

# What makes a good S'porean leader? Humility, transparency & creativity wanted: IPS Forum

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What qualities should the ideal Singaporean leader possess?

This was one of the major questions discussed on Tuesday (Jan. 19) during "The Values and Qualities of Leadership", a session at the 2021 edition of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) annual forum, Singapore Perspectives.

Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research) and Senior Research Fellow at IPS, and the moderator of the session, opened the session outlining the questions that they would be discussing and noting, "We simply cannot afford a deficit in leadership."

## **1. Innovation and creativity**

One important quality of a leader, according to two speakers at the session — Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee and University of Bath Professor Margaret Heffernan — is innovation and creativity.

Chan bypassed what she called the "obvious qualities" of charisma, communication skills, and the ability to connect with people.

Instead, she focused on an important skill for the changing world that is to come: "The ability to be bold and instilling a culture of daring to try".

### **Difference between Singapore and Dubai**

She recounted a story told to her by a foreign architect, who noticed a big difference between his clients in Singapore and those in Dubai.

When showing plans for an "innovative and unusual" structure to Singapore clients, the architect would be asked whether the structure had been built before, and how many times.

The clients would only go forward if it had been tried and tested previously.

In Dubai, the same plans shown to Emirati clients would elicit similar questions about whether it had been built before.

However, the response was different; if it had been built before, the clients would reject it, as they wanted something completely new and never built before.

Similarly, Heffernan advocated for creative leadership. Working toward a better future, she said, requires "huge amounts of imagination and creativity", especially with the uncertainty that the future brings.

## **2. Humility**

In addition, Heffernan highlighted the importance of leaders having the "capacity for humility".

She drew from an example of the Irish government's process of deciding what to do about a law regarding abortion.

In order to make the decision, the government convened a citizen's assembly to hear what everyday people felt about the issue.

"Leadership requires the capacity to believe that people can talk argue debate, and learn. It requires some trust in the process," Heffernan said

ogether with humility is also the ability to listen, she added. "It's a really provocative thought that leaders are often behind until they start to listen, hard. And very often as we've seen, it takes activists to bring them up to date."

Chan also encouraged leaders to recognise the times when they might be wrong, and said that changing one's decision after engaging with the people strengthens legitimacy.

Zuraidah Abdullah, Chief Executive Officer of Yayasan MENDAKI and one of two the discussants in the session, agreed with the importance of listening to the community.

She said if people were given the opportunity to speak up, they may agree with the points even if the decision made does not please them.

### **3. Transparency**

Another important aspect of leadership embodied in the citizen's assembly, said Heffernan, was transparency.

Heffernan stated that the Irish government "went to enormous lengths to make the exercises as transparent as possible".

Due to this, people were able to accept the eventual outcome of the decision and accepted its legitimacy, even if they did not agree with it.

Chan concurred with Heffernan, calling the way that Ireland had allowed for time and transparency on the important issue a "beautiful process".

"In the end, if you have to take a difficult decision, you tell them why you do it," she said.

### **4. Character and morality**

The other discussant in the session, Han Fook Kwang, Straits Times Editor-at-large and former Editor, also expounded on the importance of strong leadership, saying "I think, without strong leadership, we would not even survive. It's like air or water."

But this kind of leadership in Singapore, Han said, has historically been very values-driven. "I believe that leadership is less about competence than it is about character and morality," he said.

While competence is important, it can also be provided by professionals like civil servants.

However, moral leadership is about inspiring others, shaping attitudes and behaviour, and forging a sense of community and a shared future.

"Is it more difficult to achieve this today than in the past? I think, only if our leaders allow it to be so," he said.

## **5. Being relatable**

Finally, leaders should be relatable, according to Han. He posed a couple of questions:

"So what differentiates someone from another, and the rest of the 1,000 other voices there are? How does the leader stand out in the crowd, and gain their respect?"

His answer is that someone stands out if they are seen as a real person with feelings and emotions, not someone aloof and detached.

They also stand out if they have a strong conviction about what they believe in, keep their word, and is seen as one of the people.

### **Leadership reflects the diversity of the population**

Overall, the panellists agreed that leadership in Singapore should reflect the population, with Chan saying that leadership reflecting diversity is "at the heart" of politics and society in multi-racial Singapore.

This includes not just racial diversity but also gender diversity and intergenerational diversity in leadership.

Han stated that he feels that the government should broaden the pool of people that it draws upon for positions of authority, such as statutory boards and review committees.

Zuraidah also shared her thoughts on the importance of having a diversity of leaders from different segments of society:

"In turn, we will then have an opportunity to form a leadership group that is multicultural and intergenerational, that embraces diversity and demonstrates empathy and insights of the society that they serve."