



Making Asia a Great Place to Work

What do Singapore Workers Want?

Steve Morris, Head Coach,
Steve Morris Associates



The globalization of the marketplace is pushing everybody to be more responsive to customers and markets. We need the best from our people, so leaders need to bring that out. And to bring out the best from people, you don't tell them what to do – they want to do it. You make them want to do it for you. And when you start viewing your employees as internal customers, or leadership's customers, then you don't have any choice but to start addressing their needs – whatever they may be.

Although staff turnover has dramatically decreased in the last few years, this cannot be taken as an indicator of employee satisfaction. Redundancies, lay-offs and hiring freezes have led to fewer people in the workplace with higher levels of stress and lower levels of trust. Because of fewer opportunities people are staying put but they may feel very much like 'prisoners of work'. As market growth returns, existing employees will be stretched even further

This article was published in Today's Manager, a bi-monthly publication of the Singapore Institute of Management, in January-February 2000.

and many companies can expect a backlash from disgruntled employees – unless they look now at what motivates and de-motivates their workforce.

The first step in addressing their needs, and motivating them to higher performance, is to find out what they want. Fast-track promotions and aggressive incentive plans are the traditional, and expensive, answers. These can, however, easily backfire, by leading to overcompensation of individuals and unfair treatment of colleagues rather than inspiring true motivation.

Bonuses and surging pay may give employees a lift, but is this what it takes to get them to stay and perform well in their jobs? Steve Morris Associates has asked hundreds of employees in large and small companies based in Singapore what they value most in their company right now, what they find particularly motivating in their job, and what they think makes a great place to work.

Each worker has been asked to complete a questionnaire of 150 questions, rating each as to its importance to him/her and also to the extent to which it is happening in the company.



Steve Morris Associates

International Leadership Consultants

This article may be reproduced in its entirety with credit to Steve Morris Associates and any earlier publisher. Any alterations require the prior written permission of the company. All rights reserved.

Fair pay not high pay

From responses received to-date it seems that work is not at all about money. The money-related question that rated highest in terms of importance to workers, at 34 out of 150, was ‘Within my team, I am fairly paid for my contribution’. Money, therefore, is important but it’s more about *fair* pay than *high* pay – most people need a better reason than money alone to get themselves to work.

Preliminary ranked survey results (based on 357 records)

Workers Regard as Most Important	Workers Regard as Least Important
People within my organization appreciate diversity of views and styles	My boss is frank but tactful. He/she is not personal when giving criticisms on my work
People here feel secure in their jobs	People in my company are not discriminated against in age, race, gender or marital status
My colleagues are helpful, cooperative	Leaders within the organization are honest
My colleagues are not selfish in sharing information where work is concerned	Employees are treated with respect in my company regardless of my job
My boss can give and take. If I put in overtime hours, my boss allows me to take some time off	Team achievements/contributions are given due recognition and reward
I can identify with the values/culture of the company	I can speak freely to my boss at any time on any issue
My colleagues have a responsible attitude towards their given tasks	My workplace is lively and fun
I have a clear understanding of the results expected of me on the job	My team members are efficient and effective in their work
People within the company believe in and practice teamwork	Our leaders can respond calmly to changes within and out of the company and can lead employees through these changes
There is a can-do attitude amongst employees in the company	There is a minimum of bureaucracy and red tape in my organization

The question ‘My boss shows his/her appreciation by awarding me monetary rewards’ ranked as low as 96 in terms of importance. ‘My boss shows his/her appreciation by giving me a pat on the back’, however, was ranked at 21. It seems that people care more about their bosses thanking them in person for a job well done than through the pay packet. Good working relationships with colleagues, team spirit and open communication are all in the top 10 of what workers regard as most important.

Training and upgrading, the ability to learn new things and a place where people can fully develop their potential are also emerging as important values to workers. “I am given sufficient training and development to improve my skills in my current job’ and ‘I am clear about my possible career opportunities’ both ranked above the half way point in the most important list.

So, what makes a great place to work in Asia? According to the results of the employee surveys, as we have seen, money may matter in terms of fair compensation and fair treatment but it is collegiality and cooperation as well as plenty of opportunity to grow that truly motivate the Singapore workforce.

In addition to responding to the 150 questions, workers were given the opportunity to add their own comments on a series of questions about their company, leaders, managers and colleagues and what motivates them. Scoring high in the list of what motivates workers about their jobs was the simple answer: ‘nothing’! On the more positive side such comments were made as: ‘I have the trust and respect of the CEO as well as the assistance and cooperation of directors, managers, and staff’; ‘Everybody celebrates a victory and plans for the future together’; ‘Knowing that we are contributing to society and helping the less fortunate’; and ‘The fact that the work I’m doing interests me a great deal and lots of exposure is given’

The top responses were salary, job satisfaction/pride, challenges, learning new things,

recognition for work done / praise, cooperation / teamwork and good colleagues.

On the other hand, workers find it de-motivating to be surrounded by selfishness and red tape, office politics, to have bosses that breathe down their necks and companies that show a lack of welfare for staff. Among comments volunteered were: ‘People talking behind my back’; ‘People who do not dare to make decisions and uncooperative and incompetent colleagues’; ‘A manager who tells my coworkers that no one can be trusted’; ‘Lack of support from the boss and an insecure boss who always puts her interests FIRST.’

The top most de-motivating factors were heavy workload, salary, bad attitudes from colleagues, long hours, lack of interdepartmental communication, lack of promotions and monotonous or boring procedures.

Happiness as a business strategy

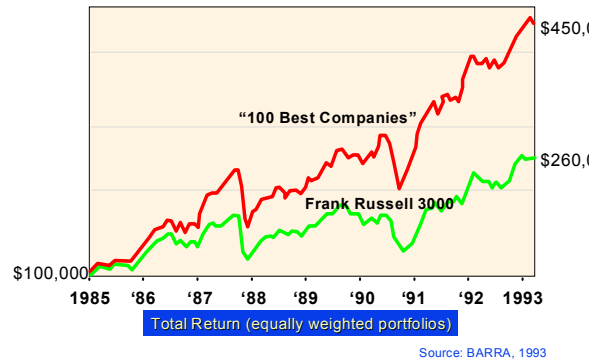
So, will flocks of smiling employees make the stockholders and other stakeholders smile too? Any business stratagem is useless unless it brings financial success. In this case, the link between good workplace practices and financial success is a very strong one. Research data show that companies that are the best in satisfying their employees’ expectations are also better performing organizations.

Market researchers in the USA have been tracking top employers for nearly two decades and have discovered that high morale and outstanding financial performance go hand in hand. Over a ten year period the publicly traded companies in the 100 Best List averaged annual returns of 23.4 per cent compared with 14.8 per cent in the Russell 3000 index of large and small companies. ‘Best employers’ earned nearly twice the average annual returns.

Other measurable results of good working environments are lower turnover rates, lower retention cost, less stress, lower healthcare costs, and higher quality products and services. The best

employers attract, develop, motivate and retain top performers.

Independent financial analysts have shown that “100 Best” firms consistently outperformed their competitors.



Employees are also found to be more willing to take risks and be creative, and firms can respond more rapidly to the fast-changing business and technological environment with a highly committed workforce.

As has been said above, improving relationships with employees begins with understanding, benchmarking, the company's current strengths and weaknesses. This awareness cannot be achieved from information filtering up through layers of management but requires direct contact between leadership and employees – asking the workers what they think and what they want. Traditional employee attitude surveys address these issues from the viewpoint of the HR Manager or the Management and not that of the employees. Our approach was to work directly with employee groups - finding out what was on their minds, what did they want to talk about and what motivates them. The Best Places to Work in Singapore Survey is the result.

For many managers in Asia, the idea of asking employees what they want represents a Pandora’s Box of risks – suppose they ask for something that the managers do not want to, or cannot, provide? From the outset it should be understood by all that

this is an examination of expectations and not necessarily a promise of fulfillment. Companies must have the confidence to learn by first being prepared to listen.

The paramount things that people are talking about, from our preliminary results, are not so much that 'I want a lot of money, a lot of monetary benefits' but more the simple stuff. Fairness matters a great deal. People want to know that they are treated fairly. People want to feel that they are trusted and feel they can trust the people they work for and with.

Most people want to know that they're appreciated. A general feeling is 'I know my boss probably appreciates me but it would mean an awful lot to me if he would actually say so. And maybe he can't because that's not the way we do things in Asia but it would mean an awful lot to me'. Maybe it's not the way things have been done in Asia, but now may be an opportune time for a change.

Just being able to have a conversation with the boss instead of a counseling session, or a performance review session, is important to people. They want to tell their boss when they could use a little bit more direction, when they lack a sense of where the company is going, or a sense of purpose to what they're doing.

Our preliminary results show that workers have plenty of advice for their leaders, managers and colleagues – if they are given the opportunity and encouraged to speak out. They warn their leaders that stressed out staff can't add much differentiating value, that they should get rid of people who practice office politics as they bring down morale and that they should listen more to the people who know their customers the best. Managers are advised to stop wasting time by having endless unfruitful talks and meetings, to provide clear job descriptions to reduce confusion and arguments and not to neglect the value of older and experienced workers. Get motivated, be more cooperative, share and be productive is the message for colleagues.

It is a commonplace but true statement that it is

much easier to complain and criticize than it is to compliment someone about something. Remember that you always attract more bees with honey than with vinegar. Treating people with respect, treating them as you would want them to treat you, is really a magic formula for a successful life.

The Asian marketplace is replete with published company popularity and performance rankings that are typically based on executives' perceptions of other executives' companies or simply on the perceptions of the sponsoring magazine's subscribers. It is indeed ironic that no one has previously sought the views of those most impacted by leadership practices and company policies - the employees!

But the workers, it seems, are hopeful for the future. There is a high degree of correlation between what they say is most important to them and the extent to which they say it is being practiced in their company. The difference is a matter of degree i.e. workers are getting what they want but not necessarily in the right amount. Also, it should be noted that the answers fall into a very tight range. The fact that workers rate as least important to them 'My boss is frank but tactful' does not mean that this is unimportant but that it is less – something has to be at the bottom end of the scale.

Areas where there is the greatest room for improvement can be flagged: bosses without the qualities of a good team player, insufficient training and development to improve skills, lack of openness and sharing of information, office politics, unfair compensation between colleagues, biased and uninterested managers, and absentee CEOs (at least as far as the shop floor is concerned).

Satisfaction with the leadership of their company, management team and fellow colleagues is low. But 57 per cent of workers said that they would still recommend their company as one of the best companies to work for in Singapore.

About the author

In 1998, Steve Morris founded Steve Morris Associates to assist leaders in Asia to respond to new economic and organizational challenges. Steve coaches and inspires chief executives and their teams within a multitude of cultures and industries to develop themselves and those around them to achieve personal goals, job satisfaction and business performance. He is one of a handful of coaches in Asia that specialize in helping leaders nurture and refine their command of the softer skills of people development and motivation.

About the company

International leadership consultancy Steve Morris Associates, the first dedicated leadership coaching company in Asia, assists leaders in Asia to respond to new economic and organizational challenges by forging stronger teamwork at the top of the organization and fully developing employee potential. SMA designs and conducts leadership development and feedback programs that are linked to the achievement of business goals by working directly with employees at all levels.

For further information, please contact:
Steve Morris Associates,
One Phillip Street #05-00, Singapore 048692
Tel: +65 538 7228
Fax: +65 538 1662
Email: headcoach@aspire.com.sg
Website: www.aspire.com.sg

