

SP's 59th Graduation Ceremony on 3 May 2019 (Session 5)

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Mr Soh Wai Wah
Principal and Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Polytechnic

Distinguished Guests

Parents and Graduands

Staff of Singapore Polytechnic

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very good afternoon to all of you! Thank you for inviting me today to witness the celebration of this key milestone in many of your lives.

2 When I reflected on the precious opportunity for me to stand here to share something of meaning to all of you, I brought myself back in time when I was a fresh graduate. And I wondered – “If I were to speak to my younger self, what would have been some advice that I wished I was given that would have been useful to me?” Three things came to mind. Let me take you through these three pieces of advices I would have given my younger self.

My First Advice – Stay Focused on Delivering Value

3 For those of you who may not know, I've been heading a HR function for more than 10 years now. In my line of work, I will come into contact with fresh graduates like yourselves, students at career fairs, interview candidates, new hires, and all levels of employees. Guess what are some of the most common questions that I'm often asked? - Even by my personal friends. The questions sound like this "What do I need to do to get ahead in my career?", "What do supervisors look for when they promote someone?", "How do I land the next big project so as to profile myself?". Sounds familiar? I guess this is something that many of us might think about, especially at the start of our careers when we want to establish ourselves, do well, and get recognised.

4 When I look back in my own career, and observe those of many others, I have come to appreciate that the singular focus on your next promotion and how to get ahead is a dangerous one. While it may be important at the personal level to some of you, I have seen ,any individuals trip themselves up when their sole focus is on getting ahead, gunning for the next promotion. They may drive themselves too hard and crash out at the critical junctures of projects. They may drive their team too hard and while the project delivered excellent outcomes, the number of relationships destroyed, or "dead bodies" that need be recovered leaves one to wonder if that is the leader you will want to uphold?

5 So my 1st piece of advice to all of you who aspire to do well is not to focus on getting ahead, but instead **Stay focused on Delivering Value.** Be it to your bosses, in delivering a good piece of analysis providing good insights on a work challenge; Be it to your teammates, in helping them out when they need some support, or thinking of how to help each one of your teammates succeed. You will find that when you shift your focus towards delivering value to those around you, you will broaden your goals. And

when you constantly deliver such value be it in your work or to your team and to those around you, recognition will naturally follow.

My 2nd Advice - Stay Humble & Hungry, never stop learning

6 As all of you young graduates step into the working world, be it immediately, after you serve your NS, or even after further studies, you will be stepping into a very different world from that when I first graduated. Technology is fast changing the way information is processed, how decisions are made, and how knowledge is shared. It has changed our lives in so many ways, and it has brought about a disruptive force to many businesses.

7 A study from the John Olin School of Business at Washington University estimates that 40% of today's Fortune 500 companies will no longer exist in 10 years. Why might this happen, you might ask? The article goes on to say that the key reason is because People are resistant to change! Right now, estimates put the half-life of a professional skill at just five years – What this means is that in five years, that valuable skill you gained in school or in the workplace is half as valuable as it was when you acquired it. Accordingly it was predicted that by 2020, more than one-third of the skills we need, regardless of industry will have changed.

8 So while we should take time out to celebrate this important milestone for all of you graduating today, we are constantly reminded that the knowledge and skills that you have acquired thus far will be outdated very quickly in the next 5 to 10 years. To ensure that we can bring value as per my 1st advice, and that we remain relevant, we will need to **Stay Humble, Stay Hungry to constantly Learn, Unlearn, and Relearn**. This is my 2nd piece of advice. To keep pace with the heightened demands of today's and

tomorrow's job markets, we need to commit to learning, growing, and continuously honing our skills. We need to commit to lifelong learning in a time of intense and continual change.

My 3rd Advice - Stay Anchored on Values and Relationships

9 My final piece of advice is a rather personal one that I hold dear to myself. When I first started work, I was full of energy, passionate about my work, with a strong belief that I can make a big difference. I was driven to prove myself - I worked hard, and I played hard, keeping long hours at work. I was hardly home. Very naturally, at some point of time in my early career life, I burnt out. I crashed my own health, and I had to spend a few weeks recuperating at home. At that point, my mother was naturally very worried and my family was the one who looked after me. I found myself asking "What would happen if I had passed away instead?" The thought was one that most of us in our younger years will never entertain. Our natural assumption, with youth on our side, was that we are infallible, it will never happen to me. Yet, coming back to the sobering question - "what will happen if I had passed away then?" Much as I did not like the answer, my own answer to the question was - The organisation will move on. My colleagues will be sad for a while. My contributions might be missed for a little bit, especially when they are in the midst of hiring and have yet filled my position. But the organisation, and the team will move on. My parents, however, will be devastated! I'm not sure if they will or can move on with life! I have since gone on to live my life in a much more balanced way. Today, I have my family with three young kids. I make time for my friends. I have since learnt to value the relationships around me, to answer the question of what kind of person I want to be, and to ensure that I set aside the time to be with my loved ones for they are ultimately the ones who will always be there for you

when you really need them. So I've figured out for myself that "I live to work, and not work to live!"

10 Before I end, if there was another anchor that you must constantly remind yourself about, it will be on core values. What really matters to you! As you enter the world, you will find yourself encountered with many situations where you may be asked to take a stand. What exactly do you stand for, and what guides your moral compass? Honesty and integrity are very core values. I have seen the most intelligent and best of individuals fall and fail when they compromise on such values. Did they seek to be bad from the get go? Often, if you hear their stories, the answer is no. It usually starts with situations that require "just a little compromise", and the boundaries are gradually pushed. So it is useful to figure out for yourself what values matter most to you, and be prepared to take a firm stance to do the right thing when the call comes. So if you ask me what should you always be anchored on? I would say to always **Stay Anchored on your Core Values & Relationships** for they will be the ones who guide, support or even pull you back in your times of need.

Conclusion

11 So if I were to sum up all that I have shared in a nutshell,

- How do you succeed in your career? Stay Focused on Delivering Value
- What is the key mindset/skillset that you will need to keep relevant always? It is to Stay Humble & Hungry to Learn, Unlearn and Relearn constantly.
- What is one thing never to forget? To Stay Anchored on Values & Relationships that matter the most to you.

12 To all the graduates, my heartiest congratulations once again, and I wish you the very best as you write the next chapter of your lives!

Thank you all very much.