

Encouraging the heart

Many companies treat their staff like they're just cogs in a well oiled machine. But connecting with staff on a personal level can unlock potential that benefits the company and creates a better working atmosphere for all. Talent Technologies' Nicholas Henley explains how it's done

IT'S almost surreal to see Bangkok returning to normality, with the smoke already cleared, the roads free of checkpoints, and buildings once besieged and inaccessible, open for business.

With the exception of the ruins of Central World Tower and Siam Theatre, it's almost as though nothing has happened.

But while the repair efforts kick into action to restore Bangkok to its former glory, there is no question that more damage has been done than meets the eye.

While what we can see may be easy to repair and replace – infrastructure like buildings and roads and facilities – there is no question that the foundations of people's spirits in Thailand have been very seriously damaged – and that it will take time and much deliberate effort to heal these wounds.

The feelgood factor

The first week back to work is usually the easy part. There's typically a 'feelgood factor' as employees get back into their old rhythms and catch up again with friends.

But this feeling is likely to wear off before long. All the old 'societal' problems will return – politicians renewing old rivalries... people in public office not observing the law... and tensions within families. No matter what political sympathies your colleagues may hold – all these factors are likely to weigh on their spirits and morale again when they eventually happen.

During the month or so of the 'Thai crisis,' admissions to hospitals on stress-related illnesses soared by over 40%. This is the 'real damage' which can't be rectified easily, and will take time to heal. And if your colleagues are suffering from stress, there is little doubt that it will impact their performance at work.

As always, it's what we 'can't see' that matters most. But there's plenty you can do to help promote a vibrant workplace.

Three things you can do to 'Encourage the Heart'

There may be little that we can do to change Thai society. However, doing a little may do a lot to life inside our companies.

Why does this matter? Because the reality of modern life is that, second to sleeping, our place of work is where we spend most of our time.

These first two initiatives (below) are examples taken from Talent Technologies' The Leadership Challenge – the world's bestselling leadership training programme.

Initiative 1: Get a Bragging Board going!

It's often off-putting when people brag about themselves. But one sure way to 'Encourage the Heart' is when you hear someone else bragging about you – about your efforts or actions, about



something you did – in a positive way.

It's typical to see companies focus on results. This may include sales, reduction of downtime, or project milestones being met.

But too often they ignore the cause of those results. They fixate on the golden eggs, but forget the goose.

Those results may be made up of many infinite events – most of which we can't see. So a great way of Encouraging the Heart is by setting up a Bragging Board, where your employees can 'shout out' their thanks to their colleagues, in a very public way.

Starbucks has bragging boards in its customer area – why don't more companies have them in their social areas too? Inside a company, bragging boards are far more authentic than customer bragging boards ever can be!

Initiative 2: Be a friend

As Daniel Maeder, of the Department of Economics of Labour in Switzerland, has said, "Organisational diagrams don't matter at all. Be sure to treat employees as human beings and not as functional workers."



There are fewer places in the world where this is evident than Thailand – a culture with a collective spirit and where 'affiliation' is highly important.

But how does 'working among friends' impact results?

In a study featured in the Harvard Business Review, 'Does Friendship improve Job Performance?' J.A. Ross found that, even working on the simplest of decision-making tasks, groups of friends were over 20% more effective than groups of acquaintances were.

We would hazard a guess that friends working together are more than twice as effective than mere acquaintances in Thailand.

One way you can promote friendship among your colleagues is by becoming more vulnerable – opening up your heart by disclosing things about yourself, your hopes and your dreams, your family and friends, and your interests and pursuits.

When we're open we become more vulnerable – and this vulnerability makes us more human and more trusted. If neither person in a relationship takes the risk of trusting, at least a little, the relationship remains stalled at a low level of caution and suspicion.

So go out for lunch with your colleagues, not just to 'shoot the breeze,' but to open up, and disclose some of your deeper feelings, as well as discover theirs.

Initiative 3: Discover your colleagues' talents

The one thing any manager can do to get instant results from his staff is by discovering the person's innate talents and putting him or her in a role that matches it.

From separate studies of hundreds of thousands of employees in different workgroups worldwide, both Gallup and the Corporate Leadership Council have found that this is the #1 driver of workplace performance.

Yet, as Gallup have also found, fewer than one out of five employees have the opportunity to work to their talents!

The result: disengagement, stress and behaviors that negatively impact corporate performance.

Talents are not 'intelligence,' 'experience' or 'competencies.' They are our innate abilities which cannot be learned. So if you are in a job that grates – the likelihood is that you're not working to your talents (or playing to your strengths, which is when you identify and maximise them).

Yet there is only one tool in the world that scientifically identifies your talents: the 'Highlands Ability Battery.'

One great way to Encourage the Heart then, is by identifying your colleagues' talents using the Battery, and then making sure they are working in their most effective roles. Is a person naturally Strategic or Tactical? Is a person more of a Specialist or Generalist? How well does a person Connect at Feeling Level (because of his or her tonal memory) and which role in the company maximises this?

Answering these questions delivers long-term engagement, as the above studies have found, and now is a great time to do that!

'Together We Can'

Following the terrible stress of the last weeks and months, there is now a groundswell of feeling which is resulting in genuine shows of altruism, community spirit and comradeship.

But this feeling always needs to be encouraged, otherwise it will fade, and 'Together We Can,' or something similar, becomes just an empty slogan.

This is why, at work, we always need to be looking at new ways of Encouraging the Heart. This not only happens through what we say but, more importantly, through what we do.

I hope the three ideas above are a start, and offer two small steps (and one bigger one) which can be readily implemented!



Talent Technologies offers management training programmes in Thailand and South-East Asia. The above initiatives come from The Leadership Challenge and Talent Factor. For more info Tel: (+66) 02 639 3550 Visit: www.talent-technologies.com