

Crossing the 'us versus them' barrier

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A divisive foreign-local confrontation was ignited at this year's National Interschool Badminton Championship finals between Jurong Junior College (JJC) and Raffles Junior College (RJC). The JJC team comprised foreign students while the RJC players were local-born Singaporeans.

It was reported that the RJC team accused its opponents of depriving native Singaporeans of the top spots in the competition.

A similar contestation was re-enacted at a recent ministerial dialogue. According to news reports, employers and employees in attendance disagreed on the extent of the need for foreign workers in Singapore, while Singapore citizens and permanent residents (PRs) argued over how entitlements and resources should be distributed between them.

The frustrations expressed by Singaporeans and foreigners exemplify the perception gap that exists. For a city-state that prides itself as the archetype of a tolerant multicultural society, what is driving this schism of 'us versus them'?

A study by Ms Sara Solnick and Mr David Hemenway (1998) from Harvard University suggests that it is not the absolute amount of benefits one gets that determines happiness, but how that compares with those received by someone viewed to be of similar standing. A person is happier if his peers are worse off, and upset if he is worse off. The sense of relative deprivation breeds resentment; the notion of fairness in resource distribution is never just an objective exercise.

Foreigners in Singapore too are motivated by the principle of fair exchange. Few fair-minded Singaporeans would want holders of work permits, employment passes, student visas, or those with PR status, to feel short-changed for their toil here as this may lead to undue anxiety and tension.

Native Singaporeans, on the other hand, shoulder more responsibilities and commitments, and most notably perform national service. They feel they deserve more privileges as their birthright, especially every possible opportunity to take top spots in school competitions and corporate boardrooms.

What can we do to mitigate the sense of unfair competition and relative deprivation felt by both sides?

The starting point is for all decision-makers to better communicate the imperatives for foreign manpower at the national, sectoral and corporate levels.

The business sector has to set out more cogently and publicly how it exercises due diligence to ensure that Singaporeans are not left out in the recruitment process. This is a conversation they need to have with Singaporeans at large. If there are other factors at play, whether work ethics, or work hours, they should say so - is it true that Singaporeans just will not do what it takes to win at the game?

Everyone at the decision-making and opinion-making levels has to find convincing ways to account for the contributions of foreign manpower to our economy and country - productivity, knowledge transfer, research and development, service standards, social development, and improved quality of life for all. It is harder to feel deprived if you know your position in the broader scheme of things.

The funding of integration activities of PRs and new citizens must also be thoughtfully delivered. In disbursing funds for grassroots organisations to reach out to new residents, the impression is that these groups are mollycoddled. In implementation, the scheme has to be seen to enrich our shared community life rather than just pandering to foreigners. This requires both sides to bring specific contributions to the activity funded.

In our engagement with foreigners here, the limits and obligations need to be spelt out clearly so that they are accurately informed about the extent of their entitlements vis-a-vis the citizens, or the social norms and expectations of them at the workplace, or just going about the daily chores of life.

Grassroots bodies and expatriate clubs can play a proactive role in this. It is difficult to feel deprived if the expectations of the host are made well known.

Most importantly, we need ways to signpost when we might be reaching the tipping point when welcome turns to animosity. More open discussion on how best to do this is necessary.

To promote the attraction of our city-state to both citizens and new residents, the idea of the Singapore Promise has been propagated - Singapore as a great place to live, study, work and play; offering a diverse but inclusive environment that rewards talent and hard work; as a city-state that epitomises meritocracy.

It is an inspiring goal but in order to achieve this, the 'us versus them' schism must be removed. The fates of residents and non-residents are closely intertwined. The way to realise the Singapore Promise is to appreciate the contribution of all stakeholders to the well-being of Singapore. This will close the gap in the perception of fairness and will engender more trust and confidence among every resident in Singapore.

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