

# Good Employee Engagement Practices in the Singapore Public Service

Nov 2022 Edition

INTERVIEW INSIGHTS



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# Overview

Having learnt more about where public service agencies pain points are from the WOG trends, we decided to focus our learning of best practices on key areas of focus, namely 'Agile', 'Career & Professional Development', 'Leadership' and 'Well-Being'. We spoke with at least 2 agencies under each category and learnt what practices they had that supported the work they do through a series of interviews. These agencies have been observed to perform well based on employee feedback and the Employee Engagement Survey 2021 in at least one of these four categories. Their practices may not be new to most of us but it is the difference in perspectives and approaches that they took to these practices that made a difference for them. And this resource aims to share that with you.

We'd like to take the opportunity to thank the leaders and practitioners of the following agencies listed below for taking the time to speak with us and allowing us to learn from them. We've synthesised our findings and shared what we might find as common knowledge and practice but are done differently or perceived from a different perspective.

**Accountant-General's  
Department (AGD)**

**Agency for Science,  
Technology and Research  
(A\*STAR)**

**Home Team Academy  
(HTA)**

**Ministry of Home Affairs  
Headquarters (MHA HQ)**

**Ministry of Education  
(MOE)**

**Republic Polytechnic  
(RP)**

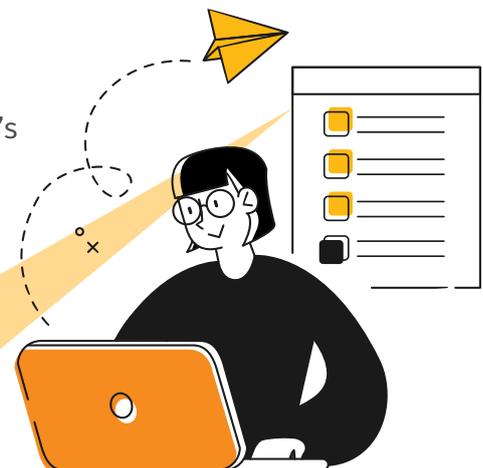
**Singapore Prisons Services  
(PRIS)**

**Yellow Ribbon Singapore  
(YRSG)**

**Workforce Singapore  
(WSG)**

If you like to find out more about these practices, or enquire about consultancy support to design them into your agency, please contact the Transformation Team in Civil Service College's Institute of Leadership and Organisation Development:

 [cscollege\\_ILOD@csc.gov.sg](mailto:cscollege_ILOD@csc.gov.sg)



# AGILE

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## What agencies interviewed have in common?



### **FLATTEN THE HIERARCHICAL DISTANCE TO ALLOW SPEAKING UP**

Bringing the leadership to the people through initiatives that allow staff to directly speak with leaders; from the purposes of idea-pitching to problem-solving current issues. Leaders also offer a direct and safe space to hear and acknowledge staff's contributions.



### **SUPPORT STAFF'S CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT**

Providing timely support to staff to equip them with the skills they need to get the work done, especially to innovate and experiment, as well as offering opportunities that allow staff to apply what they've learnt into actionable outcomes.



### **HAVE A CLEAR, STRONG LEADERSHIP MANDATE**

Ensuring that Leadership is clear, strategic and decisive on what is the way forward and how to maintain that clarity and certainty every step of the way. Discussions are necessary but decisions must be made.

# AGILE

Agencies' context	What the agencies did?	What is adaptable from their practice?
<p>Agencies needed/had a clear mandate on what their role and/or impact is. Needed to help staff understand but also to take ownership &amp; drive the changes/innovation in the organisation.</p> <p>Realised that many factors are necessary to create/enable an "agile" organisation such as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills that need to be developed to support innovation</li> <li>• Mindset and/or behaviour shifts to help staff own the change through the ROs/ Supervisors</li> <li>• Ensuring leadership offers clarity and support to staff without having to go through unnecessary layers of approval which creates "bad friction" for people to drive initiatives/ own solutions and ideas.</li> </ul>	<p>Dedicate time for leadership to meet regularly for the purposes of decision-making</p> <p>Create platform(s) that offer an "expresspass" to staff to pitch ideas and/or solutions to leadership team directly</p> <p>Equip ROs/Supervisors with ability to develop/mentor/ coach staff on the acquiring skills/knowledge to support agility/innovation</p> <p>Dovetail such growth in skills/knowledge as part of the career development progress of an officer</p> <p>Articulate a masterplan for each key area of the organisation's work and determining strategic partners/stakeholders to work with</p> <p>Adjust work processes to focus on and enhance those that sharpen and support our core purpose - e.g.: Corporate restructuring, incorporating communication platforms to support dissemination of information</p>	<p>Have regular leadership meetings/pow wows that focus on decision-making</p> <p>Encourage staff to come forward and offer ideas/ solutions. Start informally so that the pressure that another piece of work will be added is taken off before such a practice is enculturated.</p> <p>Develop coaching/mentoring skills in ROs/Supervisors who are willing and open to consult and discuss with staff the skills needed as a form of progression.</p> <p>Support/Nudge leadership teams to determine the theory of success (through a flowchart) and how to leverage existing networks/ stakeholders to support success</p> <p>Ensure alignment especially in the work processes will reduce "bad friction" (e.g.: layers of approval/clearance needed) for leaders and staff to be more agile and innovative</p>

# LEADERSHIP

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## What agencies interviewed have in common?



### **ALWAYS ENGAGE THE GROUND**

Leaders take the time and effort to engage and to address staff concerns openly, often through dialogues via multiple platforms. Leaders understand that they must take time needed to know the ground; to understand the issues and/or requests from staff in their day-to-day work as well as in other emerging (and perhaps) innovative areas of work.



### **Ensure transparency amongst leaders**

Leaders ensured regular conversations amongst themselves to create white spaces that are safe for reflection and talk through ideas, issues and challenges, achieve alignment, as well as how they can give enough autonomy for staff to follow-up on any work.



### **BE CLEAR ABOUT THE MISSION AT HAND**

Leaders facilitate conversations to help staff discover clarity on the mission of the work/organisation, as well as discover how the work they do connects back to the mission of the organisation. Leaders are also unafraid to hold such conversations repeatedly and take the time to over-communicate the mandate as a way to support staff in understanding why they do what they do.

# LEADERSHIP

Agencies' context	What the agencies did?	What is adaptable from their practice?
<p>Agencies tend to be large and have great diversity in the work across departments/divisions. They have strong top leadership (e.g.: CE, PS) who take time to speak to the ground but they realised that the touchpoints needed more frequency.</p> <p>These leaders take these touchpoints very seriously, not just a paper exercise, and show up with empathy to hear the pain points of the ground.</p> <p>Leaders also recognise that they cannot and should not be the only one role-modeling good leadership. They leverage the network of leaders within their organisation and equip ROs/Supervisors with the skills/knowledge to ensure good supervisory practices (especially managing staff when they make mistakes).</p>	<p>Some top leaders have put HR and OD directly under them so that these units can inform them immediately of the work needed as well as the impact on the ground</p> <p>Most leaders literally walk the ground and take time to not only understand the issues faced on the ground but also to have conversations with staff to understand explicitly how the work they do links back to the bigger initiative/mission of the organisation.</p> <p>Some of the leaders would forward all reflections and learning from leadership discussions/meetings with not only the senior management teams but also with the ROs/Supervisors and even team leads to be transparent on what leadership considerations and efforts are currently underway but also to role-model the kind of leadership behaviours they want to see across the organisation.</p>	<p>Create a through-train way for HR and OD to report back to the top leaders directly and for leaders to implement the changes swiftly.</p> <p>Structure opportunities for leaders to literally walk the ground to speak with staff directly</p> <p>Invite leaders to share reflections/learnings from leadership discussions/reflection meetings with staff to create transparency and enable psych safety/trust within the organisation's culture</p> <p>Create conversation toolkits to guide leaders on how to hold conversations with staff and nudge them on how they can show up to enable meaningful/impactful conversations in teams.</p>

# CAREER & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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## What agencies interviewed have in common?



### **REGULARLY ADJUST CAREER & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS NEEDS TO MEET THE EVOLVING EXPECTATIONS AND NEEDS OF OFFICERS AND ORGANISATION**

Acknowledge the evolving needs and expectations of staff and have regular reviews (some even yearly) to adjust the developmental pathways to support and manage changing needs and expectations of officers and that of the organisation



### **STANDARDISE A COMMON LANGUAGE THROUGH COMPETENCIES DEVELOPED**

Share agency's Strategic Work Plan (SWP) openly for all across the organisation to see and use during their individual appraisal and/or developmental chats. This enables the use of a common language through discussions of competencies developed and/or demonstrated during the chats with Reporting Officers.



### **INVOLVE SENIOR LEADERS AS INFLUENCERS TO HELP CONNECT THE DOTS**

Leverage the influence of agency's senior leaders to communicate and remind staff on the intent and opportunities available for all. This is also done at various platforms that ensures the entire organisation hears the same messaging. Some leaders even take an informal approach to speak to specific groups of staff about career and development possibilities and how the frames created support that.

# CAREER & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Agencies' context	What the agencies did?	What is adaptable from their practice?
<p>Agencies share and ensure all officers understand agencies' transformation plans so that staff know the desired state and how developing certain competencies will support reaching that goal.</p> <p>Agencies recognise the challenge of balancing the need to meet officers' career &amp; development needs as well as organisational needs. They acknowledge that needs are constantly evolving and take the effort to adjust (when needed) career &amp; developmental plans.</p> <p>Agencies also encourage "career agility" to help officers realise that growth in the organisation is not only vertical but can be horizontal as well.</p> <p>Agencies have leaders who are strong influencers on the intent and communicate often the desired state of the organisation and how developing specific competencies would meet the desired state.</p>	<p>Agencies communicated and shared transformational plan, and how it connects with the organisation's SWP.</p> <p>Leaders speak to staff formally and informally, with frequency, to help staff connect the dots between SWP and transformational plan.</p> <p>Agencies are transparent in sharing organisation's SWP on an organisation platform for all to reference and use to support appraisal and/or developmental conversations with ROs. Staff are encouraged to look at the org-wide SWP to inform their own competency assessment and development areas.</p> <p>Open feedback channels are provided for staff to share their concerns/needs in terms of career.</p> <p>Created "sticky" frames and taglines that support leaders and ROs in the developmental messages that agency wants to communicate.</p>	<p>Connect the dots for staff by sharing how the organisation's competencies needed translate to officers' work and development.</p> <p>Ensure transparency by allowing all staff to access org-wide SWP and change plans at a org-wide platform (e.g.: agency's intranet site or internet website)</p> <p>Involve agency's comms team to create easy-to-remember taglines/frames/mottos to help staff remember the messages on career and professional development.</p> <p>Encourage supervisors to leverage organisation competency frameworks to standardise a common language across all staff development conversations.</p> <p>Leverage senior leaders as influencers to speak with staff formally and informally on career and development pathway intents.</p>

# WELL-BEING

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## What agencies interviewed have in common?



### **ENGAGE LEADERS TO MODEL THE WAY**

Recognise that leaders need to be engaged to understand why and how they need to play their part to care for staff. Offer them examples and real-life ground scenarios to evoke empathy and guide them on what to say and when. Leaders are humans too and may not get it right all the time but by engaging them, they can be nudged to the right direction.



### **REGULARISE CHECK-INS FROM SENIOR LEADERS TO GROUND STAFF**

Create and structure check-ins that senior leaders can have with small groups of staff (possibly of the same grade or nature of work) to understand how they might be doing mentally and emotionally. Check-ins can also be used to offer appreciation directly from senior leaders to ground staff.



### **BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT CHALLENGES FACED THAT WILL IMPACT WELL-BEING**

Leverage organisation-wide platforms to share challenges that the organisation is facing and why there might be roadblocks that are happening so as to gain ground understanding and evoke empathy. Sometimes, such scenarios can be opportunities to galvanise people to start caring for one another, gradually shifting behaviours on the ground.

# WELL-BEING

Agencies' context	What the agencies did?	What is adaptable from their practice?
<p>Agencies researched what well-being is and determined what it means to them.</p> <p>Agencies created frames that are unique to their agency context and how well-being is and should be understood. The creation process involved the man-on-the-ground so that it is relatable to all levels of the system.</p>	<p>Agencies communicated their well-being frames to engage various stakeholders to garner support for well-being plans.</p> <p>Agencies take the time and effort to engage and educate leaders on what's happening on the ground, and also equip leaders with just-in-time tips on how to provide support to staff.</p> <p>Leaders find opportunity to walk the ground and give out unconventional well-being packages (e.g.: A Mr Coconut drink for every staff who isn't allergic/have any food restrictions towards coconut and cream).</p> <p>Different levels of the organisation are equipped with different tips on what and how to combat effects of poor well-being. Live talks and external support are also offered to staff with no minimum pax needed.</p> <p>Staff are enabled to reach out for help on their own through the organisational networks they are plugged in to via technology.</p> <p>Trust and/or psychological safety is created for staff to share on the ground challenges that affect their well-being with leaders without any judgements by normalising the need for well-being to be taken care of through fireside chats with leaders and even amongst staff themselves.</p>	<p>Normalise the issues of well-being by leveraging org-wide platforms to share stories – evokes empathy across the organisation</p> <p>Develop a clear framework that communicates the well-being policy of your agency and use that to engage with stakeholders to garner their support</p> <p>Leverage technology to encourage transparent sharing of challenges at org-level as well as at staff level so that everyone knows what is happening – easier to request for patience and understanding</p> <p>Ensure that networks and resources for help are frequently and openly communicated with staff so that no shame and stigma are felt if anyone chooses to seek help.</p> <p>Encourage your leaders to show their authentic side through sharing their own stories of struggling with well-being – it humanises them and makes them relatable.</p>

