

DISPLAY THE VALUES WE CLAIM TO HAVE

By Kishore Mahbubani, Published The Straits Times, 15 Aug 2015



Singapore has just had a great party on Aug 9. It was a well-deserved party. We have a lot to celebrate. Our first 50 years have been extraordinarily successful.

Indeed, in our first 50 years, we may have been one of the most successful societies since human history began. No other society has lifted the living standards of its population as quickly and as comprehensively as Singapore has.

Does success in the first 50 years guarantee success in the next 50 years? The obvious answer is "No".

Indeed, since the first 50 years have been extraordinary, it would statistically be more probable that the next 50 years will be ordinary. We will have, like all other societies, our normal ups and downs.

We therefore have to develop societal resilience to deal with these inevitable ups and downs. What is the single most important ingredient for creating resilience?

The simple answer is values.

If Singapore can create a society that emphasises the values of family, responsibility, friendship, happiness, health, caring and honesty, we would enhance our resilience.

However, if Singapore creates a society that emphasises values such as kiasu-ism (Hokkien for being afraid to lose), competitiveness, materialism, self-centredness, kiasi-ism (being afraid to die) and blame-shifting, we are more likely to end up as a less resilient society.

The list of values I mentioned above was not generated by me.

It was the result of a National Values Assessment survey done by Barrett Values Centre in collaboration with aAdvantage Consulting. The survey results were released at a meeting co-organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore (NUS).

To put it simply and without much exaggeration, the results were absolutely shocking.

The first list of positive values I spelt out contains the values that Singaporeans believe are their personal values.

The second list of negative values contains those that Singaporeans believe are the actual values of Singapore society. As The Straits Times journalist Walter Sim said in his report of this survey: "The results indicate a major disconnect between what Singaporeans see as their own personal values and those of society."

Let me add here a small but important qualification on competitiveness. If competitiveness is taken to mean a desire to excel and improve oneself, it is a good thing.

But if competitiveness means getting ahead at the expense of others, then it can easily become acquisitiveness and lead to zero-sum competition, all of which hurt our collective well-being.

Competitiveness can be both good and bad.

Again, without much exaggeration, it would be fair to say that the future of Singapore depends on which list of values is the factually correct description of the actual values of Singaporeans.

If it is the first list, we are probably okay. If it is the second list, we could be in trouble. So the big factual question we need to answer accurately is: Which is the correct list of values?

Positive and negative values

Sadly, the second list is likely to prove to be more correct. Why do I say this? I believe this dichotomy between what Singaporeans think they value and what Singaporeans think Singapore society values stems from self-deception.

Most people think self-deception is a deviant phenomenon restricted to a few abnormal individuals.

Actually, "self-deception" is a prevalent human condition and all of us are victims of it, in one way or another. I learnt this when I did a full course on "self-deception" as part of my philosophy studies at NUS. Most people's perception of themselves is often not correct.

Instead, other people, especially family and friends, can understand our true character better than we can. This is particularly true in the case of values. We demonstrate our values through our deeds.

For example, no one would believe my claim that I believe in "compassion" if they had not seen me carry out a single act of compassion. Hence, when it comes to accurate descriptions of a person's values, what others say is often more accurate than what the self says.

This is why the results of the survey are truly alarming and deserve deep reflection. It is not what we believe about ourselves that reflects our true values.

It is what our colleagues and neighbours see in our behaviour that reflects our true values.

The second list of values is what Singaporeans see in fellow Singaporeans. It is therefore likely to be more accurate.

And this list is mostly negative.

Leaving aside "competitiveness", which can be positive, it reveals that Singaporeans are kiasu, materialistic, self-centred, kiasi and prone to blaming others.

If we continue to display these values in our behaviour over the next 50 years, Singapore society may be headed for trouble.

Change our behaviour

So are we a lost cause? The simple answer is that people can change and improve themselves.

Fortunately, Singaporeans will not have to change their behaviour to suit other people's values. They have only to change their behaviour to reflect the values which they believe are their true values.

This is the first list of positive values spelt out earlier.

The survey also had a third list of aspirational values that Singaporeans would like to see in Singapore society. This list of aspirational values is also very positive. It includes affordable housing, caring for the elderly, effective healthcare, compassion and caring for the disadvantaged.

In short, Singaporeans should change their behaviour to reflect the values they believe they have and the values that they believe Singapore society should have.

Behavioural change is not impossible. The Government has used various policy tools to bring about behavioural change. These include fines against littering, taxes on tobacco and alcohol, congestion charges and other taxes to discourage driving, and many other (dis)incentives to encourage or discourage specific behaviours.

More recently, the work of behavioural economists and psychologists has influenced and inspired governments to nudge citizens to make better decisions.

Such nudges include defaults to encourage behaviours such as retirement savings and health insurance coverage, the use of social proof or norms to get people to act in socially desirable ways and timely reminders to encourage compliance. However, while many of these policy tools have worked and helped to change the behaviour of Singapore citizens, the most lasting change comes from autonomous decisions we make as moral individuals.

Hence, Singaporeans should take greater ownership of this imperative to change our values.

Three ways to act out the Golden Rule

To understand our values better, let us see how we respect a time-honoured and almost universally advocated moral norm: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It is simple and clear. We can implement it daily in three simple ways.

STOP LITTERING

First, we can stop littering. To put it simply, littering is one of the most selfish things a person can do. It is quite shocking how much an average Singaporean litters.

Per capita, we employ more foreign cleaners than virtually any other society.

Taiwan has virtually none.

By keeping common spaces clean, the Taiwanese show they care for their fellow Taiwanese more than Singaporeans care for their fellow Singaporeans.

Many Singaporeans do not believe they are habitual litterbugs. They should then ask themselves this: How many times do they clear their tables after eating at food courts or hawker centres? This simple test reflects our true values.

SHOW COMPASSION IN ACTION

Second, the best way to demonstrate that we have compassion for others is to express it in our deeds, not in our words.

Many Singaporeans contribute a good deal, in dollars and deeds, to charity. But as a recent study by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation pointed out, "in Singapore, it has been estimated that 20 to 35 per cent of households live in relative poverty".

People living in relative poverty do not have enough income to attain what their society considers to be an average standard of living.

Is this an acceptable figure for one of the most affluent societies in the world?

If it is not, what does it say about the real values of our society?

RESPECT OUR NEIGHBOURS

Third, we should show greater respect for our neighbours. Hence, we should not store our junk in Housing Board corridors and void decks without thinking of the impact on our neighbours.

Similarly, in private housing estates, we should not use dustbins to chope (reserve) parking spaces without thinking of the impact on our neighbours.

I am deliberately picking simple examples from our daily lives to demonstrate that it is in the smallest and simplest acts that we display our true values.

In this article, I have emphasised the functional rewards of good values. Yet, it is also true that we derive meaning in life through our values. Our sense of national identity and who we are is also a result of our actual values.

Hence, I hope that in the next 50 years, we Singaporeans will, in our behaviour, display the values that we claim to have and the values that we claim we want to see in our society.

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