

Singapore youth: In defence of ‘strawberries’

Today’s youth are just as vested in Singapore, despite what the older generation might think. What can be done to engage young people in Forward Singapore?

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The older generation often describe the youth of today as “the strawberry generation”, a label that carries the perception of them as easily bruised, self-absorbed, entitled, pampered, lazy and overconfident.

However, each generation is shaped by the social, political, and economic conditions of the day – and is also subject to the disdain of older people.

What makes this generation of Singapore youth unique is that they are coming of age during the Covid-19 pandemic. At a stage when they are making the key transition into adulthood, they have been confronted by the greatest crisis of our time.

We are lead researchers in Youth STEPS, a six-year longitudinal study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Social Lab and the National Youth Council (NYC) on youth transitions and pathways. Preliminary findings of the ongoing study – which started in 2017 – were shared recently at

NYC’s inaugural National Youth Dialogue (“Social support, engaging on national issues among young people’s concerns: Survey”, *The Straits Times*, July 23).

Data from the study of about 3,000 Singaporean young people shows that many emerged from the pandemic with resilience and turned crisis into opportunity. This points to it being an opportune time for the Government to strengthen mutual trust with the younger generation, and encourage them to contribute to Forward Singapore, an exercise to shape and strengthen Singapore’s social compact for its next phase.

SILVER LINING AMID DISRUPTION

More than half the study participants (54 per cent) said Covid-19 has had some or a highly negative impact on their lives, ranging from dampened employment prospects to struggling to pay for household expenses.

Overall mental health has clearly taken a hit, with many reporting a heightened state of anxiety.

When we asked participants to share how Covid-19 has changed their life goals and aspirations, we received story after story of

called-off graduation trips and cancelled overseas internship opportunities. Graduation ceremonies were scaled down, job offers were rescinded and many could not find jobs in industries they had trained for.

Despite that, weathering these disruptions during their transition into adulthood seems to have made them more resilient.

Before the pandemic, 60 per cent agreed that “they can deal with whatever comes their way”. In the midst of the pandemic, this proportion fell to 55 per cent and last year, the proportion who agreed they can deal with whatever comes their way rebounded to 61 per cent.

For every story of how the pandemic has disrupted plans, there was an uplifting recount of a young person who had taken the opportunity to pick up new skills and how people now had clearer career, financial and life goals.

The pandemic tested personal resilience but our analyses also demonstrated a curious outcome which is the rise in national affiliation. Participants who agreed that they felt a sense of belonging to Singapore increased from 71 per cent in 2020 to 73 per cent last year.

The results paint a picture of our youth rallying around the nation in a time of crisis, particularly when personal resources such as social capital and resilience were depleting.

We often hear leaders say that nations are forged in crises and people come together in times of

adversity. On some level, with social distancing, the pandemic had constrained personal relationships. Yet on another level, it has also strengthened the community and the sense of nationhood. Singaporean youth understood the need for a national response to Covid-19.

The euphoria of emerging from the pandemic as a nation was clearly felt by many during this year’s National Day celebrations. During his National Day Rally, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong expressed his hope that one outcome of the Forward Singapore exercise led by Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong would be “a strong sense of identity to hold us together and give meaning to our nation building”.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

Data from Youth STEPS – which stands for Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore – points to clues on how the 4G leaders can strengthen Singapore’s social compact with young people.

The vast majority of youth in the study (90 per cent) trust the Government at least to some extent (48 per cent trust the Government to a large or very large extent) – but that trust is not always seen to have been fully reciprocated.

For example, only a quarter of study participants (24 per cent) feel that the Government trusts youth such as themselves to a large or very large extent (72 per cent

feel that the Government trusts them at least to some extent).

In short, most youth trust the Government, but are less sure about whether the Government trusts them in return.

However, our analysis also uncovered that when the youth perceive that their trust is reciprocated, this trust is enhanced. Reciprocal trust is important for the youth of this generation.

How, then, can 4G leaders demonstrate that they trust youth, as much as youth trust them?

Deputy Prime Minister Wong has made it clear that the Forward Singapore exercise will not be a series of endless talk shops. Citizens have been invited to play an active role in shaping Singapore’s future.

As young people answer the call to action, leaders can demonstrate that they trust them by:

- * listening intently to their underlying needs; and then
- * responding to those ambitions to change the world by empowering youth with the resources to take direct action.

More opportunities for local engagement, such as the SG Youth Action Challenge by the National Youth Council, can be offered as part of the Forward Singapore exercise.

However, getting youth involved to be the change they want to see in the community will not be enough to convince them that leaders trust them. The way in which the support and resources are provided also matters.

Providing youth with resources, while “helicoptering” around their activities, won’t demonstrate trust.

Imposing grey-haired notions of success on their initiatives will also not demonstrate trust. Giving youth volunteers autonomy and accountability for their causes will cultivate an enduring sense of civic responsibility towards the community and demonstrate that leaders trust them to do good in their uniquely youthful ways.

Finally, having open conversations about any mistakes that are made and being authentic about not knowing all the answers are both gestures that youth value from leaders.

Most of all, maintaining trust in youth when mistakes are made and keeping faith that they are the ones who most want to make good on their own promises, will help demonstrate and build reciprocal trust. As Abraham Lincoln said, “the (young) people when rightly and fully trusted will return the trust”.

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