

How can Singapore move up the values ladder?

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Singaporeans can be a self-reflexive lot. We have been socialised to believe in excellence and self-reliance, and in many ways, we have tried to live up to those expectations.

However, we often feel conflicted within themselves: we have done well as a nation and economy; but, as individuals, we perhaps still see ourselves caught in the rat race, despite a strong desire to find true meaning in life and to be of service to the community and humanity at large.

Those at least are the findings of a survey conducted by aAdvantage Consulting and the Barrett Values Centre early this year.

The survey polled 2,000 Singaporeans aged 15 or older on the personal values we believe best reflect who we are; the values that best capture what we think is prevailing in Singapore currently; and the values that best define the kind of Singapore society we desire.

To track value shifts over the decade, the findings could be compared with that of the two previous surveys conducted in 2012 and 2015.

This year's survey found that Singaporeans want to move up the values ladder, moving from prioritising basic needs (health, friendship, and family) to higher order values (honesty, happiness, and compassion).

More generally, the personal values selected indicates a desire to move beyond living a life narrowly focused on pursuing material well-being and on a close circle of friends and family to seeking a well-balanced, purposeful life dedicated to serving the wider community.

They also connote a redefinition of success away from emphasising wealth and prestige to one of serving a greater purpose.

This upward shift in personal values is cause for celebration, but it can be hindered or facilitated by the prevailing societal culture.

Indeed, the survey found that while Singaporeans evaluate their society as performing well in terms of the provision of educational opportunities, care for the elderly, and effective healthcare services, they also associate the following attitudes and values with those around them: kiasu, kiasi, complaining, competitive, materialistic, blame, and self-centred.

The survey findings on what Singaporeans deem as desirable for our society are equally telling.

They indicate that, notwithstanding the negative current culture, Singaporeans remain committed to higher order values which they consider as desirable for Singapore.

In this wish list are compassion, care for the environment, concern for future generations, care for the elderly, and care for the disadvantaged.

The desired societal values they have in mind clearly resonate with their personal values, and which they hope would replace the negative societal values present in Singapore society.

The dissonance between personal values and perceived current societal culture could also be seen as a reflection of Singaporeans' unhappiness, displeasure, even anger, with their own society, and therefore a useful feedback for those charting the future directions of Singapore.

If such societal values persist and dampen Singaporeans' desire to live by higher order values, they can lead to social tensions or cultural entropy.

What is also interesting is that interspersed among the higher order societal values desired by Singapore, there are several familiar, lower order ones.

Heading the list is affordable housing, followed by effective healthcare, dependable public services, and educational opportunities.

Their presence in the wish list indicate that they remain of high priority in the lives of Singaporeans.

They reflect Singaporeans' abiding preoccupation with staying employable, home-ownership, and healthcare, and in turn the anxieties experienced by the middle class and the sandwiched generation in the face of our rapidly ageing population as well as digital disruptions in the labour market.

They also resonate with our national narrative about Singapore's vulnerability, a condition not of our own choosing.

Clearly, the survival ideology of the early years of Singapore's independence has not been superseded to an extent by which we could now afford to commit ourselves fully to living by higher order values, like compassion, work-life balance, and happiness.

Be that as it may, it remains critical that we deal with the negative current culture of dysfunctional competitiveness, materialism, and looking out only for oneself that prevent us from achieving our full potential as a society.

What kind of desirable future society could we then try to achieve?

Perhaps, it can look something like this.

First, people may play different occupational roles, but are treated as equals, in society.

Whether or not this is likely to happen would involve more than just a change of mindsets.

Rather, it would entail a transformation of our social structure from a tall hierarchy, where brain power outranks muscle power, to a flatter structure, where most people are trained for jobs requiring thinking skills, while menial blue-collar and white-collar functions are performed by digital devices.

This scenario can become a reality as more Singaporeans avail ourselves of opportunities to gain the necessary knowledge and thinking skills and acquire a can-do spirit for a diverse economy where there are multiple pathways to success.

Second, people are motivated to be creative, innovative, and productive not by individual-based, material incentives, but by passion and intrinsic rewards.

They emphasise cooperation, collaboration and teamwork in working towards common goals.

Is such a transformation in our orientation towards work and co-workers possible?

To the extent that people are given the opportunity to pursue their own passion, they would find their work intrinsically rewarding and fulfilling, rather than being obsessively focused on competing with others in a zero-sum game.

They may also seek others with like passion and interests to collaborate on projects, learn from one another, create synergy, and reap the rewards of a positive-sum game.

With careers becoming less structured and not narrowly focused on making a living, it is likely that more Singaporeans would have the leeway to pursue their passion, and in the process co-create a society largely rid of unhealthy competitiveness.

Lastly, where the society is more egalitarian and collaborative, with the potential to form a true community, people are less susceptible to kiasuism and unhealthy competitiveness, while the propensity to complain and blame others is eroded by an affirming culture which seeks to encourage positive behaviours, rather than nit-pick or harp on negative ones.

I believe the seed of the construction of such a society is present in Singapore. We would have to help it germinate, grow, and flourish.

About the author:

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