

Publication: xinmsn

Date: 16 October 2014

Headline: CSR efforts should go beyond sustainability to the community: Lawrence Wong

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© Provided by Channel NewsAsia Companies can do more to impact the community with their corporate social responsibility efforts, says Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong. (Photo: Eileen Poh)

SINGAPORE: Corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts by organisations in Singapore have been focused on issues like environmental and labour standards, and sustainable business practices, but Culture, Community and Youth Minister Lawrence Wong said they can do more.

While these focus areas are important and are rightly emphasised, companies should also look at how they can do more to contribute and give back to the community here, Mr Wong said at the opening of the 6th International Singapore Compact CSR Summit on Thursday (Oct 16).

For example, this can be done in the form of a commitment to get involved in serving the community or designing programmes and opportunities for employees to do something meaningful and impactful, beyond just soliciting donations or offering leave to employees who volunteer, he said.

"Making giving a workplace norm sends a powerful message," Mr Wong said. "It says that giving can coexist with the demands of business, because we can never be too busy to empathise with others, and do our bit for the society."

Mr Wong cited the example of Feng Ming Construction, a local civil engineering company, which has a policy of donating 1 per cent of the value of each contract it clinches. Cash donations aside, it also organises visits to homes or orphanages, and movie day outs twice a year.

"After all, the workplace is where most individuals spend a significant amount of their time. So if we want Singapore to become a giving nation, then the spirit of giving must be an integral part of the DNA of our corporate sector," the minister said.

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He added that more should be done to recognise and support outstanding companies that are giving back to society, while noting that some companies may not know how to get started.

His ministry had earlier announced that the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre will step up efforts to facilitate the matching of companies with VWOs and non-profit organisations.

"It is about time we tilt the balance to have more recognition for companies that are committed to giving back and doing their part for the community," Mr Wong said. "By giving them recognition, it also starts to shape social perception and norms. That is how we can make that social change."

CHALLENGES FOR COMPANIES WITH OVERSEAS OPERATIONS

However, one employer said while getting employees to volunteer may be feasible in Singapore, companies with overseas operations may find it difficult to do so.

"It is challenging for us to be competitive in Singapore, especially as an SME in the manufacturing sector. That is why we have to go overseas to enable us to enlarge our business opportunities," said Ms Diane Yeo, Fagerdala Singapore's Director of Corporate and Legal Affairs.

"The employees we have here, they are not struggling, they are earning a fair wage. But when you go into other countries like China, Thailand or even Mexico, it is a very different standard of living. For us to do impactful CSR, it has to benefit the employees. So I think our main priority would be to benefit the employees first before we look out into the community," she explained.

INITIATIVES TO BOOST CSR

The opening ceremony also saw students from the Singapore Management University receiving awards for their CSR proposals. The awards were part of a competition where they were assigned companies and had to propose feasible CSR solutions.

Organisers received 50 entries this year - the largest number since the competition was introduced in 2010.

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To boost CSR efforts here, a new award to recognise "all-round excellence in CSR" was also launched at the summit on Thursday. Called the Singapore Apex CSR Awards, it is presented by Singapore Compact - the national society promoting sustainable development for businesses and stakeholders - as well as Singapore Business Federation, KPMG and The Business Times.

The Singapore Compact also announced that it has obtained Institute of Public Character status. This means that donations to the organisation will be tax deductible.