

# Building ‘we first’ society requires deep mindset shifts, says David Neo

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Building a “we first” society in Singapore will be challenging not due to a lack of resources or laws, but because it requires a profound shift in how people here relate to one another, said Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth David Neo.

While the Government will initiate this transformation by providing a blueprint, real change will depend on individual actions, he added at the Institute of Policy Studies’ Singapore Perspectives conference on Jan 26.

Mr Neo was speaking on a panel about building a “we first” society, a term first used by Prime Minister Lawrence Wong at his inaugural National Day Rally speech in 2025.

Since then, there have been questions about what such a society entails, acknowledged Mr Neo, who recounted being asked whether “we first” means “me second”.

Elaborating on the concept at the

conference at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre, he said such a society is one where people look beyond their own interests to contribute to the larger good of the community.

When people support one another, society is better off, and this in turn creates the “best conditions for ‘me’”, he added.

One way to nurture such a society is to create opportunities for people to interact, and by doing so, deepen their understanding of one another in spite of differences, said Mr Neo.

He cited examples of such interactions building across the island, such as how a dozen residents in Yio Chu Kang come together every month to prepare meals and organise activities for some 40 seniors, with food supplied by the local hawkers’ association.

“Stories like these remind us that community building is about a collection of our individual actions... We all have the capacity to initiate or support such efforts in our own spheres, and in our own ways,” he said.



(From left) Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth David Neo, National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre chief executive Tony Soh, National University of Singapore associate professor Vincent Chua, and moderator Laurel Teo, who is a senior research fellow and head of society and culture at the Institute of Policy Studies, on a panel about building a “we first” society at the Singapore Perspectives conference on Jan 26. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

Another panellist, National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre chief executive Tony Soh, said nurturing philanthropy is another way to develop a more inclusive society.

He emphasised that giving is not limited to money – people can also give their time, talent and networks, and by inspiring others through the power of their example.

The panel fielded questions, including one from a Dunman High School student on whether programmes such as the Education

Ministry’s Values in Action detract from building a “we first” society by transactionalising volunteerism.

Mr Soh said such extrinsic motivation can be of value if it makes people take the first step. If they find the experience impactful, it could even turn into something more sustained.

“My view is that we should not be too purist about it, because not everyone intrinsically wants to do good and wants to volunteer,” he added.

Fellow panellist and National University of Singapore associate professor of sociology and anthropology Vincent Chua suggested that a more fundamental shift is necessary to build a “we first” society.

This is because a society with more competition and immigration often results in greater inequality, which in turn reduces social cohesion.

He noted that Singapore has moved to reduce inequality by closing the income gap, and by en-

couraging social mixing through housing and education policies.

What is harder to reduce is inequality linked with how people define success, as 60 years of meritocracy have meant that Singaporeans see themselves and others through the lens of achievement and material success, said Prof Chua.

Mr Neo said framing the question as having to choose between competition and cohesion would result in a zero-sum outcome.

But, he added, reframing it to how the larger Singapore community can become more competitive and cohesive together will result in different answers and results.

In this regard, Mr Neo said younger Singaporeans have led the charge, with many prioritising meaning and purpose over how big their house is or how fast their car is.

Young people have often asked him to convince their parents that such intangibles matter more than PSLE scores, he added.

He acknowledged that Singaporeans are kiasu (afraid to lose), but that such competitive energies can be channelled towards excellence at doing good through the right framework of what it means to succeed.

“I personally am quite optimistic about our ability to shape and nurture a deeper society,” he said.

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