

Interview with Khoo Boon Hui

Police Commissioner of Singapore, Atlanta, November 3, 1999

Others in the interview:

Mirimba Giam - Manager working in the Monetary Authority of Singapore

Soh Wai Wah – Assistant Commissioner of the Singapore Police Force

Ang Hak Seng – Superintendent of the Singapore Police Force

COS: Mr. Khoo Boon Hui, what's the role of the police in Singapore?

Khoo Boon Hui: Our mission statement is protecting life and property, and other roles that all police do. The philosophy of how we do it is a form of community policing which we adapted from the Japanese Koban system. We have been doing that since 1983, but we realized about three or four years ago that we needed to change it from community-based to community focused policing in the sense that we are also going to focus our efforts at helping the community solve problems which we have jointly identified with them. That way we also mobilize the community to us as a group and to, "self-help" themselves.

COS: And the role of the police?

Khoo Boon Hui: The role of the police is to facilitate this process.

COS: What would be an example?

Khoo Boon Hui: Little India would be an example. Little India is a place in Singapore where because of tradition, large numbers of foreign labour from the Indian subcontinent go in there to do shopping on their days off. And over a weekend, anyone going there will think they (are) in India. Now that is a problem, because the locals who live nearby get quite upset with the congestion and because some of the workers behave as if they were back in their homeland ...

Ang Hak Seng: By sheer volume of these foreigner workers, many of these foreigner workers are spilling from congregational areas to the roads and the residential areas in Little India. This has contributed to slow traffic flow and there has also been a significant increase in the amount of litter over weekends.

Khoo Boon Hui: So the residents have been complaining that police must do something about this, control them, and all that. And we found that there was little that we could do.

So for many years we've not been able to solve the problem on our own. But we decided to try this route and brought together all the community organizations, the residents' associations. And we got all the government agencies together. And then we started talking. What are the ideas to solve this problem and who can do what? So we found a bus company. And the Urban Redevelopment Authority, we got them to clear some open spaces. So move the visitors away from roads and public walkways to these open spaces. Then we got the residents to volunteer. They became volunteer marshals. Some of them volunteered to be voluntary police officers to help direct pedestrian flow.

And then we tried to move them to other areas nearby. We got the radio station to run variety shows, dancers, to attract them to where we want them to go. Then we opened up an area and got people to start selling food and sundry provisions, so that the people could also move to these other open areas to release the pressure.

Ang Hak Seng: In addition, we also put in public amenities which include public toilets, public telephones through the Environment Ministry and the Singapore Telecoms.

COS: Did that whole process also involve the talking with the Indian workers themselves? And did you involve them in that process somehow?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, yes. We communicated with them of course but through their employers. But we did not talk to them one-on-one.

COS: Why not?

Khoo Boon Hui: Many of them don't speak English in the first place. Their mentality is so very different as many of them are illiterate.

So what's happened now is that regularly I receive letters (from the residents). In the past they were complaints, but now they are telling us what a wonderful job we are doing --

COS: So that would be an example of community policing where you, in collaboration with the community, create a spirit, that allows the community to participate in creating a solution for what they really care about.

Khoo Boon Hui: That's right.

COS: So then the role of the police shifts towards facilitating a dialogue among the various groups of the society, right? Particularly on the local level?

Khoo Boon Hui: That's right. And we use the tools of a learning organization to train them, and to get them to bring up...

COS: What sort of tools are you using? And how do you train your people?

Ang Hak Seng: We are not just training the grassroots organisations. We are actually helping to build capacities within them. These include among others the ability to engage in open discussions, the capability to co-create a shared vision and to bring it into reality. With these capacities, we are adopting more of a facilitative role and grassroots would have the ability to solve problems among themselves. The crux of the issue is really to create the space and a time for dialogues and generative discussions. I think that's critical. We have to create a space and a time.

COS: How do you do that? That's a big challenge — how do you bring that about?

Ang Hak Seng: Well, we help create the space and time in the form of dialogues. We invite relevant and interested parties to a forum, which we help to facilitate. Through these forums, we help the grassroots collectively discover what they want to achieve together. Lastly, we partner the grassroots to implement the plans.

Khoo Boon Hui: So we have facilitators, we go on retreats to impart some skills with them. How to brainstorm in small groups. How to dialogue, how to do team learning ...

COS: That really sounds fascinating. Maybe now would be a good time to jump back in time and look at how all of that started in the first place. Then we can share the story, the journey of all of that. Although we would probably not use that for the interview for the journal, usually when I am doing these conversations I try to understand somebody else's journey, what is their story. You really want to understand the person and see the world through another person's eyes. The best way to do it is to start early on, at the very beginning. Maybe you could take us even further back then when you entered the organization, and tell us where were you born? Where did your family come from? Just share a little bit of that context. Would you feel comfortable with that?

Khoo Boon Hui: Oh, sure. I was born in Singapore. My father was a retired civil servant, my mother, a schoolteacher. I grew up in Singapore in rather comfortable circumstances.

COS: When was that, what decade are we talking about?

Khoo Boon Hui: I was born in 1954. So as a young boy I experienced the social problems that we had in Singapore. There were lots of strikes, there were riots. I remember as a young boy seeing fighting between races, racial fights.

COS: Between whom was the fighting?

World War II: Japanese Occupation, Surviving in the Jungles

Khoo Boon Hui: Many Chinese and Malays. Malays are one of the minority groups. That was in 1964, when we were part of Malaysia. We were not independent yet. In 1965 we became independent. My generation has gone through all these things. And of course, my parents related the time they suffered under the Japanese during the Second World War when Singapore was under Japanese occupation. Many of the families were displaced and they had to move into the jungles in Malaya to survive.

COS: That happened to your parents, as well?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes. There was not enough food in Singapore, you could go to the jungle and cultivate your own food... As a young boy I would be listening to all these stories .

COS: So how long was that? How long was it occupied by the Japanese, for how many years?

Khoo Boon Hui: 1941 to 1945.

COS: So your parents lived for four years out in the jungle?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes. Well, at least my mother did, because she had not met my father yet.

COS: Oh, I see. And those were small communities in the jungle?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, yes. Some of them would be trying to sabotage the Japanese. But these resistance fighters became communists. And when the British came back again, there was this ...

COS: So your parents were participating in the resistance?

Khoo Boon Hui: No. In fact, my father, because he was in the colonial civil service before the war, he was appointed by the Japanese to run certain governmental functions of Singapore.

COS: Oh, I see.

Khoo Boon Hui: He was known as the Controller of the Monopoly. Control of opium which was legal then, tobacco and liquor.

COS: So he had to control that?

Khoo Boon Hui: He continued administering the system that the British had established. So he rationed all these things out during the Japanese occupation. So, I think many of the younger Singaporeans here would probably not have heard these stories, right? You would probably not have experienced the turbulent period of Singapore's history. I'm from a generation, though we had comfortable lives, we knew what life was like before. We grew up to see how Singapore has changed from one where we were under the British colonial masters. Then we went through a time when we were part of Malaysia. And then how we got our independence. And how we started our journey which was wasn't very bright at first, because we were a small country without any resources, we really had to struggle. In 1969, again there were racial riots in Malaysia, and that spilled over to Singapore. I remember my brother who was working in Malaysia had to quickly come back to Singapore because he thought his life was in danger.

COS: I see.

Khoo Boon Hui: I remember how fragile racial relations can be, and how important it is for multicultural Singapore to stay intact. That problems in our neighboring countries can actually affect our own population. People would come down from the north in Malaysia to instigate some of the Chinese secret societies. They'd come down and say, Chinese are being slaughtered in Malaysia, we've got to start killing some Malays. That was in 1969, which made me about 15 years old at that time, so it's still in my consciousness. But after that you can see Singapore taking off with all the investments...

COS: Talking about shared visions, did anybody at that point in time imagine the road ahead, the incredible economic success that --

Khoo Boon Hui: I think in the first few years of independence, no. They were so worried about just providing sufficient jobs for the people.

COS: How many inhabitants do...

Khoo Boon Hui: Back then probably we're thinking about 2 million.

COS: I see.

Khoo Boon Hui: Anything else you want to know about myself? How did I come to this position?

COS: Yes, yes. So you went to school then --

Khoo Boon Hui: In Singapore, yeah.

COS: And then what happened after that?

Studying in Oxford

Khoo Boon Hui: Okay. At that time they were trying to get bright young people to join the government, especially the...

COS: The government is the most prestigious job you could get, right?

Khoo Boon Hui: No.

COS: It's not?

Khoo Boon Hui: No. I think in the early days, in the colonial days, yes. But I think by the late 60's, early 70's, the brighter people wanted to be doctors and lawyers.

COS: I see.

Khoo Boon Hui: But the government was trying to push for engineering, because they realized that we needed lots of engineers for economic development. And the way was to offer overseas scholarships. At that time, the government was trying to build up the Singapore Armed Forces. I was one of eight that year chosen for an armed forces scholarship. So I did engineering and economics in Oxford.

COS: In Oxford?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes.

COS: Good choice.

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, and joined the armed forces. So we went through training.

COS: What's the relationship between the armed forces and the police? So that's the same?

Khoo Boon Hui: No. Those are two different departments under two different ministries.

Joining the Police Forces

After I graduated I came back. The then prime minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, realized the police also needed bright young people, and that if he started a scheme then to attract people, it would take another four years before those people returned. So he asked for volunteers among those in the armed forces to transfer. I was one of three who decided to move over.

COS: What made you choose that option? And, what were your best hopes or your vision at that point in time that you might accomplish?

Khoo Boon Hui: I think when I was a young officer, as a resident, we never imagined ourselves to be at the top of an organization. My own aspirations, well, I thought that the army was maybe a peacetime army. So not much action, a lot of training. Whereas, in the police, we are --

COS: Getting in touch with reality every day, right?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, right. You can see your results very quickly. I think today when you talk to people who join the police, they'd say the same thing.

COS: Is it true?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes. There's something very tangible which we can share and see straight away. But of course today I see it very differently. The feeling is not so much that I want to see tangible results. I see a bigger issue of how do I maintain a police force that will serve the people. This desire to serve, a sense of duty -- I think every police officer has that feeling.. I didn't do any training, not like these people who went to the academy and all that.

COS: What was your first assignment?

Khoo Boon Hui: To do investigations.

COS: Without any training, you were put on the job?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes. I remember taking urine samples of drug addicts, because at the time we had a drug problem. You'd arrest people, take their urine samples, then have them tested for drugs. Things like that. Since then I've moved through various departments in the Police.

COS: Now we are in the early 70s?

Age 26: In charge of 500 Police officers and residential communities

Khoo Boon Hui: No, this was the late 70s. I think one of the most satisfying jobs I had as a young officer -- I was 26 at the time -- was to be command of one of the divisions. At that time Singapore was divided into eight geographical areas.

Soh Wai Wah: Called divisions.

Khoo Boon Hui: I was in charge of one of them. It is quite amazing, because you'd be looking after, at the time, maybe 500 people.

COS: After 500 people?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, 500 staff.

COS: Why was it that you liked that job most?

Khoo Boon Hui: Well, you are in a position of leadership. You have all the autonomy to run the division. You have the autonomy to deal with the residents and all the community groups. And basically you are responsible for making sure that that area meets the expectations of the residents in terms of safety and security.

COS: When you do that work, whom are you serving? Who is the entity that you are serving?

Khoo Boon Hui: Well, of course, in the hierarchy I have a superior... But on a day to day basis you would serve the residents as well as some of your own officers. You lead them in the best way that you can. Except that you are now a commander.

Ang Hak Seng: That's right, you're very much a servant leader. We not only serve the public, we serve our own people, too.

Khoo Boon Hui: At that time I was quite sure I was going to make the police a career, so in 1981, I went on a post-graduate scholarship, this time to the Kennedy School in Harvard, to do public administration.

COS: I see.

Khoo Boon Hui: That's where I studied under people like Ezra Vogel, the expert on Japan. And got interested in the Koban system. Incidentally, the government also had us, the police, examine how we could implement the Koban system.

COS: Can you share a little bit about the Koban system and what made you interested in that?

Khoo Boon Hui: Okay. Traditionally our police force, because of the way it had a colonial past, was one whose role was just to maintain law and order. Therefore, the policeman were seen as officers to be feared, so that they could control the population. Our police stations were built at major road junctions, so that if there was a riot, we could control all the roads.

Reinventing the Police in Singapore: Inspiration from Japan

The police in Japan were very different. They decentralized their police to many, many small stations, and from there they deployed officers who knew the community. One important difference was that the policemen were liked, rather than feared by the residents. They would under the house visit program, visit residents to get to know them. Back in the old days, the policemen were simply always bringing bad luck, you know. Either they want to arrest someone, or they want to tell you some bad news that someone has been arrested, or has been injured in an accident, or whatever. So it's a different concept of what the policeman is all about. That's how we came up with this concept of community policing.

COS: Hmm. So how did you learn about that Japanese concept in the first place?

Khoo Boon Hui: Oh, I think the Japanese concept has been around for many years. Many people have actually studied about this. But no one else has actually adapted that system outside of Japan. A lot of people thought oh, this is the unique Japanese who are doing things. Although the Japanese had copied it from the Chinese, but with the Chinese the relationship between the police and the residents is very different.

COS: Are you saying that that concept originally came from China?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes.

COS: I see. Many things in Japan once came from China, right?

Khoo Boon Hui: That's right. But the spirit is very different. One is friendly, the other one is – I'm in the community to check on you. That's how we understood how the regimes did it in the past. Maybe today it's different. Now the Japanese system impressed us so much that we decided to invite them to come to Singapore to start the system in Singapore. So in 1983 we started our first --

COS: When you returned from the Kennedy School?

Khoo Boon Hui: That's right. But I wasn't part of the planning. Though the next one or two years I was already in charge of all the eight divisions by then.

COS: There were eight districts?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, eight. So in 1984 I became the commander in charge of all the eight, and therefore had much more responsibility for all the Neighborhood Police Post, NPP, (our version of the Koban system).

COS: Okay.

Phase I (1983-90): Restructuring the Police into 91 Neighbourhoods (NPP)

Khoo Boon Hui: So in '83 we started converting division by division to the NPP system, and by the end of 1990, we set up 91 of these posts.

COS: Ninety-one neighborhoods?

Khoo Boon Hui: NPP's, yes. And we could sense --

COS: And what does that look like? That was a physical space, or was it --

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes. It's a physical space at the void deck (commonly found at the ground level of residential highrises). Because at Singapore you have residential apartment blocks. And then there were police officers at the bottom of their apartment blocks. So it was policing in the community ...

Soh Wai Wah: ...structures about 100 square meters...

COS: Inside the buildings?

Soh Wai Wah: On the ground floor.

COS: So you did that in '83, and then what?

Khoo Boon Hui: We didn't do all that in one go. We started building slowly.

COS: So it was the physical place, but then also some people around?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, each post would have about 20 officers working in four shifts. But the challenge then was to change the mindset of the policeman from one to be feared to one to be liked. I think over the years we've succeeded in that.

COS: How did you do that? That is a major shift.

Khoo Boon Hui: A major shift.

COS: That usually takes a generation or more.

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, right.

COS: So how did you do that?

Khoo Boon Hui: Well, we went the usual route of having training, propagation. We started small pilot schemes, and then with success, people with the pilot would move to other units and start to propagate all these things. I would say within a few years, by the late 80s, I think we had successfully got it going. And from 1988 onwards, the crime started to drop.

COS: Really? From where to where?

Soh Wai Wah: From 1989, we had nine consecutive years of falling crime rates.

COS: Is that true? And you relate it directly to these community policing roles?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, because the community would provide information.

Soh Wai Wah: I guess we have their support. Coincidentally, '89-'90 was when all the land divisions had NPP's. By then we had successfully institutionalized the NPP system in the whole island.

The Next Phase: Creating a one stop Policing system (NPCs)

Khoo Boon Hui: Let's move on to the next phase. After so many years of success, we decided that that was not good enough. By then we realized that to be world class you really cannot have two different systems of policing going on. And what I mean is there are these NPP officers who are community policeman, always smiling, ever helpful. They're not doing much in terms of catching criminals. That's left to the other reactive police forces, the ones in the fast patrol cars, the detectives. And we did a very major rethink. This is important, because here you have a major success story. Lots of countries have come to see how it works. We would conduct a joint course with the Japanese police to share the concept of community policing to other forces in the Asian and Pacific regions.

COS: Really?

Khoo Boon Hui: ...where we spend one part in Singapore and one part in Japan, and we invite police officers from the Asian and Pacific regions, and we got about 20 countries -- and some major success stories. But we said, where do we go from here? And we decided to remodel the whole thing.

COS: So now we are in '89-'90?

Khoo Boon Hui: No, no, 1996. We decided that we were going to have a whole different concept now. Instead of the big division doing all the patrols and all that -- anti-crime, arresting people, and NPP's doing all the community work, we're going to consolidate the 91 NPPs into neighborhood police centers, NPC's, which will also draw the patrol elements from the divisions. The NPC will provide one stop policing. Every policeman is trained to do all the jobs, so that you will have only one type of policing. This officer can be the friendly face, and yet he can respond, can arrest, and he can do investigations. That would require a major retraining again.

COS: Retraining.

Khoo Boon Hui: Because you need to get more skills.

COS: Before you really had two police forces. So the friendly people on the local level and then the more traditional.

Khoo Boon Hui: And now we're going to combine the two.

COS: So how many NPC's would you then have?

Khoo Boon Hui: Thirty-two.

COS: Thirty-two. And what do you mean exactly by one stop policing?

Khoo Boon Hui: Let's say if you were the victim of a crime and you rang up our emergency number, the division police would send a patrol car to see you and find out what it's all about. In the meantime, the NPP officer would also come and talk to you.

COS: The same story.

Khoo Boon Hui: And then after that the officer would say, I'm not the one in charge of investigations. But now, the patrol car that comes to see you will do everything. He'll take a photograph, he'll get a fingerprint, he'll take your statement, help the victim. That requires a major skills change.

1996: Building the Renewed Vision for the Singapore Police

COS: How did you come up with that vision of reinventing the Singapore police force? Is there any role model outside of Singapore?

Khoo Boon Hui: There are similar police forces in America where the same officer has to do the investigation as well as the patrol response.

COS: You went around in the world and you screened what would be useful?

Khoo Boon Hui: That is the challenge. It's not difficult to know what police officers have to do, right? Because we know all the literature. The challenge is how do we combine this one stop policing with our community policing, and ensure that there's no compromise. Because if you put everyone in patrol cars and give them all these extra duties, they're going to become very reactive. If you say "I'm going to make sure that I measure your response time," then we are back to the old pattern of just reacting and we forget about community policing.

COS: So how do you interweave these two?

Khoo Boon Hui: That's how we came up with our Community Safety and Security Program. Each NPC officer should be able to lead the residents and facilitate their work in solving their problems.

COS: I see. So he would do local training?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, and we would give him specific time periods. Say, this is your eight hours, so you're to work four hours in the patrol car, then another two hours visiting the residents, and another two hours, maybe, on duty at the counter to serve people. So we structure...

COS: Interesting.

Khoo Boon Hui: You don't force him to stay in his patrol car all the time so he becomes a reactive policeman. I think the Community Safety and Security program was a major breakthrough, because that's how we got our community focused on these same concepts. Now the NPC is responsible for working out plans jointly with the community and seeing these plans through. Another reason we are doing this is a selfish one, because we found that we could not recruit the quality of policemen that we wanted if we expected them to do boring jobs. So we had to give them a more challenging job.

COS: How interesting. What is the essence of that program that you mentioned that would be that important?

Khoo Boon Hui: The Community Safety and Security Program, which is part of our philosophy of community focused policing.

COS: So that program involves the NPC, or is it just on the local level?

Khoo Boon Hui: No, the local structure of the NPPs now becomes no longer relevant. The NPC's will be more...

COS: Oh, that is a substitute. Okay, now I get it.

Khoo Boon Hui: That is a substitute. The NPP now just becomes a deployment point. It is no longer an integrative unit ...

COS: Okay.

Khoo Boon Hui: Currently, we have only 10 NPCs with the other 22 coming up over the next 2 years. But we realize that we cannot just have ten NPC's working on community safety and security programs. So we got the other divisions who are not converted to NPCs yet. So the other division will start their plans engaging the community. But of course, that's less efficient, because you have the division working with smaller communities, right?

COS: So in creating this NPC one-stop policing vision, what were the aspirations? I mean, this other work of relating to a community, this new relationship between the police and the community, what was it?

Khoo Boon Hui: What I've talked to you about in the past few minutes is the concept of policing. But how do we develop as an organization? I'll talk about that.

COS: Okay.

Structure, Culture, and Leadership

Khoo Boon Hui: Now I should begin with our colonial background. We were very much a pyramid form, very top/down. Always from the top... the most senior man is in charge, even though he may not be the most competent. All these others from the top/down. Very centralized, very tight controls, plus orders. I grew up as a young officer in that environment. Now when we started the NPC system, we found that we had to decentralize our authority. We had to let the NPC officer in charge take a lot of initiative. There was always a conflict, because if you are doing it this way, and another one is doing it another -- how can we have so many different ways of doing things? But by the early 90's, my predecessor realized that we couldn't carry on this way, so he started the process of empowerment by allowing people on the ground to take charge and to make decisions on their own. You have to take decisions on your own. You must know how to operate in your own environment. You must take decisions, act, solve people's problems. But while this seemed to work on paper, some of the officers on the ground sensed that there was something fishy about the whole thing. You are just pushing down responsibility to me. You're not giving me the right tools for me to do all these things. And I could sense that there was something fundamentally wrong. I think people were not happy, though they accepted the ideas. And in a way, we were still very much command and control ..., because feedback had to go through the layers and get built up. People who did not conform with our initiative, we called them dinosaurs. Or dead wood. Some of the people felt that they are no longer a part of this organization. You know you are going to be phased out. My predecessor was a very driven person with a personal vision and a lot of drive. In 1996, he told me he was going to retire and I would take over in 1997. My personality is very different from his. He was obviously one generation older than I was. He'd seen a lot of the turbulent times. I may have just heard from my parents, but he probably experienced it.

COS: Yeah. In what way would a personality from a person from your generation be different? In what way?

Generational Shift: Towards A New Model of Leadership

Khoo Boon Hui: Okay. I think we would not be so self-driven trying to achieve success. We will be happier if we achieve things together.

COS: So you just would be happier to see as “We’s” things together, rather than “I, I, I”.

Khoo Boon Hui: Right. We all look up to him as a leader, as a very decisive person. I consciously decided that that was a different style of leading, and it didn't suit me, my own personal conviction of what leaders should be.

COS: Of what leadership should be.

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes. Before I took over, I tried to emulate him, and I looked at what he had written when he first started as a commissioner. He wrote out his higher vision and what he wanted to do. And each year he would come to me when I was a deputy, and I would advise him, okay, for this year he should go along this theme, next year another theme. That's how he's going to reach a higher vision. So I thought to myself, maybe I can also do the same. What's so difficult? I can also do my own five-year plan. So I spent one Christmas vacation in 1996 -- I still remember it -- I took the vision statement of the metropolitan police in London, and the Western Australian one, and I looked at them, and I said, oh, these are very nicely captured visions. Why don't I just marry the two together and put in my own input? I even got my daughter, who was eight years old, to help me type. I cut and pasted, and wow, come 1997, I had the job done. But by that time we were getting into the learning organization with Daniel Kim and Diane Corey. Do you know them?

COS: Yes. But how did they enter the picture?

Zoom shot 1: Seeing an OL Course through the Eyes of an Participant

Khoo Boon Hui: That's another story. They had done work for the (Singapore) Economic Development Board, and were doing some courses. And we got people like Wai Wah to go, right? You were one of the first to go. But of course, the rest of us didn't know what you were talking about.

COS: So you were participating, where?

Soh Wai Wah: In June, '96. That was when the police sent the first five officers to a course by Diane and Daniel, and I am one of those five. But it is still basically a small group of people, and it's not something that's pervasive in the organization.

COS: What did you do? So you met occasionally with your group?

Soh Wai Wah: Well, we tried to apply the things that we learned from the course within our own domain. I was at that time a commander of about 600 people, and so I tried to apply on my own people. But I made no serious attempt to spread it to the rest of the organization.

COS: What do you mean by “I tried to apply,” what exactly was that? What did you do differently?

Soh Wai Wah: I applied some of the team learning techniques, meeting my officers in a cozy environment, soft music, and give them the time for reflection. I've always been a consultative person, so I tried to do more consultation and proposed shared visioning processes. So these are some of the things I've tried to do.

COS: And how did that work out?

Soh Wai Wah: Well, within my division I was quite happy. I sensed that people were doing more reflection on why they are doing what they're doing. In my weekly sessions I always emphasized to them the purpose of their meeting, the purpose of their lives, the purpose of why they come to work. And I found that they were very receptive.

COS: So you told them what their purpose was?

Soh Wai Wah: I challenged them to think about what would be their purpose, so that they don't just come to work mechanically, but they come to work with a purpose, whatever their own purpose might be.

COS: So basically you had a weekly meeting where you invited certain people? Or was that open to everybody?

Soh Wai Wah: We have weekly sessions where four groups of people come each week, so over a four-week period the entire population (of my division) would have met me.

COS: So then how did you deal with your thoughts then?

Soh Wai Wah: Basically I had the attitude that this was something that appealed to me personally, intuitively. And something that will apply to things that are within my control and my domain. If I have an opportunity to share the processes I use then I will share it. But basically I do not try to change my boss.

COS: Yeah, okay.

Khoo Boon Hui: Now how did we get critical mass built here, with only five people, right? The ministry's in charge of the police, and there's other departments, like immigration, civil defense, prisons, central narcotics bureau. We were concerned about developing young talent, and so they formed interdepartmental groups of bright young officers -- officers who with, maybe two to five, six years of services -- to get them to link together and work on several projects.

COS: Any projects?

Khoo Boon Hui: No. Projects of interest to the ministry, but encompassing more than one department. And the experience was that while these were very bright officers, the projects didn't get very far, because they felt that they were representing the department. And therefore when you had to think jointly, they find it difficult if it is against the interest of their department And then we decided to send all two-hundred to a course in dialogue and team learning.

COS: So that was in '96 and '97?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, '96, '97.

COS: So a course, so that would be a what? A Five-day course?

Zoom shot 2: Seeing the Five-Day Course Through the Eyes of an Observer

Khoo Boon Hui: A Five-day course.

COS: So the whole group of 200 people in one single course, no?

Khoo Boon Hui: No, there were about 40 per course. There were about five or six courses.

COS: I see, okay.

Khoo Boon Hui: I didn't attend the course myself, but I had to attend the opening and closing, and also some of the bits and pieces to see what was going on. And I started learning about learning organizations.

COS: But those were not only people from your department but from all departments.

Khoo Boon Hui: All departments. And I could see this change, you know.

COS: What did you see?

Khoo Boon Hui: The first three days I think the participants were confused, very skeptical. But come the fourth day and the fifth, you see them transformed.

COS: So you did participate in that course.

Khoo Boon Hui: No, I didn't.

COS: No? But how could you see that they changed?

Khoo Boon Hui: Well, because I go in.

COS: Oh, you'd go in and out, I see.

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, in and out.

COS: So what did you observe on the fourth day?

Khoo Boon Hui: Some conversion, I think.

COS: What sort of conversion? How would you notice?

Khoo Boon Hui: In the level of energy of participation. In the level of ideas. Seeing them relate to each other. And seeing their engagement in processes like, even crawling on the floor, writing things. They were getting so enthused.

COS: So when you would enter the room you sensed, you would feel a generative field?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes. I remember the first session I went to, they were so animated, I stepped in and was...

COS: That was on the first day?

Khoo Boon Hui: I think that was the second or third day then.

COS: I see.

Khoo Boon Hui: But then...

COS: ... nobody would notice you.

Khoo Boon Hui: That's right. But I was convinced because the results of their transformation were applied to their projects.

COS: To what projects?

Khoo Boon Hui: Remember, they were asked to do several projects?

COS: Oh, I see. And that was immediately applied?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes. And you can sense now that the projects were really a group of people contributing ideas, not just from their departmental perspective. Something was happening which I've never seen before. I mean, all throughout my whole working life. The tremendous power of releasing such energy. All these people were again saying, "Oh, we're so energized ..." So they were energized when we were on the interdepartmental things. But we had to go back to our departments and face our boss. I didn't want them to be disillusioned again. I asked, how can I make it so that they don't have to face such things? So that when they go back to their departments, at least in the police department, they will say, yeah, this is the way we are going to work. By then I had read quite a bit, attended some sessions. I never attended a five-day course -- maybe one or two days, half-day sessions, reading.

The Turning Point: A Learning Journey to the United States

I think a turning point was for me when we went in a small group, including the permanent secretary -- I wasn't a commissioner yet, I was still the deputy. In April we went around visiting various places in America.

COS: April of '97?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yeah. We visited the Hewlett-Packard labs, Shell Oil in Houston, the US Army College in Pennsylvania. We went to MIT to look up Peter Senge.

Ang Hak Seng: And they visited a factory.

Khoo Boon Hui: ...in New Jersey. From that trip I learned three things.

One, the journey that most of these organizations took were restructuring, TQM, empowerment, and then you move on to learning organizations. So I say, hey, we've already walked so far. There's no need to reverse everything and throw all that away, we can develop from there. Secondly, I talked to one of my colleagues on the trip and said, I've been covering the job of commissioner, and when my predecessor went on leave, I would sit at his desk and do his work. And, it's terrible, it's so boring. And I can't do anything to change the organization. I said that's a terrible job. And then she said: Well, if you don't like your job, change it. So I say, yes, easy for you to change if you are just in charge of how many people? Ten people? I'll be in charge of 10,000 people, how can I change my job? But that got me inspired.

The third thing that struck me was when we went to this Ford factory. Here we were all waiting, all our nice jackets, and we went to this factory, you know. Greeted by the supervisor who was in factory overalls, you know. I wondered, why were we taken to this place? After all, we had been to Shell Oil, we met Phil Carroll, the CEO, and the next thing you know, we meet this supervisor in overalls. But then I learned how, even with limited resources, this group of people on their own trained every worker in the factory. And these workers were not very smart people. They probably had not even finished high school. And when they were spending their free time they were not reading books, they were gambling. And yet, they all learned about LO, they were applying it to solve their problems. But one comment struck me very greatly. Their supervisor told me these people are very happy to come to work each day. So I told myself can I make all my officers happy to come to work each day? That's a real challenge, how do we do that? So one, how do you make people happy to come to work? Two, how do I change my job? And that's when I realized that we have to change the way we work.

Shared Vision

COS: How did you come up with your vision?

Khoo Boon Hui: We had a retreat, and I think we adopted a shared vision. By then, of course, you all had lots of dialogues, all the ground officers. And with Diane and Daniel facilitating, we came up with our shared vision.

COS: I see. What was the size of that group?

Soh Wai Wah: There were about 60 officers.

COS: So you met then with Daniel and Diane for three or four days?

Khoo Boon Hui: Two days. But I sensed that people were really into it.

COS: So then you came up with what?

Khoo Boon Hui: A shared vision of what we wanted to see the police force in the next five years.

COS: And what did that look like, that shared vision?

Khoo Boon Hui: Oh, you'd have words like 'A force for the nation', 'people as our most valued asset', 'to be an inspiration to the world', 'a call to serve', 'our professionalism as the hallmark of our excellence'. (please fill in the core line of the mission statement).

All very, very carefully chosen words, you know. And the idea was that we're going to be an inspiration to the world in terms of policing philosophy, policing strategies. We are going to be a force for the nation -- not merely a police force ... At least we're going to do everything possible to help our nation, not just from a policing perspective. A nice thing about being in the community and all that, was we've already got that, so we just make sure that it was embodied in the shared vision. But I think people are our most value assets, not the structures, not the traditions but the people. And we started making sure that the shared vision could be translated to action. You can sense that much of our work after that actually looks to this shared vision as the foundation.

Tapping Collective Energy: Being A Force For the Nation

COS: When you show that to others, like myself or others, they just see the result of the shared vision, right? But when you have been participating in the process of co-creating that shared vision, then there often are some words or some point where people get really passionate about it, where you really see that something is ignited.

Khoo Boon Hui: That's right.

COS: So what were the points in that workshop or all these conversations where you really felt, so this is something where people share, not just rationally, but from their hearts, that they are touching it from something real? What were those points, the words, or?

Khoo Boon Hui: An example would be the force for the nation.

COS: The force for the nation?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, because until that retreat we had always had a very narrow mindset. We just do policing duty. Anything where there's no policing, we are not going to get involved with. But when we're able to say we're a force for the nation, the force must also change. We suddenly take a national perspective, not just beyond the police to the ministry, but a national perspective. And then it becomes the inspiration for us to get into a global learning community. And the authority for sharing of learning becomes an inspiration for us to serve the community by spreading the learning organization. It becomes an inspiration for us to help the nation to be a learning nation. This is one example of where the force for a nation is so powerful. If I were in my old traditional mindset, I'd say that's all extracurricular, you do it on your own time. Don't waste police resources talking about it. But, yes, we've done all that. And then the inspiration to the world, to be world class forces us to really work on the new concepts like neighborhood police center. I think the community focused policing ... one day will be a strategy...

Soh Wai Wah: ...that inspires the world.

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, something that you want other people to do too.

Ang Hak Seng: We also have good educational programs for our officers.

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, and then to say that our people are our most valuable assets means we have to develop them. So we started investing in them by co-creating courses with the polytechnics and also with the university, so that our officers can...

COS: Take advanced courses.

Khoo Boon Hui: And we have now so taken the view that if people want to leave us, then instead of saying this fellow is hopeless, now he's betraying us, we say, okay, you leave with our blessings. But remember when you're out there in the community, keep in touch with us, and whatever things you --

COS: Your fellow networks, right.

Khoo Boon Hui: Right. So people who leave us are not lost to us. They're still part of the family.

COS: Okay. You created that vision.

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, that's right.

COS: And then what happened afterwards?

Khoo Boon Hui: So afterwards --

COS: The real work started.

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes. Each unit had to create its own vision and they got engaged. To do that you have to train your people, instill how to dialogue, all those skills. By then I had taken over as commissioner, and I felt okay, it is all well and good to have this once a year sort of thing but how do you live it? Because our meetings were still going on in the old way...

Zoom Shot 3: Everyday Meetings

COS: What would be the old way, what does that look like?

Khoo Boon Hui: Okay, all of us sitting around behind a conference table, and I'm the chairman, here's a secretary. We run through the agenda.

Soh Wai Wah: Giving reports ...

Khoo Boon Hui: Then they have their own. And then if there's a crisis I'll call a few and say let's discuss what to do here. The old way would be, let's say, his department has a problem and another department has another problem, and then he has problems with the other departments. They can't resolve it so they come to me and say, well, you decide who's right and who's wrong. I say, what has all of this got to do with our shared vision? So we changed the way we work. The first thing I did was transform one of the meetings to one where we practiced all our LO skills.

COS: All your LO skills?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, the Learning Organization skills of team learning and dialogue. And so we have regular fortnight leadership meetings of the leadership group. ... I said now we're going to have a leadership group.

COS: Okay, oh, you created a new group? That includes whom? How many people?

Khoo Boon Hui: All the commanders, all the directors and their deputies about, , 40.

COS: Forty people. You would meet once the fortnight? For how many hours?

Khoo Boon Hui: A whole afternoon.

COS: And what does it look like? So it's 40 people around a table?

Khoo Boon Hui: No table.

COS: No tables. It's a circle of 40 people, and then what? So you start the meeting at one, two o'clock, and then what happens?

Ang Hak Seng: It's not a meeting.

COS: It's not a meeting? What is it called?

Ang Hak Seng: It's a dialogue.

Khoo Boon Hui: And there's no chairman.

COS: No chairman. So what happens? You enter the room and then what?

Khoo Boon Hui: There are facilitators, all the young officers.

COS: Facilitators, oh, the young officers are the facilitators?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, and they set the agenda.

COS: Oh, I see.

Khoo Boon Hui: And they set the questions, and we answer the questions. And we break into small groups.

COS: You break into small groups, oh, I see. How interesting.

Khoo Boon Hui: Of ten, maybe, or maybe five.

COS: So the agenda is written by whom? By the young officers?

Ang Hak Seng: The agenda is usually planned and written by the secretariat comprising mostly young officers.

Khoo Boon Hui: These dialogues are of the highest importance in the organization. For instance, the strategic planning process, the work planning process, the scenario planning process. Any issue which is highly important where we want a lot of generative thinking. For instance, there was a time when we had corruption in the police force, and so we took several sessions to work out all the orders that drives our behavior to dealing with corruption.

COS: So you would have meetings facilitated by people from your organization who you supported, right? Does that work? Would they really challenge your thinking...

Khoo Boon Hui:

COS: My future would be at risk, right?

Khoo Boon Hui: Well, at first I used to participate and then in the small groups, being what I am, I'll dominate the conversation. Until they would say, okay, your time is up. ...

COS: They would say that?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, it happened.

COS: How long did that take until they first said your time is up? Because you don't start with that right away, right?

Ang Hak Seng: They did it soon enough.

COS: So do you remember that, the first time?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, yes, yes. Right. And we all play by certain rules.

COS: You have some ground rules for this meeting.

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, right.

COS: And these meetings started in '97?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes.

COS: If you look at how these first meetings were, how they looked, and what they look like today, can you trace any sort of development? How would you compare them?

Khoo Boon Hui: I think initially, you thought it had to be this, and first you've got to play by the rules, right? Now it's so natural. When you say something, you have to do certain things.

Ang Hak Seng: You can see that the personal mastery in each of us has improved tremendously in terms of our ability to inquire and advocate issues. More important is the trust that has developed between us. The issues that we start to talk about are obvious taboos in the past and would never been ventured into in the past. Relationship is truly a critical development in this process, I would say.

COS: So over time, more and more difficult issues would come to the surface.

Ang Hak Seng: Yes and the most difficult issue of all which we have discussed is this issue of mistakes. I mean, in the past we would never talk about it.

COS: What was that?

Ang Hak Seng: Mistakes.

COS: Mistakes?

Ang Hak Seng: Yeah, how to deal with mistakes made by officers.

COS: What's that, exactly?

Ang Hak Seng: Well, in the past we always come down very hard on officers who make mistakes and blame allocation is always the outcome.

COS: I see, okay.

Ang Hak Seng: And as a result, different officers or departments tend to defend very much their own positions.

COS: Okay, yeah.

Ang Hak Seng: But now they don't need to take a position anymore ... mistakes are viewed openly as a learning opportunity and we can talk freely about them. Mistakes are traditionally very sensitive in our organization. But now we have the capability to discuss it. I think that is something very good.

Khoo Boon Hui: I think what's important is that people no longer come to me and say, hey, you decide who's right and who's wrong. If they do that, I'll just say can you talk about it among yourselves. So with this interconnectivity, organization of ideas, the challenges have all been dealt with before they come up to my level. But I think more importantly, because now they have experiences, they have replicated this in their own units. So in your own meetings you would have the same sort of dynamics. Then when I go down to the units, I want to meet the patrolmen, the key officers. They also sit in the same circle. And I can sense whether they've been practising this, because if they haven't, all these patrolmen will not act naturally, you know? So that's how we try to propagate and get --

Patrolmen Level: Daily After Action Reviews

COS: So on the patrolmen level? What would that look like? Would they also have a biweekly meeting?

Khoo Boon Hui: No. The way we've designed our neighborhood police centers, we've built in structures for them to have such meetings after each work shift.

COS: After each work shift. And they would meet in groups of how many?

Khoo Boon Hui: Five or six.

COS: For how long?

Khoo Boon Hui: Half an hour.

COS: Half an hour. That would be an after-action review?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes.

COS: What would be the questions? How would you structure such a 30-minute after-action review? You designed these, right?

Soh Wai Wah: Well, firstly, they were asked the questions of what they have done well today, what else they can improve. And then from there they will start to discuss what are the structures or mental models that drive what they have done well, or linking into our intranet. We have an intranet for sharing all our learnings immediately with all the divisions. So the process is very much a dialogue process and is facilitated by one of them.

COS: And how would they capture the results? You would have that conversation, and then what?

Soh Wai Wah: What happens is that the conversation will be reflected in the flow chart. And then it's then immediately transcribed into a computer and that is shared across the whole force.

COS: I see.

Khoo Boon Hui: And when they have a practical suggestion, there's a special computer program that allows them to enter that. And that's a very constructive process where each suggestion is evaluated, to be considered for interpretation. We find a lot of truthfulness in this is because now the recommendation is something that can make their job better. Because what they are discussing is what they have experienced, and not what somebody else experienced. A lot of very good suggestions have come from this, both in terms of the way we provide service to the public, and even the... that...

Learning Infrastructures

COS: What are other learning infrastructures, other things that you have built into these center designs like an after-action review? Are there other regular things that you use that came from the learning organization tools that are applied on a daily basis like these after-action reviews?

Khoo Boon Hui: Coffee corners.

COS: What was that?

Khoo Boon Hui: We now have coffee corners and learning centers. Coffee corners have very nice environments like this, and we encourage people to use them to share ideas. Some of the best ideas I see come from people just sitting down and sharing. And we have learning centers, as well.

COS: What's that?

Ang Hak Seng: Learning centers are rooms set up purposely to facilitate individual as well as group learning. For individual learning, we have computer terminals containing self learning packages for individuals to pursue learning at their own pace in their own free time. For group learning, the room has been purpose built to allow team learning in the form of dialogue. The individual and group learnings could also be shared with the entire organisation through web based applications in the computers... this is actually organizational learning. So the self-learning center gives us the flexibility of team learning, individual learning, and even organizational learning.

COS: So the physical setup is what? You have computer terminals?

Ang Hak Seng: We have computer terminals in the learning centers. The coffee corners are in most instances part of the self-learning center.

COS: I see.

Khoo Boon Hui: We have a lot of computers, and we also have distance learning packages. This learning package, for example, on investigations. If a patrol man has desires to be an investigator, he can actually go down to the self-learning center, and there's an investigation package, and he can do self-studies to position himself, so that when the job is available, he's already half way there.

Ang Hak Seng: A key leverage we have identified is what I have mentioned earlier, the Internet.

Khoo Boon Hui: Right. I think the other very interesting outcome of our journey is this issue of Internet communication and trust. We have set up a bulletin board, and in this bulletin board, any police officer can reflect and have opinions on anything. The rule is that you can post what you want. But there are rules for us managers, that we do not immediately enforce our opinions, we should only clarify. Slowly they started to develop, and they talked about the actual well-being of the organization. I think what was most satisfying is that when you talk about well-being, you have two groups of people discussing, some of them are demanding something. Maybe demanding that we should have shorter working hours. But then other individuals moderate this and then explain why we need the longer hours, without the management coming into the picture.

COS: Interesting.

Khoo Boon Hui: And I think that's very important. And the access is quite wide. Out of 10,000 or so people, I think almost 4,000 people have got their own e-mail accounts.

COS: Really?

Soh Wai Wah: And access to a computer terminal. We have a ... ratio of about one computer to two officers now. But three years from now we'll have one to one. It's a real time dialogue.

COS: It would be interesting to think about what the lesson would be from that learning if you applied it to the whole population, to the whole community. Are there any lessons?

Khoo Boon Hui: Oh, yes. In fact, the government is very keen on this now, and they have launched a Singapore 21 vision. They want us as public servants to engage the communities. They are saying that on the part of our ministry and the police, we have already started to do that, into the community's safety and security program. But I think the government wants to do more so all its major policies are engaged. We've shown how it can be done in a very practical way.

COS: Looking back at the whole journey that took you to here, if you were to describe the major accomplishment that you realized so far -- what really has been accomplished in terms of everyday action, how would you describe that?

Zoom Shot 4: Everyday Policing Practices

Khoo Boon Hui: I think there's one more area which we haven't really talked about --

COS: Okay.

Khoo Boon Hui: ...and that is the actual impact of all these things on policing work.

COS: That is what I am trying to get at.

Khoo Boon Hui: How do we solve cases? How do we learn from mistakes? And this has made a tremendous impact, because we have actually found ways of dealing with new problems in very innovative ways.

COS: What would be an example of that?

Khoo Boon Hui: Let me give you an example. A group of robbers from a neighboring country, because they are very used to surviving in the forest and jungles, come to Singapore to highly vulnerable isolated areas, and in the middle of the night attack the house, wake up the occupants, tie them up and rob them, and run into the jungle, and stay there until the morning. Then they come out and go back to their homeland. They know full well that our police officers patrol only the streets and are not very skilled at following them into the jungles at night. So they've struck many times. There was great fear among the population that they would be tied up in the middle of the night by these robbers.

Our initial reaction was the traditional way of doing things. We would try to follow them into the jungle immediately but because of our lack of familiarity, we would not be successful in locating them. I think in one case, we saw them running into the forest, but we couldn't catch them in time. So from a coffee corner discussion, we realized that, hey, they are using this forest as a place of refuge. Let's turn it into a trap for them. So we devised another scheme where once someone has reported, "I've been robbed," we would deploy policemen to surround them in the forest. And then when day breaks, we would go in (with specialist trackers). Sure enough, within a few months, we caught one group, and that stopped the whole thing for two years. Just last month another group came, but this time they didn't use the forest, they used the canal to hide. And of course, we couldn't find them. But we also learned another trick. We wait for them at the ferry points (from where they could leave the country), and sure enough, within a few hours, they wanted to take the first available ferry back, so we caught them there. These are actual, practical applications of collective thinking, of insight from dialoguing, to real issues ... on how we solve such problems.

There are many, many examples like this. I'm constantly surprised by some of the things that our men do ... Previously, they were waiting for the top to initiate or to approve, and now there are so many ideas. My job is just to make sure they share it with the others.

COS: So when you sit your everyday meetings -- I'm not talking about the dialogue meetings, but about the normal business meetings -- would they be different today than they were three years ago?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, I would say our regular meetings, are also different.

COS: In what way?

Khoo Boon Hui: For instance if suddenly something comes up and we find it needs more dialogue. We don't have to adjourn to a familiar round circle, small group meeting. In the old formal setting we can still dialogue and come up with very different ideas. And sometimes we don't know that something's going to develop into a dialogue.

COS: So you can switch the mode of conversation, right?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, yes. And there are some meetings we allow for one hour or even three hours, with a one very important issue...

Ang Hak Seng: ... that is great dialogue.

Khoo Boon Hui: In the preparation before meetings, as a result the sense of shared vision and shared purpose, a lot of people when they work together now, there's a sense that it's not my ego versus your ego, but we're trying to both come up with a common consideration. There's another example of differences from the past.

Ang Hak Seng: ...because of my emotional connection to this shared vision, there may be times in a collective decision that I may have to sacrifice my resources for the overall organization good. In the past, this is... hey, no way. This is possible firstly, because there's transparency. Secondly there is trust, and thirdly there is an emotional attachment to our common dream....

Our shared vision. So I think there's that level of sacrificing for the big picture that we have progressed to.

Khoo Boon Hui: I believe now, very strongly, that the collective thinking skills of the police division have improved tremendously. We are making a lot of wise decisions, able to sacrifice the immediate gain for future gain. And it's quite profound. Many times I will go to a meeting with a position, thinking this is a very good move. After dialogue I realized that it was only a smart move but not a wise one.

COS: If you look back at your journey that's behind you, what are the key learnings that you personally take away from that and take forward into the future? And with respect to the future, what do you consider the major challenges that we have to address in order to continue?

There's this channeling of energy to your direction

Khoo Boon Hui: The first question's answer would be, I think we could not have planned a route. When I look back I sense that there was so much good luck and things that seemed to coincide, things that seemed to happen. But it's really not good luck, because there's this energy. There's this channeling of energy in certain directions. There's a lot of ... because you are sacrificing short-term gain for long-term gain. There are certain times when you really feel, oh, why are we doing this? We're sacrificing so much. But for the longer term good. I think we will carry on. The second question would be, right now people are seeing us as a model. But we know that penetration to every corner of the police force has not been reached. Only those who feel they are comfortable with this. There are some units which are not so attuned, and I think we have to do more now that people are being convinced. We've got to put more structures in. We've got to try to help the other units now if we really want the whole organization to benefit.

There's always this doubt among the people that this is a management fad, and things will go away once I leave. But I think among the leadership group, we are quite convinced that this is the way they're going to carry on. And whoever replaces me, whether he's from within the leadership group, or from outside, will find it very difficult not to operate in the same way. I think truly a cultural change has happened. At least, in the leadership group, and key parts of the organization. But we need to work further.

COS: If we said, okay, there is this management fad, and one day it all will be gone -- I mean, all the labels. If we forgot all the labels and those kinds of things, if we really got to the essence, because there is something underneath those labels, how would you personally describe what the essence is that you want to carry forward? The essence of that, what is that?

The Spirit of Trust

Khoo Boon Hui: I would say a spirit of trust. Of trust that collectively we will be able to make better decisions and implement things more effectively as a group. And that has to be worked at. We always have tremendous pressures, issuing statements of the public, responding to the public, pressures from the government. But we make it a point to engender this trust, to make sure that our own internal people know beforehand. But it's going to come out in the paper the next day. In the past we couldn't do that because we didn't trust our people not to leak it to the press. I remember many years ago, you could never tell your department what was coming out, because they might leak it to the press. But today that's not so.

Ang Hak Seng: In order to pursue organizational change efforts, the foundation of trust and relationship among the people is paramount. The limiting factor to the challenge is perhaps the personal mastery of our people. This is very real because while we progress and get results, we will hit a threshold one day whereby, because of our own level of personal mastery, we aren't able to move up. So our next challenge is to bring the personal mastery of self, of the part and of the whole to the next level, so that we can transcend organisational boundaries together.

COS: Thank you very much for the conversation. I must say I'm really deeply impressed by what I heard, because there are many attempts today, around the world, to transform the major institutions of our society. But there are really very few examples where you have such a large scale development which really includes the way work is done on the front line. I know we haven't covered everything, and particularly, we haven't really covered all the challenges that you meet in your day-to-day work. How you really can take the mental model from one end of the spectrum to the other one, and how that work is done. So that would be one topic for a further possible continuation, but not tonight. I don't know, maybe in one or two years, or when there is another possibility.

The other thing of major interest for other learning initiatives that I heard you describing is the essence of what the police's work is in the society, that you are transforming yourself from a functional unit to being part of a larger whole, of larger communities, and to describe the nature of this larger whole, which is the larger society -- that would be very interesting to talk about. That is the kind of development you get into that happens in many places, it also happens in companies. There is a dissolution of boundaries, and then you become part of the larger whole. How do you nurture this larger whole? That would be another area where I think it would be interesting to continue the conversation. Okay, thank you very much.

Khoo Boon Hui: Thank you for your insightful questions.

COS: Thank you.

Khoo Boon Hui: I think we've got some way to go, if we look at new directions. Perhaps it would be in the area of belonging to the larger communities that you mentioned.

COS: Well, the truth is we don't know what that really is. We know what the old communities are. There is also something which is developing, which is an evolving, emerging new sense of community, and we don't know how even to perceive it. I mean, we may be able to sense it some way, but we have no language to describe it, we have no tools. So that is a very important field of our work, where we, all of us are at the very beginning. In Singapore you may have very interesting experiences from which other people may have very interesting learning. So I think it's really important work that you are doing, and this is a very subtle level of the work which we know only very little about.

Khoo Boon Hui: I think that's why it is such a challenge to explain what policing is about in Singapore. Because the mental image of a policeman in America is very different.

COS: Yes, it is.

Khoo Boon Hui: And, as you say, we have moved from traditional policing in communities to community building. Because, when you think about it, it's very hard to do community building from scratch. There must be an issue. This community has got safety and security. We will ask the community agencies to visit a family to see whether they need financial or psychological support. People we arrest and put in jail, we also ask them to look after the families to see whether they need help.

COS: You said you personally...

I'm part of a force for social change in my country

Khoo Boon Hui: I'm inspired. When I come to work I'm not just doing a narrow definition of policing, but I'm part of a force for social change in my community, for my country.

COS: How do you inspire other people? First you have to be inspired yourself, right?

Khoo Boon Hui: Yes, that's right.

COS: Interesting, this inspiring. Really, how do you inspire other people? So that's a really --

Mirimba Giam: I believe it's the energy.

COS: It's the energy?

Mirimba Giam: The energy, the aura you exude.

COS: The aura? What is the aura?

Mirimba Giam: I don't know, sometimes when you talk to people you can feel it.

COS: How does it feel?

Mirimba Giam: How does it feel? It feels, depending on the human dynamics, it could feel warm and comforting. So you want to do more because you say, "Oh, I feel really high and excited about this." So you are drawn to it, more to .., but in this case, it's not for destruction, but really to transform. Aura is something you can just pick up when you talk to people .

Khoo Boon Hui: Because I want to. How I get inspired myself? Because I want it. Because I want it and it is there, of course, I get excited. ...

COS: And what does that mean for inspiring others? You cannot want somebody else, right?

Khoo Boon Hui: Well, at least, I hope to inspire people by a higher purpose. So for me coming to work is not just getting a salary, but there is a higher purpose of doing something right and making a contribution.

COS: What's that higher purpose? What do you mean?

Khoo Boon Hui: Transforming the nation, and that is the higher purpose that I identify with. So when I want to inspire my colleagues, I will always challenge them to think of a higher purpose.

Ang Hak Seng: I think what inspires other people in this higher purpose is how it helps connects them together beyond their immediate job scope ... this connection of what they want together with the larger whole. What inspires me is the ability to help them to see or connect to the larger order, the larger whole, or the larger purpose. So it's connection ...

Khoo Boon Hui: And that relates to my first comment as to why I joined the police force. Remember I mentioned that most of us join the police force because we can see tangible results of our service to the community?

COS: Umm hmm.

Khoo Boon Hui: And now you're hearing very different answers. It is no longer the tangible, it is the dreams, the visions, I think, that will keep officers in their jobs. If you are just going to go for tangible results, you can get disillusioned, because sometimes you don't see the results. But if you can think of the larger purpose, the vision and the journey, and in between all the failures, that keeps you stick around. By the way, we're working hard here.

Mirimba Giam: Actually, if I may, I just spent two days on issues of leadership, and what inspires me is the Singapore story itself -- it just hit me so strongly, I just to want to share it -- that we have the history of less than 35 years, we have no resources other than our people. For us to be where we are right now -- what else could be a more inspiring story? It's just so incredible that we could be what we want to be without having to say we need necessary conditions before we can be what we want to be. That's very thoughtful.

So it's possible. If the whole nation could get that, every individual could do it themselves, to be what they really want to be.

Khoo Boon Hui: And I wonder also if in a way we, the police, are mirroring what has happened to Singapore, that affects you from very powerful leaders with a personal vision. Very strong drives, very strong directions. Today our leaders are more group oriented. Though we don't consciously think about it, that's how things have evolved. And I think the next generation of leaders will take it even further. Because these people that come after us will have to be better than us. I'll do everything to make sure that they're better.

COS: Thank you.

All: Thank you.