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Closed-Door Discussion on the 2015 National Values Assessment for Singapore

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On the 23 July 2015, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) partnered Singapore-based business consulting firm aAdvantage Consulting Group to discuss the findings of the 2015 National Values Assessment (NVA 2015), a survey conducted by the latter and the Barrett Values Centre (BVC) on Singaporeans' views on society and their workplaces. The presentation of the findings by Phil Clothier, Chief Executive Officer of BVC, was followed by remarks from discussants Lim Siong Guan, Founder of Honour (Singapore) and Adjunct Professor of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and Ho Meng Kit, Chief Executive Officer of the Singapore Business Federation. This ended with a free-flowing discussion with more than 30 participants from the public, private and civic sectors.

Mr Clothier explained that the survey asked 2,000 Singaporeans five questions – what values, attitudes and behaviours best described, first, their personal values; second, Singapore society today; third, what they desired of Singapore society; fourth, their current workplace; and fifth their desired workplace. They chose the 10 most suitable descriptors from a list of 100 words used in this international survey instrument. Some of those descriptors were "potentially limiting values and behaviours'" which may not be intrinsically negative but could be harmful if lived to excess. The proportion of mentions of potentially limiting values vis-à-vis other descriptors selected for the questions on the current status constitutes a measure for "national entropy"

The 2015 survey is a follow up to an initial survey conducted in 2012, and Mr Clothier noted some observations such as: since 2012, respondents had kept "family" at the top of their list in describing their personal values, but more encompassing values such as "compassion" and "positive attitude" had become prevalent since that first survey (Figure 1). As for the current survey of 2015, while values such as "*kiasu*", "*kiasi*", "self-centredness" and "competitive" — which are potentially limiting values — were still prevalent, others such as "deteriorating values" and "uncertainty about the future" were replaced in the list of top 10 descriptors cited in 2012 by more positive descriptors like "effective healthcare" and "peace". National entropy in relation to current society fell from 41% to 37% between the two surveys (Figure 2). Singapore compared favourably to the United States (entropy at 56%) and Sweden (43%), but fell behind Denmark (21%) and Switzerland (26%).

In the workplace, there had been a change from a focus on "hierarchy" to a more balanced workplace, as seen in the descriptors of current workplaces, However "long hours" and "cost

reduction" remained prominent descriptors from the 2012 to the 2015 survey (Figure 3). A "better work/home balance" was the most cited descriptor of what respondents expect in their desired workplace and, as was the case in the 2012 survey, while "employee recognition", "employee engagement" and "respect" were among the other most cited descriptors as well.
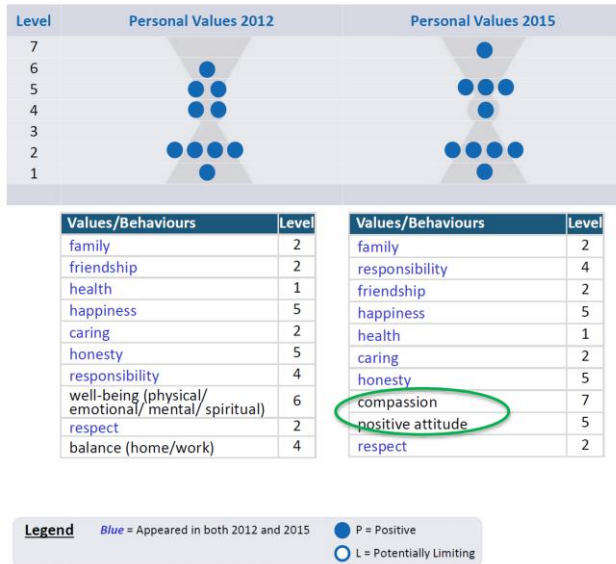
Figure 1: 2015 National Values Assessment — Top 10 Personal Values

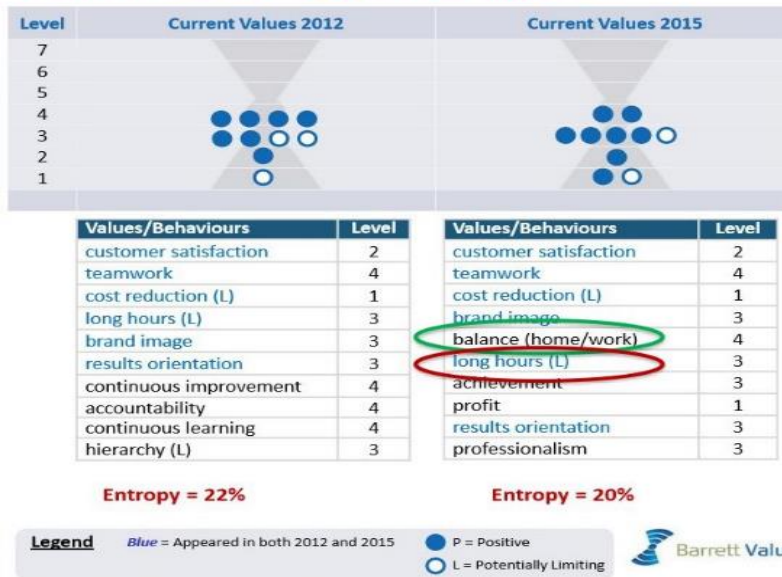**Figure 2: Cultural Entropy Score and Factors**

Figure 3: Workplace Culture in 2012 and 2015

The first discussant Mr Lim noted that the results of NVA 2015 were encouraging as the ideas of "family" and "responsibility" were prominent. However, there seemed to be a gulf between how respondents thought about their own lives and desired society on one hand, and how they perceived society to be on the other hand. While they felt they were enlightened, the perception was that society did not seem to express those enlightened values, which meant that "practically everything appeared to be someone else's fault".

Mr Lim made a number of points — first, that Singaporeans should create good conditions for positive self-perceptions to be manifested in society. Second, while Singaporeans should be encouraged by the fact that cultural entropy was relatively low, Singapore should strive for even healthier levels like those found in Switzerland and Denmark. Mr Lim's third and fourth points related to honouring one's parents and more broadly those around us. Honouring parents was more than just about children being respectful, but also about parents acting in a way that becomes worthy of praise from their children too.

He added that while meritocracy was important for Singapore, it had to be executed effectively, and its beneficiaries had to be mindful to contribute back to society rather than allow it to be manifested in "kiasu-ism", "kiasi-ism" and "self-centredness". "Meritocracy gone wrong" would make Singaporeans condescending and also lead to a sense of entitlement among the successful. Finally, he said there was a need to move from perceiving or feeling things to taking practical action to help Singapore match their notions of the ideal society. While effective government could certainly provide affordable housing and healthcare which were important descriptors of what people wanted, people had to appropriate the opportunities and choices that effective government provided to bring about positive change in society.

The next discussant Mr Ho gave a three-part presentation. First, he said that the points listed as key descriptors of the current workplace (e.g., "long hours" and "cost reduction") were

here to stay. The current reduction in the growth rate of the foreign workforce and Singapore's high business costs meant it was unlikely that work/home balance would improve, even if respondents wanted this of their desired workplace.

His greater worry was that employees also seemed to be disengaged in work and were thus under-performing. He cited a 2013 Gallup poll, where 76% Singaporean respondents were disengaged with their work; and a 2014 National Workplace Happiness Survey by the Singapore Human Resources Institute, where the majority of Singaporean workers were in a band between happy and unhappy labelled as "under-happy". The long working hours and low productivity meant that GDP growth per hour work was about 1.4% compared to similar mature economies displaying growth of 2.3%.

On tackling these challenges, he believed that employers, particularly those in small businesses, recognised the need and benefit of investing in training their workers but lacked the redundancy to allow employees to take time off for that. He also noted that many Singaporeans faced a sub-optimal job fit. The issue of motivation for work had to be addressed by employees but the question was how this could be done.

Throughout the open discussion, both the discussants and the audience spoke at length about the gap between how respondents described themselves and their perceptions of society today. One participant noted that earlier in Singapore, individuals relied on family and community for support, whereas this reliance had shifted towards the state and market. Shifting the focus back to community and family was what respondents seemed to be hankering for.

So what more could be done to move towards the ideal society? A discussant suggested that Singaporeans needed to extend their notions of who was in their world. For instance, if an individual was asked whether he was gracious or compassionate, he might respond in the affirmative but he may not see his impact in a wider setting. A speaker shared an anecdote of how someone who valued "the environment" of his car might throw litter right out of the window, as he did not have regard for that area outside of it. If the individual could expand his consciousness to say the road outside, he would take his litter further and this environmental consciousness could eventually encompass the whole globe.

Participants, both from the audience and the discussants, spoke about how leaders in the workplace have to create the settings that allow people to fully express their current and desired values in society and their workplace, especially if empowerment and recognition are important to Singaporean workers. Other participants warned however that Singaporeans also need to recognise what is expected of them: while Singapore has attracted many global companies, for instance, it is not for what Singapore can offer *per se* but often because it is a gateway to business opportunities and activities in the region. For Singaporeans to truly add economic value, they must be prepared to work and even re-locate to elsewhere in the region, which many generally prefer not to. This opens the way for expatriates to take the better, higher-level jobs as they are more prepared to move out of their comfort zones than Singaporeans are. Singaporeans who complain about being held back have to realise that it has nothing to do with lack of recognition but the level of economic value they create.

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