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4-2020

### COVID-19 HR challenge: Lessons from vigilant Singaporeans

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#### Citation

SMITH, Richard R.. COVID-19 HR challenge: Lessons from vigilant Singaporeans. (2020). *People Matters*. XI, (4), 95-97.

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# COVID-19 HR challenge: Lessons from vigilant Singaporeans

April 18, 2020

Prof. Richard R. Smith

Lessons from Singapore that may benefit global HR business leaders in caring for the health and well-being of the workforce during this challenging time.

While Singapore was the location of the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, a more current view of the city-state might be better described as *Crazy Vigilant Singaporeans*! The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed this busy hub of human activity to a place of quiet diligence as a new normal. I have been impressed with the preparation, rapid response, and overall vigilance on an island that hosts more than 20 million visitors a year. While we still have a long road ahead as we work to contain the spread of the virus around the world, I wish to share my personal lessons from Singapore that may benefit global HR business leaders in caring for the health and well-being of the workforce during this challenging time.

- **Anticipation and Forecast** – On 22 January, I was hosted by a few health leaders in Singapore at the new Center for Healthcare Innovation (CHI) which is also located at the National Center for Infectious Diseases. The purpose of our meeting was to explore collaboration by bringing more management research into the context of healthcare. However, the COVID-19 outbreak distracted our discussion as China had just reported a second death and the USA had just confirmed their first case in Washington State. While there were no detected cases at that time in Singapore, emergency planning meetings had already started taking place as the busy Chinese New Year holiday was approaching. The idea that this could be a pandemic was already shared and business leaders were alerted. How often do we carefully consider the impact of overseas events on our own businesses?
- **Proactive Planning** – After SARS outbreak, many employers learned important lessons across East Asia. As a result, most organizations have risk management plans that include a pandemic response and have mitigation measures in place (e.g. issued personal thermometers to employees, no system log-in without temperature reporting, no system log-in without travel declarations, physical barricade plan for health screening before physical site entry, etc.). It is clear that Singapore has learned from the SARS challenge 17 years ago and put measures in place- just in case. While no amount of planning can prepare for the unknown, this pragmatic approach is showing benefit in Singapore. If your business has not yet been affected by COVID-19, what is your plan when it comes?
- **Communication Channel Management** – During a crisis, communication must be centralized and clear both at a national level as well as for each business. While there is a lot of information already out from news sources about the importance of personal hygiene and the reduction of human contact, it seems important for the employees to hear this directly from their bosses as well. Eliminating large gatherings, holding virtual meetings, distributing hand sanitizers around the office and factory areas, enhancing the workplace sanitation, and reinforcing the washing of hands are all critical. Most workplaces clean the lift buttons each hour and completely disinfect offices each night. However, it is important that employees take personal responsibility for their own area and items (cleaning mobile phone, keys, computer, desk, etc.) regularly. Do you have a communication command centre that is communicating the essentials to your workforce to help them prepare?
- **Temperature and Travel Declaration** – In many complex organizations, it is hard to know where everyone is at any point in time and even more difficult to know who is not feeling well. Most Singapore businesses (and all education institutions) have mandatory travel

declarations to outline where you have been and where you are planning to go for both personal and business travel outside your immediate home/work areas. In addition, all employees must take and record their temperature two times a day and report it on a company system or smartphone app. This is carefully monitored to better understand the movement and general health of the people in the organization. Do you have people monitoring systems in place to protect your workforce?

- **Holistic Stakeholder Management** – While the focus on HR leaders is centered on the employees in the organization, the virus does not discriminate and is always looking for the next human host. It becomes quite critical to take a holistic view of human interaction within the workplace and with the workforce. This includes contract cleaning services, cafeteria services, catering services, delivery support, security services, customers, suppliers, outsourcing partners, etc. It is great to have good measures in place for your employees, but if the same safety and screening measures are not in place for others, then the containment is compromised. Do you have a clear view of the human interactions in your workplace beyond the employees? How will you manage other stakeholders for a holistic perspective?
- **Rewire Cultural Signals for Health** – To create high-performing organizations and minimize labor costs, many organizations encourage people to work hard and don't seem to mind if they work while they are not feeling well. In fact, for several types of workers many employers provide no paid sick days, which means no pay if one is home sick. During a pandemic, we need people to stay home if they are not well. Singapore implemented a mandatory 5-day MC policy for any fever or respiratory ailment – no exceptions. Most employers have responded positively by providing paid workdays for those who are affected. While the duties of work are important, HR leaders need to perhaps re-wire the cultural signals to help people at all levels understand that when you don't feel well, you must stay home. How can HR and business leaders help create the right incentives and cultural acceptance of putting health first?
- **Split Team Work Arrangements** – Since the start of February, most businesses here have been operating with split shifts to reduce risk. In other words, Team A works from home during one week and Team B works from home the following week. In case of an infection in one group it will only affect half of the team in a particular area (e.g. - imagine having your entire finance team in quarantine during quarterly closing). This can be a challenge in some areas that require secure files or physical work effort, so some organizations modify this to split the teams to different locations each week. How will you ensure business continuity in the event of a virus infection in your workplace?
- **Contact Tracing** – Since I moved to Asia just after SARS, the idea of contact tracing is new to me. Given the contagious nature of the virus before symptoms are evident, it becomes important to re-trace history of someone exposed. In other words, if you were sitting in the company cafeteria three days ago next to someone who now has the symptoms of the virus, how would you know? In Singapore, most companies use a combination of manual tracking (e.g. - sign in to meetings, restaurants, etc.) along with digital tracing (e.g. – badge swipes, security cameras with facial recognition, photo taking, etc.). It is therefore possible to call people immediately to let them know that they were potentially exposed to someone and that they should self-quarantine until the testing results are confirmed. This can be a major burden for the security and HR staff, but critical for early detection and containment. How well is your organization prepared for contact tracing?

The global COVID-19 challenge will undoubtedly change many things in our daily human lives as this unfolds in the coming months and year. The size and economic strength of Singapore has helped it to address the pandemic challenge. The nation also benefits from the trust in leadership and a collective culture, which is also risk-averse by nature. As the global situation develops, each business and country will address the pandemic in their own unique way. While I am not an expert, I do hope that the lessons from the Crazy Vigilant Singaporeans can provide some benefit to others.