

**SPEECH BY MR TEO CHEE HEAN, MINISTER FOR DEFENCE
AND MINISTER IN CHARGE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE,
AT THE PS21 STAR SERVICE AWARD CEREMONY 2008
ON 14 MAY 2008 AT HDB HUB AUDITORIUM AT 6.15 PM**

Distinguished Guests,

Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good evening.

Inaugural Public Service Week

1 Today marks the start of the inaugural Public Service Week. We decided to set aside a week to remind each and every public officer that whilst the work you do may be different, you all belong to the same Public Service: the same Public Service that many Singaporeans will agree is worthy of Singapore; the same Public Service that is widely admired by many overseas. The Public Service Week is a time to recognize and celebrate your achievements, and to remind you why you should take pride in being a member of the Singapore Public Service.

2 Here, I would like to take this opportunity to share some good news with you. We have just been informed that HDB has won the most prestigious international recognition for excellence in public service – the United Nations Public Service Award. Its “Home Ownership Programme” has been recognized by the UN as an excellent example of transparency, accountability and responsiveness in the public service. HDB will be receiving the award in New York on the UN’s Public Service Day in June!

3 May I invite you to join me in congratulating HDB and all their staff for this achievement. We are very proud of you. This is indeed excellent news, even as we celebrate our first Public Service Week.

4 Our Public Service Week is also a time for us to reaffirm our commitment to serve Singapore and Singaporeans. Singapore’s progress is a testament of the good work of the Singapore Public Service. Although we have 110,000 public officers spread over 15 ministries, nine organs of state and more than 60 Statutory Boards, we share a common identity and purpose. Each agency plays a unique role and contributes in a different way. But collectively we

all serve a common purpose – the Public Service exists to serve the public and to advance Singapore’s interests.

5 The Public Service Week is also a time for reflection. Although we have done well, we have to continue to improve, so that Singapore can remain in the “premier league” of nations. A strong and competent public service is essential for Singapore to continue to thrive and grow.

Improving Service Delivery

6 I made the point in my speech at last year’s Star Service Award ceremony that the public expects government services to be connected. The Public Service has instituted various one-stop mechanisms to help the public access its services. You would have heard of the Online Business Licensing Service, which allows you to submit license applications to relevant government agencies through one portal. There is also the Online Reporting Centre, which allows you to lodge reports, for example on environment, housing or immigration-related issues, even when you do not know which agency looks after what.

7 We must be willing to explore new ways to improve service delivery and make public services more easily accessible to the public. Sometimes, these new ways succeed; sometimes they don't. We must therefore also be prepared to learn from mistakes along the way. If all public officers keep an open mind, adopt an attitude of "how can I help", and think and act as one connected and networked government, I am sure we will uncover many more new ways to serve the public better. I urge each and every one of you to study how people interact and transact with the government, and see how best we as a government can better provide integrated and seamless services to the public.

Building a Common Understanding

8 The Public Service is different from the private sector in that we cannot choose our customers. Likewise, our customers make use of public services not so much out of choice. For this unique relationship to work effectively, there must be a common understanding between the two parties. The Public Service must strive to deliver its services with excellence. In return, customers must understand that the Public Service has to balance serving the

needs of individual customers against the collective needs of the public.

9 Instances of service that do not come up to the expectations of our customers, or public officers who are rude do arise – more often than we would like them to. Unfortunately, there have also been cases of overly demanding customers, who even become abusive if they do not get what they want. We should try our best to explain our position and offer alternatives, firmly but politely. But customers also need to understand that we won't be able to accede to every request. They also need to know that it is wrong for them to intimidate or threaten a public officer.

10 While the Public Service would like to delight every person it serves, we do face resource constraints. The cost-effectiveness of, say, extending the hours of a particular service to 24/7 has to be considered. At the end of the day, the Public Service has to provide the greatest amount of good, to the greatest number of people, with the best service level possible, within the resources that it has available.

11 Today, there is a healthy level of trust and understanding between members of the public and the Public Service. The Public Service is seen as honest, and generally efficient and fair, if sometimes somewhat rigid in applying its rules. But we should not take this healthy level of trust and understanding for granted. We must continue to build on this relationship and common understanding.

12 Last year, I asked the PS21 Office to look into recognizing members of the public who have been particularly helpful and understanding as customers. Today, some of our public agencies are doing so in their own ways. The National Library Board (NLB) has a Customer Appreciation Day, during which NLB also hopes to find and reward role model customers. The Public Utilities Board (PUB) has a Friends of Water programme to recognize customers who have contributed towards raising awareness about water. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) sends “Thank You” cards to customers who provide useful feedback or are patient and understanding. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) recognizes members of the public who give suggestions that lead to significant improvements.

13 I asked these agencies for good examples of such customers. And we do have such customers. One spreads awareness of water conservation passionately and is always on the lookout for leaking pipes and taps, and informs the relevant authorities accordingly. There was also a customer who voluntarily helped strangers to use the e-kiosk machine at one of our libraries. I have not named these two customers this year, but they will know who they are. I mention them to motivate them and our other customers. I hope that over the year we will have more such helpful and understanding customers, so that by next year, we will be able to recognize, in person, some of those who have been most helpful and understanding.

14 The different approaches to recognize helpful members of the public underscore the diversity within the Public Service. Such initiatives encourage mutual regard, courtesy and appreciation by both our public officers and their customers. I hope this will continue. Ultimately, this will strengthen and deepen the relationship between the Public Service and members of the public, and will be a step towards our becoming a more gracious society.

Public Policy Challenge

15 The Public Service is a unique career which allows one to make a difference to Singapore. What you do impacts on society, and helps to build a better home for us all. It is therefore crucial for us to continue to attract a stream of capable and committed people to join the Service.

16 I am happy to note that the Public Service Division is organizing a Public Policy Challenge for undergraduates to raise awareness of policy development and implementation in the Public Service. Modeled after business case competitions, participants will discuss policy issues, consider tradeoffs, identify implementation constraints, and think about how to communicate public policy. I hope this will help our undergraduate students better appreciate public policy development and implementation and perhaps persuade them that the Public Service is a very viable and attractive career proposition for them. The Public Service will also get a few ideas for policy development, and pointers on how to present policies more effectively.

Celebrating the Winners

17 This evening, we recognize 81 outstanding public officers who have all played important roles which had a direct impact on the lives of many people.

They are representative of the individual faces who are vital to our delivery of public services. Each one of them has a unique story to tell. Let me recount to you some of these stories.

18 At the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), officers at the foreign worker levy counters often face customers who are upset, because most people would rather not pay a levy. Ms Lisdiawaty Mansjur, who has been with MOM for 9 years, serves at such a counter.

At work, some customers would lash out at her. But she is always able to respond patiently and fairly, and even win over some of these customers.

19 Ms Linda Lee from the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority (ACRA) also has to face frustrated and sometimes angry customers. After 28 years of service, Linda is still able to show care and concern for her customers. Sometimes, she offers them a cup of coffee. Some customers are touched by her gesture. Linda shows us how simple gestures can go a long way.

20 Mr Ramli Osman, a Senior Technical Officer with 39 years of service at the Public Utilities Board (PUB), puts the convenience of his customers foremost on his mind. On many occasions, Osman has gone beyond the call of duty to schedule appointments at night or on weekends with those customers who were unable to meet him during office hours.

21 Beyond Singapore, Mr Ho Cheng Heng, First Secretary with our Embassy in Berlin, often renders assistance to overseas Singaporeans. On one occasion, an unusually distressed Singaporean showed up unexpectedly at the Embassy's doorstep to seek help. Cheng Heng worked closely with the Singaporean's family in Singapore, and eventually accompanied him on the flight to bring him home safely.

22 I hope that these stories will inspire all of you when you get back to work tomorrow morning. It is a reminder to us that service excellence is an integral part of our work in the Public Service. It is not something just for our customer service units to achieve. Service excellence requires all of us to play an active part – from policy making to implementation and delivery.

Conclusion

23 For every story we hear tonight, many more stories go untold. Many public officers are working daily, behind the scenes quietly, to improve the future of Singapore and the lives of Singaporeans. I congratulate all the award winners tonight. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to all our unsung heroes. Without your contributions, Singapore would not be where it is today.

24 In conclusion, I hope you will have a wonderful Public Service Week, and a most pleasant evening celebrating our STARS.

Thank you.