

Motivation And Retention In The SAF

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Abstract:

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the Singapore economy have been sharing a common and limited pool of human resource in the small city-state since the formation of the national defence force. To address the challenging issue of attracting talent to fill up the SAF's ranks and succession in the years to come, analysts stress the importance for organisations to pursue human resource (HR) strategies that focus on increasing staff motivation and retention. At the same time, the competition over talent and high performers is also creating a rat race between organisations to offer better and more lucrative rewards and benefits. In the light of changing societal trends such as shifting demographics, social evolution, globalisation and entrepreneurship practices, there is a need to rekindle values, soldiering instincts and learning abilities in the new soldiers.

Keywords: Motivation; Values; Human Resource; Needs; Rewards

INTRODUCTION

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the Singapore economy have been sharing a common and limited pool of human resources in the small city-state since the formation of the country's defence force. To reinforce the regulars in the SAF, the conscript service was introduced in 1967 for all Singaporean males to serve 2 years of compulsory national service. Today, the SAF has grown into a total strength of 21,000 regulars and 30,000 conscripts. In the last decade, the dramatic expansion of the global economy had stiffened the international competition for Human Resource (HR). Globally, the demand for motivated and high performing individuals has long been exceeding the corresponding supply.¹ It is the emergence of trends such as shifting demographics (e.g. ageing population and declining birth rates), social evolution, globalisation and entrepreneurship practices that are giving birth to the new HR phenomena we see today. Across all industries, commitment and loyalty are diminishing; job-hopping has become the norm. To address these issues, analysts

stress the importance for organisations to pursue HR strategies that focus on increasing staff motivation and retention. At the same time, the competition over talents and high performers is also creating a rat-race between organisations to offer better and more lucrative rewards and benefits. These developments invariably compound the HR challenges faced by the private sector and the SAF alike.



The SAF is committed to grooming our nation's talent for the defence of our country. SAF Overseas Scholarship (SAFOS) recipients interacting with Dr Ng Eng Hen (left), Minister for Defence before the SAFOS award presentation ceremony.

MOTIVATION AS AN OPERATIONAL STRATEGY

“For a small country like Singapore, acquiring and nurturing human talent is a matter of survival”, said Mr Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore, in his speech made at the Singapore Human Capital Submit Opening in 2009. The same message was reiterated again during his National Day message in 2010, 2011 and 2012. It is thus evident that the importance of human talent cannot be more emphasised. Today, in the SAF, recruitment and retention are perennial challenges. To address this, the Personnel Command (PERSCOM), which is an initiative stemming from the SAF HR transformation, was formed in Jun 2011.² According to Colonel Terry Siow, then Commander PERSCOM, at the inauguration parade, “PERSCOM was established as part of the larger Ministry of Defence and SAF HR transformation efforts to strengthen our HR system to meet new challenges, which include higher demands for HR delivery and services, as well as enhancing our manpower operations capabilities.” Evidently, the growing global demand for human capital and the challenges of motivating and retaining quality people necessitate more elaborate strategies that require well-thought planning, organising and execution. In the current volatile global environment and security landscape, the future belongs to those that can best manage change. Organisations that possess highly competent and committed individuals who can respond to changes rapidly are most likely to succeed. For the SAF, this means competent soldiers who are committed to defending the sovereignty of the country, but yet dynamic in the face of evolving threats and trends. The goal of all contemporary leaders is to garner the energy of these elites in order to achieve the organisational objectives. In return, leaders are responsible for creating the climate for our good people to develop to their fullest potential. Failure to do so may increase staff frustration, poor performance, lower job satisfaction and eventual retention challenges,³ all of which are detrimental towards the success of the organisation. Particularly,

in the increasingly unpredictable and knowledge-based environment, retention is becoming more important. While the SAF can have the competitive advantage in weapons and military technologies, it is the people who will win the war. In times of decision, the scarce number of talents will eventually become the crucial differentiating resource between conflicting forces.⁴ Economically, retention challenges also pose high costs for an organisation. Statistically, a company loses approximately one million dollars (direct and indirect cost) for every ten managerial and professional leaving the company.⁵ For the SAF, we also lose the valuable operational experience of each soldier who leaves us. Our HR system, which is essential for staff retention, is thus an integral part of our fighting systems given its function to build up the operational edge of our war fighting capabilities – our people. In the business of defence, our task of protecting the country and its people is a sacred one. Soldiers are not hired to fight but called to serve for a noble cause. Hence, HR management today cannot merely be a series of ‘corporate’ strategies consisting of cold and pragmatic methods e.g. monetary incentives, but instead should also have in place strategies that recognise and appeal to intangibles such as job satisfaction, sense of achievement and nationalistic sentiments

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WHAT THEORIES TEACH US

Past studies revealed many motivation and retention strategies that include ‘fair’ remunerations and pay, conducive and challenging work environment, good career development opportunities, strong immediate supervisor leadership and support.⁶ These

strategies are touted to strengthen the organisation's ability to motivate and retain their pool of talents.⁷ However, these strategies were established on theories that stem from a simple and basic assumption that humans are influenced by the basic biological need to survive. We can trace this assumption to the 'carrot and stick' method, evolved from the behaviour of a donkey, which moves forward based on the anticipated reward of a carrot dangling in front of it. Early behavioural scientists built on this principle to study individual, group and interpersonal relationships. Scholars like Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry L. Gantt developed theories to increase efficiency and effectiveness during the industrialisation period based on this understanding of the human behaviours. In the 1940s and 50s, these notions were further theorised by scholars such as Abraham Maslow, Douglas McGregor and Frederick Herzberg. The Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, McGregor's Theory X and Y and Herzberg's Hygiene Theory became the most commonly read, taught and practised theories amongst academics, institutions, managers and leaders. These theories on motivation and psychology relied on the

common theme of using the 'carrot and stick' approach to trigger the desired response from the employees by understanding their behaviour and responses. The study that human relies on a reward-seeking and punishment-avoiding behaviour to stay happy and productive was simple and gained popularity quickly, despite newer studies that show there are very weak links between the factors that make people happy and the factors that people strive for.⁸ It is a common fallacy to assume that the factors that make people happy are often the factors that will increase performance.⁹ Today, managers and leaders continue to treat rewards and punishments as the panacea for most HR issues. However, the dialectics of effective motivation and retention imposes an increasing need for us to differentiate between compliance, happiness and performance to achieve a more lasting and purposeful outcome.

In the same period during the 1940s and 50s, a separate study by Harry F. Harlow discovered that the use of 'carrots' had disrupted performance instead of enhancing it.¹⁰ However, this study did not take



Soldiers carrying out drills in preparation for the SAF Day parade.

traction until the 1970s when Edward Deci decided to take a closer examination on this discovery as part of his dissertation topic. This was further developed by Alfie Kohn and Daniel H. Pink in the last two decades and they argued that past human motivation developments was rooted on a donkey's psyche - an unexamined assumption, and raised the alarm that the current organisations are killing motivation through the 'carrot and stick' method. They stressed that any motivation method relying on external control systems will not be effective; motivation comes from an intrinsic drive—'to achieve autonomy, mastery and purpose'.¹¹ Other contemporary writers such as Jim Collins, Robert Fritz, Peter Senge, Daniel H Kim and Seth Godin also echoed these findings. Their literature also alludes that motivation and performance are not driven by 'carrot and stick' but an innate human behaviour to do well. Alfie Kohn stated in 'Punished by Rewards' that "We are beings who possess natural curiosity about ourselves and our environment, who search for and overcome challenges, who try to master skills and attain competence, and who seek to reach new levels of complexity in what we learn and do."¹² This argues that human behaviour is neither reward seeking nor punishment avoiding but inherently motivated to seek performance. Peter Senge, in *The Fifth Discipline* also went to uncover the flaws and detrimental effects of the 'carrot and stick' motivational theories by highlighting that "Our prevailing system of management has destroyed our people. People are born with intrinsic motivation, self-respect, dignity and curiosity to learn and joy in learning. The forces of destruction begin with a toddler—a prize for the best Halloween costume, grades in school, gold stars and so on up to university. On the job, people, teams and division are ranked, reward for the top, punishment for the bottom. Management by objectives, quotas, incentive pay, business plans, put together separately, division by division, cause further, unknown and unknowable."¹³

THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

The study of motivation is a complicated one as it centers on the irrational behaviour of human beings. Over the years, each theory continues to be effective in its own merits. Today, the dilemma of satisfying the human practical need versus the aspiration need continues to be a puzzle. Yet one thing we know surely is that the shift from the industrial age to the information age has caused employees to develop a very different world-view. The new-age employees are highly sophisticated, driven and demand greater satisfaction from their work. They challenge any signs of manipulation and are rarely bought over by simple rewards or incentives. Motivating employees today demands more than just satisfying basic needs. However, the 'corporate' notion of motivation and the harsh reality of the scarce human resource continue to cloud our judgment as we continue to use rewards as the primary means to influence and motivate our people. Throughout the years, the SAF continually offer its regulars better terms of employment, review of market rate remuneration and performance-based bonuses and increments. Manpower polices and recruitment strategies are also constantly reviewed to address the developments of the societal trends. The introduction of the Military Domain Experts Scheme (MDES) was targeted to provide a more customised reward and progression scheme that meet the demands of an egalitarian society and the 'new' employee to entice higher recruitment and retention. Through the creative use of extrinsic factors and rewards, we have achieved a temporal relief for the recruitment and retention pressures but have caused an unintentional reliance on rewards to combat these problems. Over time, these rewards turn into an addiction for the employee and pushes out their motivation. The more rewards are used, the more they seemed to be needed.¹⁴ For the professional soldier, the reasons for joining this sacred institution become more and more obscured.

While addressing the SAF's HR challenges, the essay does not deny the immutable need for extrinsic rewards. It will be a big mistake if we think that the soldier's commitment and performance can be totally substituted by the call of duty, strong values, pure leadership, respect and self-sacrifice. Ultimately, human behaviour is still influenced by the need to survive. At the foundation of every HR strategy, we must address survival. However, we must also be cognisant of the unintended consequences of over subscribing to extrinsic rewards and gratification. By recognising the ill effects of over-reliance and over-indulgence on rewards, we can better use it as a tool to optimise individual and organisational performance. In our institutional structure and values, we can hardly afford these consequences that are caused by immoderate rewards.

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In a reward system, the use of rewards for performance shifts the soldiers' relationship obligations to pure transaction.¹⁵ In such a paradigm, the people no longer feel the obligation or the drive to put in the extra effort. Their contributions are now reduced to a commodity that is traded for a value. This diminished the trust between leaders and men. For the men, they now have a choice to determine their efforts towards their tasks as the justifications are based on rewards rather than relationship and responsibility. In our business of security, the call of duty can hardly be measured or replaced by rewards.

In our highly affluent society, rewards also alter the focus of the soldiers. Rewards satisfy needs and give pleasure. People tend to repeat or change their behaviour to relive their pleasures. The focus on reward breeds stress, distractions and greed that leads

to undesirable behaviour, such as poor performance, unethical actions and power struggles. In time, soldiers lose their professionalism, candor, personal values and military effectiveness by succumbing to the extrinsic rewards and narrow self-interests.

Self-interest and rewards also affects power in the organisation. Kohn highlights that rewards not only reflect disparity in power but also distributes them.¹⁶

In the SAF, these rewards take the form of promotion and rank, since it is directly proportional to monetary rewards and benefits. In a reward system, perceptions of 'favouritism' and 'unfair treatment' are often at play. The attempt to create the perception of being the 'best' often outweighs the actual performance. Mistrust and individualism begin to creep in as people no longer trust their superiors because of the power to dispense rewards, they will attempt to mask their flaws and re-package their performance. Leaders will find it challenging to develop their men's full potential. Over time, the institution values, team culture and organisational performance will give way to the power struggle caused by greed and hunger.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE SAF?

Unlike most organisations, the SAF is a military organisation. The military organisation is always viewed as an institution. The members are connected by their values and oath to protect and preserve. They are military professionals who identify themselves with the notion of self-sacrifice, trust and responsibility. They serve selflessly without distractions and self-interest. In this structure, respect for authority and institutional bonding are highly valued.¹⁷ For Singapore, such a structure in the SAF is not insulated from the society. The entwined bond with societal trends puts the SAF in a precarious position of losing the institutional concept. As the SAF progresses to a modern military organisation, we are reminded that 'The SAF is an armed force; it is not a civilian

corporation. Its mission is to defeat its enemies, ruthlessly and completely.¹⁸ Military sociologists caution armed forces against over-inducting corporate strategies aimed at deriving higher efficiencies and neglecting the conviction of values and sacrifices unique to a military force.¹⁹ The notion of an institutional concept possesses military values that cannot be replaced by the occupational culture. In the SAF modernisation journey, we have taken a vital step to introduce practices that are highly focused and efficient. In most highly successful and efficient organisations, these work processes are targeted at maximising individual performance and minimising costs. Managers only focus employees' abilities to meet their performance goals and build the entire appraisal system to achieve it. This reasoning was attributed to a reductionist approach popularised during the industrialisation period. The reductionist approach believes that we can understand complex things better by breaking them down into smaller and smaller pieces.²⁰ Over time, the roles of the employees are reduced to mere machines; competent in complying with strict instructions without question or need of purpose. The reductionist approach sustains on an extrinsic reward system. Over time, the unintended consequences creep in and result in declining motivation and performance, culminating in recruitment and retention issues. In the SAF, we must separate ourselves from other organisations and not make the mistake of motivating and retaining staff like the commercial corporations.

TRANSFORMING THE WAY WE MOTIVATE AND RETAIN

In the SAF transformation journey, it is vital that we continually re-invent ourselves and put in place measures that will cushion the undesirable influences

of the 'commercialisation' of the Armed Forces. In this new era, the birth of the 'new' employees in the information age also demands military leaders to rekindle the true meaning of military service and articulate a core value system that is coherent with the new world-views of autonomy, drive and intrinsic motivation. With the increase in public censure and the eroding regard of military service as sacred duty, we are not surprised to observe the increasing trend of new soldiers viewing the SAF as just another job in the labour market and undermining the military values, soldiering instincts and professional ideals as a military professional.

The contemporary motivational theories favour developing purpose, self-awareness, habits and personal mastery to increase motivation and performance. These approaches produce a positive reinforcing effect but require more time to manifest and are difficult to measure. Central to these theories is the need for an individual to learn and build knowledge; to possess learning abilities. Learning abilities is the skill to observe, listen, ask and internalise experience. Learning abilities form the cornerstone of worker competencies; the new generation 'knowledge workers' use this tool to increase performance.²¹ "Learning is increasing one's ability to take effective action."²² According to Seth Godin, author of *Linchpin*, we are not surprised when we observed a craftsman sharpen his saw or when an athlete trains hard. However, when a worker develops his learning abilities, we respond in disapproval.²³ When a worker knows how to do his job, he does it well. When a worker learns how to do his job better while working, he will constantly improve his performance. Through learning, he increases the type and number of 'tools' he has. As he finds it easier to do his job, he

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will be more motivated to do well and learn more to become better. Kohn explained that it is more productive to change the way workers are treated rather than the way they are paid.²⁴ This is congruent with the discovery of the 'new' worker. In the SAF, the 'new' soldiers are highly sophisticated, driven and demand greater satisfaction, thus requiring us to move away from blind manipulation through rewards or incentives.

Increasing their learning abilities will motivate them in many ways. Firstly, learning abilities will increase their competencies and improve their value. When they recognise the opportunity to improve their worth, they will want to stay as long as possible to increase their value.²⁵ Secondly, as their competencies increase, it becomes easier for autonomy to take place. Autonomy is widely recognised as a more superior form of motivating people instead of the autocratic managerial style. As the soldiers are empowered, they are in a better position to make choices, work more collaboratively and be part of the decision and outcome. This increases ownership and motivation, which often produce surprising results. Thirdly, learning requires the individual to constantly seek the unknown.²⁶ When an individual develops learning abilities, he seeks ways to improve his work performance and the outcome of his tasks. He breaks free from the routine tasks and takes the challenge to problem-solve and improve. This continuous discovery will fuel his satisfaction and motivation, leading to better performance and commitment. As the individual progresses in his learning and competencies, he will be able to take on greater responsibilities and contribute more positively to the team. The involvement will lead to greater acceptance and collaboration. Team members will encourage and support each other more readily. The working environment will improve significantly, the desire to perform well will

become stronger and work becomes more enjoyable.²⁷ For leaders, motivation through increasing learning abilities is a more sustainable strategy than extrinsic rewards. Learning abilities not only let the soldiers get new knowledge, but also gives them the ability to create knowledge. The strength of a fighting force is the ability to adapt while we fight. By increasing the forces' ability to learn, we ensure that we possess the competitive advantage at every phase of the battle.

While we have established that learning abilities will generate more sustaining and enduring motivation without the undesirable consequences of 'corporate' motivational strategies, the effects cannot be easily measured and pegged against our organisational performance, unlike commercial organisation. For leaders, it is tempting to continue using extrinsic rewards to meet the HR challenges. As a military organisation, it is incumbent for the leaders to acknowledge the institute concept that the SAF needs to preserve and guard, against the temptation of 'corporatising' the Armed Forces. Focusing on learning abilities provides the opportunities for us to regenerate the meaning of serving in the military service. As military leaders and professionals, we must develop our people as our kin. To quote Sun Tzu, "Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look on them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death." By teaching, influencing and motivating our people through deeper engagement and relationship, we are moving away from a corporate identity to an institutional identity; a military force of professionals, anchor on common ideals and values, ready to serve and protect.

CONCLUSION

The late Dr Goh Keng Swee said that "The guns we provide the SAF are as effective as the soldiers who fire them. The soldiers are as effective as the

officers who lead them.” Mr Lee Kuan Yew, then Minister Mentor stated that “if you, who are growing up, do not understand that we have to defend this [country], then in the end, we will lose. Others will come, smack us down and take over.”²⁸ The essay began by highlighting the growing HR challenges for the SAF in the light of the changing societal trends. It also expounds the impact of ‘corporatising’ motivation in the institutional concept of the SAF. To ensure the continual transformation to a formidable and operationally ready SAF, it proposes the need to rekindle the values, soldiering instincts and learning abilities for our new soldiers as our ‘beloved sons’.

To sum up by quoting Martin van Creveld, “An army’s worth as a military instrument equals the quality and the quantity of its equipment multiplied by [its] fighting power. The latter rests on mental, intellectual, and organisational foundations; its manifestations, in one combination or another, are discipline and cohesion, morale and initiative, courage and toughness, the willingness to fight, and the readiness, if necessary, to die.”²⁹ These values of the military institution cannot be manipulated or bought. To build a fighting force that will be able to withstand the test of time, the SAF will need to look into the ways it overcomes her HR challenges to motivate and retain her people. 🌐

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