

Modifying engagement in multicultural HK

By Sarah Purcell

Recent research in the field of neuroscience suggests that HR should fine-tune employee engagement solutions to adapt to cultural preferences. The leadership study from Middlesex University considered the role of culture on motivation in both work and training settings. According to the alphaeight institute this showed that Hong Kong Chinese and westerners living in Hong Kong might have different ways of drawing motivation from a variety of known elements.

Numerous scientific findings have provided a sound understanding of the behaviours that activate the brain's reward system and thus drive human motivation. A neuroscientist named Rock has been prevalent in this field and had claimed in his 2008 study that boosting any of the dimensions: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness—collectively known as SCARF— is a source of reward for the brain and thus of motivation. The objective of this particular exercise was to determine whether there are any cultural differences between Hong Kong Chinese and Westerners living in Hong Kong in the perception of the degree of motivation derived from these SCARF elements.

Although a number of factors were found to be motivating for both cultures across most situations, the results did reveal a number of interesting discrepancies. Three of the measured elements were found to be 'neutral' or 'threatening' in certain situations:

- both cultures found Certainty to be threatening. In Hong Kong , where job stability is not valued due to the high employment rate, Hong Kong Chinese people see changing jobs as a norm, perhaps because of Confucianism values while westerners in Hong Kong are being adventurous in choosing to see a job change as an opportunity;
- Hong Kong Chinese reported Autonomy as a threatening leadership attribute. A majority of Hong Kong Chinese prefer their superiors to be directive while westerners desire the opposite. It seems Hong Kong Chinese might have a preference for directive leadership because of their high respect for authority and their willingness to avoid losing face in case something goes wrong; and
- during a delegation process, Fairness is reported as neutral to westerners yet highly motivating to Hong Kong Chinese. Twenty percent of westerners reported never having experienced any unfair behaviour at work while several Hong Kong Chinese stated that unfairness is usual and actually omnipresent.

The findings are of little surprise when it is considered that Western culture

emphasises personal achievements and individualism. HR can take from them that a high proportion of westerners assert to find motivation when their personal views are valued. The majority declare that they are motivated to work for an assertive and logical leader and training professionals should deduce that these members of staff prefer workshops run by a knowledgeable facilitator who focuses on learning objectives.

The majority of Hong Kong Chinese on the other hand declare motivation when carrying out work that is allocated according to their abilities while being recognised as good team players. It should be noted that most of them wish to work for a caring and friendly leader and like training workshops that are fun.