

Singaporeans have misplaced sense of entitlement, says SICC head Victor Mills

What was your first impression of Singapore when you arrived 30 years ago?

When I graduated (with a master's in East European Political Science from the University of London), it was during a major recession and there were no jobs.

So I joined an international bank and was first posted to Hong Kong, and then Singapore in 1985.

What really impressed me about Singapore was that it preached good race relations - and actually had them.

This was different when compared to Northern Ireland (which had a lot of political violence at the time due to the Protestant and Catholic conflict) and it was the first thing that struck me about Singapore.

What also struck me, which we have since lost, is that Singapore was much more egalitarian and relaxed back then.

People didn't wear suits. They certainly didn't wear ties - even the Government or businessmen. Anybody could talk to anybody.

How have things changed?

We're now going through a period I saw in Hong Kong in the 1980s.

The level of materialism - what you wear, where you live, what you drive, what you wear on your wrist - has become a key determinant of the value of human life. This is absolute nonsense.

But it's the unintended consequence of the fantastic economic success which we have enjoyed. In our headlong rush for more money, a lot of values seem to have been lost.

The ability to communicate with anybody else is less evident, and people now, generally, want to interact only with people of their own perceived social group.

So we're now a more stratified and polarised society, which is why you hear people longing for the return of the kampung spirit.

What impact does Singapore's success have on workplace attitudes?

There are lots and lots of people - more than before - who feel that life, their employer and the Government owe them a living.

This has manifest itself in an overfussiness or a sense of entitlement which businesses, whether large or small, foreign or local, have been telling me about.

They all say the same thing. The problem may vary in degrees in different sectors, but it exists across all sectors.

But please don't get me wrong. There are hundreds of thousands of my fellow citizens who do a fabulous job, day in and day out.

One issue that has become a challenge for many businesses is excessive job-hopping. This has come about only because of our economic success and a very tight labour market.

I have seen one extreme example in the SICC. We had employed an assistant finance manager who had a lovely personality with all the right experience and skills.

We thought we hit gold. But she turned up for work for just one day and then disappeared.

When we tracked her down a few days later - she was not answering her phone - she said: "It just wasn't for me."

But my response was: "How could you possibly know after just one day? You are not giving yourself or the organisation a chance."

It's an extreme case, but there are just too many stories of people leaving their jobs after a couple of months. I've not seen so many morose people in the workforce.

All this job-hopping is stressful, and it doesn't produce a lot of happiness. Yes, it may give \$50 to \$100 more in the pay packet but it doesn't produce satisfaction.

It is fine to say: "Look, I've given this 18 months, two years and it's not for me. I've tried everything and raised issues. But it's time to move on."

That's healthy. What is unhealthy is not turning up for work because you don't like it.

It's bad for businesses because it increases costs unnecessarily. The churn is just constant, and they have less time to focus on executing their business strategies.

What other issues have you observed?

Another problem is the unwillingness to accept feedback, even when given constructively.

The attitude now is that if you don't like me, I'll go. People think they are great and are unwilling to believe that they can learn something as an employee.

Distance is also another issue.

I know of an industrial fragrance company which invested \$25 million in Singapore. But they could not get a Singaporean to do the job. No matter what they paid, there were no takers because there was no direct bus or train. Also, nobody could tahan (Malay for tolerate) the smell at the plant.

I think all this is very disappointing. This was not the case 30 years ago. People then were very hungry for a job, and so they were willing to work. And worked hard.

So all this suggests that people have a misplaced sense of entitlement, but not necessarily retained a sense of responsibility.

Instead of a two-way street, the employer has to do all the walking. Some employees are not prepared to even meet their employers halfway.

It's only because we are so successful that we have a prevalence of these attitudes. People are no longer hungry enough.

But now, if we have - God forbid - a dreadful recession or some cataclysmic event that curtails employment opportunities, I have every confidence in the pragmatism of my fellow Singaporeans that they will change tack and attitudes.

How is Singapore unique in the workplace issues that you have observed? Don't most, if not all, mature cities face such problems?

There are those who say we have to accept this as a way of life and that we cannot do anything, that a tight labour market produces this sort of behaviour.

I do not agree with that.

<http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/singaporeans-have-misplaced-sense-of-entitlement-says-sicc-head-victor-mills>

We are a city-state and cannot behave like another developed country, which can rely on something else happening in a different sector or a different part of the country.

There is a school of thought that the days of Singapore's vulnerability are over. But my contention is that Singapore will always be vulnerable. This is because of our size and the geopolitical space where we are located. It will not take much to upset the very delicate balance we have spent 50 years building.

So we have to be careful in order to sustain our society and way of life. Singapore is an incredibly special place, and not enough of my fellow Singaporeans realise that. We cannot afford complacency because, without a vibrant economy, we can't exist as a society.

What repercussions will Singapore face if the negative workplace attitudes persist?

Our neighbours have not only caught up with us, but are now much more nimble than before.

They're capable of producing good-quality talent who can produce good output consistently. They also have a more realistic assessment of remuneration.

I met a 29-year-old US Silicon Valley technopreneur last year who first came to Singapore in 2012 to launch a start-up.

But when he arrived, he discovered many problems - among them was a shortage of good IT developers, unrealistic remuneration expectations. He was also disappointed with the quality and quantity of output.

He cut his losses within one year and moved to Jakarta after having tried everything, including counselling his staff.

So how can the Economic Development Board say "Come to Singapore, we've got the right workers" when companies will very quickly find out that, in large numbers, we do not?

We need to watch our attitudes because it is indicative of our attractiveness as an investment opportunity on a sustainable basis.

On salary expectations, Singapore has much higher standards of living than its immediate neighbours. Is it really unfair to expect more?

That is a fair point. Of course, we have a more expensive lifestyle and the cost of living is higher, but we must make sure it does not get to the point where it undermines our competitiveness.

This is why the Government has been putting in so much energy to communicate, and facilitate an increase in productivity.

We need to sit down and talk about how to help people make that mindset change.

It's not meant to be some kind of highfalutin, ivory-tower academic debate. These are real rice-bowl issues!

You have also been a passionate champion against workplace ageism. How big of a problem is it?

Many talented people above 40, especially PMETs (professionals, managers, executives and technicians) who lose their jobs due to economic restructuring, cannot find jobs due to an extraordinary degree of ageism here.

HR managers would look at their CVs and think they are too senior and probably stuck in their ways. But age is not the issue here. Rather, it is their skills, experience, capabilities and, above all, their potential.

Admittedly among this group are people who do not want to take a pay cut because they think they are going to lose face. Or they do not believe in continual learning because they think that's for young folk. That is wrong. Those attitudes must change too.

How do you think Singapore could do better in the way it crafts its manpower or workplace policies?

I don't think we are lacking in policies, though I sometimes think we are lacking in their execution.

Our manpower policy is a classic example, because it is a one-size-fits-all blunt instrument. What we need is a much more focused sectoral approach, and an honest assessment of which sectors Singaporeans want to work in and which sectors they do not want to work in.

The policy itself is clever because it tries to wean businesses off a 30-year addiction to foreign labour, and a real effort to force companies to think about how to improve their processes.

We cannot just hire an extra body anymore. But we must realise we are in danger of wage inflation if we keep the mistaken belief that if you pay more, Singaporeans will do these jobs.

That may be so for some jobs, but for the vast majority that Singaporeans are not doing today, it's because people have taken the conscious decision not to do those jobs.

So it becomes a double whammy for businesses.

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