

In Vietnam no one wants to be the squeaky wheel

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In Vietnam a deep-rooted, traditional respect for hierarchy has been reinforced by decades of authoritarian Communist political culture that discourages open expression of discontent.

Vietnamese employees, even at the professional level, are strongly averse to confrontation and rarely inclined to voice grievances within their organisations. They also shy away from constructive suggestions to their superiors about how operations could run more smoothly.

In this environment, the challenge for managers is to ensure they get adequate - and potentially valuable - feedback from their Vietnamese staff, rather than leaving problems to fester.

"Culturally, Vietnamese don't tend to question authority," says Fred Burke, a partner in the Ho Chi Minh City office of Baker & McKenzie. "They will put up with something they are unhappy with for a long time, and then it will come out in an unhealthy way. They are afraid that if they complain they will be fired, but as a manager you want their complaints addressed."

Vietnamese employees may even opt to leave their jobs out of frustration with an unresolved problem, rather than attempt to raise the issue with their bosses. "You don't really know why they are leaving, or have a chance to correct it," Mr Burke says.

To avoid such losses, he suggests, managers must foster an environment in which employees have channels to air their discontents obliquely, ones that do not involve speaking directly to their immediate superiors.

At Baker & McKenzie - with about 50 staff, including 15 expatriates, in offices in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, certain individuals have emerged as key players in an informal process of identifying other employees' grievances, and bringing the information to the heads of the offices.

In Ho Chi Minh City, a particularly sensitive and sympathetic office manager has become an intermediary between top management and staff, while a Vietnamese partner in Hanoi is the go-to guy for many colleagues who want to air grievances.

"It has to be somebody who people respect and trust to handle sensitive issues," Mr Burke said. "Somebody willing to listen, sit down with staff and understand their needs and concerns."

PwC, the accountancy and consulting firm, with some 260 employees in Vietnam, requires all staff to participate every six months in an "upward feedback" session of small groups of 10 to 14 people who are at the same "level" in the organisation.

The sessions, which last up to two hours, begin with an invitation for participants to air general grievances or comments on such matters as the overall work environment, services provided by the human resources department, and the IT system, including some restrictions on its use.

After talking about overall workplace issues, participants are asked to discuss their managers and bosses. For each person they talk about, the employees are asked to identify behaviours they would like that person to continue, behaviours they would like that person to stop, and behaviours they would like that person to start.

"It's not about feedback on people's technical skills," says Melissa Booth, the PwC special projects co-ordinator who oversees the process, says. "It's about their behavior, communication and management skills." However, she says, some new employees are astonished by the process. "When you have people the first time, they they look at you a bit strangely as to why you are asking for this," she says.

Even veterans of the process are initially hesitant to talk, she says, but the employees often have insightful points to make once they open up.

Bui Thi T Quang, the firm's human resource manager, says the group sessions create a feeling of safety, which emboldens others to express themselves more freely than they might in a one-on-one session. "It is more comfortable for them to speak," Ms Quang says. "When one person speaks, other people tend to talk more."

To prevent any hint of management control of the process, notes on the group discussion are taken by one of the participants, who writes a final summary which is approved by all the participants before it is delivered. The feedback is then presented to the individual staff members, who are encouraged to take the criticism on board.

"People take the feedback surprisingly well," Ms Booth says. "They listen, and they understand this has an impact on how they can go forward in the firm, how they can be promoted."

At Dragon Capital, a Ho Chi Minh City-based fund management company, Alex Pasikowski, a director, says that partners discovered annual performance reviews were turning into "massive outpourings of disenchantment" since employees saw the formal meeting as a safe, appropriate venue to express their opinions.

While encouraging staff to give feedback at other times, Dragon, which has grown from 30 to 60 people over the past two years, instituted a second, semi-annual performance review, giving its employees more frequent opportunity to have discussions with management in a formal setting.

"Vietnamese tend to believe that the annual review is the get out of jail free card," Mr Pasikowski said. "They come in there and say what they want and make their complaints - and we get these outpourings of problems in the office, or with their jobs."

Part of the reason Vietnamese can be so hesitant to speak at other times, he says, is that they are extremely reluctant to point fingers at other colleagues in the office, even if it is to raise legitimate work-related issues that need to be addressed.

"Nobody wants to be the squeaky wheel," he said. "In Vietnam, the welfare of the group, outweighs the welfare of the individuals. When staff have problems, they tend to get together in a group and come and approach us with it."

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