

# KEEPING EMPLOYEES FRONT AND CENTRE

BY JOTHAM LIM

When running a large organisation, it is easy to get caught up in the numbers and neglect the most important element — the employees.

“It is the people who make or break an organisation. And leaders must walk the talk and lead by example,” says OCBC Bank (Malaysia) Bhd CEO Datuk Ong Eng Bin.

He points out that a great employer will invest in its people and provide an inclusive workplace. “It will invest in their personal and professional growth and equip them with the necessary training. It will provide them with opportunities for career growth and listen attentively to what they have to say. In summary, if you take care of your people, they will naturally take care of the company.”

OCBC emerged as one of Malaysia’s best employers at the Kincentric Best Employers — Malaysia 2019 (previously known as Aon Best Employers) awards this year. It also won the award in 2016 and 2017 but missed out last year, which raised some eyebrows.

Ong wants to clear the air. He explains that from 2017, the bank decided to conduct the employee engagement survey biennially. “2018 was merely a year we

did not carry out the survey, hence we did not participate. That being said, we still continue to invest in our employees’ development to make a meaningful difference for them,” he says.

For instance, it launched OCBC’s Future Smart Programme last year. For its first anniversary this year, many of the bank’s divisions came together to participate in a digital transformation programme as a way to reskill and upskill employees and to prepare them for the rapidly changing digital landscape.

Although company culture cannot be easily quantified, OCBC is determined to keep its ears on the ground, mainly through its biennial employee engagement survey. “It helps us know where we stand in relation to the industry and also what our own staff thinks about the organisation so that we can smooth out the rough edges,” says Ong.

He recalls one of the challenges he faced early in his career. This happened during his stint at the bank’s Johor Baru branch in the early 1990s. The city was experiencing rapid growth, but much of the infrastructure was not as developed as it is today.

“I was a rookie in a place many people would call a ‘cowboy’ town. But I soon learnt to work independently, develop new businesses in new areas, establish

a network of friends and associates, work with all types of people and deal with those at headquarters and colleagues in Singapore from the branch’s perspective,” says Ong.

That is why he attends as many staff gatherings as he can, whether a formal business review or an informal teh tarik session. “The idea has always been the same — to listen, engage and then listen again,” he says.

Ong says millennials comprise about 63% of the company’s workforce, with those below the age of 24 making up 8.3%. He adds that the new generation of employees have become a core part of the bank’s workforce by sheer volume alone and that he decided to embrace all the value they bring whole-heartedly. “We have recognised that the older and younger generations must complement each other for things to move smoothly, effectively and productively.”

Ong is proud of OCBC’s diversity and inclusiveness. He says women make up 65% of its total workforce, a significant portion of whom hold positions of vice-presidents and above.

Corporate culture plays a vital role in any large organisation. Multiple studies have found that high employee satisfaction can lead to greater customer satisfaction and higher profits. However, a silo

mentality may pose a significant threat to a corporate culture.

A silo mentality is defined as a reluctance to share information with those in other divisions of the company. At best, this attitude is seen as reducing the organisation’s efficiency. At worst, it damages the corporate culture.

“A lot of what we do is across divisions, which helps our people to overcome any orientation towards a silo mentality. We even present awards for cross-functional projects. I am pleased to say that we have done well in recent years to break down these silos by taking on a collaboration mindset,” says Ong.

He hopes to continue seeing more sharing of ideas across the bank. “We want to be known for our great history, network, reputation, people and service, even though we may not necessarily be the biggest bank in the country,” he says.

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