For overworked Singaporeans: Are feedback programmes working?

Such schemes claim to raise employee’s productivity, but not all comments are heard.

Working in a communication company, Matthew felt that his work culture felt rather rigid and stifling, as firms tended to go through the motions of playing by the rules and following processes. “Work here feels very transactional, and there’s nothing wrong with that except when employees start to feel as though their supervisors only notice their mistakes but pay no attention to their successes,” he told Singapore Business Review.

Poor delegation of tasks can leave some employees overworked and unsatisfied, especially if their hard efforts are unrecognised, explained Robert Walters’ HR director for Southeast Asia, Tricia Tan. “Employees who feel valued will continue to work hard to impress leadership. Those who are not recognised as a contributor will eventually stop trying,” she said.

This reflects a study by experience management firm Qualtrics revealed that Singapore’s employee engagement in 2019 has dropped off and is now below the global average. In Asia, it lagged behind India, Thailand and Hong Kong, although it outpaced Japan and South Korea. A 2018 survey by Mercer confirms this as well—only 72% of Singaporeans felt satisfied with the companies they work for, compared to 82% in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

Further, Matthew felt that hyper-productivity has been so ingrained amongst Singapore workers that it was common amongst his peers to feel guilty for even taking a break. “The scary thing is that this has been so deeply ingrained to the extent that I sometimes find myself judging a colleague who has left the office at the dot even if they have work to be completed. It is our prerogative to work within our stipulated working hours but we’re so great at worshipping productivity that we begin to police each other,” he added.

David Lim, an employee working in a law firm, also felt that there was a need for a better work-life balance, especially for the lawyers. “That may be because the nature of their work inherently takes a significant chunk of time out of their personal lives. They are literally at the beck and call of their clients most of the time, most especially when they need to provide advice urgently as the situation requires. So they have to reply at 2am or work through the morning,” he said.

A 2019 report by IoT company Kisi revealed Singapore to be the second most overworked city in the world, trailing just behind Japan. The average Singaporean worker arrives at work by 9:34 am, takes 14 vacations a year, commutes one-way for 44.5 minutes, and has their number of actual work hours 23% higher than the mandated 48 hours per week.

Feedback programmes

To improve the workplace environment, some companies hold feedback programmes. Qualtrics’ survey revealed that firms conducting these programmes recorded a higher level of employee engagement, compared to those who do not.

Mercer International Region partner for employee experience practice, Lewis Garrad, noted various ways of holding feedback programmes, including a cyclical employee survey, gathering of feedback during an onboarding process or a leadership change, digital focus group and natural language processing, employee preference tools, and anonymous polling tools during townhall meetings.

Garrad noted that most multinational and large local firms have well-developed employee feedback programmes. He found that companies that gather systematic feedback and use it to improve their business do gain real results.

David’s company did not offer any feedback programme that he knew of, instead, feedback is taken directly to their manager. “From what I’ve seen direct feedback are very much taken into consideration and are acted upon, so long as the action doesn’t come directly against firm directive or tradition,” he noted.

In contrast, Matthew’s company holds one-on-one feedback sessions between employees and their line managers every quarter. However, he felt that there was only so much that an individual could do, citing an instance of a coworker being advised against commenting about some of the company’s practices by their line manager.

He stressed a need for a system where employees can empower each other. “For me, the mark of a company that truly cares about employee welfare is the existence of an employee welfare taskforce, which has employees coming together in conversation around what is wrong and what more can be done to improve company culture,” he said.

Likewise, Garrad recommended companies to put more focus on action and improvement, rather than just measurement for these feedback programmes.