

Being gracious makes dollars and sense

Leong Wee Keat

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SINGAPORE - In an increasingly competitive society, what is the economic benefit of gracious living to Singapore?

This question, among others, was debated yesterday at the Singapore Perspectives conference, with general agreement that civic mindedness does carry an economic cache.

On the workfront, social activist Braema Mathi felt an employee would be more loyal if a company treats him fairly, citing the fallout sportswear giant Nike suffered after it failed to practise good labour conditions in Indonesia.

On the national level, "graciousness" and "courtesy" have been previously linked to economic productivity and social harmony, pointed out researcher Dr Terence Chong.

For example, the then-Singapore Tourism Promotion Board's courtesy campaign in 1978 was meant to get Singaporeans to be gracious toward foreigners.

In 1992, the Global City for the Arts campaign aimed to transform Singapore into a cultural hub, attract foreign talent and retain talented Singaporeans.

"The economic benefits are always there and the rationale have always been played out," said Dr Chong, a fellow at the Institute of South East Asian Studies.

What may not work in future, he felt, are Government-led campaigns, as Singaporeans may "switch off". Instead, he suggested that communities and individuals stamp their identities on such initiatives.

But Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh argued, there is space for national campaigns as they had previously achieved desired goals in social norms in a short span of time. Drawing from his experience as former National Arts Council chairman, Professor Koh said policy makers often have to "dress up what we want to do in economic language". "If I don't use economic language, I don't get the money," he said.

Panellist and Republic Polytechnic lecturer Gan Su-lin offered a more personal approach on graciousness.

"Perhaps the challenge to everyone is what random acts of kindness are you going to do. And how are you going to get five others to do what you do," she said.