

Opening Address by Head of Civil Service, Mr Peter Ong at the PS21 ExCEL Convention Forum & Award Ceremony on Thursday, 15 November 2012, 10.00am at Gardens by the Bay, Flower Dome, Jubilee Hall

Friends and colleagues, a very good morning to all of you and welcome to the PS21 ExCEL Convention.

Every year, I look forward to attending the PS21 ExCEL Convention. This is because the ExCEL Convention is an excellent opportunity to witness firsthand the enthusiasm, energy, and most importantly, the passion of our public officers as they showcase their exciting and innovative projects. These projects have improved the way we work, and also made a difference to the citizens and customers we serve. The projects demonstrate that the spirit of PS21 ExCEL is alive and well in the Public Service.

The Spirit of PS21 ExCEL

Some of you may ask, what exactly is the spirit behind ExCEL? To me, ExCEL is about empowering our public officers, regardless of rank, designation or job scope. It is about giving everyone a voice, letting their ideas be heard and in so doing, enabling all to create more value for the public and for Singapore. ExCEL is about officers asking questions such as, “Is there a better way of doing what we do?”, and “Does doing this differently bring about greater effectiveness?” In essence, the spirit of ExCEL is to ensure that every officer’s ideas matter and to enable them to be motivated and empowered to do something about it.

Together, ExCELLing with a Heart

The theme for this year’s convention is, “**Together, ExCELLing with a Heart**”. Let me elaborate on why this theme is particularly relevant in today’s context.

ExCELLing Together

Our Public Service is designed to be efficient. We do this by breaking down complex work into manageable functions and tasks. Over time, we become more efficient at what we set out to do. But striving for efficiency alone is no longer sufficient to deal with the many, multi-faceted problems we face today. Increasingly, we need new inter-agency, inter-disciplinary approaches that harness the capabilities across public agencies to come up with more effective solutions.

This year’s *Innovation Spotlight*, which recognises big quantum-leap innovation in the Public Service, aptly demonstrates how a closer partnership between the Public Service and our citizens can lead to great results.

HDB's *My Waterway@Punggol* project has been selected as this year's *Innovation Spotlight*. The project is also a Gold winner for the *Best PS21 Project*. The Punggol Waterway project could have been a simple, straight-forward project to connect two reservoirs with a drain to facilitate water transfer between the reservoirs. But HDB saw an opportunity to redefine this need, and in the process create a distinctive feature for Punggol. Instead of the usual approach of an agency embarking on a drainage project, HDB embarked on a process of co-creating solutions with the residents of Punggol. An exhibition was held to gather feedback and ideas about social communal spaces, recreational facilities and ways to preserve the history and heritage of Punggol. Members of the public were also engaged through various outreach programmes, instilling a strong sense of ownership of the Waterway.

On a personal note, even though I do not live near Punggol, I have been there on countless weekends to cycle and walk with my family and friends. I feel proud that our agencies have conceptualised and implemented such an excellent project for Singaporeans to enjoy.

The project also showcased the power of collaboration among public agencies, which included the Land Transport Authority, the National Heritage Board and the National Parks Board. One innovative solution born out of this collaboration was the "Heartwave" wall. This is a 280 metre long diaphragm wall used to protect existing rail transit structures, which were transformed into an interesting feature wall with vertical greenery, water features and educational heritage panels. Through the groundbreaking Punggol waterway project, our colleagues across different agencies have shown that by working together, they co-produced a much better outcome.

For those of you who feel you may never be able to participate in such a big project like the Punggol Waterway, I want to assure you that the ExCEL spirit is not confined to big projects only. Today, we also celebrate smaller projects like Captain Spencer Giam's "Breathable Combat Boots", which is a simple but effective redesign of our soldiers' combat boots to enhance water expulsion and improve breathability. We also have Nanyang Polytechnic's Chin Yeow Hong, who invented the "EasyRest", a quick-release, detachable, foldable seat which can be attached to any walking aid. Even though they are smaller projects and impact fewer people, we want to acknowledge your good work in thinking out of the box to make the world a little better.

ExCELLing with a Heart

Excelling with a heart speaks to how we must always keep our citizens in mind in everything that we do as we go about doing our work efficiently and effectively. It is also about being empathetic to the unique circumstances that each citizen faces. It requires us to understand our citizens better and be able to see things from their perspectives.

The Public Service Division's project on "Resolving Human-Animal Conflicts" is a good example of an innovative approach that sought to tackle issues from this customer-centric perspective.

Through interviews with stakeholders and members of the public, the project team found that resolving the issue of human-animal conflicts is not merely one of removing a nuisance. The team

recognised that in many instances, the public experiences anxiety and fear for their personal and family safety. Having to navigate the bureaucracy to find the “right door” to remove this perceived threat only fuels their anxiety and frustration more.

Taking a more customer-centric approach, the team came up with an innovative solution, which was to set up a Centre for Animal Welfare and Control. This centre would serve as a “first responder” for animal-related cases with no clear-cut domain owners. The centre would operate on a “do it first” approach to ensure that cases are addressed and resolved in a timely manner. If there are any emerging policy issues, these would be resolved among the agencies subsequently. By reducing the anxiety and complexity for the public, this centre will help to reduce their frustration and inconvenience of reporting an animal-related nuisance.

I am happy to note that the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) has since set up an Animal Response Centre, to bring this idea to fruition. In another instance of this spirit of “First Responder”, the National Environmental Agency has spearheaded the setting up of the Department of Public Cleaning to ensure that complaints about litter are quickly dealt with by Government. These organisational innovations are again a reflection of the ExCEL spirit at work.

Conclusion

There are many success stories to celebrate today. Each story is an inspiration, an innovation, a dare-to-dream spirit, an outreach across agencies. Collectively, they define what we want to preserve and continue to build within the Public Service – the spirit of ExCEL.

We have in the audience today more than a hundred PS21 award recipients and nominees from across the Public Service. I would like to commend you for sharing your ExCEL story and I congratulate all of you for your remarkable achievements.

As we listen to the presentations later in the awards ceremony, let us as activists and leaders, continue to think of different ways to support our staff in this journey of seeking continuous change and improvement. Let us continue to produce solutions and innovations which increase our productivity and deliver better value to Singaporeans.

Thank you.