IPS-aAdvantage Roundtable on the National Values Assessment for Singapore (2018)

By Dhevarajan Devadas

On the 30th of July 2018, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) partnered Singapore-based aAdvantage Consulting Group to discuss the findings of the 2018 National Values Assessment (NVA 2018), a survey conducted by the latter and the Barrett Values Centre (BVC) of the United Kingdom, on Singaporeans' views of society and their workplaces.

The presentation of the findings by Vincent Ho, Director of aAdvantage was followed by remarks by discussants Tan Ern Ser, Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore; Ho Meng Kit, Chief Executive Officer of the Singapore Business Federation; and K Thanaletchimi, President, Healthcare Services Employees' Union. There was a discussion with more than 40 participants from the public, private and civic sectors as well as academia after that.

Presentation

Mr Vincent Ho explained that the survey asked 2,000 Singaporeans five questions: What values, attitudes and behaviours best reflected, first, their personal values; second, Singapore society today; third, what they desired of Singapore society; fourth, their current workplace; and finally, their desired workplace. They chose the 10 most suitable descriptors from a list of words used in this international survey instrument where a few terms had been localised for better resonance with Singaporean respondents. Some of those descriptors were "potentially limiting values and behaviours", which may not be intrinsically negative but could be harmful if lived to excess. The proportion of mentions of potentially limiting values vis-à-vis other descriptors selected for the questions on the current status constitutes a measure for "national entropy", which is an indicator of how well social order is holding together.

Cultural Entropy for Singapore (2018)

This table depicts the survey participants' total votes for Current Culture potentially limiting values by level. Potentially limiting values reflect the degree of disorder within a system and are found only at levels 1, 2 and 3.

Level	Potentially Limiting Values (Votes)	Cultural Entropy %
3	**Competitiveness (595)** **Self-centredness (479)** Deteriorating values (431) Complacency (423) Elitism (324) Wasted resources (237) Bureaucracy (158)	13% of total votes
2	**Complaining (866)** **Blame (499)** Discrimination (334) Distrust (273) Non-transparency (256) Class division (211)	12% of total votes
1	**Kiasu (1022)** **Materialistic (542)** **Kiasi (482)** Uncertainty about the future (364) Control (231) Unemployment (192) Short-term Focus (185) Crime/ Violence (132) Corruption (125)	16% of total votes
Total	8,361 out of 20,000 votes	**41% of total votes**

Current National Entropy: 41%

Figure 1. Cultural entropy score for current society as perceived by respondents

The 2018 survey is a follow-up to ones conducted in 2012 and 2015, and Mr Vincent Ho noted that "family" was mentioned the most number of times by respondents when describing their personal values. Values such as "kiasu" and "competitiveness" were among the top three current societal values in all three surveys too. National entropy in relation to current society was 41 per cent in 2012; this dipped to 37 per cent in 2015 and reverted to 41 per cent in 2018. Singapore compared favourably to Sweden (entropy at 44 per cent) but fell behind Australia (39 per cent) and Canada (32 per cent). He noted however that the increase may be due to the fact that a new term, "complaining", was introduced in the 2018 survey. It received 4 per cent of all the responses, which was equivalent to the difference between the entropy scores of 2015 and 2018. Figure 1 provides an overview of the values, attitudes and behaviours that contributed to the 2018 national entropy score.

In the workplace, Mr Vincent Ho noted that there was strong recognition of the need to embrace continuous change and adaptability, and that it was present in current workplaces. He warned however that change could also bring on the risk of failure to companies already grappling with many challenges. The good news was that entropy levels in current workplace values had declined—from 22 per cent in 2012 to 20 per cent in 2015 and 19 per cent in 2018. The value that received the most mentions for describing the ideal workplace was "employee recognition", which should prompt employers to develop workplace environments where workers feel motivated because their contributions are recognised. Figure 2 is an

overview of the values, attitudes and behaviours that received top mentions from employed respondents.

Summary of 2018 CVA Results

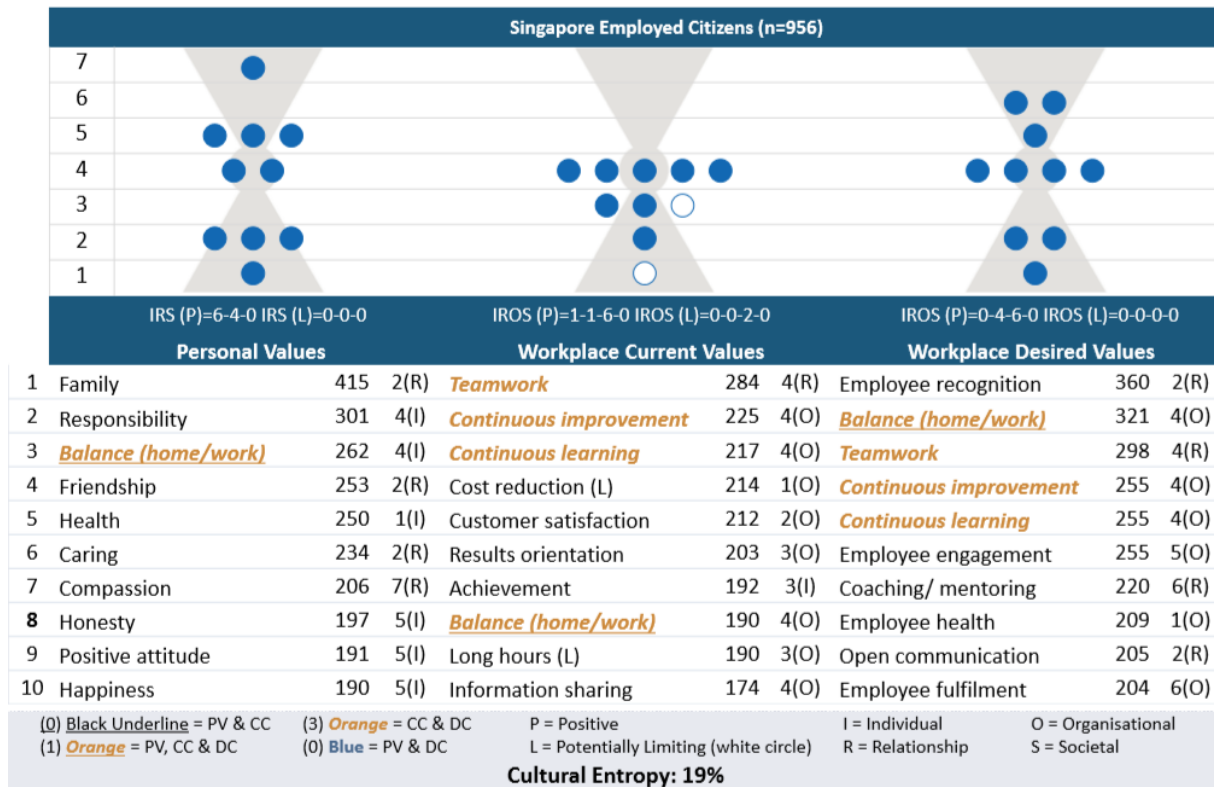### Personal Values vs. Workplace Current vs. Workplace Desired

Singapore Employed Citizens (n=956)

IRS (P)=6-4-0 IRS (L)=0-0-0			IROS (P)=1-1-6-0 IROS (L)=0-0-2-0			IROS (P)=0-4-6-0 IROS (L)=0-0-0-0		
Personal Values			**Workplace Current Values**			**Workplace Desired Values**		
1 Family	415	2(R)	*Teamwork*	284	4(R)	Employee recognition	360	2(R)
2 Responsibility	301	4(I)	*Continuous improvement*	225	4(O)	*Balance (home/work)*	321	4(O)
3 *Balance (home/work)*	262	4(I)	*Continuous learning*	217	4(O)	*Teamwork*	298	4(R)
4 Friendship	253	2(R)	Cost reduction (L)	214	1(O)	*Continuous improvement*	255	4(O)
5 Health	250	1(I)	Customer satisfaction	212	2(O)	*Continuous learning*	255	4(O)
6 Caring	234	2(R)	Results orientation	203	3(O)	Employee engagement	255	5(O)
7 Compassion	206	7(R)	Achievement	192	3(I)	Coaching/ mentoring	220	6(R)
8 Honesty	197	5(I)	*Balance (home/work)*	190	4(O)	Employee health	209	1(O)
9 Positive attitude	191	5(I)	Long hours (L)	190	3(O)	Open communication	205	2(R)
10 Happiness	190	5(I)	Information sharing	174	4(O)	Employee fulfilment	204	6(O)

(0) Black Underline = PV & CC	(3) *Orange* = CC & DC	P = Positive	I = Individual	O = Organisational
(1) *Orange* = PV, CC & DC	(0) **Blue** = PV & DC	L = Potentially Limiting (white circle)	R = Relationship	S = Societal

Cultural Entropy: 19%

Figure 2. Summary of personal values of employed respondents, their current and desired workplace values

Panel Discussion

The first discussant, Assoc. Prof. Tan Ern Ser, noted that Singaporeans were moving up the values ladder when it came to personal values. However, there seemed to be a gap between that and their perceptions of current societal values, which emphasised negative traits such as "kiasu" and "kiasi". He said while the relatively high cultural entropy of 41 per cent, based on the BVC interpretation, could be a prelude to demonstrations, violent disorder and even regime change, he saw no indication that such disruption was imminent in Singapore. Assoc. Prof. Tan added that the presence of several "potentially limiting" factors within the top current societal values demonstrated a level of self-awareness and self-criticism of Singapore society today.

At the same time, he noted there was a clear upward shift to higher order values in desired personal values, with a broader focus on living more meaningful lives beyond chasing a material standard of living. Even so, Assoc. Prof. Tan highlighted that Singaporeans remained pragmatic, ranking basic needs such as affordable housing, educational opportunities and reliable public services highly. A comparison of desired societal values

across the three surveys showed a general upward shift in the lower and middle level values and some downward shift in higher level values. He suggested that economic disruption could be steering Singaporeans to appreciate basic needs slightly more than before.

The second discussant, Mr Ho Meng Kit, made three main observations in his presentation. First, he spoke about the importance of preparing Singaporeans for the jobs of the future. He acknowledged the government's efforts in building an environment conducive for businesses to create jobs, but added that advances in artificial intelligence and automation would affect the viability of current jobs across a broad spectrum of work. While technological advances also created more jobs, previously displaced workers needed access to these new opportunities as well. Mr Ho said that it was encouraging that "continuous improvement" and "continuous learning" were among the top 10 descriptors for both current and desired workplace values; it demonstrated respondents' appreciation of that imperative to adapt to those changing conditions. It also suggested that organisations were prioritising the need for business transformation and adaptability. However, he pointed out that in terms of sampling, a far larger percentage of respondents in the survey worked in large companies or the public sector, which was not reflective of the actual environment that was dominated by the private sector, particularly small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). As a result, there were clear limitations as to how generalisable the data was.

Next, Mr Ho emphasised that local companies must internationalise their operations. With the shift of global economic power to Asia, it was crucial, he said, that Singapore companies educate and groom internationally experienced managers to take advantage of business opportunities outside the country. However, the survey results suggested that Singaporeans had yet to embrace those imperatives, otherwise, words like "entrepreneurship" and "risk taking" would have been mentioned more frequently.

Finally, Mr Ho spoke about the challenge posed by inequality. The rise in global protectionism and barriers to trade that had come about as a result of the unhappiness with inequality around the world, threatened to disrupt the growth of local firms too. This concern about how the fruits of growth were distributed, Mr Ho noted, probably explained the focus on "employee recognition" among respondents whose answers made this the top-ranked value in their conception of the desired workplace. He urged like-minded employers, especially in SMEs, to continue investing in skills training for employees potentially exposed to disruption.

The third discussant, Ms Thanaletchimi, a senior union leader in the healthcare sector, followed up on Mr Ho's points by sharing about the main fears workers had as they faced the rapidly changing economy and job market. In particular, the labour movement was concerned about three groups of workers: the low-wage workers, whose focus was on receiving higher wages and bonuses; older workers, who hoped for sustained employment; and middle-aged and middle-income workers, who feared getting caught in the wave of disruption. Younger workers, on the other hand, were nimbler and flexible enough to change as industries were transformed by that disruption. The upside, Ms Thanaletchimi pointed out, was that "high-touch" industries such as healthcare still depended on humans to deliver services and would not be so easily replaced by technology.

While "teamwork" was mentioned frequently in both current and desired workplace values, Ms Thanaletchimi questioned whether younger and older workers could truly relate to each other and work cohesively. While workplace diversity was an often-discussed issue, she added that income, age and technological divides continued to be major concerns for workers and that much more had to be done to cope with these.

Open Discussion

During the open discussion, several participants questioned why "complaining" had been labelled a "potentially limiting" value, pointing out that there was constructive criticism that could be useful in surfacing flaws and for improvements to be made. Mr Vincent Ho acknowledged the issue, explaining that some values or behaviours were useful in small doses but in excess, they could have negative effect. Hence, the words were referred to as "potentially limiting" but not coded as negative outright.

Participants also raised the issue of the role of human resources (HR) staff in addressing workplace culture issues. There was consensus that HR practices in Singapore could be improved. One participant noted that HR was often grouped with finance departments and occupied mostly with administrative work rather than being empowered to suggest and implement changes to workplace culture. Mr Ho Meng Kit responded by saying that HR divisions should be allowed a more strategic role in companies.

With regard to the conclusions presented, some participants asked whether the data could be analysed further to determine if the values affected certain outcomes or were driving people to behave differently at work. They also questioned whether the survey had measured sentiment rather than values, and that respondents were simply reflecting popular buzzwords of the time. Mr Vincent Ho responded that some words that were in the top 10 list in earlier surveys may have appeared just out of the top 10 in later surveys, nevertheless they remained relevant. Also, highly ranked values were not necessarily the buzzwords of the day. For example, "innovation" was a buzzword but was not among the top 10 descriptors of any category.

There was also a debate on whether it was wise to attempt to "codify" behaviour, given how unpredictable the future could be. In the same vein, a participant pointed out that workplace values could differ between public and private sector employees and that while Singaporeans excelled at being "logisticians", they may not feel as empowered to have the flexibility to cope with evolving environments.

Participants also touched on the age divide where the younger generation seemed more comfortable with technology and automation but might not value the human-touch treasured by older generations. With jobs and industries evolving rapidly, there was an increasing chance that younger workers had skillsets seniors lacked too, making collaboration difficult.

Finally, participants wondered who should take responsibility for facilitating the shift from current values to desired ones. Mr Vincent Ho felt that the government had a role in fostering changes on a mass scale but added that people would also have to make individual choices and change their mindsets to make the transition successfully. Ms Thanaletchmi agreed,

saying that the people had the collective power to change culture and values if they wanted to. Mr Ho Meng Kit said that it would be individuals who would make the key difference—personal motivation and family values mattered more in changing society. On the other hand, Assoc. Prof. Tan observed that saying that "it's everyone's responsibility" usually meant it became nobody's responsibility, and that clear leadership was crucial in the effort. In that regard, he hoped that in the first instance, there would be impetus to replace the current complaining culture with an affirming culture in Singapore.

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If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.update@nus.edu.sg