

Publication: TODAY Online

Date: 3 October 2022

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Recently, we have become more acutely aware of a variety of undesirable workplace circumstances and practices in Singapore.

They include reports of insufficient workplace safety measures; scant regard for the workers' personal time; discriminatory workplace practices against members of various categories of minority groups; and bias against women staff.

The evidence for all this is in numerous news reports and survey findings.

What these undesirable practices have in common is that they reflect inadequate respect and regard for the worker as an individual of value.

Some of these situations can be addressed by changes in relevant laws.

Lapses in workplace safety that result in permanent injury and death can be managed by objective measures, such as tightening appropriate laws and improving on-site safety procedures.

Cases of foreign domestic workers being exploited by their employer are also governed by existing laws and recourses.

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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has further promised in the 2021 National Day Rally that issues like workplace discrimination against nationality, race, age, gender and special needs or disabilities will also be dealt with by guidelines and requirements in a new legislation.

LAWS NOT A PANACEA

But legal recourse cannot address every situation in the workplace.

In cases of discrimination, for example, it can be difficult to prove prejudice if the boss says that the victim was merely being reprimanded for incompetence or corrected for committing an error.

A possible instance was seen in a recent viral TikTok, also published in TODAY, where a staff member at a fast-food restaurant was seen loudly and rudely reprimanding a young worker for at least 10 minutes, and then shooing him away with a peremptory gesture to complete other tasks.

The situation was compounded by the fact that the worker being scolded was not neurotypical (he was reportedly a special needs individual, possibly hired as part of the company's corporate social responsibility).

Such a disparaging scene would never have transpired if the prevailing culture had been regard for staff dignity.

The impetus to improve workplace culture is best driven by those with the most power to craft and shape a workplace culture: Institutions and individuals in workplace leadership.

If the corporate world is committed to cultivating healthy workplaces to the mutual benefit of the institution and their staff, much can be improved before laws are passed, especially in areas that cannot be covered by law.

This could even be a part of the corporate world's contribution to the Forward Singapore exercise to "examine our values and aspirations, build consensus, and so refresh our social compact".

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

The Association of Women for Action and Research and Milieu Insight conducted a survey in August 2022 on workplace discrimination experienced in the past five years, so that the findings could help shape upcoming legislation.

This survey found that about one in two respondents experienced workplace discrimination. And despite reciting the national pledge since 1966, most workplace discrimination is against ethnic minority groups.

Other minority groups facing prejudice include people with disabilities; and those who identify as part of the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) community. Women in general also faced workplace discrimination.

Such disrespect for the individual is practised in more varied and subtle ways too.

One example is the prevailing working culture of growing disregard for the individual's private time and working hours, as found by other surveys on current workplace culture.

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In Oracle's 2021 year-end survey, double the percentage from 2020 felt they had little control over their personal and professional lives.

The result was that most respondents found the year to have been their most stressful, with almost 60 per cent struggling more with mental health issues than before, and 26 per cent of the respondents experiencing declining mental health.

There are other related findings.

Over 46 per cent of respondents to an AsiaOne website survey reported dissatisfaction with work-life balance. Although 80 per cent reported a salary increment, more than 40 per cent would prefer the personal benefits of working from home rather than a bigger bonus.

Another 2022 Milieu Insight survey of workers in Singapore found almost 80 per cent preferring lower pay to an unhealthy work culture.

The most recent Mercer Marsh Benefits 2022 Report learned that half the respondents face daily work stress.

While self-reported stress levels in Singapore have always been at the higher end compared to elsewhere (as validated, for example, by the 2019 and 2021 Cigna Studies), Mercer's latest Global Trends Study discovered that 85 per cent of workers felt at real risk of burnout.

This situation of stressed and overworked staff does not bode well for employers as we hear increasingly of rising attrition rates and quiet quitting.

Hackneyed anecdotes of slogging long hours or tolerating unfair work practices for future career advancement have clearly lost their sway.

The old management mantra is that unhappy workers must be prepared to lose to hungry workers.

But it is clearly not sustainable to continually retrain new staff while avoiding measures to retain current experienced talent who have become jaded by workplace culture.

Moreover, expanding the demographic of unhappy people while parachuting in replacements does not sound tenable for society at large.

Neither should bosses just hope for attrition rates to spontaneously level down.

If miserable staff are staying in jobs where their private time and personal attributes are not respected just because they have loans to repay, it still means current workplace culture is toxic.

CHANCE TO 'DETOXIFY' BAD PRACTICES

Focusing firmly on respect for the individual regardless of their minority group or gender, workplace leaders could scrutinise their company's current culture for direct and indirect discrimination, and discrimination-related harassment.

And of course, withstand any temptation to find loopholes in existing and future anti-discrimination laws.

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Focusing on prioritising the holistic wellbeing of staff, workplace leaders need to value their staff by allocating sufficient budget to alleviate staff stress, exhaustion, mental fatigue and being overworked.

A recent article in The Straits Times on mental health and fatigue in the workplace noted that these issues rank low on employers' priorities, citing insufficient financial resources.

Focusing on respect for the individual in terms of upholding their dignity, our workplace culture probably has a long way to go in exercising basic professional courtesy.

We have traditionally relied on a high power distance culture, where institutional authority is expected to be unquestioningly accepted. This shows itself in damaging ways, as shared by Gen Y and Gen Z workers on social media.

Some bosses fling subordinates' work across the room. At least one boss made a cruel joke about working people to death when a young subordinate took their own life.

Among the red flags identified by various surveys are managers who use abusive language toward their staff; criticise the subordinate to their peers; micromanage assigned tasks; give imprecise instructions; expect staff to consistently work overtime (despite verbal assurances to the contrary); and intrude with work-related communication on weekends, or when the staff is on leave.

Management must not take delusional refuge in unreliable exit interviews that indicate only pull factors and no push factors.

When power distance is used as a basic management tool, it foments a harrowing, depression-inducing workplace for the subordinate.

Instead, commit to recognising and treating every staff as a valued contributor, not a replaceable factor of production.

If we want the best for people (and from people) in the workplace, prioritise respect for staff by pro-actively caring about their wellbeing.

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