

**SPEECH BY DR KOH POH KOON, MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY & MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AT THE SPIRIT OF ENTERPRISE 2016 AWARDS ON THURSDAY, 10 NOVEMBER 2016, AT MANDARIN ORCHARD SINGAPORE**

President of Spirit of Enterprise, Mrs Grace Chong-Tan

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

**Introduction**

1. It is a pleasure to join you for the Spirit of Enterprise (SOE) Awards Ceremony and Dinner 2016. This evening, we celebrate the outstanding achievements of our business leaders, whose passion and enduring spirit have led to success for their businesses.

**Entrepreneurship and the Economy**

2. The journey of an entrepreneur is not an easy one. It takes a lot of passion, courage, hard work and visionary leadership to build a sustainable business. One must also have the resilience and perseverance to face challenges when the going

gets tough, and the agility to innovate and adapt to changing economic conditions that are not within one's control.

3. Our home-grown entrepreneurs play an important role in Singapore's economic landscape. Start-ups and smaller enterprises are often more agile and able to react more quickly to seize new opportunities. As such, they serve as important drivers of innovation in the economy. The role of innovation in catalysing industry transformation will become increasingly significant as Singapore faces increasingly stiffer competition for capital and talent from the rest of the world, and innovation becomes an integral component of the business strategies for our companies. At the same time, our entrepreneurs help to rejuvenate existing industries and are a source of the next generation of local champions. This is important for the continued renewal of the firms in our economy. As PM Lee Hsien Loong mentioned last week in his dialogue with the unions, while we are in a period of slow growth, there are bright spots and opportunities in key sectors which our companies and entrepreneurs can continue to seize, which can provide good jobs for Singaporeans.

### **Government is Committed to Supporting Entrepreneurship**

4. Government has actively cultivated a vibrant start-up ecosystem so that the conditions are conducive for the entrepreneurial spirit to take flight. To nurture the spirit of enterprise in our society, the Government has rolled out various grant schemes to help companies build their capabilities, develop new technologies, internationalise and help their workers to upgrade. In terms of physical

infrastructure, the Government has invested in developing a dedicated space for start-ups at JTC's LaunchPad @ one-north. Additionally, the Government is committed to maintaining a pro-business regulatory environment to support entrepreneurship.

5. Our ongoing efforts have seen good progress. There has been an overall increase in entrepreneurial activity over the past decade, with a monthly average of 5,400 businesses formed in 2015 compared to 3,600 in 2005. In particular, the number of high-tech start-ups increased from 2,700 in 2005 to about 4,800 in 2015. The quality of our start-ups has also improved, attracting more investor interest. We have seen significant increases in both the number and aggregate size of start-up exits which also tripled between 2011 and 2015.

### **Importance of Private Sector Partners**

6. The Government will continue to build on the existing work that has been done to ignite the entrepreneurial spirit among aspiring entrepreneurs. But we cannot do this alone. We need to work in close collaboration with key partners – trade associations and chambers, institutes of higher learning (IHLs), and organisations such as SOE.
7. I am especially heartened by SOE's efforts to promote entrepreneurship among our youth. SOE's annual Student Entrepreneur Programme (SEP), which has been running since 2005, aims to help students understand the fundamentals of starting an enterprise, and to provide them with practical operational and

financial management skills, hands-on experience, and networking sessions with local entrepreneurs and professionals. In so doing, the programme cultivates passion, resilience, innovativeness and leadership among our younger generation. This year alone, almost 1,000 children from 17 schools and institutions have benefitted from this programme. Since 2003, SOE has also been providing an educational platform for entrepreneurs to share and interest youths in the path of entrepreneurship through its Student Interviewer Programme (SIP). The SIP gives participating students a chance to conduct one-on-one interviews with successful home-grown entrepreneurs and document their stories to serve as an inspiration for others to commence their own entrepreneurship journey.

8. The SOE Awards has also become an established platform for local entrepreneurs to be recognised for their entrepreneurial excellence, thereby encouraging innovation, sound business strategies and growth in entrepreneurship. Tonight's event celebrates the journey of our entrepreneurs in overcoming challenges to find success, and inspire other Singaporeans to follow their footsteps.
  
9. One example is the winner of the SOE-Nexia TS Entrepreneur of the Year 2016 Award, Mr Neo Kah Kiat. Mr Neo has come a long way since he first ventured out as a young businessman at the age of 17 to run an economy rice stall at a factory canteen, using his own savings and a small loan from his godmother. In 1992, Mr Neo started his now famous catering company, Neo Garden. In the early days of his catering business, Mr Neo and his seven-member staff worked more than 18 hours a day with little returns. Nonetheless, Mr Neo stayed the course and branched into a tiffin carrier meal service to stay in business. His hard work paid

off and business began to pick up. To increase his workers' productivity, Mr Neo implemented the use of technology systems in his offices and kitchens with help from SPRING's Capability Development Grant, and invested in training courses to help them upgrade their skills. The success of Neo Garden led to the launch of other catering brands, and expansion into other business areas such as food manufacturing, food retail, floristry and gifts. Today, the parent company Neo Group Limited generates an annual turnover of more than \$120 million. Please join me in congratulating Mr Neo for his well-deserved SOE-Nexia TS Entrepreneur of the Year 2016 Award.

## **Conclusion**

10. I would like to take this opportunity to offer my heartfelt congratulations to all the other award winners, who are being recognised tonight for their hard work and perseverance in their respective fields. Your success stories are a beacon for all budding entrepreneurs.

11. Finally but by no means least, I would like to applaud the outstanding efforts of the Board of Governors of SOE, who have volunteered and worked selflessly to put this initiative together. I wish everyone a pleasant evening. Thank you.