

CULTIVATING A COLLEGIAL ENVIRONMENT

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

American Express (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd general manager Ryan Lai is a humble man. First, he called up the previous winner of the “Best of the Best” award — former DHL CEO Christopher Ong — to find out how he did it.

Second, he was the only head of company to insist on having his colleagues with him during the interview held in conjunction with the Kincentric Best Employers — Malaysia 2019 (formerly known as Aon Best Employers) awards, which it has won nine times since the awards were introduced in 2001. This time, the company also took home a special recognition for agility.

Lai, who is also vice-president of the customer engagement network for Greater China, Southeast Asia and the US, says Ong shared that he had taken the time to speak to each employee at DHL, from those working in despatch to those in management, at lunch every day. “That inspired me because he had 1,500 people to deal with while I had about 1,200. So, I started something called Project Twelve Hundred. The idea was to put a face to every single one of my colleagues,” he adds.

At Amex Malaysia, the staff at all levels are referred to as “colleagues” and not “employees”. “When our new chairman and CEO [Stephen Squeri] took over almost two years ago, he directed that the staff were to be referred to as colleagues. He wanted to show that we all have a stake in the company regardless of whether you are the CEO, a customer care professional or contractor,” says Lai.

That means if the company is doing well, everyone gets a share of the rewards, in terms of better bonuses and increments.

Meeting his colleagues and listening to what they had to say allowed Lai to see what impeded their work. And no detail is too insignificant.

“A couple of colleagues told me that because of the way the building is situated, the evening sun shines directly into where their desks are, not allowing them to see their monitors because of the glare. That was a simple fix. We gave them a double layer blind, which they could open on cloudy days and close when there was a glare,” he says.

These meetings are very important to Lai. “The whole idea is to gather a group of no more than 10 people. We gather in a room, serve coffee and then it is an open session. They can say anything they want and I am usually guided by a couple of things that I can raise if they are not opening up,” he says.

Lai’s schedule was packed in the first half of the year. “It was crazy. From February to June, I had about two to three sessions a week. These stopped in July and August because there were a few priorities that we needed to attend to. These sessions will restart by November and we should be able to cover all of them,” he says.

Apart from the Kincentric Best Employers programme, Amex Malaysia also has its own colleague survey experience to get a read of how people are feeling. It measures five parameters — learning and development, leadership, employee engagement, agility and diversity and inclusion.

When the report was released this year, the comments were generally positive, says Lai. “There were about 2,500 comments provided by our people. And although a lot of these were good, there were specific comments on security in this area.

“So, we invested in additional security guards to patrol at night and now, security is 24/7. We have also started something called security escort services for our colleagues. So, they can request for an escort to accompany them



From left: Jamie, Dhanya and Lai

around the area or in the building when they arrive at work or to their cars when they are leaving the office.”

Dhanya Lakshmi Arivalagan cuts in, “I am an employee. They call us front-liners. At any time of the day, I can just walk into the offices of our directors or vice-presidents and share something with them, and they will immediately resolve the issue. We do not have to wait for these surveys to come out.”

Dhanya, whose formal title is “Customer Engagement Network premier customer care professional”, cites the issue of security as an example. “There were something like six snatch thefts in a week, so we told our bosses. The following week we had our security escorts. They took action immediately. Normally, we just send them an email and they resolve it, any time of the day.”

She likes the “colleague” concept. “My bosses are approachable. You do not feel like they are some higher authority. They are just like another member of the family or a friend. Even though they are on a different band, they do not project that onto us,” she says.

Lai says he loves the team culture of the organisation. “It starts from this guy, someone I respect a lot,” he indicates vice-president of global fraud and new accounts Jamie Azman, who is sitting next to him.

“Once, he had excess capacity on his team. He raised his hand and said that rather than remove them from the workforce, he could do more for the global network. He freed up seven people and requested some work from the US to be brought over to Kuala Lumpur. He successfully convinced our senior leadership in New York and other markets that there was a hidden gem in Malaysia and that they should try us out with other stuff,” says Lai.

In fact, the company ramped up its headcount to 1,315 last year at a time when other companies were letting go of their people.

Amex Malaysia won the special recognition for agility at this year’s Best Employers awards, mainly through Jamie’s efforts. “Our front-line colleagues are empowered to make decisions. So, if there is a situation with a card and they need to provide adjustments or approve requests, they can decide for themselves,” he says.

“The second aspect is when it comes to performance management. We have very clear guidance in terms of how you manage performance, at what stage you issue, say, a discussion note or performance warning so you do not necessarily have to consult human resources for everything.”

So, instead of using the increased efficiency to cut staff, Jamie asked for more work. “Instead

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of letting go of people because of the efficiency that we created, I told the global office that I can add to the work done by this network. We did the pilot and the test, and we either matched or beat the performance of our US colleagues. After that, it was a no-brainer to send more work our way,” he says.

Lai is delighted that the company has received a lot of validation recently for its good work. “At the recent Contact Centre Association of Malaysia awards night, we grabbed 30 of the 85 awards given, two of which were for best new contact centres in Malaysia. Two teams won — the US servicing team led by Jamie and the Japanese ecosystem servicing team,” he says.

But the company does not only engage its people by giving them a voice, better benefits and a sense of pride in their work. It also asks them to weigh in on the type of community service that it should participate in, with these projects being especially popular among its millennial staff.

Lai says Amex Malaysia used to do a lot of one-off community service events such as visiting orphanages with gifts, but its efforts were neither continuous nor sustainable. “This time around, we asked our colleagues what they wanted to do and for some reason, they chose ocean preservation.

“So, we cleaned seven or eight beaches and removed more than two tonnes of rubbish from the sea. We have released hundreds of turtle hatchlings and created artificial reefs, and our colleagues love it. It gives them a sense of purpose and they feel like they are contributing to the community.”

He feels that, being an international organisation, Amex not only provides 1,315 career development opportunities in Malaysia but also 65,000 globally. The Malaysian office has exported about 50 staff to places such as India, Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, the US and the UK.

“It is all up to you. If you are at a stage where you can move, the opportunity is yours. You just have to grab it when it comes,” says Lai.

Right now, he feels that his main task is engaging his colleagues. And Dhanya is eager to weigh in, “Our office is C-shaped and if Ryan wants to, he can go directly to the pantry or washroom without passing us. But he chooses the long way so he can talk to us. If I am all dressed up, he wants to know why. If we are taking selfies, he steps in and photobombs us. So, I see him three or four times in a day. And I think he does this intentionally.”

Lai nods, “Yes, I walk that way so I can see the people.”

“And get his 10,000 steps,” quips Jamie. ■