

KPIs in a VUCA World

In a VUCA environment, developing Singapore will always be a battle. Kindness, passion, and imagination are the constants we need in this brave new world.

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We only have ourselves when Disease X strikes, which makes the journey even more challenging, but ever more infinitely essential. Image credit: Yan Da Ng.

Bring the title of this essay into our recent history, and it would have made no sense to the common man. In that recent past when we never needed acronyms to explain the complexities of our times, COVID-19 made no sense. But alas, time is too fast even for linguistics, just as the coronavirus outbreak raced Singapore too. Our time, it seems, are bound to be weeks where decades happen.

As we continue to untangle the complexities of this pandemic, medical professionals are already offering bleak views of the onslaught of another pandemic in the near futureⁱ. As the world awakes from the deep slumber of COVID-19, the gravity of the current reality continues to choke us.

In a take-three-steps-forward-two-steps-back fashion, we are forced to consider sustainability, resilience and inclusivity as we navigate this crisis and forecast those still lurking. What does the near future – a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) future – hold for Singapore? What narrative do we want to write for our generation and those that will come after us? I offer three points of reflection.

Kindness

In any uncertain world, no one is safe until everyone is safe.

The refrain is familiar, and perhaps easily forgotten in our fast-developing society. But enter any pandemic, and we are reminded that navigating any crisis is about all of us. Fundamentally, a stronger Singapore requires a common currency of kindness: a currency of listening, patience, sincerity, care and action. Ours is a society of multiple dichotomies at its core – beyond the traditional dimensions of race and religion, there is now the young and the old, those who continue to struggle to meet ends meet and those who are much better off. For example, Census 2020 revealed that 13.9% of the population is earning at least \$20,000 (which is the top of the income bracket), while 12.2 per cent of all households had at least one employed person and with a monthly household income from work of no more than \$3,000ⁱⁱ.

In this multi-faceted community, kindness is about mutual empowerment to foster the growth of a stronger Singapore. In offering his views, Professor Danny Quah, Dean and Li Ka Shing Professor in Economics at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, pointed to the importance of focusing on welfare through a more egalitarian approach to public policyⁱⁱⁱ. Indeed, the pandemic reminded us primarily that "we lift ourselves by raising the people around us".

The pandemic has shown us that there are many doors we cannot keep open during a pandemic (and rightly so, for our safety). But there are many doors we can keep open too. For example, the COVID Migrant Support Coalition has been distributing lunch and dinner packs to migrant workers around Singapore^{iv}, keeping their hearts open for those in need. There are also organisations like Engineering Good which collected laptops to ensure that students from low-income families are not left behind during the home-based learning period^v.

Such initiatives have proven that kindness is essential for us to adapt and recover. Cumulatively, the pandemic is a reminder that a country, even one heavily reliant on such a heavy trade regime as Singapore, can close. But a society can never close.

If there is only one thing that we learned from the COVID-19 virus, then it's that the smallest things spread fastest. Kindness feeds off this revelation, because it is the small things that truly make a difference – small things that when nourished by the heart, carries with it a selflessness that exceeds the self and the deed. It is these small things that have brought us this far, and it these small things that will continue to bring us further.

But kindness does not just end at our shores. As Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung pointed out, in a highly interdependent world, it is now and in future crises that it is even more important to uphold the core tenet of Singapore's foreign policy to help "our neighbours to all do well"^{vi}. Recent examples include an outpouring of support as the Singapore Red Cross raised over \$3.2 million to help India in its Covid-19 fight^{vii}. Singapore also offered humanitarian aid to Indonesia in their bitter fight against the pandemic^{viii}. These and other efforts remind us that a pandemic is not just a national issue, but more so an international concern. While in our rush to protect our citizens,

kindness is also a call for global cooperation, which we have seen to be particularly important in our fight against the pandemic.

Because every country matter, Singapore must aim to become a global leader with an empathetic kindness. Fundamentally, kindness begins with our own citizens. But ultimately, being a leader on the global stage demands countries to lead with a heart to serve.

Kindness is a circle that can never be completed. But if each of us extend this circle by respecting, caring and helping the needy among and beyond ourselves, we can build a stronger Singapore by building the united community we believe ourselves to be.

Passion

My second point of reflection is the need for passion. Sustaining passion in our DNA asks Singaporeans to consider how we live, learn, work and play, questioning what we want to become and what we are interested in and passionate about.

During this pandemic, essential workers continue to provide Singapore with the drive to carry on. What these essential workers and many others out there have shown us is that a job may fail, but a vocation never fails us. In the same way, passion is not about finding a job; it is about finding a vocation.

They continue to work amidst the difficulties because they are passionate. How we sustain and grow this passion to Singaporeans from all walks of life will be the most sustainable strategy to preserve a strong Singaporean core that can navigate the difficulties of work and play in our future.

In the face of change, there is an equally important need to guide Singaporeans to develop new passions. As the pandemic continues to subvert traditional positions of work, we must, as the scholars Paul O’Keefe, Carol Dweck and Gregory Walton pointed out, learn to encourage Singaporeans to develop passions that are rarely fixed, but always “fluid and evolving”. As the scholars put it, we must avoid encouraging “people to...put all their eggs in one basket but then to drop that basket when it becomes difficult to carry”^{ix}.

As we have seen in the past year, flexibility and adaptability are important traits that Singapore must possess. There are examples like the new SkillsFuture Mid-Career Support Package that aims to create more career transition opportunities for locals in their 40s to 50s, helping them remain employable^x. Similarly, initiatives like the TechSkills Accelerator (TeSA) empowers workers to upgrade and acquire new skills and domain knowledge that are in demand to stay competitive in a fast-moving digital landscape^{xi}.

As Ranjani Rao writes in the Straits Times, “all jobs...are valuable and worthy of respect, because every job done sincerely is worth much more than the mere act”^{xii}. To boost our resilience as a nation, we need a broader range of support programmes to help Singaporeans develop their passions. In times of change, we must help those who are displaced to find their worth in new areas where they are in passionate in. Passion is about being in the moment, being grateful for we have been bestowed rather than

counting how much we lack. Passion is the courage that will not be easy to muster in another time of crisis. Passion is about finding the best vantage point for each Singaporean whereby she or he can make the most of their contributions.

Imagination

Lastly, the need for imagination. Primarily, imagination is possibility. This is a quality the pandemic has gifted us with. For example, the pandemic has forced us to rethink the culture of work and the way we gather. Zooming in on these drastic changes the pandemic has imposed on us, some workplaces and communities are already building flexibility that will remain even after the pandemic ends.

The pandemic has also stimulated more rigorous attempts at innovation. For example, the pandemic accelerated the efforts of the local cleaning solutions company Spic & Span to reformulate its disinfectant solution Speco to be effective against coronaviruses^{xiii}. Currently, the product is used in more than one million square feet of property in Singapore. There are also companies like Singapore-based Lucence Diagnostics, which developed a Covid-19 saliva sampling kit with the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star)^{xiv}.

These and other developments signal a wave of innovation that is highly encouraging. However, we must also remember that innovation should not come only during a pandemic. In this respect, Singapore has done exceedingly well, retaining the top spot as Asia-Pacific's most innovative nation in the 2020 Global Innovation Index for the seventh consecutive year^{xv}.

As we celebrate our achievements, we must also not lose sight of concerns that Singapore has consistently been performing relatively poorer in our innovation efficiency ratio, which shows how much output a country is getting for its inputs^{xvi}. These statistics remind us that a stronger push is essential for a wider application of innovation in our lives.

The Smart Nation is a good place to begin from. As we have seen during the pandemic, the Smart Nation initiative is necessary to accelerate the process of integrating technology into our collective efforts to improve lives. A good example is Singapore's elaborate contact tracing process which has allowed for a more nuanced and precise identification of those who have been exposed to those confirmed to have the virus^{xvii}. In the same way, FairPrice's automation of its processes helped ensure the continuity of Singapore's supply chain during the Covid-19 pandemic^{xviii}. These robust and timely developments lay the hope for a broader application of innovation to further boost Singapore's resilience in the face of material limitations.

More importantly, imagination is essential to define a broader national narrative that is more inclusive and reflective of who we want to be as Singaporeans. Beyond COVID-19, there are many more doors which we have not yet opened. To open these doors, imagination in public policy is essential to guide the pace and direction of growth of our collective society. For example, the Singapore Together Emerging Stronger Conversations is a model that we should adopt more broadly, targeting more Singaporeans from different backgrounds^{xix}. Since its initiation, these conversations

have surfaced views on how we may foster a culture that embraces differing viewpoints and raise a more socially conscious generation that can discuss difficult trade-offs when policy decisions are made.

As Jonathan Holloway writes in The New York times, the population must “heed the call for citizenship” and “answer the call...to have their voices heard and their communities seen and respected”^{xx}. Our tumultuous time demands citizens who dare to voice their needs and solutions. In doing so, nationhood is not imposed in a top-down manner but strengthened in a bottom-up fashion.

Singapore will never face 2020 again. We will never face COVID-19 again. Even if the next antagonist in Singapore’s narrative is a similar crisis, the protagonist that is all of us would have changed. Instead of binding ourselves to a dogma of our recent past, we should draw our own path to a better tomorrow. This is not to say that learning from our past is not necessary. Instead, it is to say, as the Hungarian biochemist Albert Szent-Gyorgyi puts it, that “genius is seeing what everyone has seen and thinking what no one has thought”. There will certainly come a time when SIA will once again be a great way to fly. There will come a time when we can see each other without a mask on our faces again. There will come a time when we battle another crisis again. But the way we fly, see and battle will never be the same again.

Imagination will be the genius we need.

Battling a VUCA World

It takes a hero to be one of those men and women who goes into battle. In a VUCA environment, developing Singapore will always be a battle. We as Singaporeans must always preserve that courage to fight, being a hero not just for ourselves, but for those whom we love and those who will come after us. It is not just the past generation’s, this generation’s or the next generation’s fight. It is every generation’s fight.

Disease X, when it strikes, will never just be an unfortunate fictional tale in Singapore’s development. No amount of plot armour will protect us. We will only have ourselves, which makes the journey even more challenging, but ever more infinitely essential.

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