

By Invitation

Putting Singapore above self

Overcome self-serving tendencies inherent in human nature by being aware of them and cultivating the Home attitudes: humble, objective, magnanimous, empathetic



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We can expect tomorrow's National Day Parade to evoke strong emotions among Singaporeans. Emotions will likely be most intense in the segment honouring the late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and also when singing the National Anthem at the end of the programme.

But Singapore's Golden Jubilee is more than a series of celebratory activities and feel-good experiences culminating in National Day. For many Singaporeans, it is also a reminder of one's commitment to Singapore – a decision and dedication to serve and contribute to the country.

What sparks such feelings of commitment might be the life and works of Mr Lee and his team of pioneer leaders, our sense of duty as citizens who have benefited from the policies, practices and people in this place, or our personal attachment to the country. Whatever the basis that inspired the commitment or motivation to serve Singapore, there is a deepening of one's conviction to put Singapore above self.

But to truly put Singapore above self, we need to be aware of and guard against our own human self-serving tendencies.

Implicit self-serving tendencies

Yes, humans are implicitly self-serving. We often use the word "self-serving" in an explicit way to criticise those who serve the country or organisation in an instrumental manner, using their position to obtain personal gain.

Such self-serving actions are contrary to putting Singapore above self.

But psychological studies show there is a different type of self-serving tendencies which is not explicit, even to the individuals themselves. In many ways, it is more pervasive and difficult to address than explicit self-serving.

Psychological theories of self suggest that humans have developed implicit self-serving tendencies as a way to protect our self-concept by ignoring or distorting reality. This is done by dismissing things that threaten the

self and embracing those that inflate it. Such tendencies influence us in ways we do not realise, especially when we do not pause to reflect. Their negative impact is more likely to be ignored, even though its capacity to eventually harm the self and society is no less than explicit self-serving tendencies.

Because they are not rooted in reality, implicit self-serving tendencies are likely to lead to counterproductive actions.

They become obstacles to effective service to Singapore, even for the committed individual with a "selfless" motivation to serve the country not for personal gain.

Research in human judgment and decision-making has established many self-serving tendencies that bias how we think and behave. It is important to be aware of these, and overcome or constrain these implicit self-serving tendencies, so that collectively we can overcome self-serving attitudes and behaviour to make better decisions for both ourselves and the larger entity. For example, we tend to overestimate the number of people who agree with us. Psychologists call this the false consensus effect.

In a typical experiment on this, participants would be asked to indicate their preference, choice or position on an issue, and provide an estimate of the proportion of their peers who would agree with them. Across many issues and contexts, the results consistently showed that the participants' estimated proportion of peer agreement was significantly higher than the actual proportion.

Another established self-serving tendency is positive illusions in self-evaluation. Studies have shown that we often think of ourselves as better than we actually are. We tend to magnify our strengths and downplay our weaknesses. We believe our successes are greater than what the facts show. We see our failures as commonplace and excusable, even when they are unique and damaging. And we tend to judge ourselves as better than we used to be – this tendency to conclude an improvement over time does not exist when we rate others.

We are often unaware of our self-serving biases when we make causal attributions such as trying to understand or explain successes and failures. When we do well, we tend to attribute our own successes to internal factors such as our own ability, effort, plans, choices and business or political acumen. But we tend to attribute our failures to external factors – we say bad luck, the task is difficult, the problem is



complex, or the situation has changed. And when we make causal attributions about others, we tend to do the reverse – we see external factors in their successes and internal factors in their failures.

There is also the ubiquitous confirmatory bias that everyone is guilty of: We tend to seek out, interpret and remember information that confirms our existing beliefs, positions or actions. This bias is further reinforced when we obtain feedback from like-minded people and discuss issues in a close-knit group. The group may be an online community, an advocacy group, a team of civil servants or a political party. So it is not too surprising that people often maintain the same position despite being given new information that contradicts it.

Self-awareness, positive attitudes

What do all these implicit self-serving tendencies prevalent in human beings have to do with putting Singapore above self?

The simple answer is that, whoever we are, these tendencies are powerful forces that detract us from making a true positive difference to Singapore, even though we may have the best of intentions for Singapore and fellow Singaporeans.

The good news is our actions need not be dictated by our implicit self-serving tendencies. If we are more aware of our own fallibility and how implicit self-serving tendencies operate, we become less susceptible to them.

Studies have shown that countering self-serving tendencies such as false consensus and confirmatory biases will result in better judgments and decisions. This applies to task performance, social relationships and leadership contexts. So, paradoxically, when we are less driven by self-serving tendencies, we will experience higher self-esteem and become happier, because we perform better, have better-quality relationships, and effectively influence others. We will also be more adaptive to changes and succeed in achieving positive outcomes. Positive attitudes can also constrain and counter implicit self-serving tendencies when dealing with differences and disagreements. These attitudes are good for the self and for interacting with others.

To counter our inherent tendency to be self-serving in our thoughts and behaviour, I suggest we focus more on four important but somewhat neglected positive attitudes:

BE HUMBLE

We really don't have all the answers and others may know many things that we don't. Collaboration should not be lip service – it is often the only way to solve problems. A good humility principle to guide collaboration is the possibility that

we may need others as much as, if not more than, they need us.

BE OBJECTIVE

Dispassionately ascertain facts and evaluate analyses, arguments and perspectives. When dealing with differences and disagreements, try for a moment to suspend our personal beliefs or subjective preferences. Revisit our own assumptions. Consider the weight of the evidence and weigh the consequences that others are right and we are wrong.

In the light of new information and strong evidence, have the intellectual honesty and political courage to revise our prior position.

BE MAGNANIMOUS

A malicious attack, especially on our integrity, needs to be defended rigorously and dealt with decisively. But it may be a virtue to forgive an insult or injury to our self-concept when the hurt is unintentional or caused by misunderstanding, genuine angst, recklessness, immaturity, or human causal attribution errors. It is possible that when one is generous in spirit, apparent enemies may become allies or that the issue that appeared so contentious cools into a non-issue.

BE EMPATHETIC

Get outside our own perspectives and try to understand the position and frame of reference of those holding a different view from us. Consider how they feel, their concerns and their aspirations. Focus on the constraints of their contexts, which may be about the resources available or not, the information they have or don't, and the situations that they have experienced or believe they will.

Positive attitudes towards differences and disagreements provide a springboard for constructive engagement.

They are relevant to all parties that care for Singapore and are inspired to put the nation above self – politicians, public officers, academics and public intellectuals, civil society activists, volunteers and community leaders, online commentators and anyone interested to advocate a position to make a positive difference in Singapore.

It is possible to develop these "Home" attitudes that go beyond the self: humility, objectivity, magnanimity, empathy. When we are aware of our implicit self-serving tendencies, and when we appropriately adopt and apply positive attitudes, we can strengthen the Singapore society and make this a place that we can be proud to call home.

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