IPS Institute of
Policy Studies

IPS-aAdvantage Roundtable on the National Values Assessment (Singapore 2012)

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Introduction

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and aAdvantage Consulting co-hosted a roundtable discussion on the National Values Assessment (NVA)[1] 2012. The survey was conducted by aAdvantage Consulting in Singapore and Barrett Values Centre (BVC) based in the United Kingdom, the originator of the tool. The purpose of the survey that aAdvantage and BVC conducted was to find out Singapore residents' views on society and the workplace as they are today, and what they want them to be.

The roundtable was chaired by Dr Gillian Koh, IPS Senior Research Fellow. Mr Phil Clothier, Chief Executive Officer of BVC, presented the results, which were followed by remarks from the three discussants: Professor David Chan, Professor of Psychology and Director at the Behavioural Sciences Institute at Singapore Management University; Mr David Leow, Head of Medium Enterprise, Singapore, at Standard Chartered Bank; and Ms Lian Pek, Chief Editor of Channel NewsAsia at MediaCorp Pte Ltd.

Mr Clothier explained that the NVA was conducted in June and July 2012. A total of 2,000 Singapore residents were chosen through stratified quota sampling, to ensure that they matched the distribution of the resident population on the basis of age, gender and housing-type. The results can be taken as indicative of (even if they cannot be generalised as to) the views of Singapore residents.

Respondents were asked three categories of questions about Singapore society and the workplace. In the first category, respondents defined their personal values. The second category of questions examined respondents' views of Singapore society; that is, their perception of current society and their desired society. The third category of questions focused on their views of their workplace; that is, their current workplace and their desired workplace. For each question, they were asked to pick 10 values or behaviours, out of a list of nearly 90 for each of the three categories.

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[1]. According to the introduction to the National Values Assessment, "The well-being of a nation is significantly influenced by the values, beliefs and behaviours that are uppermost in the minds of the citizens. Understanding what these values, beliefs and behaviours are and what the citizens would like to see, is vitally important for building a successful, harmonious, and peaceful nation."

The tables below have been adapted from the BVC-aAdvantage media release of the survey results, and list the 10 most frequently mentioned values in the responses.

Table 1: How Singapore residents view the current and desired Singapore society

What Singapore residents consider as the values and behaviours that best describe themselves	How Singapore residents perceive Singapore society as it is today	How Singapore residents define their desired Singapore society
- Family - Friendship - Health - Happiness - Caring - Honesty - Responsibility - Well-being (physical/ emotional/mental/ spiritual) - Respect - Balance (home/work)	*Kiasu*[2] - Competitive - Self-centred - Material needs *Kiasi*[3] - Deteriorating values - Elitism - Blame - Uncertainty about the future - Security	- Affordable housing - Caring for the elderly - Effective healthcare - Caring for the disadvantaged - Compassion - Concern for future generations - Quality of life - Equal opportunities - Social responsibility - Employment opportunities

Table 2: How Singapore residents view the current and desired workplace

How Singapore residents perceive their current workplace	How Singapore residents define their desired workplace
- Customer satisfaction - Teamwork - Cost reduction - Long hours - Brand image - Results orientation - Continuous improvement - Accountability - Continuous learning - Hierarchy	- Balance (home/work) - Teamwork - Employee recognition - Employee fulfilment - Continuous improvement - Continuous learning - Respect - Staff engagement - Coaching/Mentoring - Leadership development

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[2]. *Kiasu* is a local colloquialism in the Hokkien dialect that directly translates as "scared to lose". It is generally used to describe selfish and inconsiderate behaviours.
[3]. *Kiasi* is another local colloquialism that directly translates as "scared to die". It is generally used to describe over-cautious or extremely risk-averse behaviours.

In the question "How Singapore residents perceive Singapore society as it is today", among the 10 words that received the most mentions, eight were considered by BVC to be "potentially limiting" values[4] and just two were "positive" values[5]. In terms of "potentially limiting" values and behaviours cited, Singapore had the sixth-lowest frequency among the 18 countries where the NVA had been conducted so far. At 41%, Singapore scored lower than countries such as the United States (56%) and Finland (48%). Venezuela had the highest percentage of potentially limiting values at 72%, while Bhutan had the lowest at 4%.

The values that respondents cited when defining their desired society went beyond survival needs and included transformational and self-actualising values[6], indicating a desire for positive change in society and concern for the common good, respectively.

With regard to questions on the workplace, respondents in both the public and private sectors expressed similar perceptions and desires. Overall, the percentage of potentially limiting values and behaviours in this section was 21%. It was noted that the results could be a function of their personal and daily experiences at the workplace, rather than a projection of their perceptions on what Singapore society is. As with their perception of society, transformational values were cited when respondents described their desired workplace.

While Mr Clothier agreed that the findings were by no means conclusive, he believed that they would be a useful starting point for a public dialogue about what people desire in the future, as well as a tool to organise themes of discussion, ask specific questions about areas of public policy, and allow for deeper inquiry into creating the sort of future that Singapore residents want. He explained how the tool had been used in Iceland to re-energise its people towards the process of recovery after the economic crisis they faced in 2008. Participants also agreed that the honesty and openness of Singapore residents in citing potentially limiting values suggested that dialogue would be fruitful.

The Corporate Perspective — Workplace Values

Addressing the views of Singapore residents on their current and desired workplaces, Mr Leow gave a brief overview of the policies that Standard Chartered has in place to benefit its employees and the communities in which the bank operates. He also highlighted that the bank's employee assessment criteria that is now value- rather than performance-based. Mr Leow explained that as a multinational company (MNC), Standard Chartered is highly cognisant of employee needs and is constantly striving to give their employees a better working environment.

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4. "Potentially limiting" was defined by the survey as values that were not intrinsically negative, but could be harmful if lived to excess. The eight values classified as potentially limiting in the perception of current society were: *kiasu*, competitive, self-centred, *kiasi*, deteriorating values, elitism, blame, and uncertainty about the future.
5. "Positive values" are those that contribute to a healthy, dynamic, sustainable social setting.
6. This analysis was based on Richard Barrett's Seven Levels of Consciousness, an extension of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Details may be found in the Appendix. Additional information may also be found on the BVC website: http://www.valuescentre.com/culture/?sec=barrett_model

Two participants from other MNCs shared how their organisations engage and retain employees, with one noting that "high-touch" employee engagement has become more important in recent years. Workers value the emphasis on "experience", "teamwork" and "connectivity" over just hitting business targets, one participant said. They said the NVA results were consistent with those of their internal organisational surveys.

The issues of diversity and inclusion were highlighted as current challenges that companies face. Getting people from different nationalities to work as a team and establishing an unbiased, meritocratic framework for recruitment and promotion were two major concerns in thinking about the ideal workplace.

The Media and Values

The role of the media in shaping and reflecting values was discussed by Ms Pek. It was observed that media stories about life in Singapore resonated with the findings of the NVA. The concerns voiced by respondents in thinking about their desired society were also highly similar to those cited by the political leadership. While this could be interpreted as a product of political socialisation where people adopt the same ideals and beliefs as those propagated by the leadership, Ms Pek expressed that from recent experiences, it was more likely a case of government leaders becoming increasingly aware of people's desire.

Questions were then raised about the type of national conversations and rules of engagement that could help address and achieve such desires. Ms Pek noted that a large part of spontaneous discussions on this matter were taking place on social media. While mainstream media in Singapore is trying to catch up on the discussions that are taking place on social media, she also urged the government to re-double its efforts at online engagement. Asked about the perceived lack of credibility of the mainstream media, Ms Pek agreed that this could be the opinion in certain quarters. As such, the mainstream media would need to be conscious of maintaining its credibility by attempting to accurately capture the views and opinions about Singapore on the ground and online.

Limitations and Caveats of the NVA

Prof Chan cautioned against taking the NVA at face value, and raised several points regarding the survey results and methodology. He pointed out that out of all the values that were cited by Singaporeans as being reflective of society today, only one (*kiasu*) was cited by more than 50% of respondents. This ran contrary to previous research showing that 80-90% of Singaporeans agreed on certain values (e.g., meritocracy and integrity) as being important.

Also, certain values and concepts that were previously and usually found to be important in other studies were missing from the NVA list — meritocracy, multiracialism and filial piety to name a few. He also felt it was better to ask respondents to rank their choices, giving them the ability to indicate the relative importance of each value rather than relying on the frequency of mentions alone.

Prof Chan further stressed the importance of properly defining what "values" were to eliminate ambiguity. The words on the list shown to respondents in the NVA were not only values, but public services and personal traits as well, which made direct comparison difficult. Participants also agreed that the modification to include local traits such as *kiasu* and *kiasi* may have influenced respondents to pick those, as they would be highly familiar to respondents.

Responding to queries about operational definitions and validity, Mr Clothier acknowledged that BVC is constantly responding to feedback and refining the NVA so as to better capture the attitudes of people in different regions and countries. While the survey was designed with face validity[7] in mind, BVC had not had much experience in conducting such surveys in Asia. BVC would thus continue to adapt the survey to a more Singaporean and Asian context. He also explained that the word "values" was used more broadly to include the wider concept of "beliefs and behaviours". He hoped, as did Prof Chan, that an evidence-based approach to discussing values and beliefs people hold about society and the workplace would be helpful.

Conclusion

Wrapping up the roundtable, Dr Koh said that there were several methodologies for trying to understand what moves a nation — there were structured and un-structured instruments, such as narrative capture[8] and sense-making[9] in the case of the latter. It might be good to have systems that capture opinion in an unstructured manner rather than rely only on strong pre-conceptions of what these might be.

She appreciated how the NVA was meant to be a useful conversation-starter about the values of Singaporeans and their perceptions of society. The aAdvantage Team had highlighted in their media release that one question that should arise is whether there are other dimensions or "values" that had not been listed, and which might be important in discussing Singapore's values and beliefs about society and the workplace.

Mr Leow also highlighted the difference between the desire and the willingness to change and the need to make the choices and sacrifices to effect that change. In the first place, it was challenging enough to establish what people want.

Others felt that the NVA findings could be put alongside other data, to triangulate their understanding of Singapore society, and specifically the workplace. For instance, it was noted that there were no entries at the 'common good' level among the top 10 descriptors for the public sector workplace today, and this observation would benefit from further investigation to see if it is corroborated by other studies.

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[7]. Face validity refers to whether a test or survey appears, on first glance, to be accurately measuring what it is supposed to measure. High face validity allows for surveys to be intuitive and accessible to laypersons.

[8]. Narrative capture is a qualitative research method which uses interviews or surveys to collect narratives from individuals, through which more may be discerned about their environment, context, and understanding of events.

[9]. Sense-making is a process used to interpret raw data in order to understand the motivations, perspectives, and interests of individuals.

## APPENDIX: BARRETT'S SEVEN LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Personal Consciousness
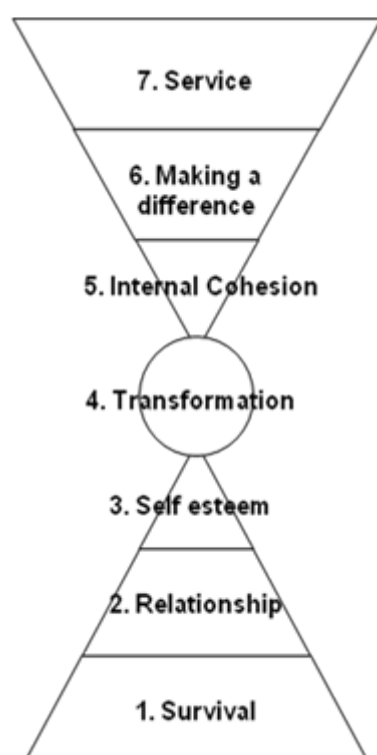
Level (diagram)		Description
7. Service	**Common Good**	**Selfless service** Being your purpose. Compassion, humility, forgiveness. Caring for humanity and the planet.
6. Making a difference		**Making a positive difference in the world** Living your purpose. Empathy, alliances, cooperation, intuition, mentoring and focus on wellbeing (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual)
5. Internal Cohesion		**Finding meaning in existence** Finding your purpose. Integrity, honesty, authenticity, passion, enthusiasm, creativity and humour & fun.
4. Transformation		**Letting go of fears.** Finding the courage to grow and develop. Adaptability, lifelong learning, continuous renewal and personal growth.
3. Self esteem	**Self-interest**	**Feeling a sense of self-worth** Confidence, competence, self-reliance. **Fear: I am not enough.** Leads to need for respect and recognition and power, authority or status seeking.
2. Relationship		**Feeling protected and loved** Family, friendship, loyalty, safety. **Fear: I am not loved enough.** Leads to jealousy, blame, and discrimination.
1. Survival		**Satisfying physiological and survival needs** Health, security, financial stability. **Fear: I do not have enough.** Leads to control, domination, demanding, and impatience.

National Consciousness
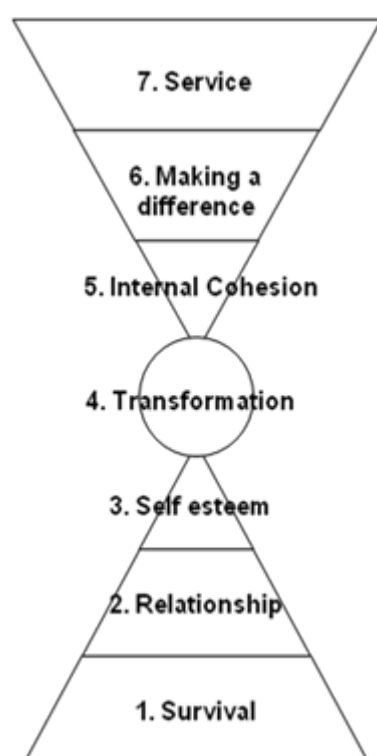
Level (diagram)		Description
7. Service	**Common Good**	**Global sustainability** Human rights, long-term perspective, ecological resilience, peace, focus on future generations and inter-generational equity. Global perspective.
6. Making a difference		**Strategic alliances and regional partnerships** Regional collaboration, environmental awareness, quality of life, community involvement and sustainability. Caring for nature and for the disadvantaged.
5. Internal Cohesion		**Strong cohesive culture** Shared vision and values. Fairness, transparency, trust, shared vision and values, citizen dialogue and social cohesion. Positive cohesive spirit.
4. Transformation		**Democratic process and continuous renewal** Freedom, equality, empowerment, accountability, adaptability, shared values, entrepreneurship and consensus.
3. Self esteem	**Self-interest**	**Institutional effectiveness** Law abiding, community/national pride, governmental efficiency and high-quality public services. Bureaucracy, central control, elitism, complacency, and apathy.
2. Relationship		**Sense of belonging and social stability** Neighbourliness, conflict resolution, racial harmony and a focus on family and friendships. Inequality, discrimination, intolerance, hatred, and loneliness/isolation.
1. Survival		**Economic stability and citizen security** Prosperity, health care, employment, emergency services/defence and social safety nets. Corruption, violence, poverty, environmental pollution, and greed.

Organisational Consciousness
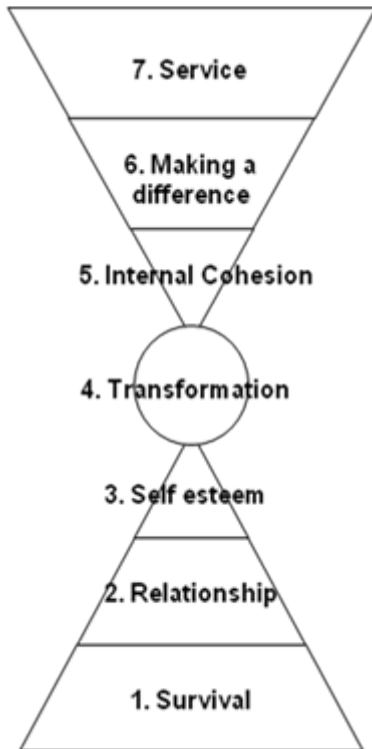
Service to humanity and societal contribution Social responsibility, long-term perspective, ethics, compassion, and humility.	**Common Good**
Internal/External collaboration, community involvement Environmental awareness, employee fulfilment, coaching/mentoring and caring for the local community.	
Sense of purpose & strong internal community Shared vision and values. Commitment, creativity, enthusiasm, integrity, honesty, generosity, fairness, openness, transparency and trust.	
On-going improvement and employee participation Adaptability, accountability, empowerment, teamwork, goals orientation and continuous improvement.	
High performance systems and processes Reliability, quality, efficiency, productivity and excellence. Bureaucracy, hierarchy, confusion, and complacency.	**Self-interest**
Positive relationships that support organisational needs Loyalty, open communication, customer satisfaction. Manipulation, blame, favouritism, and secrecy.	
Financial stability and people safety Financial performance, organisational growth and employee health and safety. Control, greed, exploitation, and micro-management.	

Diagram levels (left to right):
7. Service
6. Making a difference
5. Internal Cohesion
4. Transformation
3. Self esteem
2. Relationship
1. Survival

Source: Barrett Values Centre
(http://www.valuescentre.com/culture/?sec=barrett_model)

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