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Bank's public criticism of a senior officer sparks debate

ROBIN CHAN

DBS Bank was not saying more yesterday about Ms Josie Lau, after it publicly rebuked her for taking on the top post at Aware despite being told not to.

Ms Lau, vice-president in its cards division, reported to work as usual yesterday.

She issued her first statement as Aware's new president, but said nothing about the criticisms levelled at her by her employer on Wednesday and Thursday.

DBS had revealed that she disregarded its staff code not once but twice, first by not seeking approval before joining the Aware executive committee, and then by defying her employer's advice against becoming president.

The bank's action has drawn flak, with some taking issue with the fact that Ms Lau needed approval before taking up a voluntary position.

A female human resources executive at a multinational corporation here said: "DBS should be proud that someone from their company wants to take up this position."

But others noted that Ms Lau flouted a rule staff should have known about.

A senior corporate affairs officer at a large Singapore-based company said that most top companies would have codes of conduct to deal with conflict-of-interest issues. "In this case, it seems that she was aware of it and yet chose to breach the bank's code of conduct."

Still, Mr Josh Goh, senior manager for corporate services at search firm The GMP Group, pointed out: "In most cases, this would have been kept a private issue."

Asked why he thought DBS reacted the way it did, he said it could be because Aware is an influential group.

"It seems there are serious concerns over whether she should take up such a major role. So they had to come out strongly," he said.

Others felt that DBS acted the way it did because it was unhappy at the prospect of being drawn unnecessarily into controversy.

Ms Lau's team had been asked last year to identify a suitable charity to benefit from a DBS credit card fund-raising drive.

The bank chose Focus on the Family, and ran into protests from some customers upset that the charity and its American parent group took a strongly anti-homosexual line.

A banker with extensive consumer banking experience said: "Given that DBS only recently went through a fiasco when it chose the anti-gay Focus on the Family as the Christmas charity for its credit cards, they would understandably have been very worried about Josie taking a leadership role at Aware.

"It's easy to make the link from Josie to the DBS cards division and the Focus on the Family issue."

So while the bank's actions may strike some as excessive, she pointed out: "It wasn't just any officer taking on any appointment."

chanckr@sph.com.sg