

There's trust in competence, trust in integrity and trust in benevolence. Some Singaporeans are going through a state of trust-in-transition. What will move people to trust or not trust the Government?

Trust is a many-splendoured thing



BY INVITATION

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TRUST enables citizens and the Government to work together to build a cohesive and adaptive society – one with good quality of life for all; where Singaporeans can call home.

So when we examine the issue of public trust in the Government, it is ultimately about citizen well-being, not the survival of a political party.

Trust affects how citizens think, feel and behave. It takes time to build, is easy to lose and once lost, is difficult to restore. Given how critical and complex the concept of trust is, research on trust perceptions may shed light on how and why the public trusts, or distrusts, the Government.

Studies have identified three major dimensions of trust: competence, integrity and benevolence.

■ **TRUST IN COMPETENCE:** This is about people's confidence in the Government's ability to perform and solve problems. It involves the ability to address issues affecting quality of life and also effectiveness in managing crises.

Efficient delivery of public services, low crime rates and a positive record in tackling economic and public-health crises contribute to trust in competence.

On the other hand, issues of infrastructure, such as public transport lagging behind population growth, raise doubts relating to trust in competence.

■ **TRUST IN INTEGRITY:** This is about people's assessment of the Government's character or the extent to which they think it is not corrupt and is impartial. The focus here is on the integrity of public service officers and political leaders but it also involves the perception of how breaches of integrity are handled.

The series of high-profile corruption and sexual impropriety scandals involving politicians and public officers erode trust in integrity. Vigorous action against those caught for corruption, regardless of who they are, may mitigate the erosion of trust to some

extent and reinforce the Government's position on zero tolerance for such wrongdoings.

■ **TRUST IN BENEVOLENCE:** This is about people's belief in the Government's intentions and motivations – in what it says and does and in people's perceptions about the underlying reasons for a policy or government action.

Trust in benevolence increases when people believe that the intention of policy and government action is to serve their interests and is motivated by genuine concern for citizen well-being, as opposed to being influenced by vested private or partisan interests.

It gets eroded when people think that policies are formulated by an elite which is disconnected from ground sentiments, is unable to empathise, or does not care enough for the less fortunate or ordinary folk.

There has been increasing emphasis on citizen well-being, social mobility, quality of public engagement efforts and humility and empathy in public service.

There are also significant policy shifts in housing, health and education. If these emphases and policy shifts are sustainable and translated into intended outcomes that benefit citizens, trust in benevolence will increase.

When such trust is low, people experience diverse emotions, from anger and anxiety to disappointment and frustration. They become sceptical when reacting

to policies too.

They are also more likely to advocate counter-proposals. It is unwise to treat these strong disagreements, especially those expressed on social media, as arising from irrational emotions, anti-establishment sentiments or a lack of understanding of the policy's substantive content.

The good news is that some of the counter-proposals put forward are constructive and lead to real improvements in policies. If the Government engages critics and even sceptics, and adopts their counter-proposals when these are in fact better, it demonstrates principled adaptive leadership. This in turn builds trust in benevolence.

Trust-in-transition

HOW issues or incidents are managed by the people and the Government can exert lasting influence on trust in Government.

The socio-political changes in the past two years are sometimes interpreted as reflecting a decline in public trust in the Government.

But it is important to not confuse a decline in trust with strong responses from a politically active citizenry that simply reflects disagreements and pluralistic perspectives.

In other words, more disagreement and criticism of government

policies does not automatically suggest a decline in trust. It is also worth noting that a fall in trust in the Government is neither a given nor inevitable.

The level of trust in the Government will depend on the relationship between the people and the Government, the actual trustworthiness of the Government and the people's likelihood to trust, given the context, and their previous experiences.

That means it is not pre-determined that trust will decrease or increase in future. It also means it is possible to improve trust levels.

A significant segment of the Singaporean population is undergoing what I call a state of "trust-in-transition". This is a transition period in which the "trustor" has feelings of doubt and ambivalence towards the "trustee". It is a critical period because what occurs during this time can be highly impactful and "tilt" the trustor towards trust or distrust.

During trust-in-transition, the trustor experiences conflicting thoughts and mixed emotions. This occurs because the trustor has a previously positive perception of the trustee based on evidence but is now undergoing negative experiences related to issues of competence, integrity, benevolence or some combination of these dimensions.

Currently, a segment of the

Singapore population is likely undergoing trust-in-transition as they compare the previous positive record of the Government with the ongoing challenges in infrastructure support, management of population issues, procurement lapses and high-profile scandals.

It is important to focus on trust-in-transition. People undergoing trust-in-transition are not indifferent or uninterested fence-sitters. They are people in a committed relationship with the Government but are now experiencing mixed emotions, attempting to sort out conflicting thoughts.

Whether people move out of their transition into trust or distrust will depend on their belief in the Government's competence, integrity and benevolence. They need to feel the Government has the ability to put citizen interests and well-being as the top priority; and have the intention and sincerity to do so.

The future of trust

I SUGGEST people and the Government look at trust from a three-pronged approach.

First, we should discuss trust in the Government by examining competence, integrity and benevolence – both actual and perceived.

Trust in competence increases when the Government solves

problems and deliver on its promises.

Trust in integrity increases when the Government is transparent, objective and fair when making decisions, and accountable for its use of resources, its actions and the resulting outcomes.

Trust in benevolence increases when the Government understands and empathises with Singaporeans' needs and problems and puts Singaporeans' interests and well-being as top priority.

Some approaches will contribute to all three dimensions of trust. For example, public communication can be more strategic and coordinated across agencies. Public engagement can be more inclusive and begin earlier prior to policy formulation.

This means going beyond seeking feedback and explaining policies.

There could be more sharing of relevant information early – to work out collaborative solutions with the public. For Singaporeans to contribute more to the country, they need to be given more information and a greater voice in the decision-making process.

Second, trust could evolve and change over time, either gradually or suddenly. The level of trust in Government is not static. A low level of trust at a point in time must not be taken as a given and a high level must not be taken for granted. This means one needs to adequately assess trust levels and track changes over time.

Finally, there is a need to understand how trust is built and how distrust originates, what factors could predict and influence trust, and what consequences may result from trust and distrust.

One also needs to understand how trust or distrust propagates and spirals into positive or negative effects, and how trust could be repaired, restored and rebuilt.

A good way to start is to revisit assumptions about these issues and check them against research findings and different perspectives.

Trust is critical and complex. There must be an understanding of the trust process in order to repair trust violations, restore trust erosion and rebuild trust development.

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