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Stop calling those who speak up a vocal minority

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ByInvitation

Stop calling those who speak up a 'vocal minority'

Labelling people into opposing groups of 'vocal' and 'silent majority' is not helpful for public engagement.

David Chan

For The Straits Times

Government leaders in Singapore receive a lot of advice and feedback from diverse individuals and groups, both publicly and behind closed doors. Not surprisingly, there are different opinions on how appropriate leaders' reactions are and how effective their responses may be.

For several years now, there have been calls for government leaders to see things from the people's perspectives. Commentators and activists have often asked the Government to be able and willing to listen to alternative viewpoints and consider them seriously.

Thus, it was not a new message this week when Members of Parliament from all sides spoke on the need for leaders to effectively engage the people and earn public trust.

Both in and outside Parliament, this point on the importance of public engagement has become more salient after last week's unexpected change of government in neighbouring Malaysia, when the ruling coalition, which had governed for six decades, lost the general election to the opposition.

Singaporeans watching across the Causeway felt as though the political tsunami that knocked the government out of power up north, was lapping at our shores.

This psychological salience is not a bad thing for Singapore. It guards against complacency and reminds all to never take public trust and public engagement for granted.

REACTING TO CONTRARY VIEWS

Policymakers and governments able to take on board seriously the views from well-intentioned people will often find that such inputs contribute positively to the policy or issue at hand. This is because genuine views are relevant considerations, even if leaders disagree with them.

But the outcome will be negative if leaders react inappropriately and dismiss the contrary views without engagement. It gets worse if they attach a label with negative connotations, for example dismissing views as representing "a vocal minority". People will get upset and disengage, thus depriving the leaders of potential valuable inputs.

Emotional contagion occurs as people share with each other their negative experiences and emotions. This mutual reinforcement leads to a negative spiral. Differences in viewpoints between people and the leaders are accentuated, facts get ignored, and people seek out information to support their negative beliefs of the leaders. In some cases, people will either take flight from the leaders or fight them.

This negative scenario can occur even when leaders are neither ignorant nor arrogant, although being so will certainly contribute to it. The tendency to resist contrary views is part of our human psychology. It can apply to every leader regardless of educational background, socio-economic status, political belief and moral position.

But if leaders understand the underlying psychology, they will be not just principled but also adaptive – able to handle disagreements effectively and create a lot of good from contrary views.

VOCAL MINORITY V SILENT MAJORITY

One important psychological issue concerns using "vocal minority" and "silent majority" to describe segments of the population.

Last Sunday, Opinion editor Chua Mui Hoong wrote a commentary in The Sunday Times on five takeaways for Singapore from the Malaysian General Election. As her first takeaway, she cited a point I have often made in presentations and in my writings – about how each of us may be part of a "vocal minority" on some issue; but that the various vocal minorities can add up to a sizeable vocal majority. She concluded: "Politicians dismiss vocal minority issues at their own peril."

Put another way, there are actually many people who are voicing concerns, or trying to, in various ways, and on various issues, that matter to them. Add them up and the number can form a majority.

It also means we should not assume there is always a large silent majority who do not speak up on issues, and are somewhat happy, agreeable and share a similar view on the status quo. The size of such a silent and singular group, if it exists, is not as large as the term tends to imply.

Using the labels vocal minority and silent majority produces many other problems.

First, labelling groups does not help policymaking. Even if there is indeed a vocal minority and a silent majority on one particular policy issue and the two groups have opposing views, it does not mean that the minority is wrong, or that the majority is right.

Calling people a vocal minority or a silent majority hurts more than helps policymaking, social cohesion and co-creation of solutions. If we all learn to stop labelling people, initially mild or resolvable disagreements are less likely to end up in a polarisation of attitudes.

Adaptive leaders know that positive policy changes can come from a good idea that started as a lone voice or minority viewpoint. They also know that minority views may serve to check against complacency and groupthink.

The point is this: What a position says, how valid an argument is, and how effective a policy is, are all separate from how vocal a minority is, how small or big the minority and majority groups, and what the majority wants. Group labels are not views.

Second, having a binary division of how people respond to an issue is not constructive and can have negative consequences.

Let's say you classify people into one of two mutually exclusive groups with opposing views – one a vocal minority dominating the discourse and the other a silent majority choosing not to contribute to it.

What will be the impact? It divides rather than unites people. It creates a "us-versus-them" mindset. This exclusive mindset can evolve or erupt into social divides. Some may ask the divisive question: "Are you with us or against us?"

Dividing people into two camps will not help identify what is common despite the differences, and how the differences can in fact work in complementary ways.

The binary distinction often misrepresents reality. For most major public issues such as immigration, taxes, minimum wage, and Internet regulation, it is not true that there are only two different and opposing views in the population. The more complex an issue gets over time in public discourse, like that on social inequality, the greater the spectrum of views. Some people may even move their position along the spectrum.

People who are vocal can have very different views. This is clear when there are many viewpoints and disagreements in public discourse. Also, some may speak up on one aspect of a policy but others may do so on another aspect or the underlying rationale.

Those who are silent can also have very different views. But we may not know what these views are, and thus how they are similar to or different from those expressed by vocal people. Without evidence, there is no basis to say that the large group labelled as silent majority share the same view, and that it is opposite to that articulated by the vocal minority group.

ENGAGING THOSE WHO DISAGREE AND THE AMBIVALENT

Rather than dismiss those who speak up on a topic as belonging to a "vocal minority", leaders should pay more attention to those who disagree and those who are ambivalent. They span across all demographics and socio-economic classes.

People who disagree strongly with the leader on an issue may or may not speak up. For those who don't, they may express their disagreement in other ways – at the ballot box, sharing views with and influencing family, friends and colleagues in private conversations, even leaving the country. For those who speak up, they are the ones most likely to be labelled as a vocal minority.

Why engage people who disagree strongly? If they are right, it helps solve problems. If they are wrong, convince them or get them involved in a way that will help rather than hurt the situation. In many situations, it is not a given that leaders are right or wrong, so honest engagement for co-solutions is important.

Of course, groups with ulterior motives to sow discord will require leaders to take a different approach. But such groups are the exception.

The large majority of Singaporeans who speak up strongly in disagreement do so despite the costs and potential risks because they hope to make a positive difference.

Calling them troublemakers or vocal minorities who cause social disharmony is not just inaccurate but also self-defeating. It will only lead them towards maladaptive and aggressive behaviours because they cannot see alternative means of engagement.

Then there are people with ambivalent views. They may have mixed feelings and conflicting thoughts. They can see the two contrasting positions each with pluses and minuses, and they are unsure what to feel, think or do about it. They are neither neutral nor indifferent.

There are probably many Singaporeans who are ambivalent about something, be it about the Government, the public sector, the opposition, a policy or a social issue. These are views that involve both positives and negatives. Ambivalence is a discomforting psychological state. The motivation to get out of it to take a position can make them more susceptible to emotion-based influences and cognitive biases.

It is not easy to effectively engage those who disagree or are ambivalent. But there is much to lose when they are not engaged.

LEADERSHIP IN ENGAGEMENT

What does all this mean for leaders? Put simply, they should not label people as belonging to a "vocal minority" when tackling a difficult issue. And do not label the rest as silent majority and assume that they agree with the issue.

Calling people a vocal minority or a silent majority hurts more than helps policymaking, social cohesion and co-creation of solutions. If we all learn to stop labelling people, initially mild or resolvable disagreements are less likely to end up in a polarisation of attitudes.

But leaders are human too. The challenge for principled leaders is to be aware of their confirmatory biases to see only the strengths in their own position and only the weaknesses in the opposing view. Being principled involves doing what one believes is the right thing, but it does not mean one is right all the time.

Principled leaders are also adaptive when they are self-aware, humble, able and willing to acknowledge mistakes and learn from them, and can see things from another's perspective.

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