

Your organisation's strength could lie in its cultural diversity

By: Andy Goodwin, CEO International (Africa, Americas, ANZ, SAME) Surbana Jurong



In today's globalised world, an appreciation of cultural diversity, and knowing how to leverage it, not only breaks down barriers but also leads to better organisational performance.

Cultural diversity is rarely given its due in discussions around organisational success. The world focuses on intelligence quotient (IQ) and emotional quotient (EQ) as traits for success, but often forgets about cultural intelligence. Large, multicultural companies demand culturally intelligent leaders with the ability to synthesise diverse attitudes, perceptions and cultural influences into a cohesive and integrated identity.

Cultural intelligence is a differentiator for successful leadership. Since leadership is ultimately what shapes an organisation and determines its course of action, it is imperative that the leadership team recognises that it needs to do things differently in different cultures.

A successful leader in today's multicultural environment always works to the strengths of others, helps employees develop an awareness of cultural differences, wins the trust of the different people they collaborate with and is sensitive in their communication.

An appreciation of cultural differences

allows you to maximise every employee's unique strengths_

IQ involves an individual's intelligence, which may have nothing to do with their capability on the job, and EQ is interpersonal intelligence that comes into play during interactions at work. However, cultural quotient (CQ) is more advanced, encompassing how one uses this intelligence to work across boundaries, spot opportunities and respond to change.

A leader's ability to appreciate cultural differences is crucial to both performance and creating value for an organisation. Recognising what these differences can or cannot do for your business is important and you must ask yourself: 'How do I maximise what everyone is bringing to the table?' The collective experience across multiple cultures should be used to add value to and increase the performance of business.

The competitive advantage arising out of leveraging cultural diversity is a bit like a fine watch. The dynamic competencies required to work cohesively are like the wheels inside a watch. Should one of the

wheels not turn, or turn in the wrong direction, the watch won't work.

In an organisation like Surbana Jurong, which operates in 44 countries and includes about 70 nationalities, you must inherently believe in the value of working together and understand the strengths of everyone's contribution.

Employees who are open to cultural diversity are more self-aware_

Interacting with different cultures can make a person self-aware. Having the openness to accept alternative perspectives allows us to better reflect on, recognise and adapt to cultural differences. It helps us understand our own weaknesses and learn from them, and see how to apply our strengths to develop interpersonal relations.

Unfortunately, not all employees have exposure to various cultures, and hence organisations should institute cultural awareness programmes to remedy this. Having the opportunity to work in cross-cultural teams is important to one's career growth, and should be a part of every employee's toolbox. It helps them pick up on all kinds of cross-cultural skills – from learning how to address people from another culture to dealing with disagreements in the workplace.

Cultural intelligence gains trust at every level of the organization_

I believe that trust is the greatest differentiating asset of any successful organisation. Without a natural trust in their leaders, employees will not give their best.

Winning the trust of all employees becomes more challenging for leaders as they move outside of their culture. With more scope for misunderstanding and miscommunication, trust becomes more fragile. More simply, different cultures have different frameworks for defining trust.

Cultural intelligence in a leader is therefore a requisite tool, helping them navigate uncertainty, unify people, and build trust to define outcomes and solve problems.

Good leaders must understand the nuances of communication across different cultures_

The best strategy in the world will work only when people feel empowered. To reach the desired cultural outcomes, leaders need to think of different ways to communicate and maintain meaningful dialogue with people. Otherwise, however promising your organisational strategy, it will not take off.

In a multicultural organisation, you must first understand cultural nuances before implementing strategies and changes. When people feel they are engaged, you can then walk projects with them and sell successes.

For example, in an Asian culture where people are quiet and don't challenge things, management has to intervene to break those barriers. At Surbana Jurong, we have Friday get-togethers to allow management and employee teams chat intimately about day-to-day lives.

I myself adopt different styles of working with different people. Scandinavians aren't as outgoing as most Europeans and may require a consensus before reaching a decision, so I am careful about understanding and managing that. With Africans, I encourage them to speak up more and express their opinions. I don't want to have them just take orders from other people in the team.

Here's an interesting example of how I would typically communicate bad news to two different cultures – Indian and Australian. When I need to communicate bad news to the Australians, I tell it to them straight. Australians are direct and they want you to be direct with them. But Indian employees won't be comfortable with that. I will first need to speak to the manager and agree on the ways to communicate the same news.

Leading by example_

Personally, despite the cultural diversity I have seen, every new experience brings new challenges. In coming to Asia, I've learnt to be more patient and adapt myself to the different working styles here. In a continent like Asia that offers so much cultural diversity, I have also learnt to better appreciate differences and embrace the advantages that they bring.

It is important that leaders share their experiences with the rest of the organisation. We need to empower our people and give them clear cultural outcomes and identify genuine, memorable values that are shared throughout the organisation. Creating an environment based on this shared understanding will allow cultural appreciation to flow throughout the organisation and across geographies.

Connect with us

Andy Goodwin

Andy.Goodwin@smec.com