

How do you commit and get going no matter where you are at MITI?

Wan Suraya Wan Mohd. Radzi, the former Minister Counselor (Economy) in the High Commission of Malaysia in Singapore, has served and represented Malaysia's trade and industry interests in the European Union (Brussels) and Singapore for a number of years. When one is far away from HQ, it might be tempting to just slack off. Even those who are committed might struggle to get going, because they are still trying to find a sense of belonging in a new country. Here are some unique tips from Wan Suraya on how to hit the ground running:

1. *Ask your predecessor for introductions and contacts.* Before Wan Suraya left her posting in Brussels, she personally wrote to all her main contacts in the country to inform them of her leaving and to ask them to extend the same courtesy and cooperation to the new officer, so as to ease the process of transition and ensure continuity of MITI's work.
2. *Hit the ground running – literally.* Besides doing the daily work, Wan Suraya advises that newcomers travel the country's width and breadth to get to know its people closely. It's important to understand the country on the ground. "Resist the temptation to just mix with Embassy officials, or settle for what is familiar," she said. Spending time on the ground would enrich the reports officers send back to MITI. "In the same way, when you join an organisation such as MITI, it is important to talk to people from all different walks of life – including the business community, Malaysian professionals and CEOs working overseas," she added.

3. *Develop your powers of observation and hone your listening skills.*

Listen not to just what is being said, but also to what may be left unsaid (“*bukan saja apa yang tersurat tapi apa yang tersirat*”). For example, when you enter any room, make note of who is there and what people are talking about. Also be fully prepared before going to any event or meeting. This will help officers to think on their feet and engage in effective conversations.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is the first thing you do when you get to work? Do you check your email? Do you dash from meeting to meeting with no time in between? Do you work later than you wish, and end up checking email when you get home? If you do, try the 90-minute exercise. Then see what happens.
2. Take a second look at Dr. Jemilah’s quote. Try paraphrasing it in this way for yourself: “I am MITI. If I think that work and life at MITI should improve, I do not just ask others to do something. Instead, I ask: what have I done to make things better? What have I done to facilitate change even at the micro level? I have the right to strengthen MITI myself.” Tell a friend what you discovered, and what you will do.

# Travel Far and Take Off Together



**C**he Nazli Jaapar, Director of Human Resource Management, came to MITI after a stint serving at the National Palace as Head of Management Services. On her first day at work in January 2011, she was informed that she had to wait for her job placement. Because of that, there was no office for her. So she parked herself in the library.

On the second day, there was still no news of her placement. She stayed on in the library. To quell her restlessness, she tried to meet new colleagues, but she found out that people seemed to prefer email than face-to-face communications. "I was puzzled by some people who seemed so detached. That really threw me off," she said.

Days turned to weeks. She found herself in the silent company of books, magazines and shelves on the 11th floor of MITI's HQ. She was living out the saga played out in "The Terminal", a Steven Spielberg comedy about a man (played by Tom Hanks) trapped in an airport terminal for nine months. The only difference was that Che Nazli was stuck in the library.

Che Nazli was eventually extricated – one month later – and assigned. In reflecting on her rocky start at MITI, she discovered that it was the sense of personal estrangement that hit her hardest. She told herself, "If I don't like to be treated this way, I don't want others to experience this." And the reverse was also true: if she had the privilege of experiencing good things, she would want others to experience it too.

This early challenge led Che Nazli to a central insight when she became head of HR at MITI: in life, you must bring people with you. It's only when you travel together that you can take off together.

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In life, we might encounter people who generally respond negatively instead of positively. Some people tend to say "No ... cannot be done," more often than they say, "Yes, let's see how we can do it better." All of us think this way some of the time. One strategy to address this at a personal level is for us to ask ourselves whether we are willing to be committed to get things done. But how do we deal with inaction at an organisational level at MITI?

In a group we have institutional memory that allows us to leverage on one another's strengths.

Leadership experts say the key lies in alignment i.e. getting the right things done and moving the organisation forward in the most effective and efficient way possible. Or to put it more simply, it is the willingness to travel far with one another, and then to take off together.

“To travel together, for me, is a practical issue,” said Mohd Ridzal Sheriff, Deputy Secretary General.

“I don’t have all the knowledge, expertise or answers at MITI. I doubt if any single person does. But in a group we have institutional memory that allows us to leverage on one another’s strengths.”

Ridzal observed that traveling together may be desirable but it’s not always easy. In a group, it is crucial for teammates to give credit where it is due and not bask in self-glory. People have to be fair towards one another. And above all, Ridzal said: “Never lose your sense of humour. You won’t last 35 years in the rat race without it.”

The alignment that comes from traveling together will not happen on its own. Leaders must take the initiative to spark things off, generate momentum and ensure that the change initiative will be sustained – and not easily reversible. Here’s an example of how Che Nazli made a pilot project take off, and as a result, impacted hundreds of people at MITI.

1. *Start small.* It began with a whisper, almost. During Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) 1.0, Rebecca had an idea of offering productive employees at MITI the opportunity to work from home for a few hours in case of a personal emergency. “I’m trying to give people more work-life balance,” she said. When

the idea was presented at BLC, the members were not too sure that flexible work would be a good thing in MITI. For example, there were already problems even with a punch-card system. But the BLC members did not shoot down the idea. At the end of the session, Rebecca asked, “Che Nazli, could you form a team to look into this idea?”

2. *Go to the ground for data.* At this point, it was important to note what Che Nazli and the BLC members did not do – they did not form a strategic plan. That would have resulted in dozens of hours writing a theoretical report. Instead, Che Nazli and her team identified three companies – DIGI, Shell and Petron – that had already implemented various forms of flexible work arrangements. “We interviewed the people who worked there, we spoke to HR, and we took photos. The research gave us baseline facts for decision-making.” Three weeks later, Che Nazli presented her findings at BLC, which sparked off sharp debate. How do you offer flexible work to such a diverse workforce? Some traveled extensively while others were office-bound. Some organised events that required people working together, while others wrote complex papers in solitude. Che Nazli offered to re-group and formulate a plan customised for MITI’s needs.
3. *Design prototypes.* After private discussions with BLC members and talking to more HR people in the government, Che Nazli’s team developed two prototypes. Flexible Work Arrangement 1 (or FWA1) allowed staff to come in at staggered times during the day as long as they worked the full nine hours a day. FWA2 enabled staff to work any day from home as long as that staff and her boss agreed on the assignments and outcomes to be delivered while she was out of office. “We spent a lot of time at BLC thinking about how people might play games with the system, like using the flexi-work as a replacement for annual

leave. We worked through these issues together,” Che Nazli said. That process won Che Nazli the full backing of the BLC members.

4. *Travel together.* At this juncture, it would have been tempting to launch the programme. But Che Nazli waited a few more months. She felt it was important to confer with all the senior management team to gain their buy-in. At the MITI management retreat in 2012, the BLC group volunteered to facilitate breakout sessions where everyone in the room brainstormed the optimal conditions for flexible work at MITI. The feedback – written out in rolls and rolls of flip charts – proved invaluable. Che Nazli’s team subsequently integrated the ideas into FWA1 and FWA2 policies and guidelines. Most importantly, the breakout sessions generated lots of buy-in. The senior managers felt emotionally invested in the project because they had spent several hours discussing, debating and prioritising their concerns and best ideas. “After the retreat, it was quite natural for KSU (Secretary General) to give the green light to proceed with the pilot project,” Che Nazli said.
5. *Take off together.* Che Nazli kicked off the pilot programme in May 2013. The interest was palpable. A manager with a long-term physical ailment no longer had to apply from her quota of annual leave to go to the hospital for a few hours. There were different people with different needs applying for the FWA privilege. As Che Nazli monitored the progress, she realised that the pilot created even more basic questions for her, such as: “Who are the people who really need to apply for the flexible hours? What type of flexible hours do people need?” The process of implementing and improving the flexible work arrangement addressed more than work-life balance issues. “It also has implications for how we recruit new talent into MITI. Before this, new hires might not want to commute to MITI

from Bangi, Nilai or Putrajaya. FWA improves the prospects of us being able to attract and retain the staff we want,” she said.

The case study of implementing flexible work arrangement at MITI offers valuable leadership lessons on how to travel far and take off together:

- *Form a coalition to travel far.* This is especially when you are initiating a project that cuts across divisions and impacts nearly everyone at MITI. The BLC group – though small in numbers – became a coalition of supporters because they came from different departments and divisions.
- *Don't just communicate with stakeholders – engage them.* The FWA plan may not have been so well-received among the senior management if Che Nazli had merely sought them for endorsement. The breakout sessions turned everyone into collaborators. “The breakout sessions have ensured that my problem became everyone’s problem to solve together!” Che Nazli told Alvin, the retreat facilitator.
- *Sometimes less is more.* A few good men and women with strong commitment and convictions can make everyone else take off together. The process must be supported by genuine respect. There must not be one hint of “I-know-it-better-than-you” attitude, especially towards senior management. “We must be sincere,” Che Nazli said, “then people will respect our intent for implementing the FWA process.”

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- *Assume the best intentions from people – and they might just exceed your expectations.* Che Nazli was painfully aware that any form of flexible work arrangement could be abused. So she developed accountability guidelines. Nevertheless, she also chose to trust MITI staff. “We must emphasise the spirit of sincerity, honesty and trust. We must trust that people will respect the system, and not try to exploit it. We cannot be naïve, of course, but we must learn to trust.”
- *Top-level sponsorship is critical at the right time.* Most people try to enlist support from senior or top leaders – but they do it prematurely. Instead, you must first do the groundwork and enlist buy-in from key stakeholders before getting a final decision from the top leader (who will help you fend off your detractors).

The FWA project is a significant piece of the jigsaw puzzle in building a healthier organisation at MITI. The other pieces of the ecosystem that BLC members have helped to spark off include:

- The management review board – This group of senior managers meet regularly to ensure top-down alignment in decision-making within MITI and among the agencies
- Middle managers retreat – BLC 2.0 middle managers have designed and executed a programme to train and develop future middle managers (rather than assume that these tasks will be done by HR)

- Process facilitators – A different group of BLC 2.0 middle managers are meeting to train themselves to become ‘process facilitators’ who are skilled in using brainstorming and decision-making tools to help various departments at MITI run meetings
- And on a strategic level, MITI is shifting towards outcome-based budgeting so that funding is directly linked to the delivery of key outcomes.

## Tales from Within

### **GROWING A GARDEN IN THE CITY**

As Malaysians, we have grown used to driving by barren spots of land or looking with disapproval at flyovers plastered with posters put up by *Ah Longs*, or debt collectors. One day, as Rebecca commuted to work and her gaze fell upon a barren area under the Duta interchange flyover, she thought to herself: “This place is ugly. Why don’t we try to do something to beautify this place?”

She turned to Hanibah Ab Wahab, Senior Director of Management Services, for ideas and views. Then the Admin team headed by Hanafi Sakri initiated the project together with other agencies, including Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL) and Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE). They discussed a strategy on how to beautify and improve the scenery underneath the flyover near MITI. They kicked off the project in June 2013.

First, they enlisted the help of DBKL to plant 1,000 plants within the 100-meter area. MITI volunteers improved the watering system by installing an automatic water sprinkler to ensure the plants thrive. Then they organised monthly *gotong-*

MITI is also part of Kuala Lumpur. Everybody should take part to ensure that KL is always clean and green at all times.

*royong* sessions together with the Gardening Club to maintain the park-like zone.

A typical clean-up session commences after Friday afternoon prayers, and attracts about 60 MITI staff and volunteers. Their tasks include keeping the area clean and well-watered. They replace the dead plants, and fertilise the healthy plants. They also clear the place of weeds and tear down any posters that

have been glued on the walls of the nearby flyover. Alam Flora helps them with garbage collection.

“Initially there was resistance to this Corporate Social Responsibility project,” said Hanafi. “We were told that it’s not your core business. But we’re doing this to instill the spirit of volunteerism and loving the environment. I think we might be the first government ministry to collaborate with local authorities to do this.”

Nazrul Izwan Ismail, Principal Assistant Director of Logistic and Maintenance, added another justification for the project: “MITI is also part of Kuala Lumpur. Everybody should take part to ensure that KL is always clean and green at all times.”

“In Malaysia, most CSR projects are related with charity work. Our approach is to beautify and protect the environment,” said Hanafi. With a smile and a wink, he added that

MITI gets free advertisement because of their CSR project. Besides tearing down posters put up by *Ah Longs* offering sky-high loans, MITI was now allowed to put up an alternative poster which declares that MITI is a driver of Malaysia's economic growth.

## EDIBLE GARDEN

In June 2013, two edible gardens were grown at the front and back entrance of MITI's HQ in Jalan Duta. The project kicked off when two officials from the Agriculture Department briefed about 50 MITI officers on how to grow edible plants. After that meeting, they grew lemongrass, pandan, chili, *misai kucing* and *lengkuas*. At the back portion, they grew aloe vera, *limau purut*, *kacang telang* and other herb used for *ulam* and *tomyam*.

Because the garden plots are so small – barely enough for a few dozen plants – Hanafi said the plants are decorative. The soil also needs to be enriched. “We started this project to instill skills among MITIans on how to grow edible plants. We also hope that more people will appreciate greenery,” Hanafi said.

“The herb garden is a place where we can watch things grow,” said Rebecca. “In Tokyo, you'll see gardens on every rooftop. It's amazing, it's beautiful, it's enterprising. It shows us that we can build a creative space no matter how small.”

## TIPS

Marshall Goldsmith, a renowned executive coach, suggests six questions any supervisor or staff can ask one another to travel far and take off together<sup>1</sup>:

1. *Where are we going?* As a boss, share your division's key priorities, and then ask your staff for their views.
2. *Where are you going?* Tell your staff about their key priorities, and then ask them for their views on the desired direction.
3. *What are you doing well?* Share with your staff on what they are doing well, and then ask your staff to share about what they think they are doing well.
4. *What changes can lead to improvement?* Share your ideas on how things can improve, and then ask your staff for ideas (and be prepared to accept that their ideas may be more useful than yours!).
5. *How can I help?* Use this question to ask your staff for ideas on how you can help them achieve the agreed goals.
6. *What suggestions do you have for me?* Ask your staff for ideas on the changes you can make to be a more effective supervisor. This question lets you lead by example so that your staff can keep on growing and learning.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. An African proverb says, "If you want to go fast, travel alone. If you want to go far, travel together." Do you believe this proverb? Can you name 3 to 5 people who would want to travel together with you, and where do you want to go together?
2. Think of an idea that you would love to see happen. Then review the steps taken by Nazli's team to implement the flexible working arrangement programme at MITI. In what ways can you start small, go to the ground for data, and enlist others to implement the idea?

"I believe that MITI is a place where being the best is valued and doing your best is expected."

**PETER BRIAN MWANG  
CHEE KEONG**

*MITI Sabah*

"Be patient and listen."

**MOHD SHAMSULNIZAM  
SULAIMAN**

*Administration*

"Simple words of encouragement are easy, inexpensive and can motivate your subordinates."

**ARFAH SULAIMAN**

*Marketing and Business  
Development*

"Sometimes we need to look at different ways of working so that we can be the best of the best."

**NORHANIZA ALI BABDAR**

*Economic and Trade Relations*

# TIPS

"Working in MITI requires a high level of mental and physical resilience as you will need to face lots of challenges."

**CHE ROHANA CHE OMAR**

*Resource Centre*

"Listen to subordinates and understand their situation. It will go a long way in building up good teamwork."

**HAIRIL YAHRI YAACOB**

*MITI Washington*

"Work. Don't listen to gossip."

**MOHAMAD FARID  
MOHD ARIS**

*Investment Policy  
and Trade Facilitation*

"I survived in MITI so far because of the support of my colleagues in each division - most of them are my buddies."

**SYAHRIL SYAZLI GHAZALI**

*Sectoral Policy II*

"Managers will have to love their job and know each and every staff and subordinate. Get to know them and bond with them."

**EZRAL UZAIMI**

*Industrial Coordination  
and Trade Cooperation*

"I was directly involved in the establishment of SMIDEC which has now become SME Corporation, a successful agency under MITI."

**KAMARIAH YEOP ABDULLAH**

*Trade Practices and Cooperation*

"I was the Secretary General for the MITI Club serving under three different Presidents."

**AZMIR MUSYABRI ABDUL MUTALLIB**

*MITI Penang*

"MITI encourages young officers to speak up and to ask questions where necessary."

**MANGALESWARI  
ARJUNAN**

*Information Management*



## OPPORTUNITIES

"I had just joined MITI for two months when my director asked me to present a paper to the Minister. I truly appreciate MITI's trust in new officers."

**NURUL AINI RAMLY**

*Sectoral Policy I*

"I am grateful for the exciting learning process and the exposure that MITI offers me not only at the national level, but also regionally and globally."

**RAVI A/L CHAKKARA  
KUNKI RAMAN**

*Sectoral Policy I*

"I value the endless international exposure and the opportunities that MITI has given me."

**LIN AZURA YAHYA**

*FTA Policy and Negotiations Coordination*

"I am grateful to work with global leaders and to organise Trade Missions, SIFE World Cup 2011 and MITI Nite."

**FARY AKMAL OSMAN**

*MITI Bangkok*

**R**

**REFLECT**

**Know Yourself**

**A**s a young man and a junior officer in the civil service, J. Jayasiri envied his friends and colleagues who studied, worked or lived abroad. It seemed so glamorous ... and a faraway dream. But one day, he received a word of congratulations from the top management.

“Here is your posting order to Geneva. It’s a nice place to work in, but you’ll either sink or swim,” the boss told Jayasiri. Jayasiri felt excited by the prospect of going to Geneva, a global city nestled in a land of snow-capped mountains, azure-blue lakes and precision-driven Swiss watches. He imagined himself joining

a cadre of diplomats who worked in a financial hub that hosts the highest number of international organisations in the world. Geneva was the epicenter of where the Geneva Convention was negotiated. And he, J. Jayasiri, was now a negotiator there.

And then reality sank in. He was charged with representing Malaysia's position in the 100-odd member World Trade Organisation. Was he up to the task? Doubt set in. "How could they send me to Geneva without proper training and guidance? I can't rely on my bosses, I have no one to assist me ...," he thought to himself.

But Jayasiri took the challenge. During his term, he learnt to do things without help, he accepted any task given without question, and he continued to school himself in the finer nuances of diplomatic engagement and negotiation. He gathered all the experiences, both blissful and bitter, and he passed his baptism of fire. A few decades later, Jayasiri, Senior Director of Strategy and Monitoring, is recognised as a respected and reputable negotiator in the international arena. He has become Malaysia's chief trade negotiator in the most complex trade agreements.

Nevertheless, one day, Jayasiri found himself reflecting: "I have become a lone ranger. All the things that I know are all kept within me. How can I ensure that the next generation of officers benefit from my experience and knowledge?"

It was in that moment of reflection that 'Jaya,' as most people call him, came to a point of deep self-awareness: he needed to leave a legacy and begin mentoring others. He also reflected on systemic issues at MITI. He realised that in MITI, work usually flows to the most efficient officers who were capable of delivering results. That was a sign of recognition of one's capability, but over the long term, this approach would be dis-

The unexamined  
life is not worth  
living

astrous for MITI. “If this culture is not addressed, MITI will eventually become a Ministry with few experts and many headless chickens,” he concluded.

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Socrates once said that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” The philosopher felt that humans must understand themselves to savour the true value of life. The same goes, too, for leadership. The most powerful thing leaders can do to improve their effectiveness is to become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, what motivates them, and how they make decisions.

This need for self-knowledge might seem foreign for some MITI staff. As noted in the earlier chapter on the “Headless Chicken” syndrome, it is the norm for staff to be busy, busy, busy – chasing deadlines and completing ad hoc work. The default mode is to plow on relentlessly without pausing to reflect on what went well and what can be improved, or what was done poorly and needed to be done differently.

Not surprisingly, the quality of work will suffer. Producing an enormous amount of paperwork or attending a humongous number of overseas meetings may justify one’s existence at work, but that might not result in good quality work or excellent results. Worse, some might focus on meeting deadlines more than focus on producing the most relevant outcomes.

What then can break this cycle of busy work? Two things:

1. *The need to reflect on actions.* When we analyse what we do, we learn from our mistakes. The Spanish philosopher George Santayana once said that “he who does not remember the past is condemned to repeat it.”<sup>1</sup> As we become more reflective, we stand a better chance of identifying our blind spots. On a positive note, reflecting on our actions enable us to analyse our strengths and build them from good to great.

2. *The need to act on reflections.* If we do not act on our reflections, we will end up in paralysis analysis. But when we act on our reflections, we will live more congruently with our most deeply held values. Our actions will have more impact because we have thought things through much better. People will sense depth, purpose and passion when we spring into action.

The need to oscillate between action and reflection becomes more important the higher up we rise in the organisational hierarchy. That's because the root issues embedded in today's most complex leadership and strategic problems are almost always connected with psychological and relational issues. Successful bosses need to become astute about people's emotions, self-interests and motivations. And we cannot understand such things about other people without understanding ourselves.

Sharbanom Abu Bakar, Director of Delivery Management Office, values her lunch hour as a space for reflection and learning amid all the many action items she has to carry out during the day. "Sometimes I enjoy my alone time at lunch. It's my personal thinking time. Plus not everyone likes to eat sandwiches everyday, like me!" she said.

One of the most important times when we need to know ourselves comes when we hit rock-bottom – be it in our personal lives,

or while leading teams at work. During Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) 2.0, the members in an action team became discouraged when their proposals to impact MITI did not gain traction during various presentations to senior management. However, when they reflected on their journey, the four mem-

**We cannot understand such things about other people without understanding ourselves.**

bers realised that every week, they were still brainstorming. They still had not given up trying. “You have to fail ... to succeed,” a member said. Most importantly they realised they enjoyed one another’s company. They had become friends. And that was the most precious gift for working together.

Reflection makes us see whether what we have done was the right thing.

Leadership specialist, Warren Bennis, once said that managers do the things right but leaders do the right thing. “Reflection makes us see whether what we have done was the right thing,” Jayasiri said. Eventually, with deliberate practice, we will be able to do the right things naturally.

Upon his return from Geneva, Jayasiri vowed to do something within his capacity to change the system. “We talked about how great MITI is. But a strong system should not create individual performers but ones who are ready to be deployed to multiple teams to complete any given task,” Jayasiri told his colleagues.

So when Jayasiri took up the Senior Director post in the Multilateral Policy and Negotiations Division, he introduced the concept of sharing among colleagues. “I made sure all emails were copied to everyone in the division so that everyone is kept in the loop. I am a strong believer of building capacity of the next generation and one of the best ways to do this is through sharing of information,” he said. He even initiated an online bulletin ‘WTO for all’ for all MITIans.

Jayasiri still reflects on his daily life regularly. “Reflecting helps me a lot in picking up lessons in life which I can later on share with my son to guide him in his life journey,” he said.

Jayasiri’s insights and turning points in life are aligned with the insights of management guru, Peter Drucker, who wrote a classic essay called *Managing Oneself*.

“It’s up to you to carve out your place, to know when to change course, and to keep yourself engaged and productive during a work life that may span some 50 years. To do those things well, you’ll need to cultivate a deep understanding of yourself—not only what your strengths and weaknesses are but also how you learn, how you work with others, what your values are, and where you can make the greatest contribution. Because only when you operate from strengths can you achieve true excellence.”<sup>2</sup>



1. Keep a journal of daily experiences, which includes listing down the top three highlights and one main challenge of the day. Review your journal once a month to see common themes, values and experiences you cherish the most.
2. Take a 30-minute timeout each day to analyse your successes and observe challenges faced by your peers and subordinates. (The investment sage Warren Buffett has made it a habit for years to write down the reasons why he is making an investment decision and later look back to see what went right or wrong.)
3. Renew and recharge yourself by carving out times of solitude, where you spend two or three days completely cut off from technology. Go for long walks, pray and write down as many things you are grateful for. This will not only rejuvenate your energy for work but also give you new perspectives and insights for the long haul.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Do you prioritise time for deliberate reflection? When was the last time you withdrew from ordinary work in order to pause and re-think the way you work, and why you work?
2. Think of a few people in your life who seem to have drawn the best out of you, in whose presence you were your best self. List down their names. What do they have in common, if anything? How often do you now place yourself in the presence of such people?
3. What does being an 'effective' or 'successful' leader mean to you? What defines a person of character?

### Tales from Within

#### LIFE'S HIDDEN BLESSINGS

Around the year 2000, Wan Suraya Wan Mohd. Radzi learnt that her elder son, Rizal, was diagnosed with autism.

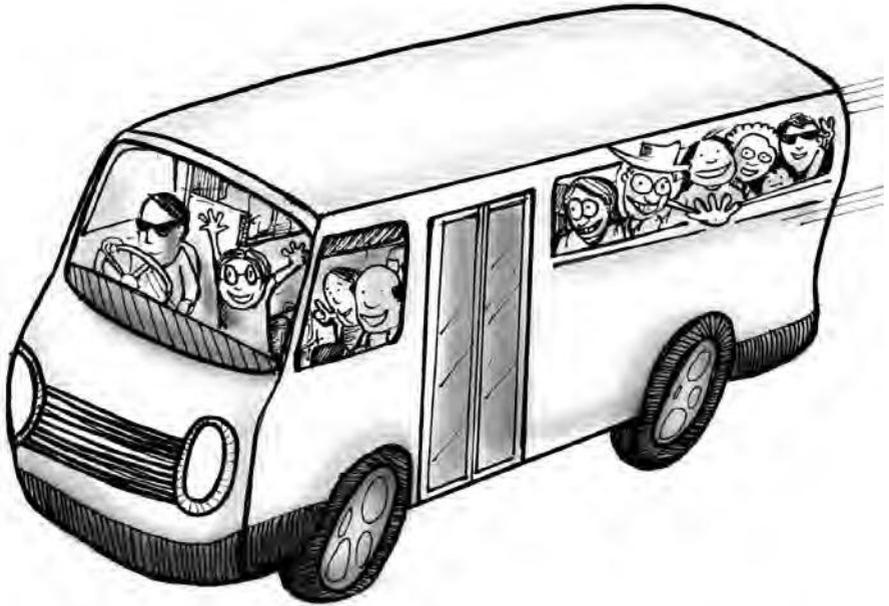
"The diagnosis turned our work and family life upside down," said Wan Suraya, the former Minister Counsellor (Economic) of the Malaysian Trade Commission in Singapore. Autism is a development disorder that affects how a person communicates and behaves with people. To date, there is no medical cure for autism.

But as Wan Suraya and her husband reflected on the events, their perspective changed. "Both of us had to dig

deep inside ourselves to find the strength and confidence to deal with this crisis and move forward,” she said.

“Now, I can see that my life is actually enriched through our son. Through him, I have met many wonderful friends and parents of other special children as well as teachers whom I consider as angels. Our experiences have also taught us to have empathy and patience in dealing with others. We know now what is important in life. We’re learning not to fuss over the little things. It has also given me much more focus on my work. My greatest incentive to work is actually so that I can provide for him adequately. Rizal is also very loving and my greatest supporter. He stays up with me even when I am working late into the night. So I consider myself very lucky to have this sweet child.”

# Retreat to Advance Together



**G**oogle, a company worth over US\$200 billion, offers a five-month maternity leave plan for new mothers. Staff enjoy free haircuts, free gourmet food and sleep pods for restorative naps. They commute on buses (Wi-Fi provided) to HQ which offers on-site laundry, wellness centres, video games and a bowling alley. It is no surprise that Google consistently tops Fortune magazine's list of 100 Best Companies to Work For.<sup>1</sup>

The most powerful perk at Google is the simplest one. It turns out that Google's 20 percent principle – any employee can take one day per week to work on a cool project – was the biggest driver of creativity and productivity at the company. In 2006, half of the products Google launched came from projects birthed during that 20 percent time. The core idea is that knowledge workers are most valuable when given protected space to reflect, tinker and experiment. That's why you need to retreat to advance.

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The dangers are real for organisations that do not carve out time to connect, think and plan together – and especially so at MITI. In early 2012, Rebecca shared her concerns among the participants of Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) 1.0. Everyone agreed that the incessant fire-fighting often prevented management from focusing on long-term issues, such as MITI's organisational health. Rebecca said: "My deep fear is that our younger officers are feeling restless. They may be feeling that their personal goals and views about MITI are different from that of their supervisors. If we have supervisors who do not appreciate their staff's needs and desires, then we will have folks who go through the motion, without passion, and looking for the earliest opportunity to leave MITI." The team agreed that one critical issue was how to motivate and nurture the talent of younger staff. A management retreat was necessary to address this strategic concern.

"It's so difficult to bring a team together for strategic thinking," says Rebecca. "But it's even more dangerous if we don't do it. Any policy we come up with will have huge implications down the line for the country. And these cannot be easily undone."

With this in mind, on a Thursday evening in October 2012, 50 directors and senior directors, including Rebecca, locked themselves up in a Melaka hotel for three days. The purpose

was to reflect and plan on what it would take to make MITI a great place to work but without Google's big budget or the executive chefs or the personal masseuse.

Here are seven important steps that the senior management team at MITI decided to implement during their 2012 retreat.

1. *Make a decision to retreat.* For a general, a retreat sounds like surrender. But any leadership team needs time away to reflect and connect with one another. "We've organised many work retreats before," said a senior director. "Why not have a retreat where we can play, and think things through in a less structured manner?"
2. *Level the playing field.* Everyone came on a bus. Everyone stayed in similar rooms. The first order of the day at the retreat was for people to agree that they would address one another on a first name basis. Rebecca, Shahabar, Vasu, Tay, Khoo, Mazni, Faizal and everyone else were invited to speak their mind regardless of rank or position. It was not easy at first. But the retreat participants got into the spirit of play as the days went by. Anyone who was late – or who accidentally blurted out "Datuk" – was fined RM5. Several hundred ringgit in fines were collected in a jar. The funds were donated to the MITI Club for intramural activities.
3. *Position leaders as facilitators.* A group of senior directors who formed the nucleus of the Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) 1.0 served as facilitators during breakout groups. These were the men and women accustomed to barking out orders. But during the retreat, they became the ones holding the pen, listening carefully, and writing down suggestions from other directors. Thanks to the facilitators, the discussions during the breakout groups were animated, and went on till past midnight.

4. *Create conflict.* By the final day of the retreat, there were seven project teams formed to develop proposals to implement at MITI. At this point, Rebecca instructed the facilitators to reduce the seven projects to five. “We need to focus and prioritise. That’ll give us energy,” she said. At the ‘marketplace’ event, the seven proposals were put up on seven flip charts around the hall. Participants were told to stand up. They were given 20 minutes to decide which projects to choose, and then to stand beside a flip-chart of their choice. The two flipcharts with the fewest people would have to be closed down. After three minutes of awkward silence, as people mulled which projects to choose, suddenly there was bedlam. A few individuals started persuading others to join their project teams. J. Jayasiri, Senior Director of Multi-lateral Trade Policy and Negotiations, held on to the mike and refused to relinquish it. Isham Ishak, Director of Strategic Planning, grabbed the mike. There were arguments, physical shoving and loud threats. “Your year-end appraisal will be affected if you don’t come here and stand with me,” someone said. All in good fun, of course. Everyone had a stake in the idea they were selling. Everyone had strong convictions. The positive energy generated was infectious.
  
5. *Enlist volunteers to deliver results.* At the end of the rowdy ‘marketplace’ event, the participants voluntarily reconstituted themselves into five teams. Each action plan was headed by a senior director. The plans were presented to Rebecca. Now came the crux: who was willing to become the ‘focal point’ who would meet regularly with Rebecca and management team to monitor progress made by the five teams? There was a deafening silence when the facilitator asked the question. Suddenly a hand shot up. It was Isham’s. Everyone clapped and cheered (and breathed a huge sigh of relief). Isham was now responsible for ensuring that the five teams delivered.

6. *Advance together.* After the retreat, Isham met up with the team leaders. Then he compiled the action plans into a guidebook which was distributed to all directors and senior directors. Isham also inserted a code of practice – called the ‘Five Great Workplace Tools’ – to remind the senior directors that the process of engaging staff was as important as the results. In the next 100 days after the retreat, Isham met up with the team leaders to ensure sufficient traction in implementation. The guidebook was a testament that the senior management wanted to make MITI a better place to work. “We spend most of our time at work. So we need to care for the people and the organisation. When the organisation that you work for understands your problems and provides a comfortable and suitable work environment, you would want to give your best at work,” Isham said.

“We spend most of our time at work. So we need to care for the people and the organisation.”

7. *Measure results.* After more than six months, there have been tangible and significant structural changes. A pilot project was launched to provide flexible work arrangement for employees to work from home. There is increased transparency in the selection of overseas postings. A better job rotation mechanism has been formulated. And a more impartial annual appraisal system has been introduced. Other efforts yielded mixed results. But overall, the retreat became a catalyst for collective action.

What happened during the 2012 management retreat became important steps for MITI to advance. The seven steps sparked off

positive energy. The moment one person stepped up as a volunteer, he or she created energy. When a small group at the retreat decided to walk that extra mile beyond what their job entailed, they collectively created energy. Energy begets energy.



### **HOW TO HARNESS POSITIVE ENERGY FOR YOUR TEAM**

Tony Schwartz, CEO and founder of “The Energy Project,” has observed that an organisation needs to effectively reenergise its workforces. This is done by shifting the emphasis from getting more out of people to investing more in them. This will motivate the workforce and in turn they are able to be more productive at work. Tony Schwartz offers several tips to renew energy:

- Turn off email once a day;
- Plan your meals;
- Put yourself in someone else’s shoes;
- Exercise regularly; and
- Take all your vacation days.<sup>2</sup>

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. According to leadership guru Daniel H. Pink, what 21st century workers want most are:
  - Autonomy – the desire to be self-directed;
  - Mastery – the urge to make progress and get better at what we do; and
  - Purpose – the yearning to contribute and to be part of something greater than ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

How are you creating these three things for yourself? How are you creating such an environment for your team?

2. “As leaders, we have to be passionate about the tasks given to us. We need to understand and appreciate the impact of our work – that our contribution matters,” says Rebecca. On a scale of 1 to 10, what is your level of passion?
3. If you were to organise a retreat for your team, what would you do? What are some areas that you would love to advance?

## Tales from Within

### **JUST DO IT. FAST.**

Barefoot Leadership Circles (BLC) are opportunities for participants to connect with one another and explore ways to work together.

Early on, Alvin Ung, the facilitator for BLC, suggested that the BLC 1.0 members create their own task force groups. Each group should be small, five or less, and voluntary. The duration of the task force should be limited. No assigned staff would be required. To eliminate bureaucracy, any report should be just one page – a summary of conclusions and decisions. The goal of the task force was to recommend pilot projects that could be tested, modified and formalised at the organisational level. “Aim for speed and action,” Alvin said.

At a BLC session in June 2012, Mohd Ridzal Sheriff, Deputy Secretary General (Trade), suggested that it would

be good to think about how decisions are made I, and especially how resources are allocated at MITI. He volunteered to co-lead the task force with Rohana Abdul Malek, the then-legal advisor of MITI.

Ten minutes after the BLC session ended at 2 p.m., Ridzal dashed off a crisp email to his direct reports to set up an accountability task force.

“Hi All, it was decided at BLC that we should have smaller task force groups on various issues. The task force should also include people from outside the BLC group. My task force is on operationalising accountability and decision making,” wrote Ridzal. He asked his directors to nominate younger officers to join the task force. The names were nominated.

Thirty minutes later, he sent a follow-up email asking everyone to meet in his office at 4 p.m. that same day. They met, debated the pros and cons, and left.

At six o’clock, Ridzal and Rohana updated their BLC peers with a one-slide Powerpoint chart describing a decision flow-chart they had drawn up together. The chart proposed that a small group of senior leaders would review, approve and think about how to leverage on other agencies whenever MITI organised major events. In less than two months, the proposal was approved by the Secretary General. The task force proposal is now called the ‘Management Review Process.’

“It’s a perennial problem in large organisations – government or otherwise – that there are things happening you’re not aware of. It still happens today,” said Ridzal, as he recollected what led him to moot the idea at the first BLC. “The goal of the ‘Management Review Process’ is to gain more control of what’s happening, to become like a gatekeeper, and to also leverage on

one another's efforts. It helps us become cohesive and aligned, rather than contradicting one another. Since starting this initiative, this is slowly becoming a culture."

It is striking to see how quickly Ridzal committed himself. A more laidback manager might have asked one of his staff to study the matter, and wait till a Management Meeting to ask everyone for the green light to establish a task force that might take two months to develop a 10-page proposal with five recommendations. Instead Ridzal acted immediately and got most of the work done within two hours. And he stayed on board the team till the project was executed.

Now, one might argue that it was easy for someone of Ridzal's position to get things done, because he has so many people at his beck-and-call. But the truth is everyone has a specific sphere of influence. We, too, can enlist others.

"Courage requires you to take control and get things done. Just go ahead and do it," Ridzal said. "Yes, you'll think through all the pros and cons, you'll get advice for whatever it is you want to do. And then ... you don't wait for permission anymore. You go do it."

Courage requires you  
to take control and  
get things done.  
Just go ahead and do it.

## FONDEST MEMORIES

"When I was involved in the making of the farewell video for our ex- KSU (Tan Sri Razak)."

**SUHAILI ISMAIL**

*Entrepreneurship  
Development*

"... when my officer claimed that I am the best boss he has ever worked with!"

**SABARIAH MOHD SOFIAN**

*Sectoral Policy II*

"I never expected to travel so much within five years. Thank you MITI, for such a priceless learning experience."

**AZUWIZA DARUS**

*Import and Export Control*

"I played Dam Haji at Sukan Traditional MITI 2013, a game that I haven't played in 15 years!"

**HAZRUL IMRAN AZAHAR**

*Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation*

"Being seconded from another Ministry, I appreciate the opportunity given to voice opinions and participate in discussions."

**WAN MOHD RADZI**

**WAN AHMAD**

*Strategic Trade Secretariat*

"The coaching applied in MITI, is real and lively."

**KHIDAYU HAMZAH**

*Sectoral Policy II*

"I can't believe I survived over 10 years in MITI, it must be a really wonderful place - it is!"

**ZAIREEN OMAR**

*Services Sector Development*

"Being in MITI has given me the chance to grow. Despite all the ups and downs, I must honestly say- I am now a different and better person, emotionally and spiritually!"

**SHIREEN AIDA SHAMSUL KHALIL**

*Import and Export Control*

“On my first day in MITI I was surprised to be greeted by the then Deputy Secretary General of MITI, Dr. Rebecca with “Welcome on board” and a ready smile.”

**MANGALESWARI ARJUNAN**

*Information Management*

“My journey in MITI began with Eunice and Marweena making me feel at home. Our friendship means a lot to me.”

**ASZMY MAHMOOD YUSOF MOHAMED**

*Sectoral Policy I*

“When I was first posted to MITI, it was a little intimidating. So my advice to people newly posted to MITI is this: take it in your stride, focus on your work, and do not take things personally.”

**HISWANI HARUN**

*Services Sector Development*

“MITI is my first love and I hope it will be my last too.”

**KAMARIAH YEOP ABDULLAH**

*Trade Practices and Cooperation*

“When I joined MITI, I was surprised to discover that the work culture here is as intense as the corporate sector.”

**ZAINAL SHAHRIR AHMAD MOKHTAR**

*Human Resource Management*

**FIRST  
TIME**

**E**

**ENGAGE**

# Be A Bit Bold Yourself



**C**hong, a middle manager at MITI, took a deep breath as he stared at the computer screen. He had just finished an email. To send or not to send? That is the question.

If he clicked the 'send-all' button, everyone from the biggest boss to the newest employee would be able to read what he wrote. One thousand words in all. Each word was potentially a radioactive isotope that could set off a chain reaction throughout MITI that might explode in his face. Chong (not his real name) re-read what he had written.

On the surface, the assignment was simple. He was voluntarily sending suggestions to the 'MITI Stick on Your Idea' programme. But besides giving ideas, he wanted to address the root issues that thwarted the best ideas from being implemented. His

**We've got to be bold. Or, at the very least, we've got to be a bit bold.**

other concern was that when ideas were suggested, the person who gave the suggestion would be asked to carry out the idea. "Maybe that's why so few people offered ideas," he thought to himself. So, in 11 bullet points, he suggested

that the most effective way to get ideas from MITI staff was to create a culture of innovation. For that to happen, changes needed to be made to the existing 'comfort zones' in the organisation, including the organisational chart of MITI.

He grew more nervous as he wrote. What was he getting himself into? Would the bosses view him as an agent provocateur? Would he get a slap on the wrist? Or would he be rewarded to an overseas posting in ... Siberia? On impulse, maybe to safeguard himself, he typed down a twelfth bullet point: "Now I have to confront the 'emotional risk' for voicing out these ideas openly!"

He took a deep breath. And then he clicked the button....

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'The boss is always right' has become a mantra in the civil service. If the boss tells us what to do, we unthinkingly say "Yes." In the long run, it creates a culture of compliance where people do the bare minimum or do not speak up when things go wrong. These issues were discussed in the "Ya ... OK Lah" chapter.

So how do we address this major challenge? What do we do at the personal level to be an effective civil servant at MITI who's not servile?

We've got to be bold. Or, at the very least, we've got to be a *bit* bold. It means stepping out of the zone of security. It means putting ourselves out there – not all of the time, but at opportune times, just as Chong did, when he sent out that mass email with suggestions for organisational improvement. The bottom line is this: it is better to do something than to do nothing at all.

“It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed. In this life we get nothing save by effort,” said former US President Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>1</sup>

Here's the thing: Some people know what is right, but they may choose not to speak up or do anything about it. They would rather lie awake in bed fretting about worries, or stewing over resentments and unspoken grievances. Inaction turns out to be more painful than failure. But when we choose to be a bit bold, life becomes more fun. We feel the adrenaline of taking action. When we choose to spark off new or more challenging initiatives, we gain confidence.

“I find that officers shine when they are pressed for results but are limited in resources,” said Mohd Ridzal Sheriff, Deputy Secretary General (Trade). There were two types of MITI managers stationed overseas, he said. In some offices, the managers wait for directions from HQ. In other

offices, there is a marked tempo of activity and creativity. What was the difference between the two types of managers?

Ridzal explained: “There are those who prefer to play it safe. They seek direction from HQ before proceeding to do anything. And then there are the brave ones who have the strength of conviction to do the job entrusted to them. They take personal ownership.”



When we choose to be a bit bold, life becomes more fun.

Here are small steps that some people at MITI have taken to be a bit bold – at all levels of the organisation.

*Junior officers.* There was once a junior officer who habitually answered “No comment” whenever anyone asked him for an opinion. One day he received feedback about it from a leadership facilitator. Immediately he resolved to change. He decided never to say “No comment.” Then he chose to be a bit bold by talking to any officers he met in the hallway (rather than step away and hide). And he also resolved to improve his English. He would boldly send out mass emails when necessary (rather than to always ask his supervisor to do it). By being a bit bold, this junior officer has discovered new confidence in his abilities.

*Middle managers.* One morning, a group of middle managers in Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) 2.0 were asked to step into the office of the Secretary General. They greeted her. And then, quite mysteriously, she said “Goodbye everyone,” and vacated her office. The befuddled middle managers stood around nervously in the hushed, wood-paneled space. There was a leather couch set, a large television, and glass cabinets full of folders. Here was the seat of power at MITI. The BLC facilitator then invited the middle managers to step behind the Secretary General’s table. “Who would like to sit in her chair?” the facilitator asked. No one moved. It was inconceivable to sit in *her* chair. But eventually one person grew bold. She sat on the chair. She grinned broadly. Someone snapped a photo of her at the table. One by one, the other middle managers did likewise.

“When I sat down on the chair, I suddenly saw things from *her* perspective,” a manager said. “I felt a great weight of responsibility. All the issues and controversies were suddenly mine to handle. I had to make all the toughest decisions. It felt almost unbearable. Sitting on the Secretary General’s chair gave me a new perspective

on my work. She has to make the tough calls at her level. So I, too, must make the tough calls at my level.” This middle manager shows us that we can be a bit bold by proactively making decisions within our sphere of influence.

*Senior managers.* Sharbanom Abu Bakar, Director of Delivery Management Office, often found that she had to engage stakeholders at the highest levels of government, agencies and ministries. Originally from the corporate sector, she was not sure of all the norms and protocols required at this level. So she would often check with her bosses. Sharbanom said: “I feel fortunate that the Secretary General and YB Minister have been very supportive, so I make sure I present my work accordingly. When I’m not sure, I will seek their views, and I typically get instant responses. That is so helpful. The support I receive gives me confidence.” This director shows us that we can be a bit bold in asking for help. In fact, research shows that once we have done our best to prepare for something, asking for help from others is an effective way of building bonds with people.

*Top leadership.* The age-old adage is true – it is lonely at the top. So it requires courage to give feedback to the No. 1 leader of any organisation, and it requires courage to receive feedback as well. Rebecca discovered how difficult two-way feedback was when she was named Secretary General of MITI. She tried to be as open as possible. She practiced an open-door policy. She answered her emails personally. She organised *Kopitiam* sessions with staff from all levels. And yet sometimes people still had trouble approaching her.

Because of this challenge, she experienced firsthand how helpful it was to organise the management retreat in 2012. “The retreat was excellent because we threw away our titles and our nametags. No one called me Datuk Rebecca. People got bolder in speaking up. Some of the things said during the retreat really shook me. But

**Your brain  
is like a muscle,  
the more  
you use it,  
the stronger  
it gets.**

I tried my best to just listen. It's good they said it in front of me and not behind my back." A top leader in an organisation can be a bit bold in receiving feedback from others – and thus help others be more bold in giving feedback.

And what happened to Chong's bold move of emailing his feedback to all at MITI?

A few days after hitting the 'send-all' button, Chong was seen having lunch with a colleague. He was energetically recollecting the feedback he received from

the email he sent out. People responded! People actually appreciated what he wrote! By being a little bit bold, he felt free. "By saying what I truly felt, I put to rest all fear of giving honest views about MITI, and concerns about how people would react to it. I felt so much better for doing it," Chong said.

## TIPS

1. Your brain is like a muscle, say brain scientists and psychologists. The more you use it, the stronger it gets. When you try or learn something new for 20 minutes everyday, you brain begins to form new connections and grow new neurons. What is something new you can try today at work or in your personal life?
2. Look for a few challenging projects. Volunteer to take these on. You are growing your brain as you try something new everyday.

## REFLECTION QUESTION

It is hard to be a bit bold when we are not sure which are the areas we can improve ourselves. Traditionally we ask for feedback. But that can make us feel a bit defensive when people start pointing out our flaws. Instead, try feedforward, an exercise designed by leadership coach Marshall Goldsmith:<sup>2</sup>

1. Pick one event/behaviour you would like to change.
2. Describe this to someone you know e.g. “I want to be a better listener” or “What can I do differently when I run the update meeting next week?”
3. Ask for two suggestions that can help you achieve a positive change in that area.
4. Listen attentively to the ideas and take notes.
5. At the end, say “Thank you.”
6. Reflect on whether the feedforward process was more effective than asking for feedback. If yes, why was it more helpful?

## Tales from Within

### EVERYONE IS IN THE MIDDLE

Middle managers have many duties but little authority. They have people to please both above and below. Their days are filled with meetings, sudden crises and ad hoc meetings. And yet Google – after conducting surveys and studies – has found that middle managers are incredibly important. This is also the case at MITI where middle managers do a lot of heavyweight lifting to supervise junior officers, write reports, and juggle competing demands from senior managers.

So, early in 2013, a group of middle managers at BLC 2.0 felt that it was important to develop a guidebook that would become required reading for any new – and experienced – middle manager in MITI. The guidebook would outline the five most important attitudes, skills and knowledge areas required for MITI’s middle managers of the future. The guidebook would serve as a survivor’s guide for middle managers, a coaching tool for managers to encourage one another, and essential reading material for anyone joining the ranks of MITI’s middle management. “We hope that every middle manager would be able to relate somehow to each other’s situation and help one another in times of need,” said a BLC 2.0 member.

To kickstart the process, the dozen-odd managers divided themselves into two groups to develop ‘soft skills’ and ‘hard skills’ for the guidebook, which they named as ‘Motivating Middle Managers for Dummies,’ or M<sup>3</sup>D. They divided the work among themselves and began writing. But the smooth sailing soon hit rocky waters.

Aida Shafinaz Alias, a key member and group energiser, was posted to India. A few others got swept into the vortex of FTA negotiations which had become extremely controversial at a national level. Others cited various work commitments. People lost focus on the voluntary group project. “What you’re all facing really reflects the challenges of middle management in juggling competing demands,” Alvin, the BLC facilitator, told them. Then he asked: “Is there anyone willing to step up to take the lead? You will need to be a bit brave to take this on. Because you’ll be leading your peers with little power or positional influence.”

For a minute or two there was silence. But eventually one person lifted her hand: Aedreena.

“What gave you the courage to step up when no one else did?” Alvin asked her later.

“I volunteered because I believed in the project,” she said. “It is not something that needs policy change or makes you crack your brain to produce. And everyone agreed to lend me their support.”

Within two weeks, the team presented their project to Rebecca when she dropped by during one of the BLC 2.0 sessions. She loved the idea. The team then presented their efforts at the Management Meeting. The top managers gave the project a go-ahead and asked for an implementation plan. They also suggested that the middle managers organise a ‘boot camp’ or retreat to engage the rest of MITI’s middle managers and to seek their input for developing the guidebook. The stakes were raised: they could not depend on HR to do it. They had to do it themselves.

In the next phase, Aedreena discovered that to be most effective, she had to find a trio – Suhaili Ismail, Syed Mohd Faizal Syed Mohd Dardin and Zainal Shahrir Ahmad Mokhtar – to design and anchor the retreat. A budget was submitted and swiftly approved for the retreat to be held in a Putrajaya hotel. They sent out an invitation to all middle managers and were pleasantly surprised when more than

**I was seen as the leader, but I still couldn't get things done without the right people in my team.**

**A team will  
only work if you  
have the right  
people in it to go  
with you.**

half signed up despite their busy schedules. The other BLC 2.0 members pitched in as facilitators at the tables. At the interactive one-day retreat, 50-plus managers showed up. Together, they brainstormed the core challenges they faced; they proposed solutions that they themselves could tackle. Several solutions that required institutional intervention were also prepared. Everyone spent

several hours working together to prioritise the top five attitudes, skills and knowledge areas they felt were most important for future managers at MITI.

Looking back, the retreat came into existence because a core group of people chose to be a bit brave when their team was going through choppy waters. "I was seen as the leader, but I still couldn't get things done without the right people in my team," Aedreena said. "A team will only work if you have the right people in it to go with you."

Some of the best outcomes of the retreat were the intangible ones. A manager who went said: "It was so meaningful for me to meet middle managers from other divisions. Now because I know who they are on a personal level, I can be more bold to pick up the phone to talk things through more effectively with my fellow middle managers."

# Be A Lot Bolder Together



**O**n the third and final day of the 2012 management retreat, a few people from MITI's senior management team began shouting at one another. The rest of the 50 participants stood by in ragged-looking groups, like gangsters facing off, except they wore casual office clothes.

The alpha males dominated the center and battled it out.

"Traitor! How can you betray our cause?" one man yelled, exaggeratedly, as he waved the microphone like a caveman wielding a club. "You come back here!"

On the margins, two women teamed up, stealthily walked over to the next group, and forcibly dragged another woman back to their team. Cave-woman-Cat-woman-style.

Fortunately this was not some kind of 'Extreme Sports for Civil Servants.' The rules of the 'marketplace' game were simple. Everyone in the room had to choose which projects they wanted to join. Projects that attracted insufficient supporters would be closed down. So, if you wanted to implement a specific project, you had better convince others to join you. You also had to persuade the right people to join your team. The rules of the game caused the people to dash around recruiting – or running away from – one another.

The bedlam died down after 20 minutes. There were no dead bodies. After dozens of hours spent brainstorming and debating a series of strategic leadership issues, only five projects survived. Two projects were killed. But everyone was laughing. Instead of a typical Management Meeting held in a formal room presided over by a chairperson, this boisterous method of project selection energised everyone.

More importantly, the 'marketplace' exercise during the management retreat enabled the senior civil servants to say "No" to one another without fear of reprisal. That exercise allowed – and encouraged – dissent. In the spirit of fun, they could shout, threaten, cajole, persuade or even physically drag people to join their teams. The participants were being a lot bolder together.

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Tension is universal. When managed well, such tension generates collective energy and helps to build alignment. But conflict can also be painful. This can cause people at MITI to say "Ya ... OK lah" instead of being bold in disagreeing or offering new ideas. In such settings, there will be bystanders who observe problems but will not help. How do we battle against such behaviours?

At a personal level, we've got to be a *bit* bold. A junior officer learns to speak up. A middle manager makes proactive decisions. A senior manager solicits feedback, even if it is painful. These are small acts of personal courage that create organisational health over the long haul.

Furthermore, at an organisational level, we have got to be a lot bolder when we are together. To do this, it requires creating the right environment for people and teams to speak up without fear of reprisal. It means allowing people to say their "No's" so that they can decide together on the most effective "Yes's."

Being bold requires saying "No" to minimal standards. "Previously, I thought that if I can deliver any task, it's good enough," said Che Nazli Jaapar, Director of

Human Resource Management, as she reflected on how Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) impacted her leadership style. "But now I realise that good enough is not good enough. My focus is to do much more, at a higher level of excellence. Now, when I'm entrusted with a project, I don't try to do things normally. I think to myself: to which level can I bring this further? It's not about showing off. It's feeling satisfied that I'm doing my best. I'm so lucky that at Barefoot Leadership Circle 1.0, I could observe everyone, learn from them, and analyse how they do it."

“Previously, I thought that if I can deliver any task, it's good enough. But now I realise that good enough is not good enough.”

Being a lot bolder together also requires managing conflict in constructive ways. “If you want to succeed in an age of ever-increasing complexity, you have to establish clear vision, set strategy and build alignment. Then you need to systematically orchestrate right fights – and fight them right,” say the co-authors and business strategists Saj-Nicole Joni and Damon Beyer.<sup>1</sup>

One small way MITI tried to help staff manage conflict in the right way was by developing the ‘Six Great Workplace Tools.’ The process began in BLC 1.0 when the dozen-odd participants were asked to list down the biggest people challenges they faced at work. Managing conflicts and fear of reprisal were big issues. Over the next several weeks, the participants then brainstormed and prioritised solutions. Alvin, the BLC facilitator, gathered the outcomes. He cross-checked with the latest insights from neuroscience and psychology, and developed a pack of pocket-sized cards called the ‘Five Great Workplace Tools’ (which were expanded to six tools, one year later).

The cards were designed for anyone to use – one card at a time – during team meetings, strategy sessions or even while working alone. While seemingly simple, the cards addressed root issues on why people choose not to be bold – and what we could do to become a lot bolder together in building a great workplace. The cards were visible reminders to act on the six positive actions (as well as stop doing the negative actions).

“At BLC, it’s the spirit of promising to do what we said we’d do. It requires us to get out of our silos and choose to work together,” said Isham Ishak, a BLC 1.0 participant and Director of Strategic Planning. As president of the intramural MITI Club, he coordinated a six-month project in 2013 that challenged staff from MITI and other agencies to scale five mountain peaks – including Mount Kinabalu – so that everyone could do something bold together.



## TIPS

How can we be a lot bolder together in making a difference? Here are some tips based on the 'Six Great Workplace Tools' developed at BLC 1.0:

1. *Listen first.* Seek to understand before being understood. Ask clarifying questions. Repeat back what is said. Always find ways to draw out introverts during discussions.
2. *Be true to my word.* Be utterly reliable in keeping our word. Do the right thing even when no one's watching. And speak up in person, or else keep the peace.
3. *Be personal.* Say what we truly feel, with respect and warmth. Be willing to be vulnerable at appropriate times, or say "I don't know."
4. *Harness energy.* Do the most important thing first for 90 uninterrupted minutes. Practise one skill repeatedly and ask for feedback.
5. *Build partnerships.* Explore possibilities first before saying "No." Find common goals for greater good. And then ask for help in areas where we are weak in.
6. *Recognise contributions.* Say "Thank you," and be specific. Praise effort, not only results.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Being a lot bolder together requires us to stop thinking about certain debilitating thoughts or doing certain actions that rob us of courage. Six negative thought patterns were identified by the BLC participants. Which of these six thought patterns describe how you think (sometimes)? Which do you want to quit doing?

- “I quit saying ‘But ...’” (When people suggest ideas, stop contradicting those ideas by saying “But ... you didn’t think of this or that.” Instead of saying but, say “And.” For example, *And ... I think we can do it this way too.*”)
- “I quit saying things I don’t believe in.”
- “I quit being afraid of what others think.”
- “I quit mindless surfing.” (We waste an incredible amount of time on social media and web surfing)
- “I quit saying ‘Cannot be done.’”
- “I quit taking people for granted.”

## Tales from Within

### **SQUEEZING ORANGES FOR CREATIVE JUICE**

Being a lot bolder together sometimes requires the courage to harvest lessons from failure, and the grit to keep on going when no one’s watching. Here’s a story of how a small group of middle managers, called the ‘Orange Zone,’ faced obstacles when they were trying to start a project that would make an obvious difference at MITI within 90 days.

During BLC 2.0, Lin Azura Yahya proposed to establish a ‘Trade Negotiation Bureau’ to improve the negotiations process for Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). Shamilah Perumal, Wan Syafinaz Wan Abdul Rahman and Angelina agreed to form a team with Lin.

“How are we going to form a ‘Trade Policy and Negotiations Bureau’ that cut across several Ministries and Agencies ... within 90 days?” someone asked. The time frame was not realistic. The team discovered that similar proposals had been proposed to – and shelved by – senior management.

But then they realised there was no specific repository of all information related to past and present FTAs. Why not create an 'Orange Room' (the color of creativity) where people could learn the important basics of the FTA process? The proposal was presented to Rebecca. "It would be nice to have a space for people to be creative. Help me visualise the room," she said.

The team gathered PowerPoint slides, briefs, press statements, information papers and any FTA-related info. "This stuff is technical and dry!" a team member said. "So let's do sketches and dramas to make FTA easier to digest," suggested another member. "But why would people come to the room?" someone else said. Who would want to watch the dramas? Who would keep the drama going on? "We still have not nailed it!" Shamilah said, after many weeks of emails and meetings. It was disheartening. Doubt set in.

But they became convinced by one thing. "We cannot give up. We have got to produce something," they told one another. Amid the struggles, a silver lining emerged. They realised that they had gotten to know one another personally, and they had even gotten to know one another's problems in their respective divisions. "We found ourselves asking, 'How can we make MITI better? What is the main problem in MITI? Why do people have problems fitting in?'" Angelina

We were asking the big questions. But we did not get the answers we were looking for.

said, as she reflected on their journey as a team. “We were asking the big questions. But we did not get the answers we were looking for.”

“Maybe it’s because we are changing our plans too often. Did we give up on FTA too fast? Let’s revisit FTA!” Syafinaz suggested one day. They sought out Khoo Boo Seng, Senior Director of Strategic Planning, who spent 1.5 uninterrupted hours with the team brainstorming many FTA-related ideas.

“FTA is a big thing, and it involves some very serious matters. We need to do the most urgent thing,” someone said. They sought out Rebecca for more guidance on what to do. She held back from telling them what to do. “Do something you can manage. Explore the options. Why not sit in the Management Meeting to get some ideas?” Rebecca offered.

With the 90-day deadline looming, the Orange Zone team brainstormed some more. They felt they had the right attitude and teamwork. But they were hitting a brick wall with the subject matter. “Let’s take a rain check on FTA,” they said.

The moment they dropped pursuing the FTA angle, they realised that the answer may have been there all along. They had spent so many hours brainstorming, seeking out advice, experimenting, and deciding what to do. Maybe the learning process they had gone through was the project itself! It was an ‘aha’ moment. Together they formulated their performance objective: “We want to create a zone, not a physical room, where we assist people with tools for thinking creatively and and for coming up with solutions.”

Now they knew what they had to do: they needed to equip and train themselves with brainstorming techniques and thinking tools. Together, they helped Syafinaz solve

a workplace issue. On one hand, they did not develop a tangible project within 90 days. Yet that 'failure' led to an unexpected success: they discovered a learning process. "We will keep on sharpening our skills to see how we can create tools that can be used in everyday work at MITI," they resolved together.

Despite being initially frustrated by the lack of progress, Shamilah now concluded: "The team made me think more creatively, open up to new ideas, and say what is on my mind. These are skills I have put to use in my everyday tasks."

"It shows that we cannot succeed if we do not fail. And after we fail, we look for yet another way. That's the learning process I gained," Syafinaz said.

"I have found good colleagues who are like new members of my family. So I travel everyday not only for work but to meet my extended family."

**SURESH KALIYANA SUNDAM**

*Multilateral Trade Policy and Negotiations*

"I appreciate the exposure MITI gives me. When I see news on MITI on television, I am proud to be part of the Ministry that is contributing to our country's economy."

**HASIMAH ISMAIL**

*Administration*

"I am excited about the international exposure that I get in MITI and the Ministry's interesting core business."

**FATIMAH WATI CHE ABDULLAH**

*Strategic Planning*

"I know that I am contributing, in some small way, to nation-building in MITI. And it is a great feeling."

**ARIVIDYA ARIMUTHU**

*MITI Brussels*

**MITI EXCITES ME BECAUSE ...**

"MITI gives me enough opportunities and exposure to excite me and push me out of my bed early morning!"

**AMUTHA SOCKLINGAM**

*Human Resource Management*

"Every door in MITI is open. Any opinion is listened to. People might not agree with you, but your views will be respected."

**ALBERT CH'NG CHUN MENG**

*Economic and Trade Relations*

"Despite the occasional headaches that I sometimes get in working hard to become more efficient, I appreciate the fact that my welfare is also taken care of."

**FARAH ATIA OTHMAN**

*Strategic Trade Secretariat*

"I want MITIans to be proud working in MITI, and to be known as MITIans."

**NADIA SAPEE**

*Multilateral Trade Policy and Negotiations*

"I hope MITI continues to grow and maintain its high standards in the coming years."

**GUNA SEELAN  
BALAKRISHNAN**

*ASEAN Economic Cooperation*

"I hope MITI could be more focused in its functions to avoid overlap with other Ministries."

**KAMARUL HAFIDZAN  
KAMARUDDIN**

*Strategic Planning*

"I hope for MITI to introduce channels for reflection and constructive criticisms between bosses and subordinates."

**TAN CHEE KEONG**

*ASEAN Economic Cooperation*

## HOPE FOR MITI

"I hope MITI will be the friendliest ministry in Malaysia."

**MOHD MAZDAN  
MOHD JAMIL**

*Sectoral Policy II*

"I enjoyed working in my previous workplace although it was challenging and came with its own share of pressure. Similarly I hope I will be able to look back at my journey in MITI as enjoyable and memorable."

**JURAI DAH MUSTAR**

*National Institute for Entrepreneurship (INSKEN)*

"I hope MITI will always be among the best or among the top 5 Ministries, and to open up more opportunities for the differently-abled people."

**MELISSA MOKHTAR**

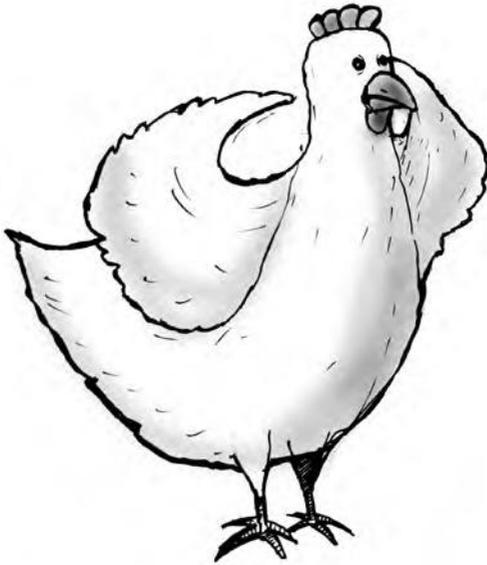
*Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation*

"I hope for MITI to continue to make a difference and excel as a team."

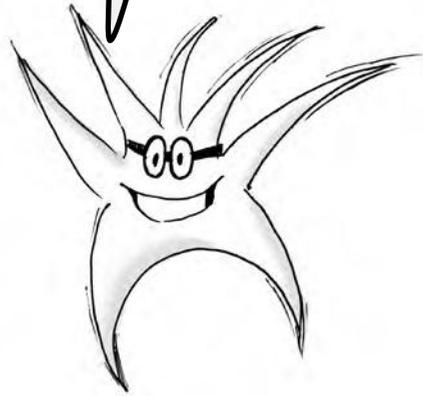
**FARY AKMAL OSMAN**

*MITI Bangkok*

Ahhh. I've found  
my head at last. Where  
do I go from here?



Be a spark ...  
and get a fire  
going.



# CONCLUSION

4

CHALLENGES

THE  
8

STEPS

Go Do  
It Lah

**B**

BUILD  
BONDS

Care to Dare Yourself

Dare to Care Together

No ...  
Cannot  
Be Done

**A**

ACT

Commit and Get Going Yourself

Travel Far and Take Off Together

Headless  
Chicken

**R**

REFLECT

Know Yourself

Retreat to Advance Together

Ya ...  
OK Lah

**E**

ENGAGE

Be A Bit Bold Yourself

Be A Lot Bolder Together

## C O N C L U S I O N

*“The ultimate measure of a person is not where he/she stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he/she stands at times of challenge and controversy.”*

**Martin Luther King, Jr.**

**W**e have attempted to capture many stories, lessons learnt and tips in this book. But the journey of leadership at MITI has just begun.

That’s because work at MITI has grown exponentially complex. In a given week, an officer might find herself negotiating with trade experts in Europe and fielding questions in a *kopitiam* session with local entrepreneurs in Pahang. MITI officers are expected to understand the latest policy, legal and technological changes in a specific sector, as well as grasp the historic and socio-economic factors that influence those changes.

In terms of attitude, MITI officers are expected to be confident *and* humble. They must possess an inner compass that guides them through ambiguous situations, *and* they should be amazingly open to change in a room of closed minds. MITI officers should be visionary *and* practical. They should be bold *and* prudent in times of crisis and controversy. Ideally, they should speak three foreign languages and three local dialects so that they can connect with first ladies and the tea lady. We want supermen and superwomen at MITI.

Okay, we’re exaggerating. But not too much.

The truth is that as life becomes ever more complex, the four leadership challenges outlined at the beginning of this book will not go away:

- **Challenge #1: Top-down leadership.** Bosses who say, “Go do it lah”
- **Challenge #2: Culture of compliance.** Subordinates who say, “Ya ... OK lah”
- **Challenge #3: Perpetual busyness.** People who run around like “headless chickens”
- **Challenge #4: Negative mindset.** People who say “No ... cannot be done”

To overcome these challenges, we need leaders who embrace the art and heart of going the extra mile. Doing work that is ‘good enough’ is no longer good enough. Leaders must strive to build meaningful connections with people, add value to their lives, and achieve breakthroughs together. Such people

**We need leaders who embrace the art and heart of going the extra mile.**

can inspire and motivate others to go that extra mile with them. It’s tough work. But it’s also fruitful and fulfilling.

In less than two years, the two BLC groups, comprising only a dozen people per group, have sparked off the following initiatives as they discussed how to create a better workplace at MITI:

- Designed flexible work arrangements that have offered hundreds of MITI staff more opportunities to juggle work and family responsibilities
- Set up a committee to evaluate how major events among MITI agencies are selected and implemented
- Reviewed the process for evaluating officers’ quarterly and annual performance appraisals, including postings for overseas assignments

- Hired several staff with physical disabilities and designed jobs around their skills and abilities so they can contribute to substantive work at MITI
- Organised and facilitated MITI management retreats in 2012 and 2013, which sparked off multiple initiatives and kicked off a strategic and activity planning process for outcome-based budgeting
- Organised and facilitated a retreat for middle managers, which led to the drafting of a handbook that outlines the attitudes, skills and knowledge of middle managers – so that more experienced managers can use the handbook to coach new managers
- And we have also written a book – this one – that records the stories and lessons learnt on the journey.

These are the tangible outcomes of Barefoot Leadership Circles (BLC). We have achieved a lot. But there is still much, much more we have left undone. There are promises given, and project plans made, that have yet to be carried out. There are systemic, organisational and even personal issues we need to address in order to tackle the leadership gap facing MITI in the coming years. We are still far from home.

**We've achieved a lot. But there is still much, much more we have left undone.**

The last three lines of Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," express how we feel:

But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

## CONCLUSION

The most important and powerful lessons we have learnt on this journey are the unseen ones. We have seen some people achieve personal breakthroughs because they have done the following:

- Persist in doing small things in new ways to address big challenges
- Realise that they are learning, leading and growing the most when they tackle work-related challenges
- Admit that they have made mistakes, choose to learn from failure, and respond by changing themselves rather than blaming others
- Build relationships of trust among colleagues from other divisions
- Forge genuine friendships and informal partnerships
- Cheer, support and encourage others by playing the role of a servant rather than a leader
- Reflect on their actions, and act on their reflections.

The two co-authors of this book, Angelina and Aedreena, have experienced all the above, especially the final point on action and reflection. For one year, they committed to attend the fortnightly sessions held during normal working hours. They spent dozens of hours in project work. They also spent more than 100 hours to write and rewrite the chapters for this book – in *addition* to their day jobs. They volunteered to go that extra mile. But the most important thing they did was that they also took time to reflect on their experiences. The capacity for reflection helped them grow the most.

For example, Angelina wrote the following excerpt in her journal as she reflected on her 11-month journey through BLC 2.0:

You cannot diligently attend the sessions without allowing your true self to surface at some point. Once your true self comes

out (e.g. irritability, impatience, sarcasm, worry), you get true reactions from your colleagues who may not agree or tolerate what you do. That's when you have to decide on how to react. You can run away or deny your behaviour. Or you can choose to reflect on your reactions. Once the reflection starts, change can happen.

Essentially, leadership is at the very core (for me at least) getting to know yourself and managing yourself FIRST and then reaching out to people. Managing oneself here does not mean 'I take care of my needs.' Rather it means 'I will admit my flaws and be truthful in seeing myself the way others see me. I also choose to correct, adjust and change myself.'

**A little gesture of appreciation, acknowledgement and kindness really makes a huge difference.**

My perspectives are now different after BLC. And that has made me feel more like a leader. I now see things that I never saw before. I now realise that a little gesture of appreciation, acknowledgement and kindness really makes a huge difference. And I make deliberate attempts to see better things in people. When I think something is not right about someone, I deliberately recall something good

about that person that impressed me previously. Everyday, if there are events that disturb me or concern me, I will go home and reflect, and ask why this happened. I will pray about it, and learn how I can improve, with God's help. No one is perfect, no one is always right, and that includes me! So I can always do something better.

## CONCLUSION

Likewise, Aedreena extracted the following insights from the yellow journal that she scribbled during BLC 2.0 sessions:

A great leader manages power to benefit others. She's able to unleash other people's strengths. A great leader's small but bold contributions can have a big impact on others and make a lot of people happy – and this in turn can cause a chain reaction throughout the organisation.

On that count, I have to admit that I have fallen short. I wasn't able to build bonds as effectively as I would have wished. Nevertheless I was able to draw closer towards one person because the both of us had the shared belief that our project could be something that we could leave behind, and be proud of one day.

BLC is not about learning the usual leadership skills. It is about discovering your own talents and skills, and seeing how to put these to use in the workplace. For example, I have always seen myself as a private person, and someone who works best in the background. But when we hit a low point in our project, I was compelled to enlist one or two people who were willing to join me, even though I was convinced I had no pulling factor. And it worked. This is something I will keep on doing. BLC has taught me to be bold, even in saying "No" to people. Instead I will say "Yes" to: setting specific goals from the beginning, visualising the outcome, giving my best, and staying focused on the objectives that I have set before me.

Aedreena and Angelina, along with other BLC 2.0 members, learnt firsthand about the challenges and opportunities on how to lead and leverage on the strength of others when they have little power, position or authority.

So how do we lead without power? And how do we lead ourselves in such a way that highly capable individuals are willing to follow us – even when they don't have to?

1. *We must lead changed lives.* People will only follow us out of their free will when they sense that we are genuinely trying to change our own behaviours and attitudes. Change is never static. Our followers want to see that we are constantly learning and growing. “BLC was the first time in all my years at MITI where I saw experienced and senior leaders sitting around and speaking so candidly – like a family. We were transforming ourselves,” said Wong Seng Foo, a senior director.
2. *We focus on delivering tangible results.* Outstanding people don’t just want to talk. They want to get things done. And if they see that we are effective in overcoming obstacles and generating momentum, they will want to join us. J. Jayasiri, a senior director, was initially skeptical about BLC but his perspective changed when he understood that BLC was not about training. “I realised that we were here together to tackle substantive issues that affect the most people at MITI,” he said.
3. *We always seek to serve the best interests of others.* People will seek our best interests only when they sense that we are genuinely interested in serving *their* best interests. “Those who lasted the long haul at BLC were the ones who always wanted to contribute,” observed Rebecca. Leaders are first and foremost servants. Leaders are servants who lead. Anyone of us can seek to serve.

And that is how we become sparks. There are times when people around us act in cold or hostile ways towards each other. There are times when people lack courage, waver in their convictions, and run around like headless chickens. There are times when we feel lost in the woods, and we long for someone to light a fire in the darkness. In times like these we remind ourselves: it only takes a spark to get a fire going. And we can all be that spark.

# INTERVIEW WITH **CHE NAZLI JAAPAR** DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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**C**he Nazli Jaapar has an office that befits her position as Head of Human Resource Management at MITI. The office space is like a cross between an English village and a traditional *kampung*. One half of the room is full of mementoes from UK hotels as well as photographs of the *Istana* where she used to work. On the other half of the room, she transformed an odd L-shaped space into a lovely nook with a small round table where visitors are offered cookies and coffee brewed fresh by her. One of the mugs had these words: “As you get older three things happen. The first is your memory goes ... and I can’t remember the other two.”

**Q: What a remarkable room you have! It’s like a home within an office....**

A: My room is a secure base for people. If people want to cry, or get stressed, I will listen. I have a lot of secrets here around this round table. Their secrets become mine.

**Q: What was your first memorable experience at MITI?**

A: When I first joined MITI in January 2011, I was stuck in limbo on the 11th floor, the library, for one month. I was waiting for my placement, but the HR Director explained that KSU (Secretary General) was overseas. It was so frustrating. But finally, when a group of us were given a courtesy visit to see the KSU, that was really memorable. We shook hands. Although we’d not met in years, she remembered me. “I know you. We were together in India,” she said. KSU was then the lead negotiator for ASEAN-India

FTA, while I was a representative from Ministry of Finance (MOF). Everyone else in the room had to be introduced to KSU but there was no need for me to be introduced. I liked that feeling!

**Q: What did it feel like to be new to MITI?**

A: I was puzzled by some people who seemed so detached. They communicated by email only. There were no face-to-face meetings; that really threw me off. Subsequently I told myself, “If I don’t like to be treated this way, I don’t want others to experience this.”

“At BLC, I began to see that when you lack the human touch, you cannot become an effective leader. Building bonds requires passion. It’s also a skill.”

**Q: Your experience at Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) was quite different, right? There were lots of face-to-face time there.**

A: I’m so thankful for BLC. I personally witnessed how people changed in their character. The changes are not 100 percent, but I could see the change. One big realisation for me is to see that people are human, and that it’s so important to take time to care and build human connections. At BLC, I began to see that when you lack the human touch, you cannot become an effective leader. Building bonds requires passion. It’s also a skill. I could even sense changes in KSU. I find that she takes extra time to listen, and to consider the feelings and personal circumstances of other people.

**Q: Did BLC help you see the importance of building trust?**

A: Yes, I saw the changes in my mindset. Previously, I thought that if I can deliver any task, it's good enough. But now I realise that good enough is not good enough. My focus is to do much more, at a higher level of excellence. Now, when I'm entrusted with a project, I don't try to do things normally. I think to myself: to which level can I bring this further? It's not about showing off. It's feeling satisfied that I'm doing my best. I'm so lucky that at BLC, I could observe KSU and other leaders, and I could see how they do it.

**Q: What's the biggest challenge of growing people at MITI ?**

A: We have a strategic challenge of engaging Gen Y staff who are thinking of working at MITI. Location has become a huge priority for them. If they live in Putrajaya, they are very concerned about the petrol and toll. So they may turn down a job in MITI for that reason. That leaves us with a pressing challenge: how will we fill the vacancies? And are our people able to survive working at only 80 percent capacity instead of the optimal 100 percent capacity? Is it sustainable for MITI staff to handle more responsibilities? These are difficult questions that require collective thinking at a strategic level as we project MITI's needs over the next five years.

**Q: What's your vision for HR, and for people at MITI?**

A: I would love to see MITI as a place with lots of heart, kindness, bonding, sincerity and love for each other. If you just think of work without these things, you become a heartless person. At the end of the day, your work won't be special. I think of the work we do like a parent who prepares a meal with love. You can taste the flavour and the love in the dish. In the same way, the outcome of the work we do should be bursting with flavour.

# INTERVIEW WITH **ISHAM ISHAK** DIRECTOR OF POLICY AND STRATEGY

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Isham Ishak is the deputy lead negotiator in the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA). Before joining MITI in 1994, he ran a niche business that supplied small boats with portable lifeboats, anti-skid flooring, doors, inflatable dinghies and glass windows. He subsequently studied in University of Nebraska, majoring in international trade and economics. He worked in a bank for eight months. Then he joined MITI and has remained here for 19 years.

**Q: What's your biggest highlight in nearly two decades at MITI?**

A: My biggest highlight is serving three years as special officer for Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz. I learnt so much from her. She was so professional, super organised, and the longest-serving trade minister in the world. I tried to never fail her. As special officer, I was the gateway to Tan Sri Rafidah. People offered me gifts and monetary offers just to ask for favours. Those temptations could solve a lot of problems – pay off credit card mortgages and car loans. But if you take it, you lose your values. The gifts and monetary offers are not blessed; they are unclean to feed my family. So I told the person, “I don't want to see you ever again.”

**Q: What's the Barefood Leadership Circle (BLC) spirit?**

A: It's the spirit of, firstly, promising to do what we said we'd do. Secondly, it's getting out of silos and choosing to work together. And that includes getting all the agencies together to climb Mount Kinabalu as a MITI family. BLC 2.0 is a good thing

because it's focused on developing the next layer of leadership. Hopefully they can impart their experiences to those below.

**Q: At the 2012 MITI management retreat, you volunteered to become the focal point to follow up with five action teams. What were the outcomes one year later?**

A: I'm really glad that we got things done. It was fulfilling to see the outcomes. Thanks to the post-retreat groups, the HR team has implemented flexible working hours for staff and improved the *penilaian prestasi* grading procedure to ensure that the performance appraisals are fairly leveled before being submitted to *Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam* (JPA).

**Q: But not everything was so smooth sailing, was it?**

A: Unfortunately some projects were not implemented. It all boils down to the individual commitment of those who attended the retreat. If they felt forced to do something, they will not do it. Those who are passionate about MITI truly tried to implement the action plans.

**Q: What did you do to ensure there was sufficient follow through?**

A: We did three things. First, we published all the action plans in a booklet to ensure that everyone's accountable. Secondly, I gave progress reports during most of the Management Meetings. And thirdly, most importantly, I personally engaged the team leaders who came from different divisions.

**Q: Why was personal engagement so important?**

A: It was difficult. The team leaders were more senior in rank and age. So I had to use a highly personal approach. I learnt that from the 'Great Workplace Tools' (that was produced for the retreat). I started all the conversations by building bonds on a personal level. I inquired about their families. Also, rather than telling them

what they should be doing, I engaged them differently. I'd ask a team leader, "I'm worried about this project. What's your advice?" I didn't force things on them. I enlisted them as a partner to work together. It was fun discovering different ways to engage people in different ways.

**Q: If you had one minute to give a pep talk to middle managers, what would you say?**

A: I'd ask them whether they come to MITI because they have to, or because they want to. The biggest leadership challenge lies in creating an environment where people want to come to MITI, and feel satisfied about the work they do. With this attitude you can overcome any crisis or flash points. You won't run away from problems. We need a group of people who want to come together to face crises together.

**Q: Can you try to describe a MITI spirit that might make this ministry different from other ministries?**

A: I try to treat the ministry as a company. We are engaged with the business people. We have been performing well in the past because we work like a company. We work longer hours. We understand how precious time and money are to the business community. When our stakeholders are happy, they perform well. When they perform well, their productivity and exports increase. At MITI, we are helping to generate revenue for the country.

**Q: What kind of people do we need to build a more dynamic MITI?**

A: They must have energy and be forward looking. We must have people who are knowledgeable about the industry – the facts, trends, the R&D – maybe even more so than the private sector. Only then can we develop policies that are good for that industry. In the past, when we do a new policy, we only consult the industry and implement it. But now things are different; the civil society also wants to have a hand in the development of policies and decisions.

## INTERVIEW WITH **DATO' NIK RAHMAT NIK TAIB** **DEPUTY SECRETARY GENERAL (INDUSTRY)**

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**D**ato' Nik Rahmat Nik Taib joined MITI in 1983. In 1989, he was transferred to the Ministry of Finance for five years, and the Economic Planning Unit for another five years, before he returned to MITI in 2000. We spoke in his sunlit office where he commutes from his home in Rawang. He wore a purple tie and a grey shirt. A business suit hung on a coat rack. Our conversation was conducted at a coffee table with a copy of *Utusan Malaysia* and the New Straits Times.

**Q: What was your first memorable experience at MITI?**

A: One month after I arrived at MITI in 1983, I was posted to the Malaysian Export Trade Centre (now MATRADE) to promote exports. We were given heavy responsibilities. When I was just 23, I was sent to Singapore to represent Malaysia in a handicraft industry meeting participated by senior ASEAN counterparts. My only experience of handicrafts was being born in Kelantan; at least I knew something about the batik and silversmith industry. So I studied the files, got guidance from the previous assistant director, and learnt the profile of the handicraft industry. I was surprised by how I found ways to manage the challenge.

**Q: What do you most appreciate about working at MITI?**

A: I love MITI work. I value the friends. When I was at the Ministry of Finance, we were working in silos then. One day, while I was back in my *kampung* for Hari Raya, I saw a car with a Ministry of Finance (MOF) sticker parked at the mosque. "Where do you

work?" I asked the man. I learnt that he worked on the 7th floor while I was on the 10th floor. We never met in all the three years we were there. Now the officer has become my friend and we meet almost every week in meetings that I chair in MIDA. The officer is still working with MOF.

At MITI, I knew almost everybody. We interacted very frequently. One big highlight is working with my former boss Dato' Kalsom, who conducted prep meetings for an annual dialogue between the MITI Minister with trade and industry associations. The

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then-minister, Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, was the chairman. Preparations for the dialogue was long and tedious. First, we invited the 100-plus associations to submit memoranda which came with so many issues and proposals. We had to prepare a matrix by association and by issue to brief the Minister so she could respond to the associations. For me, the preparation process was challenging.

I enjoyed getting feedback from other senior officers on the work I did. I liked the challenge of writing a simple and concise paper from all that complexity. That process also enabled all of us to know the work from other divisions, and to understand the bigger picture of the industry and the world economy.

**Q: What's your biggest challenge as a senior leader at MITI?**

A: If you have a lot of things to do, you just handle what comes. So there's not much time to sit down and think about a better way to do things, how to improve the procedures, and to plan for the future. Leaders should think of how to always improve the delivery

system. We must think ahead so we are more innovative in dealing with the public. Otherwise the organisation becomes static with no future improvement.

**Q: If I were to replace you as Deputy Secretary General, what would I need to know to be an effective leader at MITI?**

A: You need the experience of working in MITI long enough to know every aspect of the trade and industry. People say that you can learn new things in just a few months. Well, maybe some people can do it. But to sit in this position, you'll need to know what the others are doing when you supervise them. Externally, you'll need to strike a balance between the upstream and downstream sectors to make sure that both sides of the industry can grow.

**Q: What are the most important attributes for managers to become leaders at MITI?**

A: The biggest thing is integrity. In this division, we have Approved Permit (AP), application for foreign workers, and *Saham*. So there's potential for people to abuse their power to get some money. You need integrity from top to bottom.

INTERVIEW WITH  
**MOHD RIDZAL SHERIFF**  
**DEPUTY SECRETARY GENERAL (TRADE)**

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**S**ince Mohd Ridzal Sheriff joined MITI in 2012, he has been on the go. “I’ve not been home for weeks,” he said, as we stepped into his office together. He had just returned from a long trip in Australia. In a few days’ time, he was off to China.

The globe-trotting pace was nothing new to him. Prior to joining MITI, Ridzal was head of global transaction banking at Deutsche Bank Malaysia. He also led business development, marketing and communications at Bursa Malaysia. We sat down to talk about his transition into MITI, his views on the civil service and his hopes for MITI.

**Q: Since joining MITI in 2012, what have you most appreciated of your time here?**

A: There are so many dedicated people here who are trying to make this country a better place. This is surprising and refreshing, especially for someone like me, who comes from a world where everything is driven by incentives.

**Q: What’s been challenging?**

A: I joined the civil service for the same idealistic reasons of making a difference. Since coming, I’ve seen that MITI has drawn a lot of fire from a lot of people, and sometimes it’s quite hurtful. But you have to accept some level of scrutiny.

**Q: The Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) was kickstarted around the same time that you joined MITI. How do you feel being part of it?**

A: I felt bad I couldn't attend half the meetings we had. For those sessions that I went, the people were very open, and that made me uncomfortable.

**Q: You felt uncomfortable because people were open?**

A: Well, yes, because people were talking about themselves, and their hopes and aspirations. BLC takes you out of the professional comfort zone and blends in the personal aspects of life. It gives me a different level respect for these people other than just being colleagues. These people have done amazing things; if you didn't take the time to listen, you might not have heard about their incredible secrets and personal achievements. What was shared at BLC was an eye-opener.

**Q: You've navigated the challenges of coming into MITI. What are some strategies and tips you'd give to any new officer who wants to hit the ground running, and to thrive in the MITI culture?**

A: I've noticed that there are a few managers who are particularly outstanding. These managers put in the same level of work, effort and standards compared to their fellow managers. But these outstanding managers are then able to communicate and make a convincing case in a very short period of time.

**Q: What do they actually do when they are with you? What behaviours and actions do you see that make them stand out from the rest?**

A: Okay, so an officer may schedule in 15 minutes to talk to me about an issue that they want me to champion or sign off. When that officer is with me, he can explain things to me in a nutshell

with all the salient points in five minutes flat. He knows the subject much better than I do. He acts like my advisor. He takes time to understand where I'm coming from. And then he makes recommendations on what I should do. He makes that call. I may not always agree. But I respect that he makes a stand, and tries to defend it. His goal is to add value by giving good advice. These are the hallmarks of a good officer. Above all, good managers prepare diligently on how they want to spend their time with me. This dynamic works the same for me with my boss, and the same for my boss with their bosses.

**Q: What about the hallmarks of a mediocre officer?**

A: Don't shove 10 pages of paper under my nose and expect me to understand all that data, and a whole list of pros and cons. Don't go round and round and round in reaching your point. People who do that give me the impression that they haven't sat down to think about what it is they want to tell me.

**Q: What's your vision of MITI and how we can prepare for the significant leadership transition in 2017?**

A: I'm just considering whether we can have a trade career path for MITI. All my foreign counterparts are subject matter specialists. They are not many but they are specialists and are very experienced. What worries me is that these talented people will retire in a short period of time. The new talent we have don't stay for very long. If there's this looming gap of leadership by 2017, we need to cultivate subject matter specialists. Currently, we're not short of intelligent and educated people. My hope is to help build a core of dedicated trade people who are trained and experienced in their work.

# INTERVIEW WITH **SHARBANOM ABU BAKAR** **DIRECTOR OF DELIVERY MANAGEMENT OFFICE (DMO)**

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**S**harbanom Abu Bakar spearheads the DMO, an ad hoc unit at MITI aimed at ensuring the delivery of targets and goals for MITI's contribution to the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP).

Sharbanom studied accounting at the Victoria University of Wellington. After several years at Telekom Malaysia, she obtained a MSc. in e-Business Management from University of Warwick, as a Chevening scholar. She was Director of Government Programs at IBM Malaysia before she joined MITI in January 2013. In 2010, Sharbanom participated in the National Key Economic Areas (NKEA) Business Services Lab. This interview was conducted in her office on Level 14. The most striking thing – given how much paperwork and reports there must be to juggle among so many government agencies – is the bare table in her office.

**Q: How did you end up in MITI?**

A: Early last year, I was approached by PEMANDU on the possibility of my helping out with programme management for the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP). I was offered to be assigned to a ministry, and was asked to choose between Ministry of Science Technology and Innovation (MOSTI) or MITI. Since I've been working in ICT for the past two decades, and felt that I'm already very familiar with MOSTI, I opted for MITI.

**Q: In a nutshell, what's DMO?**

A: The Delivery Management Office ensures timely completion of

all ETP projects under MITI. I coordinate and engage with relevant MITI agencies to ensure that MITI KPIs are delivered on time. Some of the MITI KPIs are implemented by other agencies outside MITI, as well as by private companies. So, DMO is responsible for ensuring that these projects are completed on time.

**I was pleasantly surprised, even in my first month in MITI. I found out that the decision-making process is very fast.**

**Q: Hmm. That sounds so ... abstract. What do you do on a daily basis?**

A: On a daily basis, I spend a lot of time facilitating discussions between various agencies, reaching out to various agency leaders, and helping to clear bottle-necks if required. More often than not, it's about managing people's expectations, managing the boundaries, and addressing the areas of overlap between various parties.

**Q: What did you do in your first 100 days at MITI?**

A: During my first three months, I spent a lot of time reading up

on various topics, trying to absorb as much information about the substantive work under MITI. I was also making mistakes.

**Q: What mistakes?**

A: I came to MITI with preconceptions, and some turned out to be misconceptions. For example, in my past dealings with government agencies, I had this view that the decision-making process can get really sloooow. But I was pleasantly surprised, even in my first month in MITI. I found out that the decision-making process

is very fast. It is refreshing to watch KSU taking charge every time. She's always on a roll. She's charging ahead. Snap, snap, snap.

**Q: What tips do you have for me if I want to become an effective manager at MITI?**

A: You've got to get involved in the work itself, roll up your sleeves and get your fingers dirty. And most times, you've got to look beyond the ranks. If it requires engagement with lower level managers, then you just have to repeat the same message all the way to the top. I found that that's part of embracing the protocols and culture in MITI. It may feel slower but you're creating a sense of belonging for yourself as well.

**Q: I'm struck by your insatiable curiosity for learning new things. What are the random questions on your mind as you think about life at MITI? Please rattle off as many questions as you can in one minute....**

A: I'm intrigued by the FTA process. For example, in Bali, during the APEC discussions: how do 21 countries come together to talk about economic pacts that would benefit all when there's a mix of advanced and not-so-advanced countries? What is political economy? Will graphene really replace silicon and ceramics in the E&E industry? Can we really create a hub for MRO in Malaysia when we don't have the skill sets for design and high-value maintenance of aircrafts? Why must we look at things primarily from a dollar potential, but not assess our capacity to go up to that level? How do we link innovation into effective industry development? Do we have the appetite to adopt new technologies if we want to go to a higher level?

**Q: So, that's how your brain works! You're a geek.**

A: I'm a geek. But I've been blessed with the opportunities of being coached by some extraordinary leaders. One of my mentors at

IBM is the Chairman of IBM Europe. One of the assignments he gave me was to watch all 156 episodes of *The West Wing*, a serial political drama television series, and prepare a brief on the lessons learnt. I grudgingly did so but eventually got hooked! Some of the best lessons in life need not be work-related at all.

**Q: Do you switch off your brain?**

A: I watch late-night comedy shows snippets on YouTube to wind down. As a mother of four, I can't afford to sit through 40 minutes of these shows. Sometimes I also log on to [www.9gag.com](http://www.9gag.com) for some laughs.

**Q: Then you go to bed.**

A: No. Then I go back to catching up on my reading. And then I go to bed.

## INTERVIEW WITH **WAN SURAYA WAN MOHD. RADZI** MINISTER COUNSELLOR (ECONOMICS), SINGAPORE

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**W**an Suraya has a refreshingly low-key office located in prime real estate in Singapore. In person, she has that rare ability to listen intently without any interruption and with great empathy; at the same time she is also able to talk comprehensively about any subject matter. Over a bowl of *sup tulang* at Kintamani restaurant, she shared about her experiences engaging with Malaysian CEOs living on the island republic, meeting her Singaporean trade counterparts, and what it is like to be asked to speak off the cuff to diplomats and business delegates from around the world. (Note: As of March 2014, Wan Suraya was posted back to MITI HQ.)

### **Q: What are some turning points in your career at MITI?**

A: The international dimension of work has really changed me. Doing international trade, being involved in FTAs, and being posted to Brussels and Singapore were game changers for me. I really had to step up. Back then, there weren't so many young officers being sent out, nor were there so many negotiators. So these challenges and experiences changed my perspective and personality.

My second turning point came when my son was diagnosed with autism. That changed my sense of what I want for my life, my work and family. My husband and I realised we needed to spend more time together as a family and go for the things that really mattered. No more late night *teh tarik*. I have always loved my work, but now there was a focus to it. I don't stay late at the office, if I can help it. I try to go back home and have dinner with the fam-

ily. Only then do I open my computer to finish up my day's work. My son has helped me to sharpen my focus on time management, especially when we have finite resources of time. So before I send an email, I ask myself, "How do I maximise resources when I write the email?" This is a small example of how I try to do my work to the best of my ability.

**Q: What's your perspective of MITI?**

A: No other ministry is like MITI. We cover almost the whole spectrum of the economy. It is the go-to ministry with regards to economic policies. You need a centre that can look at all the disparate elements and provide an overall perspective. We are not only planning but we also get involved in implementation and monitoring. We resolve problems. We are tapping on the pulse of the private sector.

The economy will always evolve. So MITI's role will be to chart the progress of the economy. You need to engage with policy makers from other countries, and you need to make sure Malaysia is relevant in years ahead. Internally, it's important to be involved in the development, human capacity, and learning part of MITI.

**Q: What will bring MITI greatest value?**

A: We really need to get the best people in the ministry. For example, we need more people with legal background who can deal with legal agreements, and more people with real knowledge of the issues. We must have dedicated resources within the ministry. People must also be able to communicate and connect with stakeholders.

**Q: Tell me about the most important attitudes, skills and knowledge required for middle managers to thrive at MITI.**

A: In terms of attitude: don't give up. Always ask questions. Sometimes the environment might not be so nurturing but there

are other bosses you can talk to. New issues and crises will come up. You are not alone. There are others in the same boat. If you give up, you will become critical and cynical. So if you can't solve it, sleep on it. Things will get clearer in the morning.

In terms of knowledge, you must know your brief in and out. There are always new things to learn. Keep up with the news. Read the papers every morning. You don't want to be the odd one out. Know your subject matter in and out.

In terms of skill, do a lot of networking. Civil servants can be afraid to speak something out of turn. Wherever you are, you have to be prepared for what you can or cannot say. You must think on your feet, and be able to carry on a conversation. Language proficiency is critical.

Another skill is to listen. Listen not to just what he or she is saying, but also to what he or she is not telling you. *Bukan saja apa yang tersurat tapi apa yang tersirat.*

Also develop your powers of observation. When you go to a room, look at who is in the room. What are they talking about? At a restaurant, I might see a minister talking to somebody. I can check out who that person is.

**Q: What is the long term impact of Barefoot Leadership Circle (BLC) for you?**

A: BLC played a big role in improving communication, especially the retreat in Melaka. Although there were naysayers, we showed that it was not a typical retreat. We got things done.



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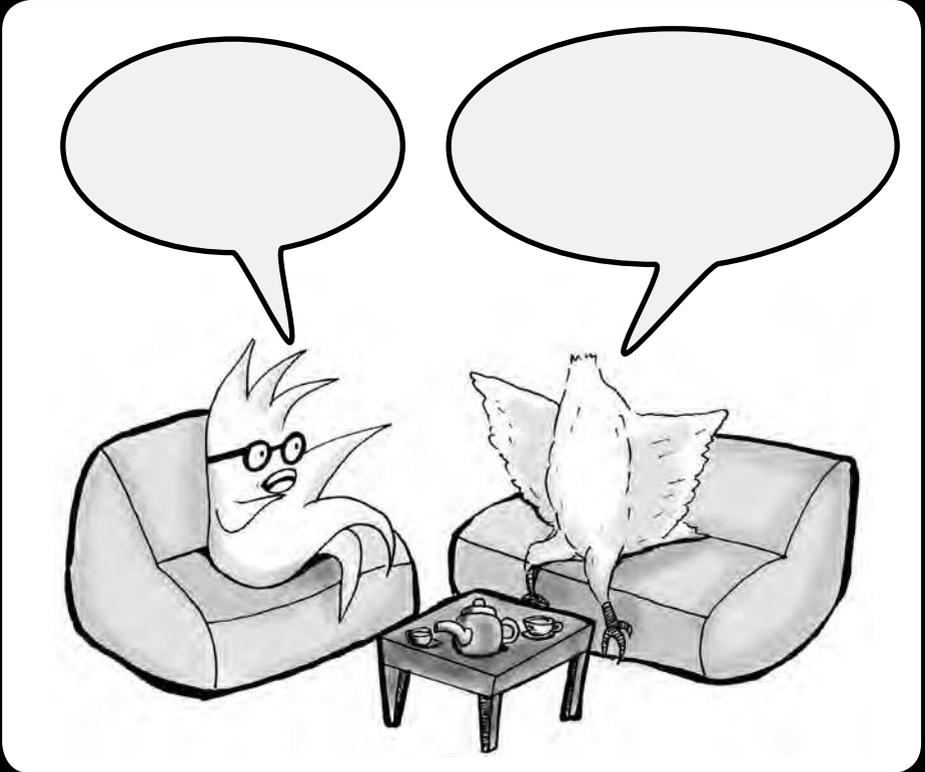
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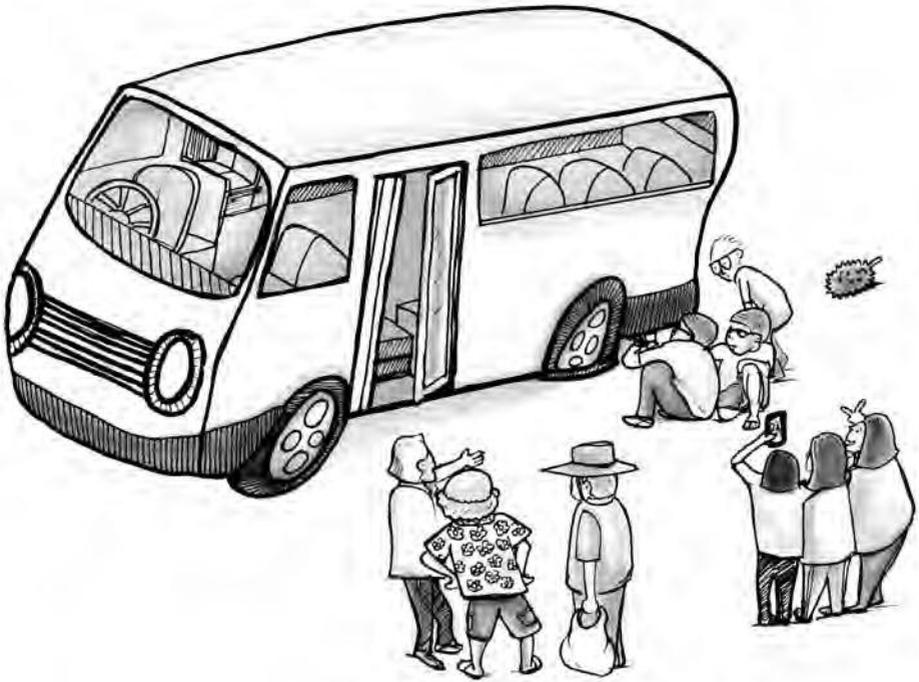


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