

How the 4G generation can build trust with my generation of youth

The relationship must be based on interdependence and respect for each other's roles

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For The Straits Times

In 2019 Singapore, two processes of coming of age are taking place simultaneously.

The first of these is the political coming of age of the so-called fourth-generation or 4G political leadership, a transition in progress which recently reached a significant milestone – the appointment of Mr Heng Swee Keat as Deputy Prime Minister (DPM).

The second is the demographic coming of age of my generation – the youth.

Much has been written about the 4G leadership and much more about the youth. Yet beyond an understanding that the 4G leaders must engage youth, little discussion has focused on the relationship between the two.

Last Saturday, Singaporeans got a glimpse of what this relationship would look like, with the formation of the SG Youth Action Plan panel on the heels of a Youth Conversation dialogue.

This panel will be co-chaired by Senior Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth Sim Ann, and comprises 15 other members whose backgrounds include entrepreneurship, music and civil society.

The panel will lead efforts to articulate young people's vision for Singapore in 2025 and formulate an action plan to get there.

As a young person, I believe the panel and its plans provide an important opportunity for a good meeting of minds and hearts between the 4G and the youth. It accelerates the ongoing shift from engagement to empowerment,

from conversation to action.

It was significant that the panel co-chair, Ms Sim, said the Government's goals were aligned with those of young people in many areas, such as building an inclusive society.

As a member of Access Singapore, a ground-up organisation tackling educational inequality, I found this extremely heartening.

More broadly, a good relationship between the 4G leaders and youth is key to a strong 4G mandate. After all, the 4G can take the country into the future only if the actual future generation stands with them.

Alignments in an age of disruption

And yet, when I look back on the happenings of recent years and reflect on the broader trends that define my generation, several questions emerge.

For one, while the Government's goals are aligned with those of youth in many areas, does this translate into alignment on what these goals actually mean?

For example, inclusiveness is such a broad term that nobody would disagree with it, but gaps in expectations or desired outcomes may soon arise when these have to be defined.

Furthermore, misalignments may also arise on the policies needed to achieve said goals.

As both the 4G and the youth come of age, these gaps or even misalignments could grow sharper.

Many older Singaporeans, including 4G leaders – most of whom are in their 40s or 50s – understandably want to continue the structures and foundational values that underpin Singapore's success, but some of these key principles are being questioned by

youth today.

For instance, in a recent interview, DPM Heng highlighted the flaws of multi-party democracy, arguing that greater opposition does not mean better outcomes. He was responding to a question on younger Singaporeans wanting more political opposition. It is debatable if many young Singaporeans subscribe to that same view.

The recent 19+ Worldview survey conducted by The Straits Times and the Singapore University of Social Sciences also points to other gaps.

A poignant example: 91 per cent of respondents who were not already pursuing a degree wanted one to improve their salary prospects, which may not align with the Government's 40 per cent cohort target.

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung, like his predecessors, has maintained the importance of aligning education with the economy's needs and stressed that skills, not paper qualifications, should be the arbiter of workplace success – but are young people persuaded?

Vocal young people are among those questioning the assumptions underlying government policies. They take issue, for example, with the fundamentals of meritocracy, questioning the level of inequality here; how racial harmony is maintained and discussed; and the implementation of fake news laws.

Quite frankly, I do not think these differences in views – which may reflect gaps in aspirations – will simply go away as time passes.

Coming of age in an era of disruption, my generation will be much more inclined to question the assumptions of past generations, pushing the boundaries more than what is normal.

Thus, even if the Government's goals are aligned with those of the youth now, will this alignment stay when we are forced to confront the answers to difficult questions and make the necessary trade-offs?

My fear is that as both political leaders and youth come of age, gaps in expectations may widen, exacerbated by the forces of disruption.

A consensus that binds

The solution, therefore, must be that the glue which binds the 4G and the youth must go beyond broad goal alignments or even individual policy alignments, which could end up being rather transactional in the face of disruption.

What is needed is a strong consensus to underpin these alignments and to minimise the impact of the inevitable misalignments.

In an increasingly diverse Singapore, disagreements on policy options, even on core principles, are a given. A climate of trust and mutual respect is crucial to maintaining a cohesive bond.

This consensus has to be based on trust and moral authority, with the youth trusting that the 4G leaders will steer the Singapore ship properly, especially when it hits turbulent waters and even

when they disagree.

Indeed, this is what the 4G leaders will set out to do in the coming months. As DPM Heng said in an interview: "Our biggest challenge that we need to address is to build a sense of unity amid these tremendous changes that are going on around us."

In the age of disruption, however, this consensus will not come easy. Furthermore, the 4G leaders must also ensure that this is not a transactional consensus that breaks when tough times come, but a consensus that binds in the face of disruption.

Thus, I would like to suggest two guiding principles on which to build consensus.

First, the principle of interdependence. Leaders and people, including the young, must understand that they are in a symbiotic relationship. Leaders cannot take Singapore into the future if the future generation – today's youth – does not stand with them.

Similarly, the youth should understand that the success of their future is intertwined with the Government's success.

The current political leadership is the best available right now to lead Singapore. There is no other; no parallel universe exists with an alternative set of leaders. The 4G is all there is, and its success is possible only if people support its best efforts.

To further their causes, it is far more beneficial for the youth to work together with the Government, seizing the opportunities that it will open up to encourage participation. Furthermore, the Government remains the best provider of established resources and networks for the youth to achieve their goals.

Second, the principle of mutual respect for each other's roles, which is embedded in the idea of "first among equals".

Among the 4G leaders, DPM Heng is seen as "first among

equals". Scaled up, this power relationship can be applicable in government-people relations, an answer to the question of what a new social compact might look like.

In contrast to a more hierarchical relationship, I hope to see the Government and citizens engage with each other as more equal partners, though the Government retains "veto power".

On the Government's part, this entails a greater readiness to compromise after considering the depth of public opinion.

More importantly, citizens, especially the youth, must be ready to compromise too. After all, how can we expect the Government to compromise when we are not willing to do so?

"First among equals" also means that we must be more willing to accept the Government's judgments even when misalignments occur, trusting the path that the Government has chosen.

Interdependence and the idea of "first among equals" are two principles on which the new consensus between the 4G leaders and the youth must be based.

For alignment between the 4G and the youth to last, it must be underpinned by a binding consensus that is rooted in these principles.

Like other endeavours in an age of disruption, it will not be an easy road. Conversations are ongoing and the youth panel has been formed. But on the road to a strong relationship between the two generations coming of age, the hard part has only just begun.

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