

CASE STUDY : BUS ADS

2nd GENERATION MANAGEMENT – DARING TO EXPERIMENT & TRULY CARE FOR YOUR EMPLOYEES

Background

Started as a one-man business in 1983 handling bus panel advertising, BusAds is today a leading one-stop outdoor advertising production house involved in the manufacture and installation of large-scale signs and displays, including for car fleets, buses, trains, boats, ships and aircraft.

Founder Mr Matthew Yapp is ably assisted by his children, Cheryl and Alvin, both of whom have had years of corporate experience before joining the family business.

Today, the company has over 50 staff, mostly Gen Xers & Yers, with a large proportion from overseas.

Daring Changes

With a different style from the founding management, Alvin is constantly grappling with how to function effectively in a family-run business with a less structured operational style and comprising many non-Singaporeans who are less conversant in English.

Soon after he joined, he quickly realised that the company's long term success was dependent on good human resources and promptly worked to invest in them. Seeing how swiftly business and people decisions could be made in an SME compared to an MNC, he used this as a strategy to make HR decisions that would strengthen staff loyalty and dedication by addressing welfare and hygiene issues. This progressed into a work-life strategy that focused on meeting the specific needs of the staff and the company. Some work-life measures that were implemented included providing staff with the options of flexi-hours, telecommuting and compressed work schedule and empowering production managers with the flexibility to adjust staff's shift schedules according to business needs and staff's preference. Flexible leave benefit options and employee support schemes, with a number catering to family members of staff, were also introduced.

To ensure the successful implementation of work-life practices, open communication was deliberately emphasised to bridge differences between the founding management and second generation as they focused on the key objectives of the business. A key thrust of the company is in working towards educating and empowering supervisors and staff to take ownership of their work and life. When the company participated in and won the Work-Life Achiever Award in 2010, it helped to raise staff awareness and appreciation of the work-life strategy of the company.



Family Values

Alvin shared that a key unifying factor of the company is the inculcating and preserving of core family values to its stakeholders, e.g. paying salaries promptly, no short changing on OT pay, ensuring that they develop and promote deserving staff. He felt that it is in the interest and the responsibility of the company to add value to their staff, e.g. they would pay for the conversion of foreign driving licenses to Singapore licenses for their staff.

Stressing that mistakes affect everyone in the company but can happen to anyone, the company tries to foster a culture that allows individuals to fail and learn from their mistakes, with the focus on the issues and learning process rather than on the person. This enables

everyone in the company to treat failures as learning experiences and leads to better performance and greater confidence.

Work-Life Strategy in Practice

The work-life strategy of the company arose from Alvin's focused approach in addressing staff needs. He was careful in tailoring practices to his staff, e.g. he realised that 60-70% of his staff were single non-Singaporeans and would prefer to work longer hours and get extra pay. However, they may not be able to go home every year so he allows them to accumulate their leave over 2 yrs and allows them to take extra no pay leave if needed. He also allows them to stretch their personal loans over a longer period so that they can service them more comfortably. Staff are also given ex-gratia bonus as a surprise and means to reward good performance.

While they have mapped out a 4-yr work-life strategy, they believe that this is an ongoing process. The timeframe is set for them to educate and increase staff awareness of measures to support them. They also hope to formalise career paths so as to better manage the aspirations of staff. Staff are beginning to respond favourably and some have even asked to learn English for their own development.

The company organises outings for staff to promote social interaction. Noticing that their staff do not like to fuss and dress up for events, the company organises more in-house parties, e.g. Chinese New Year celebration with lots of food and lucky draw prizes. To develop staff, the company also organises or sends staff to workshops on sales, time management, etc.

The company adopts a strict weekend-free policy. This is commendable especially for an SME with limited resources compared to bigger organisations. Management will refrain from sending SMS or making calls on weekends if information can wait till Monday. The company does not encourage staff to work on weekends or on night jobs unless it is required by clients. As a role model, Alvin tries to protect family and personal time of staff and when a weekend call is necessitated he will end his phone call with a reminder to "have a good rest and spend time with the family".

To encourage family bonding, the company specifies that its annual travel award of \$3,000 for tickets and accommodation and \$2,000 cash must be spent with family members. In

recognising the important role of family members, Alvin even shares credit card redemptions such as Häagen-Dazs ice cream vouchers with his staff, whose son has a special liking for this ice cream. He also allows his staff to borrow his car when he is away on business trips.

He will also take the trouble to buy birthday gifts in advance for his staff when he has to go overseas so that each present is chosen with thoughtfulness and a personal touch.

Such thoughtful measures have proven to strengthen the relationships with his staff. This is also a reflection of a key philosophy of Alvin in building strong relationships with his staff as he recognises that an SME may not be as competitive in its remuneration and benefit packages compared with larger companies. However, its strengths are that it can be more personal with the ability to make faster decisions and redress mistakes more quickly. He also encourages his staff to treat projects as their “own business” so that they can make good pricing and return choices.

Alvin also initiated a weekly briefing meeting with his production team to foster communication within the team. He has learnt to develop sensitivity to his staff over time. For example, he noticed that a staff often called in sick on Mondays but did not produce an MC and ended up applying for annual leave. On speaking with the staff, he found that the staff felt tired after working late on weekend jobs and wanted to rest but did not want to take MC as it was not fair to the company. The dialogue and open communication prevented management from jumping to conclusion and allowed them to address the staff's needs by adjusting his work shift and weekend job schedule subsequently. Another unconfirmed staff with no leave entitlement was allowed to take no pay leave to return home overseas to fulfil some family responsibilities.

Working with Middle Management

Alvin works hard to strengthen relationships with each of his immediate managers, helping them to appreciate the corporate culture, what they stand for and what cannot be tolerated. He empowers his managers to make decisions and stresses that if staff decisions are made in the interest of the company, they would always get support from the management. He also invests time to develop his managers and help them manage their teams and add value to individuals and the company.

He involves his key stakeholders i.e. his senior managers, in decisions concerning their staff as he recognises their “pseudo-union leader” role. He provides opportunities for his middle management to learn how to handle HR issues by involving them in HR decisions and in counselling staff. Recognising their instrumental roles with staff, he intends to involve them in a work-life integration committee to help in educating and addressing specific work-life needs of staff so that eventually a self-directed instead of a top-driven work-life friendly culture permeates the company. He also bounces off ideas with other entrepreneurs and friends on HR measures and encounters with staff as an external realism check.

Walking the Talk

Having joined one year ago from another corporate job, Business Development Manager, Samann Loh is thrilled that she is able to find quality work-life and can enjoy the best of both worlds at BusAds. Being empowered fully to manage her work and personal needs, she relishes the flexibility of working from home, flexi-hours and a challenging job handling company branding and work-life strategy. She observed that a key success factor in BusAds is that the leaders walk their talk and act as good role models in managing their work and life and are genuine about promoting a conducive work-life environment.

Moving Forward

With a strong work-life culture and management support for employees, the company is beginning to see its efforts pay off. Turnover rate has decreased and more of its foreign employees are requesting to renew their contracts. As a testament to its conducive work-life environment, six staff who had left for various reasons have returned to the company recently.

Moving forward, Alvin’s principle for his company and others contemplating a work-life strategy is to see the work-life journey as a learning process that requires regular reviews, experimentation and refinements. It is also wise to remember that staff are individuals with changing needs over time. If management is fair and willing to invest time to build a relationship of mutual trust, they will make the business grow – whether as employees now or as clients and business partners in the future!