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Leadership and the Workforce in Singapore: Evaluations by the Singapore Human Resources Institute

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ABSTRACT

During 2006 the Singapore Human Resources Institute commissioned two visionary Human Resources Management (HRM) surveys. The first, which was undertaken in March, was a comprehensive examination of the characteristics and behaviours of the Singaporean workforce. Later in that year, in September, a second survey was conducted to determine the views of employees as to 'what makes a good leader.' This paper presents an outcome of the findings of these two surveys. The key findings of the initial survey revealed that many employees held valued academic qualifications; that these employees were reliable, diligent, and held good work attributes; and many were enthusiastic, ambitious and held vocationally relevant skills of problem solving and team work. A key finding of the second leadership survey demonstrated that there were perceived substantial gaps in leadership skills such as motivating and inspiring, giving recognition for achievement, and providing feedback. More positive findings were in terms of relationships with staff, the quality of leadership performance and associated competencies. These important findings are discussed from the standpoint of engagement/recruitment as well as the strategies for human resource development, which are vital elements of healthy HRM policies and practices.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, management research has evolved from the study of the attributes associated with managing production, finances, and technology, to an increasing interest in the crucial characteristics which successful leaders need in order to engage, inspire, and motivate their employees to consistent standards of production and quality. Coincident with the emergence of human resource management as a key component of overall organisational management, and the parallel rise of the services sector overtaking more traditional industries such as agriculture and manufacturing, effective leadership has become regarded as perhaps the single most important competitive advantage for public and private sector organisations in most countries.

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In the contemporary global context of the replacement of unskilled and semi skilled labour by technology or off shoring in developed countries, and severe skills shortages in the trades, technical, and professional occupations, effective leadership can facilitate both the attraction and retention of talent. Such leaders not only gather around themselves qualified, enthusiastic and motivated employees, but they also create group synergies, and consequently, innovative products and customer responsive services.

Whilst there have been many studies of leadership in the United States, Europe, and Australia, very few have been undertaken in the Asian region. This paper attempts to redress this deficiency in the research by presenting the findings from a survey of Singaporean managers and business owners in a range of industry sectors. This survey was conducted by the Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI), to assess their views of the characteristics and behaviours of effective leaders in the Singaporean context; to elicit their leadership gender preferences; and to report on their perceptions of the gaps between their expectations and experiences of leadership performance. Overall, the paper thus, explores the general satisfaction levels of a sample of Singaporean managers with their designated leaders.

METHODOLOGY (LEADERSHIP)

Respondents

Data were obtained from 192 respondents who were engaged in a wide variety of Singaporean industries. As most of the respondents reported to others it can be conveniently implied that these respondents are in a position to provide a perspective of senior level leadership. Table 1 provides a profile of the respondents and their institutional linkages.

Table 1
Demographics % (N = 192)

Age (years)		Organisational level	
< 26	4	Directors	42
26 to 35	24	Executives	21
36 to 45	37	Senior executives	7
46 to 55	27	Self employed	20
> 55	8	Other	10
Industry sector		Organisational type	
Service	38	MNC	46
Manufacturing	17	Local firm	21
Managerial	15	SME	12
Professional	11	Public	8
Electronics/IT	11	Other	13
Chemical/food	8		
Capital structure		Organisational size	
Local	47	< 51	24
Foreign	47	51 to 200	26
Joint venture	6	201 to 800	29
		> 800	21

Notes:

a. A total of 68 per cent of the respondents are HRM practitioners.

b. Many of the respondents are supervisors reporting to senior management such as CEOs and managing directors. A total of 60 per cent reports to one supervisor, some 24 per cent report to

two supervisors, and 12 per cent of the respondents report to more than three supervisors.

Procedure

A questionnaire, which focused on incisive dimensions of leadership, was administered to 192 respondents. The respondents were required to address a variety of items that were underpinned by theoretical concepts embedded in the organisational behaviour literature to assess a number of leadership themes. For instance, respondents had to rank a number of items, consider expectations and experiences of leadership behaviours or to estimate a value from a set of statements. Each item of the questionnaire was reported as a percentage of the total responses (for that item) to account for missing data.

Measures

The questionnaire had six main parts. In the first part, expected and experienced leadership was reported. The second part of the questionnaire invited respondents to express their leader gender preferences. In the third part of the questionnaire, the level of leadership satisfaction was the focus. The fourth part of the questionnaire, provided opportunity for the respondents to comment on a variety of leadership behaviours. In the fifth part of the questionnaire, leadership performance was scored. The final section of the questionnaire evaluated leadership competency.

Expected-Experienced Leadership

Comparing the expected leadership qualities against the experienced leadership was underpinned by the met-unmet expectancies framework. Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982), and earlier Vroom (1964) advanced that an individual has a preferred state for a situation, but a different level is likely to be experienced. When the gap or gulf between the expected and the experienced state is relatively large, the individual is likely to engage in dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours. These assertions have been supported by empirical evidence. For example, Muchinsky and Tuttle (1979) showed the gap was related to turnover, Bottger (1990) found the absence of preferred attributes was associated with absenteeism, while Pearson (1995) demonstrated larger differences between expectations and experiences was correlated significantly with lower responses on a variety of job attributes. In an academic context, Pearson and Chatterjee (2004) reported, in a study with university students, that smaller gaps were associated with better grades.

The expected qualities of a leader was assessed when the respondents were asked to rank the first five desired leadership qualities from a given list of 19 items. A percentage score was determined for each item from the responses. The respondents were also asked to rank the first five most experienced leadership behaviours from the same list of 19 items. From the responses a percentage score for each of the 19 demonstrated (experienced by the respondent) leader behaviours was obtained. By comparing the percentage scores of the lists of expected and experienced leadership behaviours, 'gaps' in leadership competencies were identified.

Gender Preference

Respondents were invited to respond to the question, Which gender makes a better leader? Three possible responses were allowed — male, female, no difference. A percentage score was determined for each of the three allowed answers.

Satisfaction with Leader Performance

Six dimensions of leadership performance were evaluated. Respondents were invited to agree or disagree with six statements. The six statements were,

1. My supervisor's performance meets my expectations
2. My supervisor is a good supervisor
3. My supervisor has motivated me
4. My supervisor has developed my skills and abilities

5. I have a good relationship with my supervisor
6. My supervisor needs leadership training

For each statement there was a percentage agreement and a percentage disagreement score.

Leadership Performance

Leadership performance was assessed across four main sectors. These four sectors were 1) commitment to the development of people, 2) ability to share with people, 3) passion for and pride in what they do, and 4) strategic thinking. The assessment of these four sectors was operationalised when the respondents addressed 20 statements. For instance, the commitment to the development of people had five statements and the ability to share with people had four statements. One of the six statements for strategic thinking was establishes good working procedures. The allowable responses to each of the 20 statements were 1) all of the time, 2) most of the time, 3) sometimes, and 4) never. A percentage score was determined for each response. Hence, there were 80 (4x20) percentage scores for the assessment of leadership performance.

Leadership Behaviours

This scaled approach assessed seven specific leadership behaviours. The seven features were 1) communication, 2) care and recognition, 3) empowerment, 4) vision and strategy, 5) team builder and collaborator, 6) mentor/coach/innovator and 7) resource manager. Respondents were given a set of behavioural statements (31) and asked to indicate the frequency of their use by the supervisor (of the respondent). For instance, there were six behavioural statements for the communication behaviour (e.g., explains why he/she is doing what he/she is doing, knows his/her audience when speaking to them). The respondents were required to address each statement to indicate if the frequency of the behaviour (of their supervisor) was 1) all the time, 2) most of the time, 3) sometimes, or 4) never. A percentage score was recorded for each of these four categories, for each statement for each leadership behaviour. This gave a total of 124 percentage scores (31x4). These functions are remarkably similar to the 10 managerial roles as advanced by Mintzberg (1980).

Leadership Competencies

Leadership competencies were assessed across three sectors. These three sectors were 1) core competency, 2) strategic business partner competency, and 3) people management competency. Each sector was evaluated with statements that respondents addressed to indicate the extent to which their supervisor possesses the behaviour nominated in the statement. For instance, one of the five statements for the core competency sector was does your supervisor have tolerance for stress, ambiguity, adaptability and change. There were a total of 16 statements and each one acquired a percentage score.

RESULTS (LEADERSHIP)

Overall, the survey findings were aligned with a number of specific chosen leadership dimensions, and thus, were informative. On the one hand, the respondents expressed a position that there were significant 'gaps' in important leadership skills, such as motivating, inspiring and acknowledging staff contributions. Over one half of the respondents believed their supervisors were not good role models and they lacked vision and creativity. On the other hand, the respondents reported strong relationships with sound supervisors who endeavoured to solve work related issues. There was reasonable consensus that the top five leadership behaviours that were displayed by their supervisors were 1) ethics and integrity, 2) accountability, 3) confidence, 4) communication, and 5) dedication. On the question of the relevance of gender to leadership, 64 per cent of the respondents claimed gender was not a predictive attribute of a good supervisor, while half that number (31%) said males are better leaders than females. Another interesting comment was that 41 per cent of the respondents claimed they had resigned from an earlier job because of poor relationships with their supervisor. Greater delineation of these general findings follows. The ranking of the first five leadership attributes resulted in the generation of Table 2.

Table 2

Expected and Experienced Leadership and Gap				
Rank#	Expected	%	Experienced	% Gap
1	Ethics and integrity	53	Ethics and integrity	50
2	Lead by example	52	Accountability	49 *
3	Visionary	51	Confidence	47 *
4	Communication	48	Communication	47
5	Accountability	37	Dedication	46
6	Building trust	36	Knowledge	44 *
7	Knowledgeable	33	Supportive	42
8	Motivator	29	Interpersonal	38 *
9	Supportive	28	Influential	33
10	Inspiring	25	Courteous	31 *

Notes:

a. * = Expected, but not experienced.

b. The attributes were from a list of 19 attributes, from which respondents ranked their first 5 (1 = most important to 5 = least important).

Inspection of the six statements that assessed supervision with supervisory leadership performance were revealing. The lowest scoring was for the item that was aligned with an important work goal of opportunity to learn new things at work. The overall responses to the six statements are presented as Table 3.

Table 3
Satisfaction with Leadership Performance %

Statement	Agree
My supervisor's performance meets my expectation	65
My supervisor is a good supervisor	72
My supervisor has motivated me	56
My supervisor has developed my skills and abilities	48
I have a good relationship with my supervisor	85
My supervisor needs leadership training	54

Table 4 presents the responses to the statements that were used to assess three broad leadership competencies. Some of the low scores are of concern. There is some correspondence with the results of Table 2.

Table 4
Leadership Competencies %

Does your supervisor possess the core competencies of	
Relationship, orientation and management	47
Positive and innovative thinking	38
Tolerance for stress, ambiguity, adaptability, change	50
Communication and influence	48
Problem solving	56
Does your supervisor possess strategic business competencies	
Knowledge of external and internal environment	65
Strategic business perspective	50
Visioning and alignment	39
Change management/process facilitation	36

Business	45
Does your supervisor possess people management competencies	
Human capital mobilisation and maximisation	42
Staffing and retention	23
Coaching , counselling and developing others	30
Compliance	49
Organisation design, development and effectiveness	30
Assessment, evaluation and measurement	36

Note. Scores are for a positive alignment with the statement.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this sample of managers reveal some interesting aspects of the expectations and performance of leaders in the Singaporean context. A significant proportion of respondents reported gaps between their expectations and their leaders' performance, especially in relation to the key features of motivating, inspiring, and rewarding employees, and acting as effective role models. However, some leaders displayed clear competencies in the areas of ethics, accountability, confidence, communication and dedication, which may be regarded more as managerial than leadership attributes. Less than half of the respondents rated their leaders highly on either 'strategic business competencies', such as visioning or change management; or on 'people management competencies', such as human capital maximisation, staffing and retention, performance management, and coaching and counselling. Encouragingly, the gender of leaders was not considered as a significant issue.

These findings are not entirely inconsistent with those from studies in other countries. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that Singaporean organisations may need to reconsider their leadership selection, development, and performance review strategies, in an increasingly competitive regional and global marketplace, in order to address these perceived deficiencies. Suggestions include revisions of leadership selection criteria to incorporate desired competencies, ongoing leadership development programmes, and multi source feedback from supervisors, subordinates, internal and external clients. Follow up research may also be useful to complement these findings, and to examine the characteristics of highly effective Singaporean leaders.

THE SINGAPORE WORKFORCE SURVEY (2006)

The twin forces of globalisation and new technology have irrevocably changed the business landscapes of all nations in the Asia Pacific region, and accordingly, the desired competencies, behaviours, and attitudes of the associated labour markets. Whilst many regional workforces are characterised by younger, well educated and highly skilled employees with different job expectations and career aspirations from their parents, Singapore has some unique circumstances in relation to both its industry structure and workforce needs. Thus, negative issues such as a lack of natural resources, increasing regional business competition, and threats to its prosperity from developments in transportation technology, together with positive factors such as political stability and a strong sense of commonality between Singaporeans and their government differentiate it from its neighbours such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

Singapore's willingness and ability to recreate itself has been its defining strength over the last decade, but this strength is heavily dependent on the dynamic competencies and shared values of its changing workforce. In particular, an educated, skilled, and engaged workforce underlies Singapore's economic and social strategy. The human resource management mantra that 'our people are our greatest asset' is possibly more crucial in Singapore than in other regional countries.

National success is reliant in the societal human capital, but what are the determinants of a competent workforce? Thus, an analysis of the contemporary workforce in Singapore with a view

to uncovering their predominant characteristics, the degree of engagement that they feel to their employers, their turnover intentions and underlying causes, provides valuable information for government planning and employer retention purposes. This paper reports on the findings from a survey of a small, but arguably representative sample of Singaporean managers employed in a relatively broad selection of industry sectors. The survey was conducted by the Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI) during 2006.

METHODOLOGY (WORKFORCE)

Respondents and Site

The respondents were 61 employers from a broad cross section of Singaporean organisations. A majority of the respondents (70%) were in the 26 years to 45 years of age group. Nearly 80 per cent of the sample held managerial positions with almost 25 per cent of them in senior roles (e.g., directors and executives). Some 65 per cent of the respondents were HRM practitioners, mainly in the field of management with fewer members in sales and marketing, administration and finance. The respondents were dispersed across industry sectors. For instance, 29 per cent were from the service industry (i.e., retail, insurance, hotel and leisure), a further 20 per cent of the respondents were engaged in manufacturing, while a sizeable 18 per cent were active in managerial/administrative and educational focused business. Organisational size varied considerably. The smallest firms had cadres of 50 employees or less while the largest corporations had cadres of over 800. There was a strong representation from MNCs (42%) and SMEs (33%), while local companies represented some 18 per cent of the respondent group. Nearly one of half of the capital structure was local and foreign investment was a healthy 44 per cent. Table 5 presents a profile of the key dimensions of the respondents.

Table 5
Demographics % (N = 61)

Age (years)		Organisational level	
< 26	2	Managers	56
26 to 45	70	Directors	20
46 to 55	25	Executives	12
> 55	3	Senior executives	12
Industry sector		Organisational type	
Service	29	MNC	42
Manufacturing	20	SME	33
Managerial	18	Local firm	18
Professional	16	Public	7
Electronics/IT	10		
Chemical/food	5	Organisational size	
Capital structure		< 51	35
Local	49	51-200	28
Foreign	44	201-800	27
Joint venture	7	> 800	10

Measures

Data were obtained by administering a questionnaire that had 29 scales. Four main types of scales were used. One type of scale required the respondents to select one box from a number of boxes that each gave unique information. For instance, respondents nominated their age group by choosing the box (one of six) that expressed a range of years that included the respondent's age in

years. A second type of scale required a respondent to rank a set of items. For example, respondents were required to rank the importance of the first five items (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) out of a list of 14 items to reveal their perceived level of importance of factors (five) on why employees resigned from the respondent's organisation. The third type of scale required respondents to provide data in boxes of a two dimensional matrix. The size of the matrix, and hence, the amount of data, was a function of the number of top fields and the number of side fields of the matrix. Respondents used this type of scale to nominate the average tenure of employees in different departmental levels of the respondent's organisation. For this information there were four top fields that gave different levels of tenure (< 3, 3 to 5, 6 to 10 and > 10 years) and the left hand field of the matrix nominated different departmental categories (e.g., administration, sales and service, HRM). Matrices of different numbers of top and side fields were used to obtain data about a variety of employee features (education level, age) and organisational properties (firm size, departmental level). The fourth type of instrument was an interval scale. Respondents used a five point Likert scale to respond to over 60 items of interest. All responses were reported as a percentage of the total number of responses to cater for missing data.

RESULTS (WORKFORCE)

The results of the Singapore Workforce Survey (2006) reveal a typical Singaporean employee has a unique profile. For instance, a majority of employees are in the range of 21 years to 50 years of age. Almost 70 per cent of the study firms reported that less than 10 per cent of their employees are below 20 years of age or above 60 years of age. A great number of this personnel is employed in sales and manufacturing or operations generally, in full time jobs, as few Singaporean workers are working either part time or on contracts. And organisational linkage is relatively well defined with 36 per cent of the work force remaining in their organisation for three to five years, nearly one third (31%) of a firm's employees remain for three to 10 years, and a quarter of the workforce typically remains attached for 10 years or more. Only 12 per cent of the employees are likely to remain with the same organisation for less than three years. The results demonstrate that employee age and tenure are related. Those employees aged less than 30 years generally, do not stay in the same firm for more than three years, while workers in the 31 years of age to 45 years of age group are more likely to remain in the same company for between three to ten years. Expectedly, job hopping declines with age.

It was demonstrated that in the Singaporean work context, job tenure is a function of work type. The highest employment occupation is 1) sales and marketing, and this is followed by 2) operations. Nearly one quarter of the respondents claimed that more than 26 per cent of their company employees were in these two job sectors. The lowest employment occupation (about 10%) was HRM. Generally, employees remained in sales and marketing for less than three years.

Formal education qualifications are a dominant hallmark of Singaporean employees. The bulk of the work force has either a polytechnic diploma or an university degree. Some 28 per cent of the study organisations reported that 26 per cent to 40 per cent of their employees held polytechnic diplomas while the respondents of a similar number of companies (29%) stated that more than 41 per cent of their employees had university degrees. A total of 17 per cent of the study firms had 26 per cent of the workforce holding a Masters degree or a higher qualification.

It was claimed by the respondents that the Singaporean workforce was highly committed to their employing company. In large, they experience high job satisfaction, and are productive. Generally, these features were cited in an earlier study (Koh 2006). The paradox is that in spite of a majority expression that the workplace has many favourable dimensions nearly one half (45%) of the survey organisations have turnover problems. Despite being the biggest employer group, sales and marketing had the highest turnover rate and even at the executive level in all employer groups, the tenure could be less than three years, while at the director level or above, employees usually served ten years or more.

An endeavour was made to identify the reasons for severing organisational linkage. When asked for

the top five reasons for staff resignations, the 61 respondents, collectively, provided a list of 14 features. Only two features, better pay (71%) and better prospects (71%) attracted a consensus. A third hygiene factor (promotion) attracted some 44 per cent of the responses within the top five rankings. A further six dimensions, which were associated with attributes of personal growth, work life balance, matching of job incumbent and task requirements, attracted the next highest level of responses (39% to 23%). The remaining five reasons attracted few responses. These data demonstrate that while the prioritisation of work related goals in a diverse Asian context is being aligned in a knowledge based economy, the modern Singaporean lifestyle is relatively expensive "... in terms of family education, health, accommodation, private transport and living." (Pearson & Chatterjee 2000: 33). Thus, the economic hygiene dimensions predominate.

Despite the profiled generalisation, there was diversity, particularly across age. For instance, the respondents claimed younger workers were less committed. They put more emphasis on financial rewards and promotion, but are more learning conscious and more energetic than older (above 50 years) employees, who have lower drive. The study respondents stated experienced workers were the most committed to their job while middle aged workers were more patient and customer orientated. A salient inference of these observations is that people at different life and career stages have different work goals, and consequently, designing HRM policies and practices that are better aligned with employee aspirations is a significant challenge for contemporary employers.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a brief, but pertinent snapshot of the contemporary workforce in Singapore, which reveals a number of issues of interest to the government and employers in several industry sectors. Given the vulnerability of Singapore's economy in a dynamic and increasingly competitive region, it also provides some implicit suggestions for employers who are seriously concerned to attract and retain the best possible talent in order to grow and remain prosperous.

The findings show an inverse relationship between employee age and length of tenure, confirming earlier indications of a significant decrease in employee loyalty and commitment resulting in frequent 'job hopping' especially amongst younger employees. Singaporean employers, therefore, would be well advised to provide attractive employment conditions for their younger employees (for example, flexibilities in working hours, learning and development opportunities, mentoring programmes, challenging work projects), and to reconsider their utilisation of the skills and work behaviours of their more experienced employees. In addition, the management of employees from a broad range of generations (e.g., Baby Boomers, Generations X and Y) may require different and at times diverse managerial styles and competencies.

In particular, the study results suggests that employers will need to recognise the unique characteristics of the Singaporean economy and its contemporary labour markets, with a view to assuring that their employment conditions are designed to match both the requirements of their businesses and the changing demands of their employees. Further research into both these aspects would no doubt provide more specific information on how employers might better respond to these ongoing developments.

AUTHOR

Mdm Ho Geok Choo has been a HR practitioner for almost 28 years and is the President of the Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI) since 1997. She was the past President of Asia Pacific Federation of Human Resources Management (APFHRM). She is also the founder member of the Singapore Professionals and Executives Cooperative (SPEC), where she currently serves as Deputy Chairman. She has grown beyond her HR profession to aligning human competitiveness to business operations. She is now with Hyflux Ltd as Group Executive Vice President, Corporate Services & Development. Mdm Ho presented a paper at the general meeting of APFHRM and successfully bid for Singapore to host the 11th World Congress on Human Resource Management under the auspices of the World Federation of Personnel Management Associations.

Mdm Ho has contributed in her profession both locally and in the international arenas. She has presented papers on Human Resource Management and Customer Services Programmes in countries such as Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong and Oman, She was chosen to represent Singapore as a delegate to the Duke of Edinburgh's 8th Commonwealth Study Conference in Canada, a programme for future leaders. She was also invited to be a member of the Singapore's Manpower 21 Study Mission to Europe.

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