



# Making Asia a Great Place to Work

## Don't Guess - Ask! Using Feedback Tools for Organizational and Leadership Development

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*Feedback is critical to effective action. Before leaders make changes in their leadership style or in their workplaces, they would be well advised to benchmark the current situation and understand how it meets or, more often the case, fails to meet, employees' expectations.*

Despite the recent changes and challenges in the Asian marketplace, many managers still fail to understand that new economic realities, with mergers, acquisitions, redundancies, resignations and routine transfers, demand a new leadership approach. Senior managers who have enjoyed nearly a decade of continuous growth often do not have a mindset that encompasses teamwork and are less than willing to yield power, resources and responsibilities by delegating decision-making and authority. The more senior the managers, the more ingrained are their attitudes likely to be and the more difficult it is to change their behavior.

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At the same time, the pressure for continuous improvement has forced Human Resource Managers to target middle and junior managers for training and development – overlooking those at the top. Some even believe that managers are born and not made and once promoted into the top slot will somehow naturally have all the right skills to succeed. Limited leadership development in Asia means many top leaders are just not equipped to manage their own development, let alone that of others.

Despite this adverse situation, a few organizations in the region have recognized the need for change. Often learning as they go along, their leaders are looking outside their own organizations at ways to empower employees, introduce more flexible organization structures and invest in leadership team development and succession planning.



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### Using feedback

Before taking action, however, leaders and the leadership team must obtain an external detached view of their current management style and practices. Each individual has to understand how their boss, peers and direct reports view them before they can begin to learn how to manage more effectively. Multi-source (360°) feedback from all parties is an essential prerequisite to learning and growth.

The National Library Board of Singapore, for example, is making rapid changes to achieve its vision of becoming a world class library system and a high-tech learning organization. Chief Executive Dr. Christopher Chia says establishing teamwork at the top through a feedback mechanism is one of the keys to achieving their goal.

“We realised that we needed external expertise to establish a common framework and assimilate the language of teamwork. Initially we thought that we had personality conflicts in the management team but the coach, through feedback, has enabled us to examine our skills, needs and goals as individuals and as a team. We now know that it was a question of style and preferences and this is something that we are working on.”

The idea of such feedback can be a cause of anxiety and even concern to the leaders involved. They know that they are relatively weaker in some areas yet they would rather not think about it or they feel that they will look bad, lose face or even have their job prospects adversely affected. This is a common misperception. Feedback is an opportunity for development and not assessment nor criticism and can help leaders to achieve their objectives faster, easier and more effectively.

There are four key points to using leadership feedback:

- What feedback will be based on - participants must agree the objective i.e. the standard of leadership expected
- How feedback will be obtained - participants must 'buy-into' the method for collecting

feedback

- How feedback is to be used - participants must be well-briefed on interpreting and using the feedback
- Closing the loop - participants must acknowledge the feedback given

Leadership feedback questionnaires should not cover work issues but rather address leadership behaviors - they are an opportunity for leaders to know where they stand from a perspective that they cannot see themselves. Questions asked, for example, are whether the leader praises people for a job well done, treats people with dignity and respect, gives team members appreciation and support and develops cooperative relationships. As well as blind spots, they may uncover opportunities and, above all, help the leader to identify areas for development.

A typical process would include a pre-workshop briefing for all participants; the distribution and completion of the feedback questionnaires by the participants, their supervisor and a select number of peers and reports; a peer learning workshop to discuss the issues and establish guidelines for interpretation of the reports; individual debriefs on the reports; and individual developmental planning meetings with an experienced executive development coach.

### Stimulating experience

Feedback from Asian leaders who have participated in a feedback program shows that they have found the peer learning workshop sessions stimulating. They pick out the most interesting aspects as: "constant interaction, facilitated by tools, which helps build up trust and understanding"; "learning together something valuable about ourselves and how to work together"; "knowing my strengths and weaknesses"; "receiving peer's feedback". One participant cited as an important learning point "the present team's linking skills and how I have either contributed or not contributed. The importance of communication and dialogue amongst each team member."

Feedback is the first step to seeing yourself as others see you and learning what matters to your colleagues, boss and staff. Once leaders have obtained feedback, however, it is very much down to them where they go next. Leaders can be given guidelines on how to maximize their strengths and skills and minimize areas for improvement. Too often leaders do not help their fellow leaders to take the next step and put into practice all that they have learnt. Organizational leadership can help by encouraging follow-up development.

### Retaining talent

People are an organization's greatest asset and efforts to attract, retain and develop the best can lead companies astray, with the best of intentions. Employers who believe that money can buy good work and loyalty will find themselves in a vicious circle of settling unspecified grievances with pay rises, only to find their employees are still performing below their potential. Money does not address the real problem of satisfaction in the workplace.

The key to motivation is not money but to understand what employees want. Generally people leave a company because of unmet expectations. Find out what these expectations are; manage them; and your employees will be happy to be at work and this will be reflected in their and the company's performance.

This business stratagem has been practiced in the United States and Europe for many years and has been validated in Asia by Steve Morris Associates. We discovered that money is certainly important but motivation and satisfaction are more about *fair* pay than *high* pay. People remember when their bosses thank them in person, and in public, for a job well done. This springs to mind more readily than the last pay rise.

Opportunities to learn, interesting and challenging work, great colleagues, competitive salary, job satisfaction, recognition for work done, and teamwork head the list of what employees, from shop floor to board level, want from their employers.

### Happy and productive

There is a very strong link between great workplaces and financial success. Research data show that companies that are the best in satisfying their employees' expectations are also better financially performing organizations.

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.

Money compensates, leadership motivates. While money does not motivate, it can de-motivate. It is employees in poor workplace environments who tend to focus on compensation issues. So leaders who focus on money are addressing the symptom and not the problem. Of course we need to make people feel fairly paid for their contributions. Beyond that, it is up to the leadership to build loyalty and motivation.

Employee feedback is a must for companies aspiring to be among the world's best employers. We developed a benchmarking tool to find out what employees think is important and what motivates, and de-motivates, them. The *Best Places to Work*<sup>®</sup> Survey is a unique Asian leadership feedback tool, specially designed to establish a benchmark from which improvements in the quality of work life can be measured.

Over the past two years we have used this tool with companies in Asia to help them to first measure the status quo and then provide guidance on the way forward. Only by being prepared to listen will companies be able to learn. Organizations taking part in these surveys benchmark what employees value most in the company right now, what they find particularly motivating in their job, and what they think makes a great place to work. The objective is for leadership to listen, learn, and respond, not merely to feel good about how others perceive their company.

Findings from thousands of questionnaires show that the best places to work in Singapore provide fair pay and fair treatment, opportunities for training and development and a friendly working environment work.

The money-related question that rated highest in terms of importance to employees was 'Within my team, I am fairly paid for my contribution'. On the other hand, the question 'My boss shows his/her appreciation by awarding me monetary rewards' was in the lower third of important considerations. As already mentioned, money, therefore, is important but it's more about *fair* pay than *high* pay – most people need a better reason than money alone to go to work each day.

In fact respondents to the BPTW Survey said that their workplaces in general do provide what they want. The difference is a matter of degree – they want more attention paid to the things that matter to them.

The most important areas for improvement are supervisor relationships, training and development and communications. It should be noted that these are all issues that can be addressed through a change in attitude and approach. They require time-input rather than budget, and hence are within the capability of all companies.

The direct supervisor has the most significant impact on an employee's satisfaction in his job and whether he stays or goes, adds value or marks time. Managers and supervisors need not only to have but also to demonstrate the qualities of good team players, 'walking the talk'. They should be seen to be fair and unbiased to everyone and take an active interest in the career development of those who work for them. CEOs in particular should take time out to mingle with staff, particularly on the shop floor.

### **De-motivating factors**

Employees identify the worst places to work as those where they are surrounded by uncooperative and incompetent colleagues, paid below the market rate, and have no idea about where the company is going. The top most de-motivating factors are low salary,

heavy workload, routine work, low level of interaction among colleagues, managers and supervisors, and lack of recognition and guidance.

Unsurprisingly, they find it de-motivating to be surrounded by selfishness, red tape and office politics, to have bosses that breathe down their necks and for companies to show a lack of welfare for staff.

Among the dislikes most often cited were: people who 'do not dare to make decisions', 'uncooperative and incompetent' colleagues, and leaders and managers who 'manage through intimidation' or make 'de-motivating' comments. Other grievances are job scopes that are not clearly defined, and rewards that are regarded as inadequate for the work involved or low compared to market standards. Employees also do not regard as 'real' rewards anything with strings attached, 'even for a cheap training course'.

### **The first step**

Feedback can provide some surprising and unexpected answers but it is the first step to seeing yourself as others see you and learning what matters to your colleagues, boss and staff. Armed with this awareness, leaders are well equipped to motivate everyone on the organization to higher performance.

Great leaders come and go. Some people are naturally great leaders; for most of us, however, greatness doesn't come naturally. It has to be learnt. For most great leaders, greatness comes with effort and experience. A feedback program combined with leadership development coaching can help speed up the leader's learning curve while also helping to ensure team success and organization performance. The speed at which top management transitions to the new realities in Asia will determine their likelihood of success and, ultimately, the measure of prosperity for them and their work communities.

### **About the author**

In 1998, Steve Morris founded Steve Morris Associates to coach leaders in Asia to respond to global 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, coaches leaders in Asia to forge stronger teamwork at the top of the organization while 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.

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