

Sri Lanka stand to lose in global economy

— Gerard Muttukumaru

J. B. Muller, freelance journalist, conducted an interview with Sri Lankan born US based management guru Gerard Muttukumaru, CEO of the Centre for Global Leadership, an executive training and learning centre for senior management based in California, USA with representative office for the South Asia Region located in Sri Lanka.

Question: Mr. Muttukumaru, What have you and the US based Center for Global Leadership been doing in Sri Lanka and the rest of Asia?

Thank you. We have established a presence in Latin America, the Middle East, North America and South East Asia. In Sri Lanka, we have set up the South Asia Regional Operation. We have a very distinguished international and South Asia Board of Advisors. A few months ago, I was invited to deliver a series of lectures international and South Asia Board of Advisors. A few months ago, I was invited to deliver a series of lectures on "Leadership in the New World Order" at a major business school in Thailand. 75% of the audience was female. This was of particular interest to me because I have led numerous programs worldwide for women in management and leadership. It was also a tremendous experience for me because of the authenticity of the audience and the real thirst for knowledge that they had. They really wanted to learn. This is a real prerequisite for any nation or person to move forward. The audience represented managers from several multinationals and government organizations. We have also set up strategic partnerships in India and other countries in Asia, which take a lot of my attention.

In Sri Lanka, my associates and I are working on several assignments with the senior managements of organizations. Some of these are of a very sensitive nature. Two already publicized assignments conducted in the past three years were conducted for the senior management of Seylan Bank and the senior management of the Employees Trust Fund. I mention these two because one is a leading domestic bank and the other an important public institution that touches the lives of all working people. It was a pleasure working with Mrs. Rohini Nanayakkara and her team at Seylan Bank when we launched a program of Leadership and Change Management, Strategic Thinking and Strategic Planning.

The corporate culture was created which today, I fervently hope is the driving force of everything the bank does. I am not there to monitor it. I love this country and whenever I am here, I try to get out of Colombo. On a recent tour, I happened to stop by out; of the more remote branches of Seylan Bank. The manager recognized me and showed me the Seylan culture on a card. I told him: "I hope you are all living it." He smiled and told me that I should never have stopped what I started. had no control over that. This was only the beginning of a long journey for them. You must remember that the creation of the right corporate culture for any organization is only a first step.

The new Chairman of the ETF, Dinesh Weerakkody, has made a real difference in the functioning of this organization. It was a real delight working with him, his HR consultant, Mr. R. Reffai, and the senior man-

agement team at ETF and creating their new culture.

Another interesting experience in Sri Lanka, which had a strong global component was a retreat I led for the Ambassador and staff of a prominent diplomatic mission. My background in teaching cross-cultural and global management in California, and working with managers from all over the world, proved useful. A major focus of my post-graduate studies, research and work over the last several years in numerous cultural settings, has been on organizational and human behaviour, and what really makes people, organizations and nations succeed or fail. I remember one particular executive education class I taught in California which had managers from 22 countries, 9 of them women. How they saw each other and dealt with each other on specific issues was fascinating. The Latin Americans appeared to be the most animated of the lot! How does this apply to Sri Lanka? We have so much to learn from the rest of the world. But first we must have the intellectual curiosity and thirst. We must stop being preoccupied with ourselves and our own problems, grave as they may be. There really is a world out there. Not merely a world of donors, but a world that has so much to teach us.

As several of your readers might know, our organization really enjoyed working closely with CIMA Sri Lanka Division in bringing four power-packed and high impact seminars to Sri Lanka with Dr. S. Erevelles, formerly of the University of California. The CIMA Sri Lanka 2001 Annual Report was brought to my attention. It had this to say about Dr. Erevelles, who was my colleague at the University of California and a friend: "Of the seminars held during the year, the one and a half day seminar on 'People Management and Service Excellence in the New Economy'. The second program by Dr. Erevelles of the University of California, Riverside, attracted 180 middle and front-line managers, which is the highest number of participants". The first program was a full day seminar on "Strategic Management and Leadership in the New Economy" which was attended by 136 top managers and CEOs. Both audiences were held spellbound for two and a half days.

Among the participants in the previous programs were senior managers and CEOs of the MAS group, Hayleys, Richard Pieris, Seylan Bank, NDB, Dankotuwa Porcelain, Jinadasa Holdings. Reckitt Benckiser among others. A special program was also requested by the top management of Aitken Spence. Trevine Jayasekera former Board Member and CFO of Aitken Spence observed: "Dr. Erevelles presentation has got the class, quality and substance you are looking for. The delivery is outstanding". I am glad that our organization has been able to make a real difference in so many organizations.

On a lighter note, I was invited by a dear friend, Upali Ratnayake, Executive Director of CIMA Sri Lanka Division, just after I returned from Los Angeles to address the Trinity College Old Boys Association on "Leadership and Change Management". It is not easy to do this in 30 minutes. But I think they all enjoyed it and hopefully learned something! The parents who brought their children and even wives told me that they wanted to hear me but could not afford the usual fee! I think the Old boys Association only charged 200 rupees which they could afford!

Another program was conducted by a leading advisor to the Chairman of INFOSYS, the Government of India and several global blue chip companies on "Positioning your organization and country for world class software development".

All these efforts are driven by one purpose: to develop the top leadership in corporations, governments and other organizations. There is so much more to do. Implementation is the key.

Question: I see that you have taught Global Marketing in California for several years. Where does Sri Lanka stand when you think of Global Marketing?

Interesting question. Every person in a position of leadership I have talked to here has told me the same thing. "There is no global marketing in Sri Lanka. Exports, yes. But not Global Marketing. We know nothing or very little about it." I did not quite believe this.

Then an interesting thing happened. I have been preaching the importance of Global Marketing ever since the Center for Global Leadership was established in Sri Lanka three years ago. Very few listened. But when the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce invited the keynote speaker from Stamford, Connecticut (where I have spent a lot of time!) for their 2002 Conference, the headline the next day read: "CCC Keynote speaker says that what Sri Lanka needs is Global Marketing!! Talk about the medium and the message!"

We have begun assisting organizations in Sri Lanka with "Developing and understanding new global Markets". Crucial to this is an understanding of cultures. I have worked in numerous cultures and taught global Marketing at the graduate and executive level in California. It is a fascinating subject This is very critical for Sri Lanka, particularly at this juncture. We really did not need a gentleman from Connecticut to come and tell us this! We have a lot of hurdles to overcome, most of them having to do with our mindset, and the way we view ourselves and the rest of the world. The critical need for an understanding of global marketing has also been shared with me by leaders who accompanied the Prime Minister to New York. There is so much that can and must be done.

Our organization has tremendous expertise in Global Marketing.

Question: What in your opinion do Sri Lankan Organizations need?

That's a loaded question. And I have to be very careful! What I have learned throughout the world also applies here, but must be adapted to the Sri Lankan context. First, as I have said so many times before, an organization, in the private and public sector, must create the right corporate culture that every-

body understands and embraces. Second, they must develop the best possible leadership and management team. Thirdly, the culture must be one that thrives on change and trust. Finally, in a highly competitive global economy, globalizing the organization, becomes a matter of life and death. Now, I may have said this all beautifully, but making it happen is what my team at Center for Global Leadership and I do. Implementation and results are our focus.

I also believe that in a developing country and in the context of Sri Lanka, a war ravaged nation, all corporations and organizations, have a critical role to play to uplift of society, at the least of it's citizens. They could very well be your future customers. More than that it is a moral responsibility of every Sri Lankan citizen. I am not referring to hand-outs and donations to a cause. But in having the organization and its employees deeply involved in the life of the communities they serve.

There is a lot of talk about governance. Conference after conference is held on this topic, a lot of them funded by donor organizations. Numerous papers have been written. The head of a leading NGO told me that it is still a buzzword in their jargon. As a leading CEO told me. "Very little if any is changed. We go through the motions." But I believe that this is wrong. The scandals in the boardrooms of the world, including Sri Lanka, must wake us up. The abstract theories must become very real. Governance is a moral imperative. We owe it to the taxpayers and investors. Every organization is a steward of the resources entrusted to it. Accountability from top to bottom must be the driving force. Our Center's global team works with boards of directors to build this accountability and ensure it.

Sri Lanka must also free itself from the bondage that it is in. It must reject all that is ugly in it and embrace and build on the good. We must respect and value each other first. Most readers will understand what I am referring to here.

It is also critical that the consultants that are hired by organizations have a deep and practical understanding of the local culture and mindset, in addition to their western expertise Organizations, often the country itself, hire and fly in advisors and consultants at exorbitant fees to tell them what they already know. There are those who are really worth the price. Imagine hiring the economic advisors to Latin American and African countries! Look at the sad state of these countries. Even when real reform is needed, only cosmetic changes are made. Real change is

very scary and upsetting even in the most sophisticated western corporations and organizations. Now when you translate this to the public sector (I understand Sri Lanka has been ranked 56th in the global corruption scale, with the police being the most corrupt), imagine the trauma and resistance to change that will occur in these organizations. Real change and transformation transcends matrixes and grids. It must occur in the hearts and minds of people. This is what we do.

Let me add that a top Sri Lankan government official recently told me: "Other than peace, the paramount need in Sri Lanka, is the development of leaders in the private and public sectors".

Q: I have been told that you did a terrific job for the Liaison Officers of the recent Asian Athletic Championships in Sri Lanka. What exactly did you do for them?

That was fun. My colleagues handled this with Mr. Prema Pinnawale and the organizing committee of the Asian Athletic Championships. They wanted a brief orientation session for the liaison officers on how to understand and deal with the different cultures that would be present in Sri Lanka for the championships. I believe there were over 150 fine young men and women who participated in this orientation. I think it went well. You will have to ask the organizers to get the most objective feedback. I enjoyed it because this kind of thing is in my blood. I left Sri Lanka at the age of 10 and have had extensive cross-cultural or multicultural experience. And as I have shared with you earlier, I have also taught cross-cultural and global management and worldwide business practices for over 15 years in California. My knowledge of the Sri Lankan culture and behaviour patterns also came in handy. There is so much for Sri Lanka to learn about the rest of the world, if there is a real and genuine desire to learn.

Any other thoughts as we conclude this interview?

Yes. Let me end by sharing a disturbing experience in Sri Lanka. I was invited to address a group of young students. They appeared to have lost faith in the leadership of the country. And worse, to have lost hope. Most wanted to leave the country if they had the opportunity. I was facing the future, tomorrow's leaders, managers and professionals. I did what I could. This to me is a great challenge facing those who run the organizations and the nation. This a major challenge for the people who currently run the nation, it's organizations, corporations, academic and other institutions.