

Moving forward with great expectations

BY INVITATION
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High public expectations are a good thing. They become a problem only if the government views public expectations as a problem in policy and governing.

CITIZENS form beliefs about how governments should perform. These beliefs are often referred to as "public expectations".

Public expectations can be seen when people complain about the cost, reliability and delivery of public services in transport, health care, housing or education.

But public expectations can also be about less tangible things. Examples include public engagement in decision-making, fair treatment of different segments of the population, and the integrity of political leaders and public servants.

If the specific context of public expectations and their underlying psychology is understood, the government can better address issues with the support of the people.

The power of unmet expectations

CONSISTENTLY unmet expectations can lead to a permanent sense of disappointment and anger, as well as decreased public confidence and trust.

Left unaddressed, people's negative experiences can lead them to interpret things in a way that reinforces their preconceived ideas, regardless of the objective evidence.

The result can be counterproductive because it makes it more difficult for the government to solve problems.

For example, citizens may expect government intervention to stop unfair treatment of Singaporeans at work. If these expectations are consistently unmet, people become more likely to dismiss any subsequent government effort to address the issue.

This may partly explain why when the Fair Consideration Framework was introduced to address unfair employment practices, some Singaporeans quickly reacted with scepticism about the government's sincerity and the framework's effectiveness.

Attention was focused on how it might be possible to exploit the framework to perpetuate unfair hiring practices.

Less attention was paid to how it could produce positive effects through awareness and mindset changes.

Regardless of how they are formed or have evolved over time, unmet public expectations therefore matter. They influence both policy and public actions.

Myths about public expectations

THERE are two popular myths about public expectations.

The first is that public expectations can be generalised. This myth is propagated every time someone refers to public expectations as if they were a singular variable that increases or decreases without reference to specific issues or segments of the population.

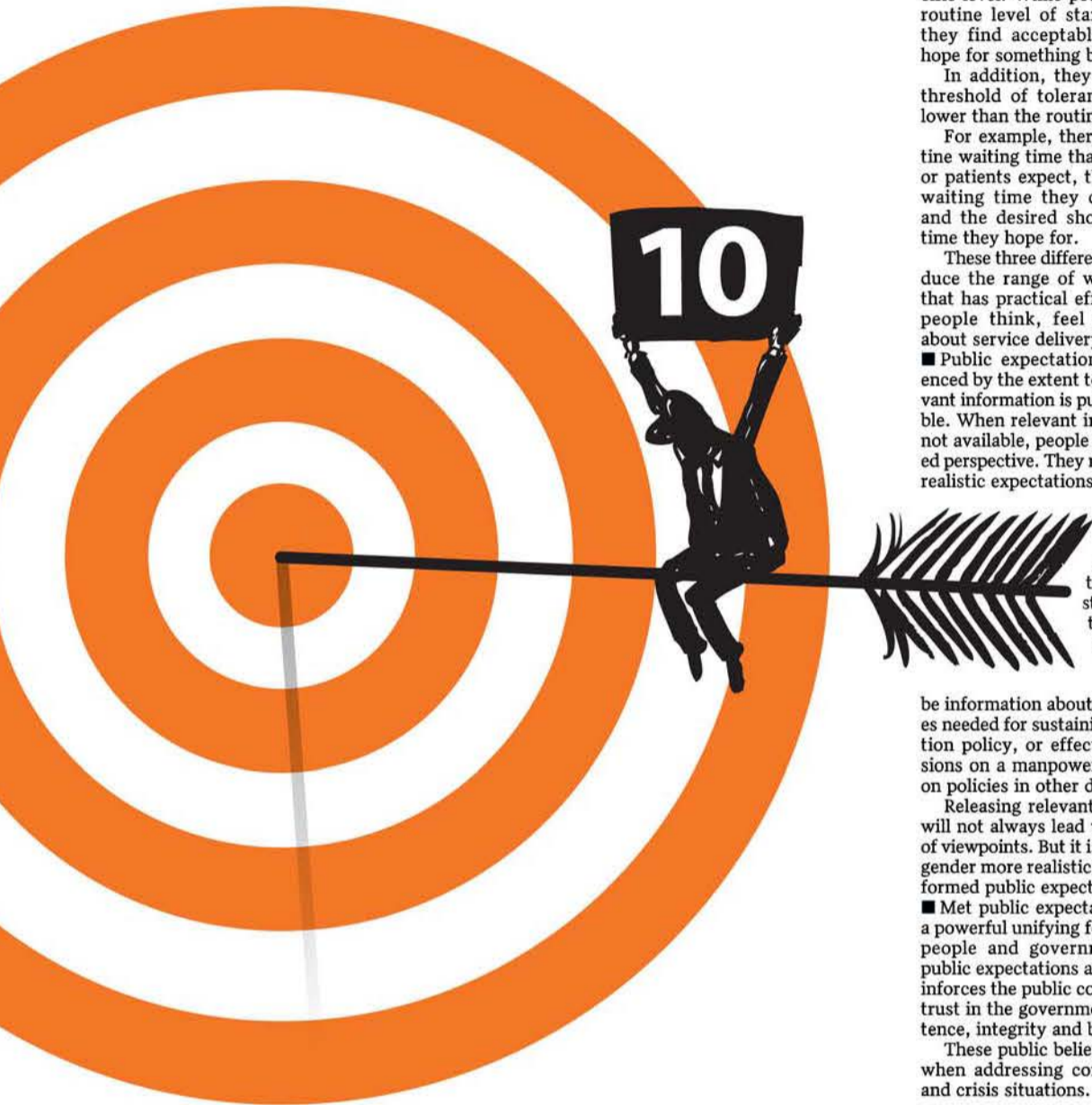
In reality, the nature and level of public expectations – and the consequences of unmet expectations – vary a lot. For example, public expectations involving issues of integrity, fairness and accountability are rooted in values and principles.

Failure to meet these expectations tends to have more negative and permanent consequences than failure to meet expectations about standards of service delivery, such as waiting time for buses and frequency of MRT service disruptions.

The consequences of unmet public expectations also differ among different segments of the population. For example, people who travel by bus or train will react more intensely to crowded buses and MRT service disruptions than those who travel by car. Motorists, on the other hand, are likely to be far more concerned about traffic jams.

Thus, it is not useful to explain

policy challenges or strong public reactions by making generalised references to public expectations. The second myth is that Singaporeans expect everything to be perfect and have zero tolerance for any mistakes. Like people everywhere, Singaporeans form expectations partly based on what they have experienced routinely. This involves getting to work or school on time, or getting to see a doctor within a reasonable waiting period. When unmet expectations upset people, it is often because their routine goals are frustrated – not because the standards of service did not achieve a perfect score. They react when lapses have personal consequences, such as when a public transport disruption makes them late for work or results in a missed appointment. Attempting to moderate public expectations or address unmet expectations by emphasising that perfection is impossible or that human lapses do occur misses the point. In fact, trying to do so will only lead to perceptions that the government or the public service provider is lacking in empathy, disconnected from ground sentiments or trying to shift the blame



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to alleged public irrationality.

Addressing public expectations

NEGATIVE public reactions can often be prevented or mitigated if Singapore adopts the following attitudes or approaches when addressing public expectations.

These approaches are also likely to contribute to constructive dialogue on possible solutions.

Public expectations involve what the people desire or hope will happen.

This means that addressing public expectations requires an understanding of people's concerns, goals, aspirations, values and beliefs about the role of government.

Management by lowering public expectations may backfire. This is particularly so with issues involving shared values such as integrity and fairness or core principles such as rule of law and accountability.

When issues are of fundamental importance, high public expectations are not only justified but should also be encouraged.

Public expectations of service standards are best understood as a range of levels rather than a specific level. While people expect a routine level of standard which they find acceptable, they may hope for something better.

In addition, they may have a threshold of tolerance which is lower than the routine level.

For example, there is the routine waiting time that commuters or patients expect, the maximum waiting time they can tolerate, and the desired shorter waiting time they hope for.

These three different levels produce the range of waiting times that has practical effects on how people think, feel and behave about service delivery.

Public expectations are influenced by the extent to which relevant information is publicly available. When relevant information is not available, people have a limited perspective. They may form unrealistic expectations about an issue, but understandably so. Information is not restricted to statistical data not released to the public. It can be information about the resources needed for sustaining an education policy, or effects that decisions on a manpower policy have on policies in other domains.

Releasing relevant information will not always lead to agreement of viewpoints. But it is likely to engender more realistic and well-informed public expectations.

Met public expectations can be a powerful unifying force between people and government. When public expectations are met, it reinforces the public confidence and trust in the government's competence, integrity and benevolence.

These public beliefs are critical when addressing complex issues and crisis situations.

When policies meet public expectations and translate into actual benefits experienced by citizens, they become popular. There is nothing wrong with this. Popular policies are problematic only when they are populist – pandering to prevailing public sentiments without regard to the quality and sustainability.

Real problems occur when public expectations are construed as the main problem in governing and policymaking.

When the context of public expectations is understood, it becomes clearer that most expectations are reasonable and they reflect important citizen concerns, goals and aspirations.

Unmet public expectations do matter. They are not simply transient complaints or intellectual displeasure. Both people and government should and can improve the ways they calibrate, frame and manage public expectations.

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