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## The quality of our Workmanship and Work Ethics and Principles, post-LDC Graduation

By Howard Aru  
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**This very successful ni-Vanuatu** entrepreneur has quietly survived Covid-19. He recently interviewed about 100 locals for his business and selected 3 to work for him. He was saddened though and ‘alarmed by the level of incompetence and lack of skills prevalent in our employment industry’, to quote his words about the unfortunate experience. It’s that serious.

We say we have workers, but workplace tests defeat us. In discussing his concerns with the writer last week, he specifically highlighted the need to address the dual issues of ‘Work Ethics and Principles.’ A lot of enterprises tend to get by with minimal performance and output, and get away with it. A classic example is told below, and further down this article. I’m sure you also know of many others.

The Cheap Window Frame



A local carpenter won this bid to install window frames for a particular newly-built house. His instruction from the owner was clear, 'I want you to use hardwood only for my window frames'.

The owner then returned to his employment in town while the carpenter set to work on the job. Despite the instructions received, the sneaky carpenter had better plans. He will cheat the system! In order to save on costs, he bought cheap soft wood and painted it over with hardwood colour to give it a solid hardwood appearance. Sounds familiar practice today?

This illustration was actually told by one of our national leaders during the recent high level leaders' breakfast meeting with the private sector on Friday 30th October while discussing the ongoing effort to recognise ni-Vanuatu-owned constructors.

The story depicts and highlights an ongoing crisis of trust and confidence in our workmanship as Ni-Vanuatu. We perpetuate and deliberately do things like that because it's become part an ingrained habit for us. We want recognition, we fight for our place in our employment industry, but these kinds of stories paint a very negative picture of us.

### Story of Mr. X

I was serving as DG in a certain Ministry when word reached me that the Minister wanting to engage a particular carpenter to build the fence around the compound. I did some background checks on the guy. Unsurprising, the news was bad.

This constructor was previously engaged to build another million dollar Government complex by his political relative high up in that agency. The building was incomplete and fraught with faults. We chose another person for the Ministry compound.

This contributed to my unlawful suspension. The carpenter landed a contract elsewhere and made a mess again, but this time around to the demise of his hopes.

## Mr. X Part 2

The same builder ended up convincing a different organisation very recently to rebuild their office complex, to tidy up the lousy work of another local builder. He used up all the building materials and got paid, but the building was incomplete. He thought he could escape, but this time around the tide turned against him and he faced an ultimatum he was unprepared for.

The finance man in the organisation warned him: 'we will purchase material and you will complete the construction at your own cost...or we sue you'. He surrendered and cooperated and completed the complex. This is a true story. And there's probably hundreds more like this!

Singapore of the Pacific?

In exactly 2 weeks Vanuatu will celebrate LDC graduation, just like we did for 'Yumi 40' Independence celebrations – nationwide! But after the celebrations, then what? Many might not like discussing this, but we have to. Careless workmanship in products and services have no place in our workplaces, be it in Government or in private enterprises. There is so much at stake.

We need to rise up above what is base metal and be serious about our development progress and the quality of our services, products and workmanship. After 4th December we must turn a new page and walk away from the negative past depicted in the stories above.

Some want to see Vanuatu become the 'Singapore of the Pacific'. During my early days of promoting FDI in Vanuatu I fancied this idea too. The story of Lee Kuan Yew inspired me. It still does today. Many of us who have been to Singapore know that for them, quality is indispensable.

Unfortunately in Vanuatu many always tend to sacrifice quality on the alter of a careless attitude to work, service and workmanship in products.

That's one of the biggest hurdles we must overcome after the festivities of LDC graduation. Otherwise 4th December 2020 will just go down in our history books as another memorable date that has no real longterm significance.

The pivotal role of Training / our Nationalistic spirit

Singapore is not endowed with a huge amount of natural resources. Two of Singapore's greatest assets are its strategic location at the cross-roads of the East-West trade routes 'in the heart of Asia,' and most importantly its highly skilled, disciplined, dedicated and committed workforce!

Arrive at Singapore's Changi Airport and the first impression you get within this beautifully decorated airport infrastructure is the evidence of this very fact. The pride of Singapore! Conversely, in Vanuatu it's almost the exact opposite.

On arrival at our airport you meet gloominess: the frequently late officer who's supposed to have already arrived to stamp your documents, etc. Do we need more training or is our laid-back culture the culprit? Culture doesn't have to be an issue though. The core issue is not culture but us. What kinds of values and attitudes do we display at work? Are we serious? Do we care about service? Or are we just there for the salary (the money!)?

The most disappointing part of it all is, we want to get by with inferior grade work, and yet expect national policy protection, workplace security, safeguards and fairness in contracts compared to others. And we want to call this Nationalism. Seriously, who is to blame for our localisation challenges, 'them' or us? Or maybe both??

### A Question of Excellence

An old wise king once said, 'whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom' (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Excellence in product workmanship might be related to training and experience, but excellence has to be first and foremost a reflection of the state of our mental attitude to work more than anything else.

You can be a Masters or first Degree graduate, but that does not mean anything when it comes to work attitudes and delivery of results.

'Work ethics and principles', to use the words of the entrepreneur friend who caught up for a chat last week, must play far greater and more significant and pervasive roles in our workplaces, post LDC-graduation.

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