

Tharman Shanmugaratnam: Build a culture of respect in Singapore where everyone feels Singaporean

The OTCi Board of Governors Chairman also shared other inspiring insights at an engagement session with content partners.

By Nicolette Yeo 17 Aug 2023



To build a culture of respect in Singapore for people from all walks of life, especially the vulnerable.

Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Chairman of the Ong Teng Cheong Labour Leadership Institute (OTCi) Board of Governors, shared his main motivation in life with a group of young content partners at an informal Every Worker Matters Conversations engagement dinner on 15 August 2023 at the Nalati restaurant.

His wife, Jane Yumiko Ittogi, also attended the event.

A wide range of topics were discussed at the session, ranging from his personal and family life to Singapore society and his plans for taking the nation forward if elected president.

A culture of respect

Mr Tharman said that developing a culture of respect in Singapore is about giving people more respect.

He explained: "It's not just giving people more money or handouts, or SSO (Social Service Organisations) or systems, or workfare, and so on.

"People have emotions and know when they are treated with respect or looked down upon, sometimes even despised.

"I feel Singapore is still a place where you can develop a culture of respect, with everyone feeling more of being Singaporean."

He pointed out that Singaporeans take easily to foreign cultures and encouraged them to know the different cultures in the country.

Mr Tharman said: "This, too, is a culture of respect. It is a culture of real respect for each other, not just tolerance, not just living with each other and feeling that we're multicultural.

"It has to be more than that; we have to start inviting other cultures and feeling that our identity is being enriched."



Helping people on the ground

Recalling his experience as a Member of Parliament (MP) in the Jurong Group Representation Constituency, the former MP said that his other motivation in life is to help people on the ground.

This was done by “shifting and changing national policies so that they can be much more enabling for people who start off with something less,” he said.

He recounted that he spent three weeks helping one of his constituents whose life was in a ‘bad place’ when she was 15. Through Tharman’s intervention, she turned her life around and has never forgotten the help she received.

Social mobility

Mr Tharman also stressed that improving social mobility is important to strengthen Singapore as a society.

He explained: “We now have to work much harder, starting from the younger years of life to help everyone who starts off with less to catch up, to have extra opportunities.

“The Government is doing more, the community has to do more, but is also [having] the culture of respect in the classroom to motivate each other.”

Fatherhood lessons

On a personal note, Mr Tharman revealed that fatherhood has grounded him as a person.

He shared: “The nice thing about being a father of four kids is that we [as parents] encourage them to have minds of their own.

“It helps that you never feel too great in the family because they are always criticising you and joking about you.

“You never let success or anything you achieve get you at your game.”

Presidential candidacy

Mr Tharman shared that, if elected, he intends to work with his wife to support initiatives on the ground.

He also plans to find his own way to support Singapore on the international front.

“I have a good standing in China, India, the US, Europe, and so on. And I intend to use it as much as I can. I intend to use my reputation to serve Singapore the best I can.”

The former senior minister and coordinating minister for social policies **announced his decision on 8 June 2023 to contest in the upcoming presidential election.**

Mr Tharman also announced his retirement from politics and all government positions on the same day.

He resigned from the People’s Action Party and government positions on 7 July 2023.

Within the Labour Movement, Mr Tharman has been the chairman of the OTCi Board of Governors since 2002, contributing significantly to the institute’s growth.

He also served as an advisor to the **Singapore Industrial and Services Employees’ Union** and the **Chemical Industries Employees’ Union.**

Mr Tharman also chaired key councils such as the National Productivity Council, SkillsFuture Council, and the Council for Skills, Innovation and Productivity.

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