

The business case for positive workplace culture

True work-life harmony happens when employers and employees collaborate to build and sustain a positive workplace which enables their personal development, and the commercial success of the business they work for. **By Victor Mills**

THERE has been a lot of talk about work-life harmony in Singapore over the past couple of years. Too many people still think this is the responsibility of employers only and can be achieved by employers simply giving more. For instance, by improving freebies like a piece of fresh fruit on Fridays, or a free ice cream every 2 months, or amping up the quality of buffets. This is sheer fallacy and underscores the often asymmetrical, adolescent and overly simplistic nature of how too many people still see employer-employee relationships.

It is not about employers giving more to demanding, sometimes self-entitled employees. It is about employers and employees collaborating together to build and sustain the positive workplace which enables their personal development, and the commercial success of the business they work for. This is the only way true work-life harmony can happen.

It also only happens with the right kind of leadership from everyone in a business, and with everyone accepting accountability and responsibility for their behaviours, actions and outcomes. So, what does a positive workplace culture look like, and why should every business have one?

A positive workplace culture is one in which no one is abused, discriminated against, sexually harassed or undermined at work. Where hiring and promotion are based on merit. Where people who wish to be developed are given every opportunity to build and practise capabilities and skills.

To build a positive workplace culture, it is important to treat it like all other change management projects and start at the top. It is the board's job to define – with the senior leadership team – the values which the business wants to uphold and the behaviours which demonstrate those values, and which everyone in the business is expected to practise consistently.

Once that is done, the senior leadership team, supported by HR and every people manager, needs to communicate and validate the values and behaviours with each team. This is to make sure nothing has been inadvertently omitted that is important to the teams. The end results are easy to understand, clearly and regularly communicated values and expected behaviours from everyone in the business.

At the same time, policies, procedures, job contracts, vendor management and key performance indicators are all aligned with the values and expected behaviours. Penalties for non-compliance are also clearly communicated and enforced.

To achieve and sustain the positive workplace culture which everyone says they want, everyone must be prepared to practise self-leadership, whatever their role and seniority, and be accountable for their actions, be-



haviour and outcomes. Employees need to see that non-compliance with the agreed values and behaviours is punished no matter how senior the individual is or how much revenue he/she/their team generates. This is critical to the trust and mutual respect needed to sustain a positive workplace.

When I was talking recently with a good friend about positive workplace culture and its benefits, my friend said: "Beware of suggesting simple solutions to complex problems."

There is nothing simple about implementing positive workplace culture, which is why it is, sadly, more often the exception than the rule in corporate life. It is hard to build and even harder to sustain because none of us humans are perfect. We all make mistakes. We can all be thoughtless and take out our frustrations on others. However, if everyone in a business can see the benefits, there is every chance that values and expected behaviours will be practised. When that happens, positive workplace culture can solve many of today's workplace challenges. This why leadership at every level of a business and self-leadership by every employee are so important.

Let us take the most common type of workplace discrimination: hiring. If one of your business's values is to treat everyone with equal respect, you will not have hiring practices which are ageist or discriminatory in any other way. You will look at the individual and assess their attitude, character, capabilities and potential, and hire the best available candidate.

Practising the same values means that if bullying, undermining or, even worse, sexual harassment occurs, the victim has recourse and the perpetrators are punished.

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The same values mean that local and foreign talent are treated equally, integrated and enabled to work together for the benefit of the business.

Again, take another workplace challenge: promotion. With the right values, behaviours and policies in place, promotion is based on merit, not seniority or any other consideration.

The commercial case for positive workplace culture is this: happy and engaged employees are more productive in their jobs. They work together better and serve their customers with responsiveness and excellence. All of these actions contribute to healthier revenue and more sustainable businesses.

The other benefits of happy and productive teams are societal. Most of us spend most of our time at work. If that experience is positive, our private lives stand a better chance of being more positive too. As a result, the good reputation of the business will grow. Its ability to attract and retain talent will increase. The benefits will flow beyond the business across the community in which a business lives and works, and will encourage more take-up of the right values and behaviours.

Business can be a force for good, and so can everyone in a business. Employers and employees should choose the tough path of building and sustaining positive workplace culture for their own sakes, the sake of their business and for the betterment of society as a whole. This is the symmetrical, adult, collaborative and mature way to see employer and employee relationships, and to achieve positive human outcomes and sustainable businesses.

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The writer is chief executive of Singapore International Chamber of Commerce.