

Increasing productivity by living our values

By Uwe Kaufmann

On a recent trip to Japan, I took a Shinkansen high-speed train from Kyoto to Tokyo. The train was scheduled to arrive at Tokyo Station at 9.03pm. Since I had made an appointment to meet a good friend after arrival, I asked the train conductor whether we would be on time.

The conductor looked at me, not understanding my question, and said: “We will be arriving at 9.03pm.” I thought to myself, yes, I know the schedule. But will we be on time?

He must then have somehow guessed my real meaning. He said: “There is no reason for a delay. We have not had an earthquake or tsunami today. So, we will be on time.”

I had not heard this kind of answer for a while.

My professor at a German university where I studied – let’s call him Hofmann – was very strict in many aspects. His style was driven by a deeply ingrained set of values. One of them was punctuality. Unless there was a very, very good reason for being late, we had to be on time – always.

Once, I was quite late for a meeting. However, I thought I had a good reason: “My train was delayed by 40 minutes.”

His reply was, “Okay, you take this train every day, right?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied.

“Was it ever late before?”

“Yes, this happens from time to time,” I answered, thinking that I was off the hook.

His answer: “Then you should have taken this into account and been prepared. Don’t use this excuse again!”

With this management style, we were able to deliver outstanding results. No project was ever delayed.

Despite this tough regime, Professor Hofmann was known as one of the professors everyone wanted to work with. He was not only able to develop one's IQ (intelligence quotient) but also took strong care of EQ (emotional quotient) as well.

As a result, punctuality is one form of behaviour that I hold very dear to my heart, because it reveals one's attitude towards the most basic values of integrity, professionalism and respect.

Every human relationship starts with basic courtesy.

"Punctuality is the politeness of kings" is a saying coined by King Louis XVIII of France. He was making the point that educated people, and people who aspire to have and try to show a certain status, will fail if they don't master the most basic of all manners: punctuality. Without punctuality they are just "small men".

In Singapore, I have had to get familiar with the phrase, "Sorry, I'm late", uttered by members of all levels of society without hesitation or shame. Often, it comes without any excuse. Only sometimes is it paired with statements such as "heavy traffic on PIE".

No one is really surprised about the fact that some people are late, or the fact that there is heavy traffic on the Pan-Island Expressway, although both facts really have nothing to do with each other.

It is very likely that there is some heavy traffic on the PIE at certain times. This happens daily.

But heavy traffic is as good an explanation for being late as something like "There are many birds in Changi Village".

So what is the real reason for being late? I think that this is because we are good at talking about values, but have forgotten that these values should also be part of daily courtesy and kindness, and not only values to be put on display on National Day.

A good example of the huge gap between theory and practice is when meetings regarding value development or competency deployment cannot start on time because of the late arrival of key players.

Their entrance with a "Sorry, I'm late" can be directly translated into "Sorry, I don't respect you". Would you want to say this to your colleagues or friends? Wouldn't it

be more appropriate to show the correct behaviour ourselves before we try to plant this seed in others? This would be good for our credibility as well.

In Singapore, we should live every day the way we deliver great projects: excellent quality, on time.

How much time gets wasted and how much productivity gets squandered every day due to our inability to walk the talk?

There are always excuses for not doing things. Can we instead try to find reasons for doing things such as being on time? Our co-workers would thank us for it.

Remember, behaviour is contagious. Is yours worth catching?

Published on [The Straits Times](#), 15 Jul 2013