to be drawn is the importance of ensuring that the right people are picked for key jobs, with the necessary skills, experience, character and temperament.

Such decisions should turn on more than just good grades, fancy degrees, or the right connections. Grit, groundedness and good sense should count as much. Finding the best people must entail appointing whoever can do the job best, regardless of gender, race, age, background, or even nationality.

So please, let's go easy on the anti-foreigner "Singaporean first" rhetoric that has become so popular these days. Give the job to whoever will deliver when it counts.

Sooner or later, a crisis will come

The best way to prepare for a crisis is to expect one. Some might see this as paranoia, or even "scare mongering". But simply assuming that such disasters won't or can't happen to us, or that our systems are sound and superior, is the surest way to set ourselves up for a spectacular fall.

The best organisations don't allow for such delusions. Instead, they get ready, and rehearse repeatedly. All players need to know how to react in such an eventuality, from who will take charge of what, including overseeing operations, coordinating information gathering and processing, to managing communications with key stakeholders, including the media and the public.

In today's hyper-media age, the old assumption that in a crisis, public communication is a luxury or distraction is likely to compound a disaster. As we have seen, in the absence of credible and timely information, conspiracy theorists will rush to fill the vacuum, forcing the authorities to respond.

It is much better to get ahead of the information curve. Those charged with public communications will have to hone their abilities to do so. They could take a leaf from the calm, collected fashion in which Australian officials handled themselves last Thursday, presenting new satellite information which offered fresh leads, even while managing expectations and stating plainly what they did, and didn't, know.

Building trust and sense of community

Long before such a crisis strikes, people will need to have developed a sense of community, trusting in themselves and each other, as well as the authorities, to do the right thing in a difficult moment.

Without this, the tendency will be to assume the worst, including the notion that officials are withholding information or just plain lying, for whatever reason.

As emotions will naturally run high in crisis situations, it will be critical for everyone to have a sense that they are all in it together, and that finger-pointing, or worse, point-scoring, for organisational, personal, partisan or political gain, will do no one any credit.

All of this, I grant, is easy to state, but much harder to do. It is more likely than not that we will revert to business-as-usual once the incredible story of MH370 recedes from the headlines, as it eventually will.

Therein lies the greatest danger.

After all, we all assumed that planes don't just disappear without a trace, certainly not in the 21st century, with all our sophisticated modern communications technology.

Well, now we know that this can happen.

Returning to the sense of security we enjoyed before March 8 will require that we put in the effort to learn from the disturbing missteps that made the sad saga of the past weeks possible.

— WARREN FERNANDEZ
ANN/The Straits Times

