

**OPENING SPEECH BY MS JOSEPHINE TEO,
MINISTER, PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, SECOND MINISTER FOR MANPOWER
& SECOND MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS,
AT GREAT PLACE TO WORK'S BEST WORKPLACES AWARDS CEREMONY
2017
(9 NOV 2017, 1345h)**

Making Singapore a Great Place to Work

Mrs Joni Ong, Ms Evelyn Kwek, Managing Directors of Great Place to Work Institute Singapore

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Good afternoon. I'm happy to join you at this year's Great Place to Work's "Best Workplaces Awards" Ceremony.

A Business Case for Good Workplace Culture

2. Joni tells me the award recipients have good stories to tell. Rightfully, the spotlight should be on them and not on me. But since I'm asked to speak, I shall just make three points.
3. The first is that good workplace culture is undervalued. Organisations set up Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). They design systems and processes to help them meet the KPIs. These are important.
4. But systems are ultimately operated and processes implemented by people. We hold people accountable for the KPIs, not the machinery, the systems or the processes. People's behaviours are never completely independent of one another. What we say or do depends not just how we ourselves think, but also what we see others do.

5. Everyone who sets foot in an organisation immediately begins to observe their new colleagues. They try to figure what norms of behaviour are acceptable. Is it ok to come late – 5 mins, 15 mins? At meetings, they observe the interactions between colleagues with different job titles. Is it normal to ask questions and what happens when different views are offered or mistakes made? Do people have fun and are motivated by a sense of purpose?
6. These observations help an individual to size up the norms at the workplace. It takes a brave soul to challenge these norms. If a new recruit is too different, he might encounter “organ rejection” unless there is a deliberate effort to welcome contrarians. If he chooses to stay, he must adapt. The group norms shape individual behaviours.
7. Not enough organisations pay enough attention to shaping these group norms which constitute the workplace culture. They may bring in new talents but don’t invest enough effort to create the conditions for these new talents to successfully bring about positive change. They may not have realised that having a few excellent staff is good but probably not good enough.
8. Part of the problem is that CEOs are more likely to be rewarded for meeting revenue or profit targets than something as intangible as workplace culture. It also takes painstaking effort and unless the C-suite has the patience for it, will it be worth the CEO’s investment of time and effort? As long as the numbers are good, is the board interested? If the numbers are bad, so what if the team is all charged up and raring to go?
9. But to achieve optimal performance over the longer term, workplace culture matters. Great places to work are more likely to retain talents and to have engaged employees who help the organisation to keep advancing. Great places to work are more likely to weather the storms and emerge stronger. Great places to work more likely to outperform the competition, not perhaps immediately, but over time.
10. It is very much up to the C-suite to look beyond the pretty presentations to try and get an honest appraisal on what goes on at every level. Shareholders should equally express interest and ask related questions. Not enough of them do.

11. My second point is workplace cultures matter not only to the businesses but also a great deal to the kind of economy and industries we want for Singapore: highly-productive, innovation-driven, internationally-oriented, skills-focussed and inclusive and enabling. It is why underpinning the 23 Industry Transformation Maps, we have a Human Resource Industry Manpower Plan.
12. To properly implement the ITMs, enterprises in every industry must be activated. In every one of these enterprises, people must be activated. How the workplace culture is re-shaped - to be more productivity-focussed, more innovative, more mindful of international opportunities, value skills more, more open to meeting the aspirations of employees, more likely to support their varied needs - all of these will determine how broad and deep the transformation goes.
13. Although we call it the HR IMP, it is not to suggest, in any way, that people matters and workplace culture are things you delegate to HR and forget about. In the best organisations, the C-suite set the right tone, and walk the talk when it come to the values they espouse. The values percolate to every level of employees and every aspect of the business. Such organisations are great places to work at. In my view, they should also command a premium with smart investors.
14. My third and final point is that it is never too late to try and change workplace culture, or to reshape it.
15. In fact, the norms in every organisation must constantly evolve. The competitive landscape is dynamic. Each generation of workers has different aspirations. There are new problems to solve and new opportunities to capture. Just as business models and strategies need updating, so do the cultural norms within the organisation. That is why we have OD or organisation development, to keep the workplace culture alive and responsive to new challenges.
16. With the right leadership focus, this is achievable. The companies we are recognising today are good examples.

Government Will Do its Part

17. Finally, I would like to say something about Government's efforts to also promote good employment practices.
18. At the same time that we recognise outstanding companies that are great places to work, we also want to motivate the hundreds and thousands of other companies, especially the SMEs, to strive to be better. One way of doing so is by introducing the Tripartite Standards.
19. There are now three Tripartite Standards – for term contract employment, flexible work arrangements (FWA) and grievance handling. Each Tripartite Standard spells out a set of verifiable actions that good employers take. For example, an employer that adopts the Tripartite Standard on FWAs commit to appoint a senior management to champion FWAs at the workplace, and to inform all its staff what FWAs it offers and that it is willing to consider requests for FWA. It also commits to evaluate all requests objectively, and where they can be accommodated, to appraise the staff fairly. Where requests cannot be accommodated, the employers will also look for alternative ways to helping the staff.
20. Because the needs of each business is different, employers can adopt only the Standards that are relevant to them. They can then use the appropriate logos and be listed on website of the Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices (TAFEP) which will improve their visibility and attractiveness to job seekers.
21. I am pleased to share with you that for the Tripartite Standards that we have launched to date, we now have close to 500 adopters covering over 360,000 employees. Not a bad start since they were launched just about 3 months ago. More Tripartite Standards will be launched and we hope they help job seekers to differentiate between the so-so places to work and the great places to work.

Conclusion

22. To conclude, I congratulate all award winners. I encourage you to keep raising the bar because when you do, your employees benefit, Singaporeans benefit and certainly Singapore benefits. Thank you once again for having me.

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