Moving forward with great expectations

High public expectations are a good thing. They become a problem only if the government views public expectations as a problem in policy and governing.

By DAVID CHAN
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

There are two popular myths about public expectations.

The first is that public expectations can be generalized. This myth is propagated every time someone refers to public expectations as if they were a singular variable that increases or decreases without reference to specific issues or segments of the population.

In reality, the nature and level of public expectations – and the consequences of unmet expectations – vary a lot. For example, public expectations involving issues of integrity, fairness and accountability are rooted in values and principles.

Failure to meet these expectations leads to more negative and permanent consequences than failure to meet expectations about standards of service delivery, such as waiting time for bus and frequency of MRT service disruptions.

The consequences of public expectations also differ among different segments of the population. For example, people who travel by bus or train will react more intensely to crowded buses and MRT service disruptions than those who travel by car. Motorists, on the other hand, are likely to be far more concerned about traffic jams.

Thus, it is not useful to explain policy challenges or strong political reactions by making generalized references to public expectations. The second myth is that Singaporeans expect everything to be perfect and have zero tolerance for any mistakes.

There are two popular myths about public expectations. The first is that public expectations can be generalized...