

SIDE EFFECTS OF BEING A BEST EMPLOYER

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

Prashant Chadha, managing director of Malaysia and the Philippines at global human resource solutions firm Aon Hewitt, loves to tell a story that illustrates the side effects of being a best employer.

Characteristically, this story has nothing to do with winning other awards (being a best employer, not so strangely, tends to attract the best employees) or seeing a marked increase in financial performance. It has to do with motivated employees who go above and beyond and save a life in the process.

The story goes like this. Datuk Chang Khim Wah — president and CEO of Eco World Development Group Bhd, which won the Best of the Best award at the Aon Best Employers awards in 2016 and 2017 — plays football with the auxiliary police on weekends.

"It is just him and them. One day, at one of EcoWorld's developments, two security officers were doing their rounds and, because they took their job seriously and were attentive, they heard a baby crying over the sound of their motorcycle," says Chadha.

He is convinced that the security personnel made the extra effort because of the kind of leader Chan is and the personal interest he took in them. Chadha shudders to think what could have happened to the baby had they been less alert. "There were wild dogs and other animals around. And even without the animals, there is just exposure. It is a horrible thought!"

This is what being a best employer is about. "If you are an engaging leader, everybody knows it. You don't have to go around saying, 'I am a good leader because I have X% growth or saved Y% in cost or have done whatever.' An engaging leader is known because of the personal brand he has created for himself," says Chadha.

This was in response to a question on whether being a best employer ultimately becomes a repetition of the same formulaic mantras used in the human resources-speak of the day — a polished performance without much substance.

Companies that participate in the Aon Best Employers awards are tested on three fronts: an interview with the CEO to determine his or her vision, finding out what the HR practices of the company are that back up this vision and an employee engagement survey (where companies are given a score of up to 100) to find out what the employees think about all this.

Chadha says there are enough safeguards in place to prevent those who acclimatise themselves to simply saying the right things from winning or even being shortlisted.

Ridhima Khanduja, principal of Malaysia and Brunei for talents, rewards and performance at Aon Hewitt, agrees that organisations can start training their people to communicate the right messages over time. But she adds that the firm has become attuned to the nuances of performance versus sincerity.

"We use two points to check: First, we hear them out because the process allows us to test this. Whether we feel it or not, we are not the only judge. Their impact has to be created with the employees. Did their people feel it? Even if the leader says the right things during the CEO interview, if the proof is not there in the employee perception, the company does not make the cut," she says.

And what if the employees have been coached to answer the survey in a certain

way? "We have an auditing process aligned to it so we can weed this out. The employee survey is 60 straightforward questions, but there is a minimum amount of time they must spend on the survey, which is not disclosed to the clients," says Khanduja.

"So, if there is a pattern in employee responses and they finish the survey too quickly, it will not seem right. If there is a trend in the answers ... we have actually disqualified organisations for this ... because not everyone can be happy with everything that is going on in your organisation. Some amount of variance is expected."

Sometimes, companies may be asked to provide evidence for certain assertions they make. Khanduja says this is not something that Aon Hewitt resorts to often. "Even in this present cycle, we have only done it for two companies."

But it is not just about winning. Chadha thinks companies should participate simply to know where they stand in terms of employee perception. "The first thing we do is measure. If you don't measure, you don't get the data, and you don't know where you stand," he says.

Chadha finds that companies in Malaysia, especially the small and medium enterprises, are reluctant to participate because they are afraid of not making the cut. But that is beside the point, he says, as no one will know that you participated and did not win. The important thing is finding out where you stand and moving forward from there.

There has been a slight increase in both the number and quality of applicants. Best employers are scored between 0 and 100 (based on the employee engagement survey). Previously, the organisations that "made the cut" scored in the mid-80s onwards while those that were "on the journey" had scores in the 60s. There was a clear absence of companies with scores in the 70s.

"This year, we had that filled up. So now, where do you cut off a best employer? That is going to be a challenge. It was not a challenge in the past, which is a good sign because organisations have moved from the 60s to the high 70s," says Chadha.

What this means is that the judges had to really narrow in and look at each pillar and driver. "Drivers are things like career opportu-

nities, perceptions of leadership, supervisors, work-life balance and diversity, which is huge on the agenda in Malaysia," he says.

How different is this year's best employer programme compared with the previous years? Chadha says the issues that came up were pretty globally linked. "So when we looked at the whole impact from the global landscape, we saw a lot of change happening from a political and geographical standpoint. Malaysia has been in the thick of things, for obvious reasons with the whole political change that we have had. The new government will definitely have an impact on the way we operate and do business."

He adds that while the company does look at other drivers, the most important is employee engagement. "Yes, we look at different drivers that have an impact on employee engagement, but we also look at the 3S — say, stay and strive. The things you say as an employee, your stickiness with the organisation and your willingness to go the extra mile, that is, to strive."

But it is not as straightforward as it may seem. "Say a company's engagement score is high but its 'strive' score is a bit lower than its overall engagement, there is a concern with the performance. But if they look at the performance process again, it could have an impact on 'say' and 'stay'. So, is that the right thing to do? Or is it okay to continue with the high engagement score while the strive score drops?" says Chadha.

He adds that the process does not stagnate. "We focus on four pillars and organisations that have done this every year are used to these pillars. But as a consulting firm with a commitment to organisations and the countries we operate in, we also shake things up."

What does this mean? "We are adapting those four pillars to be something else in 2019," says Chadha.

How will the firm go about doing that? He muses, "If you talk about effective leadership, for instance, it is not just about focusing on the numbers anymore. It is about going out there and actually saying, 'Are you an engaging leader? Can you get people to move based on the charisma that you have developed and the actions you have taken?'"

"It is about looking at the future vision and saying, 'What are the actions that we are going to take? Are we one leadership team or is it just about one individual?' It is also about futureproofing your organisation."

Chadha points out that while someone may be an engaging leader, if everything is dependent on this one individual, there is a risk. "The succession game has changed completely. When you look at succession, it is all fact-based. So, it is around data and analytics to say that, if a person is a successor, what are the key factors that warrant going down that path?"

There are a number of assessments and diagnostic tools to measure whether someone is ready to take on a leadership role. "We can test individuals based on the roles they have played, which includes integrity testing. You may be great at what you do, you may be a technical expert, but does that make you a good leader? Are you able to manage the different balls in the air?" he says.

Khanduja says being an engaging leader is more than talking the talk. "Yes, it starts with saying the right things. But it is also about how you act, what you believe and how you deliver." E

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