

More Head or Heart?

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The New Paper On Sunday suggests 3 ways to tweak meet-the-people sessions

- *Give training to MPs on how to handle emotional and tricky situations.*
- *Organise a retreat for grassroots volunteers to fine-tune procedures, and to develop EQ.*
- *Hold meet-the-people sessions more frequently for the duration of the recession.*

A NUMBER tag in one hand, a petition in the other, and a long wait in line for a few precious minutes with your Member of Parliament.

For many Singaporeans, this is their queue of hope - a chance to get a favour, bend a rule, find some sympathy, get a little leg up, or a second chance.

They are not there to compliment their MP or to simply chat.

Nor is this really a 'meet-the-people' session (MPS) for the MP.

This is the fringe group, the ones with problems. They do not represent the majority of people.

This is not the place to hear views or build a rapport with people. This is problem-solving at a frenetic pace.

So, should it be called a 'meet-the-problem' session instead?

If so, it will help clarify how the sessions can evolve to better serve the target audience.

To put it another way, it will help clarify what should lead the way - the head or the heart?

Head for efficiency

'At every MPS, I see about 50 cases,' said MP Halimah Yacob (Jurong GRC).

'That adds up to hundreds of cases per year, and easily thousands in just a few years. And that's just for one MP.'

The sheer numbers call for a form-filling approach - to record and track all requests in an organised way.

It also means that lines have to be kept moving, so others do not have to wait ages before they get to see the MP.

The head rules here.

But the expectation is different.

Those with problems expect all heart from the MP.

So, how can this be better managed?

Some observers think grassroots workers can be trained to follow up after the first meeting with the MP.

This will give people a chance to talk more and for grassroots leaders to empathise with their plight.

Leaders with heart

A veteran grassroots leader, Mr Philip Liao, the 58-year-old chairman of the Shun Fu Residents' Committee, claimed: 'There is not enough empathy, not just at the MPS, but also at the town councils and CDCs.

'When it comes to the poor, we cannot rationalise too much. Worse still, you cannot treat every case like the one before.'

Indeed, 25 years ago, when he became a grassroots volunteer, 'people volunteered with their hearts', said Mr Liao.

'Nowadays, people do it to get their kids into good schools.'

Long-time volunteer Henry Ling, 63, director of a human resources firm, echoed the same concern.

'People are volunteering at MPS for a variety of reasons, some personal and some altruistic,' said Mr Ling, who was a volunteer for 10 years at the People's Association and still helps out at MPS.

'Some of the grassroots volunteers these days don't even know their own neighbours.'

MP Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade GRC) and MP Halimah Yacob said they do not face problems with grassroots volunteers who come with the wrong motivations.

'It is natural that in the course of work, ties are forged between MPs and their volunteers,' said Mr Seah. 'But if you don't come with the right motivations, one can see. Sometimes, one can also hear.'

Said Madam Halimah: 'If you are not sincere, it is not sustainable.'

Old-style bonding

Mr Francis Han, the 62-year-old former chairman of the Kaki Bukit Community Centre management committee, fears that grassroots volunteers are losing touch with the poor.

'The grassroots scene in Singapore has evolved from the 1960s, where it was a down-to-earth affair where people mingled with one another, to one today where volunteers are more aloof, do not empathise with the poor, and where there is a lack of touch.'

In the old days, said Mr Han, MPs settled problems by picking up the phone and talking to the person-in-charge.

'Nowadays, the MPs send letters instead and many of them are standardised, copy-and-paste type of letters.

'And when they receive these letters, the ministries might send back the same standardised replies,' said Mr Han.

Both heart and head

Mr Seah disagrees with those who say the MPs are losing touch with those with problems.

He has seen a rise in the number of cases at every MPS - from an average of 35 before the financial crisis last September, to an average of 45 these days.

'If I am seeing fewer and fewer people instead, then that may be even more worrying,' said Mr Seah.

To criticism that ministries give standardised replies to the letters they send, Madam Halimah said that only one in 10 replies she received may 'tend to be standardised'.

'But if we are not satisfied, we can write directly to the minister or bring it up in Parliament,' she said.

What's most important, she said, is that the MP tries, even for cases with little chance of succeeding.

'Even if the problem isn't solved, at least it's a chance for us to explain the policy to them in a face-to-face manner because sometimes, policy can be very dry and difficult to understand.'

Train our MPs

Reader Khoo Kah Liang, 55, a businessman, suggested getting psychologists to train MPs in people management skills.

'Just because they are MPs and can speak well in Parliament, it doesn't mean they have the ability to manage people,' said Mr Khoo, who has been involved in grassroots activities over the past 10 years.

'MPs are our frontline soldiers. They are already doing one heck of a job. But it won't hurt to give them a bit more training,' he said.

As hundreds head for meet-the-people sessions all over housing estates in Singapore, the investment in training both MPs and grassroots workers might well yield dividends.

Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, suggested getting all grassroots volunteers to go on a retreat.

It would be a chance, she explained, for them to examine the strategies, protocol and language of comforting the needy at the MPS.

Her other suggestion: Hold MPS more than once a week for the duration of this recession.

This will give MPs, if they can work it into their already jam-packed schedules, a chance to spend more time with every resident who comes in.

For the down-and-out, there is perhaps nothing quite like sharing their burden with an MP sitting across the table.

That few minutes, though short, can mean the world to them.

Additional reporting by NG TZE YONG