

Managing diversity the *tom yum goong* way

One stalk of lemon grass. Three kaffir lime leaves. Two tablespoons of fish sauce and twelve black tiger prawns. Who knew when these ingredients of extreme flavour are mixed together, they create a gastronomic experience so strongly associated with Thailand - the *tom yum goong*.

A good chef must understand the diverse properties of his ingredients and know what tastes good together. With the current global manpower shortage and increased mobility of talent, it is imperative that a manager be equipped to manage talent from diverse backgrounds and motivate them towards the desired outcome. Like a chef, he has to unlock the potential of his “ingredients” so as to produce the best result.

Why diversity is necessary

To survive in today’s competitive business arena, more employers are adopting fair employment practices to attract talent. This certainly creates a diverse workforce with different values and beliefs. If not well managed, it could create tensions among staff and affect their performance and morale. On the other hand, if handled effectively, a diverse workforce could produce amazing results for the organisation. For this reason, diversity has evolved from a window-dressing initiative to a business survival tool.

However, managing diversity goes beyond accommodating people of different ethnicity, gender or even values. It is about acknowledging distinctive values and these beliefs are invaluable to the organisation. It creates an inclusive environment that engages the varied workforce and treats every employee fairly.

Implementing a diversity plan

But before any eager hiring manager starts recruiting people of different backgrounds and embarks on an overhaul in its human resources policies, it is crucial that the organisation has a structured diversity integration programme in place. Promoting diversity does not happen overnight. It is a process where lots of planning is required. If not, chances are any diversity plan would not take off and it could end up costing the organisation more than it should.

Like any other business strategy, a diversity programme needs the unwavering support from the top management and board of directors. It is not another nice-to-have feel-good initiative. The C-suite executives must recognise that the diversity programme must be aligned with the business goals and activities. It is a business decision that will change how the company functions.

To prepare the ground for such a programme, the company must promote a long-term view that supports diversity from rank and file to senior management. This could be in the form of lunches and company outings where employees get to know one another. This promotes intercultural communication among all staff and reduces the possibility for any form of confrontation out of miscommunication.

Training must also be provided for all the managers. This is crucial to the success of the diversity programme. For organisations embarking on a diversity programme for the first time, it is recommended that the HR division engages an external trainer to coach the internal leaders on the intricacies of managing a diverse workforce. Managers have to be sensitive and aware of the cultural differences in their staff. After which, the leaders could hold regular in-house workshops to facilitate learning from one another's experiences.

Benefits of a well-managed diversity plan

While the costs of managing a varied workforce might seem to surpass its immediate gains, but engaging a diverse workforce does have its long-term benefits. An inclusive environment with diverse talents allows employees to state their views and be themselves. Research has proven that a diverse workforce encourages creativity. And when it comes to performing out-of-the-ordinary tasks, the diverse pool of talents tends to outshine a homogenous group. Indirectly, it encourages critical analysis.

An inclusive environment helps to promote goodwill among the diverse employees. And when employees are happy, the corporate culture will improve and customers will most likely be well taken care of by them. Furthermore, in the long run, the positive vibe will help to attract the best talents and develop the company's brand as an employer of choice.

Promoting diversity takes time and several attempts to find the right balance. It will not be a smooth sailing process. But the end result is very rewarding when the organisation is equipped to meet the workforce challenges.

This article is contributed by Mr. Josh Goh, Corporate Services Manager, The GMP Group.

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