

Getting to the root of Singapore's productivity problem

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SINCE the start of the productivity movement in Singapore more than three decades ago (the inauguration of the National Productivity Movement took place in 1981), many efforts to enhance productivity in Singapore and our workforce have been struggling to attain the desired level of productivity.

Why is it that despite all these efforts, organisations still experience lower levels of productivity? Here, I attempt to provide two possible reasons for this and how organisations can do things differently to achieve higher productivity levels.

Reason 1: Organisation views productivity as an end state and fails to align to organisation mission and outcomes

Let me draw out a common scenario in Singapore to explain this:

At a residential car park, why would someone want to park in the red lots designated for residents? Apart from the recalcitrant few (or maybe a dozen more), most would agree that it is because we have too many cars on our roads and our infrastructure, in this instance, parking space, has failed to catch up. So, this seems to be a problem first created upstream. Does this sound familiar?

At a productivity and innovation conference I attended, one of the speakers who was a system integrator for a public agency, shared how the agency is leveraging technology to cut cost and boost productivity in car park enforcement.

A device mounted on enforcement vehicles can traverse within a car park and identify "offenders" who park their cars in designated red lots for residents. The device identifies the car plate number or tag to determine whether an offence has occurred. This means that there is no longer a need for enforcement officers to actually walk within the car park to perform the task, resulting in productivity gains of 50 per cent! This seems to be a successful project in terms of productivity, doesn't it?

Not exactly.

It is ironic that the speaker mentioned no fewer than two times that "He's not sure if Singaporeans will be too pleased with this" ie the technology innovation. Perhaps he knows

something? As an affirmation, a new-found friend I made at the conference turned to me, shook his head and showed me a cross sign. Bad idea? Why?

This is where I think productivity is given a "bad" name. The KPI for the enforcement branch of the public agency is probably met through this initiative but what is the outcome? Would the driving population at large be appreciative of a latest technological innovation that will improve the situation?

I appreciate that in the interim, schemes where parking lots are painted in red and white to cater for off-peak and peak demands, are put in place. But surely there are similar or other more innovative ideas, besides better and cheaper enforcement, to mitigate the challenges today?

To do this differently, the agency, or any organisation for that matter who intends to improve their productivity levels, should start with thinking about their desired outcomes and view productivity as a means to achieve their desired outcomes rather than as an end in itself. Only in this way will there be buy-in and acceptance from stakeholders and this is the only path to build a sustainable productivity and innovative culture.

Reason 2: There are organisational inhibitors to higher productivity levels

Having done many culture reviews and health-checks for organisations in Singapore, it does not surprise me that we have yet to realise the full benefits of our productivity drive. Many organisations continue to invest in best-in class technologies and more investments are channelled to training and communications to staff. However, productivity levels remain low as suggested through the survey by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Why is this so?

Let me use the illustration of an iceberg; only the tip is within your view. What sank the Titanic was not the tip of the iceberg but what was not in view. Likewise, you have to go beneath the water-line of the iceberg to understand some of the root causes of low productivity levels.

Let me suggest some.

We work in an increasingly collaborative world. We are dependent on the timeliness and quality of work of people around us. Singapore has often been perceived to possess a skilful and efficient workforce, yet employees in many organisations typically experience long hours. Why? Based on my consulting experience with clients across industries, here are three contributing factors:

- **Waiting for others**

Due to hierarchical and bureaucratic practices, there may be a lot of documentation and many levels of approvals needed. No matter how productive the employee is in "finishing" his/her part, there is still the process of clearing with fellow colleagues, the boss and the boss's boss. When there are amendments, the cycle repeats itself. Often, when the decision comes back, the staff would have been waiting for hours or days and guess what, he/she has to rush because it is "urgent" . . . familiar?

- **Rework**

When work deliverables and/or approaches are unclear, staff may not deliver what's expected of them or do things the wrong way. This leads to frustration on both ends and may cause significant rework. In worst cases, supervisors themselves may not be clear about the output and change their minds frequently or end up being a "middle man" between their own bosses and staff; not value-adding.

- **One-size-fits-all approach**

We have a multi-generational and multi-cultural workforce. Our workforce is made up of people at different stages of their lives; they are motivated differently and have diverse experiences. How often do we hear people make remarks about the Baby-boomers, Generation X, Y and now Z? What about the differences in work practices in terms of people from different countries?

Yet, many of us adopt a one-size-fits-all approach towards leading and managing this diverse workforce. Employees who are aligned to the work approach and practices of the supervisor find it relatively easier to exercise creativity and be productive whilst others find it challenging and frustrating to say the least. Are supervisors effective in coaching and managing the diverse workforce? Are they aware of their own beliefs, prejudices and limiting behaviours? Are they equipped to coach and manage?

So, what can we do differently to increase our productivity levels?

First, we need to align our action plans to our organisation's desired outcomes and view productivity as a means to achieve those outcomes rather than an end in itself.

Second, we need to get to the root causes of low productivity rates. More often than not, these include:

- Hierarchical and bureaucratic practices that delay the decision-making process.
- Unclear work deliverables and/or approaches resulting in delays of deliverables as team members are uncertain about what is expected of them or do things the wrong way.
- Adopting a one-size-fits-all approach towards leading and managing a diverse workforce.

My friend Joanna Barclay aptly puts across what it means to remain status quo: "Maintaining the same leadership, management style, and behaviours while expecting your employees to embrace new habits and greater collaboration is cultural insanity!"

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