



## **A High-Trust Workplace Culture: The Key to Future-Proof Your Organization**

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Talent shortage is a widely-known challenge in Singapore for decades: 96 percent of employers in the nation are struggling to find the right talent today, which could severely impact their business operations in the following years<sup>1</sup>. An alarming turnover rate of the millennial workforce (those born between 1981 to 2000), three times higher than the other generations' workers, raises other continuity issues for today's organizations.

As millennials represent close to 22 percent of Singapore's resident population and are estimated to form 75 percent of Singapore's workforce in the next decade<sup>2</sup>, this war for talent in Singapore will only prove to get tougher. It is no wonder, the ability to attract and retain talents who are "good fits" for organizations remain one of the key conundrums that keep C-suite leaders awake at night.

Despite the bleak picture workforce statistics has generated for our "little red dot", our long-term engagements with numerous organizations in Singapore and the region suggest there can be a winning strategy to this talent war: Best Workplaces, locally and globally, beat competition by being intentional and focused on one thing – they build high-trust, high-performing workplace cultures; providing a great environment for all generations.

So, what exactly is a high-trust workplace culture? In simple terms, it is **a workplace where trust-based relationships are highly valued, specifically when people can trust the leaders they work with and for**. The key drivers behind increasing this trust level for anyone are when they are treated with respect as a person, they view their leaders as credible, and they are treated fairly. Without trust (and a leader's trustworthiness), employee engagement, at its best, is superficial and temporal; at its worst, leads to feelings of hypocrisy and disappointment.

Aside from trusting their leaders, all employees (regardless of age, gender or different backgrounds) tend to be more productive and engaged when they are proud of what they do and their organization's contributions; and when they experience high levels of camaraderie with teammates. Decades of research, from both local and global Great Place to Work® studies, confirms that a high-trust workplace culture addresses more than the talent war issue; it brings with it business agility that benefits all significantly, and here's how:

### **1. High trust levels are exponentially related to strong organizational performance**

Our longitudinal studies show a strong connection between a high-trust culture and the financial well-being of an organization. These high-trust, high-performing

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<sup>1</sup> 2017 Hays Asia Salary Guide: Skill shortages continue to burden Singapore's employers, 2017.

[https://www.hays.com.sg/press-releases/HAYS\\_1820557](https://www.hays.com.sg/press-releases/HAYS_1820557)

<sup>2</sup> Channel NewsAsia: Companies take steps to attract, retain millennials, 2016.

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/companies-take-steps-to-attract-retain-millennials-8169798>



organizations also display high resilience (often supported by employees who show high grit) and generally have far superior results, even during economic downturns. For example, we have observed those organizations who understand the firm link between positive employee experiences and strong business performance perform three times (3x) better than the general market.

## **2. Your talents will be committed to contributing positively for a longer time**

Employees who have consistent great workplace experiences built on the pillars of trust, pride, and camaraderie are far more likely to remain in their organization for a long time. We find that great workplaces are 7 to 25 times better when it comes to retaining employees across all generations. In fact, the Fortune “100 Best Companies to Work For” in the U.S. last year saw, on average, 50 percent lower voluntary turnover compared to their industry peers. Staying focused and committed to their great workplace agenda have helped these organizations save money, resources, and effort on recruitment and re-training new hires. At the same time, more productive initiatives can be invested to promote greater performance from stable teams, giving these organizations a tremendous advantage over their competition.

## **3. Giving trust inspires creativity and promotes productivity**

Based on Stanford University’s Research Report in 2015, employees who feel trusted by their leaders perform better and are far more productive. This is critical to nurturing creativity and innovation. When employees — regardless of generation, background or thinking styles — feel entrusted by the people around them and are comfortable being themselves, they are better problem solvers and are three to four times more likely to give more to get the job done.

## **4. Happy employees make happier customers**

The golden rule for every business is happy customers, people who want to be associated and to engage with you again and again. The ‘not-so-secret’ (and often underutilized) key to achieving that is when organizations focus their attention on employee satisfaction and happiness first. High-trust organizations are filled with engaged and empowered employees who make decisions they believe will benefit the customer, enabling them to service them better. It is also believed that employees with positive attitudes toward their workplaces are more likely to carry those attitudes over to customers and support in high-level performance.

Let’s turn our attention to leaders, the critical builders of trust in a workplace. When we look at both successful leaders (think CEO of Salesforce closing the gender pay gap, twice) and poor leaders (think Founder of Uber guilty of sexism and bullying) of today and yesterday, values that provide a moral compass for the way leaders conduct themselves are crucial to creating strong brand value for their organizations in the market. More critically, it is foundational to a high-trust workplace culture that encourages better performers all around the organizations.

Today's leaders must realize that the key to organizational sustainability starts with identifying where they stand (values), what matters to them (performance and people), and leading the way to articulate what their organization stands for (purpose). Here are three considerations for leaders of Singapore organizations who are serious about building high-trust workplaces and bringing out the best in their people:

### **1. Make your workplace a community to promote resilience**

A universal quality of great workplaces is the strong sense of family and team experienced by employees across the organization – we call this 'community' or in local terms, the 'kampong spirit'. When the going gets tough, relationships borne out of this community can be critical touchstones for employees in making their days more enjoyable, leveraging one another's strengths, and cultivating a winning attitude. A workplace that celebrates both successes and opportunities often, and actively promote transparency across all levels will, over time, encourage enriching conversations, diversity of thought and ultimately, innovation.

Reflect and evaluate if your day-to-day thoughts, words, and actions have added to, or unwittingly detracted others from developing this 'kampong spirit'. Be courageous to openly admit areas that require more work or alignment.

### **2. Listen with curiosity to make better decisions**

Increasingly more workplaces and leaders are realizing that tapping into the collective wisdom of an organization is the key to success. Organizational goals to increase the levels of 'openness' and 'engagement' are often approached by giving employees multiple avenues to share their ideas, questions, and concerns. However, these channels mean nothing if employees do not perceive an authentic desire, on the part of leaders, to actively seek out opinions prior to key decisions made that would impact them.

Send clear signals to let employees know they make a difference in the organization – adopt a posture of "listening to understand" rather than "hearing to confirm". Follow through with swift implementations where possible. Communicate with clear rationale and empathy when hard decisions must be made, after taking all things into account.

### **3. Define your organization's purpose and connect your employees to it**

An organization's purpose, or in simpler terms, its clear reason for existence, is aspirational in nature, rooted in humanity, and inspires action. In the words of Simon Sinek, "People don't buy what you do. They buy why you do it." We observe many great workplaces in and outside of Singapore who get this. Senior leaders of these high-trust, high-performing organizations spend an enormous amount of effort and time distilling what value they create for others, how they improve the world we live



in, and find ways to inspire employees – helping them internalize their roles of purpose and contributions.

Shift your focus momentarily away from the business tools, processes, and operational system levers used to promote growth and innovation. Be honest with yourself and evaluate if you are building a career or a legacy – are you leading your organization with purpose? If not, start by aligning your leadership team towards a meaningful and shared purpose to help sharpen your focus on where and how your organization should function in the market. Consult employees across all levels to determine if the shared purpose resonates with them, and further refine.

Building a high-trust workplace culture is not a one-and-done approach. It does take consistent and deliberate effort to chart the change path, but not impossible. Many great workplaces in Singapore and around the world, have shown that ‘high-trust’ is not just a good idea to adopt when “your ducks are aligned”. The business case is strong, and their results are showing all-round. Is it time to define yours?

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