

Building a united and shared vision beyond the bottom line

By Ong Siow Heng

FROM June 23 to July 10 this year, the world's attention was riveted on the well-being of 12 boys and their football coach in Tham Luang cave in Thailand. Among the quickest on the ground were, quite expectedly, the official team including the Thai Navy Seals. Almost simultaneously, individual volunteers turned up unbidden, including the vital cave experts who quickly marshalled their worldwide community of cave rescuers and cave divers.

Following close behind were small business owners who came to render help wherever they could. Going beyond the proverbial "thoughts and prayers", the small business owners provided moral support through practical, mundane action. It is only now, after the heart-pounding moments are over that we are hearing of the many small businesses that delivered free hot food and even free laundry service to the rescuers.

These businesses operated at a loss, putting aside all normal revenue-earning matters for a higher calling. Their employees, taking the cue from their bosses, sacrificed time and energy to support the drama that unfolded before the world's eyes.

These small and medium-sized businesses were able to quickly make the choice to disrupt daily operations, allowing the heart to direct the decisions of the mind and the actions of the hand. This is the major advantage of the SME. Being an SME enables the boss and the management to steer the firm in quick response to changes in the wants and needs of the community.

The SME's imperative

What about times of calm and normalcy when there is no urgent community need requiring speedy response? In such times, should SMEs give total concentration to the business of being a business?

All business professionals would agree that a firm with a hundred or



One of the rescued Thai boys ordained as a novice Buddhist monk, praying at the Wat Phra That Doi Tung temple in Chiang Rai. The episode in Thai history also shone the spotlight on the tireless philanthropic efforts of Thai SMEs who quickly set aside their business priorities to step up to the plate to do their part in the rescue efforts. PHOTO: AFP

more employees has to pay attention to the corporation's culture by creating and reinforcing a shared mission and common values. The experts are now telling us that this is equally applicable to the SME.

In 2010, Harvard Business Review suggested that a corporation of any size should initiate and purposefully craft its culture. Similar action is advocated by various experts on branding. Today's thinking is that concern for the business is not mutually exclusive from concern about the culture of the firm.

Some SMEs may not be convinced of this message. The assumption is that with fewer employees, fellowship, solidarity and a shared vision will naturally emerge and evolve. The truth is that dedicated attention to culture is just as important for SMEs as for large companies and MNCs.

It would be unwise for SMEs to think they can build their culture after they reach a larger size or after they become an established success. Any SME that wants to develop its po-

tential does need to build and promote company culture from the start. Even if the firm plans to remain an SME over the long term, initial nurturing of a meaningful culture helps.

A distinctive culture can become a rallying point for staff to help achieve the firm's goals. This is all the more so in Singapore where the typical SME could have workers from different backgrounds and nationalities (unlike the SME employees in the Tham Luang emergency). Building a unifying corporate culture is vital for an SME.

In the process of shaping and nurturing this culture, senior management themselves will develop a more united and shared vision, beyond the bottom line. The business aspect of being a business and the culture aspect of shaping the firm's character are not incompatible; they are indispensably congruous.

Three characteristics for the SME to cultivate

Staff must know that their leaders are

agreed on the firm's values, and united in promoting them. If there are diverse thoughts among senior management about these values, the inevitable different "camps" will be visible for all to see. Fissures will immediately appear in the daily operations of the firm. Here are suggestions for three core values to be cultivated and practised.

First, the values of meritocracy and transparency, while praised and proclaimed by most firms, should never be mere lip service. Leaders' actions and behaviour must give a fair chance to all who are qualified – whether for internship opportunities, hiring, promotion and advancement. In practice, there must never be a time when the best person for the job is passed over for another candidate. When obvious partiality supplants transparent meritocracy, the company will find it difficult to attract or retain good staff.

Second, the capacity for every level of staff to care about the firm must be nurtured. Knowing that periodic self-assessment of internal practices and policies can drive the SME forward and upwards, most companies have annual if not half-yearly retreats for senior management to strategise for the future.

Often feedback is also gathered from external stakeholders or business consultant firms who would bring objectivity to discussions about the firm's future vision or mission. However, an often neglected aspect of this culture of improvement is to provide avenues for the views of staff. Many staff will have good ideas for the daily operations of the company that senior management would have no concept of. Possibly, a full staff retreat would help communicate a culture that encourages and values idea generation by staff.

Third, the SME must establish authentic avenues for initiative and creativity beyond immediate business concerns. Nowadays, schools, polytechnics and universities provide opportunities for students to apply re-

sourcefulness and ingenuity in executing community service projects, sporting events and musical productions. Students learn, think and operate beyond conventional texts and immediate tasks. They hasten from the classroom brimming with ground-breaking ideas to contribute to a greater good. The working environment that recognises and honours this desire will surely benefit.

SMEs would do well to purposefully build a company culture that reflects their vision and resonates with staff. For a company's culture to endure, leaders must walk the talk, enable creative contribution to thrive and adopt receptivity to feedback. This will help in the long-term survival of the SME, regardless of whether it hopes to expand or remain its current size.

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