

How DHL went from nosedive to sky high by lifting its people

Faced with financial collapse, DHL made a bold bet on people—not panic—and emerged stronger, prouder, and more profitable than ever.



From left to right: Kulwant Singh Bardh, Head of Strategic Partnerships, Nanyang Executive Education, Nanyang Business School; Avi Liran, Chief Delighting Officer of Delivering Delight; and Chris Ong, Managing Director of DHL Express Singapore. (Photo credit: NBS NTU Business School)

It was early, the coffee was still kicking in, and the morning panel at Nanyang Business School's (NBS) HR Connect 360 was just getting underway. The room was at full capacity, hosting an invitation-only audience of C-suite executives and senior HR leaders from diverse industries and sectors. The event's theme could not have been more timely: Driving Workforce Transformation Amid AI and Geopolitical Challenges.

Then, Chris Ong, Managing Director of DHL Express Singapore, took the mic.

CRISIS IN THE AIR: THE 2008 TURBULENCE

Chris walked the audience through a tale that felt like a mix of corporate survival training and a leadership masterclass. During the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, DHL faced significant turbulence. The US business was bleeding. The competition was fierce. Tough choices were made. Billions in assets were parted with. Most would have curled into a corporate fetal position and stayed there.

THE BOLD BET: CHOOSING PEOPLE OVER PANIC

DHL chose a different path. They bet on their people.

From 2010, the company shifted its full attention to building a culture powered by pride and purpose for everyone. Not just leaders. The idea was simple. If your team members feel good about their work and are proud of the people they work with, they show up in full force. They give better service.

Customers come back. Profits follow. DHL put this into practice, and the results became impossible to ignore.

SINGAPORE TAKES THE LEAD: FROM 60% TO 98% ENGAGEMENT

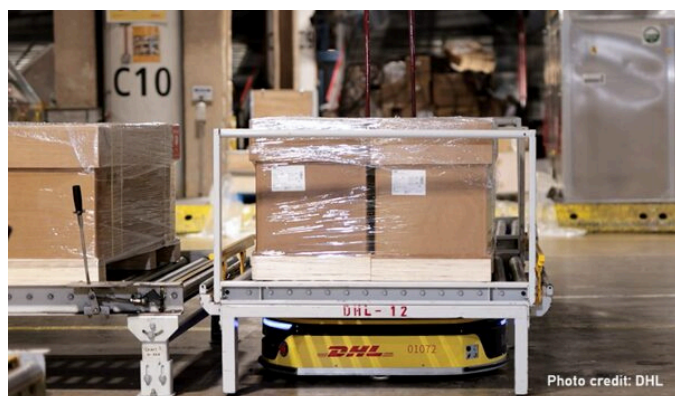
DHL led the charge in Singapore. Employee engagement moved from 60% to 98%! DHL Express became the only company to be named the number one Best Workplace in Singapore five times. Global profits climbed year after year, reaching over €4 billion (US\$4.54 billion) in 2022, with the highest margins in the express logistics industry.

THE SECRET SAUCE: INVESTING IN FRONTLINE LEADERS

Chris explained how this “magic” happened. DHL focused on the people closest to the action – the team leaders managing small crews. The company invested in training, support, and a sense of belonging. Culture was not floated down from headquarters. It was carried by every supervisor who knew the names, strengths, and stories of their team.

CHANGE THAT STICKS: TRUST OVER TECH

When change arrived, the team moved with it. DHL introduced Automated Guided Vehicles to improve safety and performance at its South Asia Hub in Singapore. The forklift drivers did not feel replaced. They felt supported. They were trained to grow. During the COVID-19 pandemic, volumes surged, yet the team maintained its pace without expanding its headcount. That kind of agility does not come from software. It comes from trust.



INNOVATION FROM THE INSIDE: CITIZEN DEVELOPERS AT WORK

Then came one of the audience favourites: DHL Express’ citizen developer programme in Singapore. Chris shared how team leads created their own apps and dashboards using simple tools. One leader developed a cloud-based damage tracker that saved time and increased customer satisfaction. These were not pilots or pet projects. These were frontline innovations that made a real difference.

THE BAMBOO MINDSET: FLEXIBLE, ROOTED, AND RESILIENT

Chris wrapped with a metaphor that landed softly but stayed firm. He described DHL’s mindset as bamboo. Deep roots. Strong spine. Able to sway with the wind without snapping. This spirit helped the company grow in regions such as Asia and Europe, with Singapore becoming a favoured hub for global distribution, particularly in the tech and life sciences sectors.

His session ended with this clear message: When leaders invest in people, people create magic. DHL has an ambidextrous strategy that combines people with purpose and profit to deliver long-term superior business results. The wind may swirl, the markets may dance, but bamboo still rises.

Powered by People and...Curry Puffs: DHL’s Small Acts of Appreciation

THE BUDGET WITH HEART: SMALL, MIGHTY, AND DELICIOUS

When I talked to Chris in private, he shared an amazing real-life story:

One of the simplest tools DHL uses to maintain its frontline culture is a small yet significant gesture: the budget for small acts of appreciation. It is not flashy. It does not involve banners, balloons, or a performance review. It is personal, thoughtful, and delicious—sometimes literally.

GRATITUDE THAT SHOWS UP (AND SMELLS AMAZING)

Frontline team leaders receive a modest budget they can use at their discretion to thank their teams when effort turns into excellence. It's a way to say, "I see you," without needing to schedule a town hall. One supervisor decided to use his budget to buy curry puffs for each of his team members. No speeches. No HR memo. Just a golden, flaky, warm thank you for a job well done.

At first, the team thought it was a nice one-time surprise. But when it happened again—and again—they started to notice something deeper. Their hard work led to appreciation. Not later. Not in theory. Right there. In hand.

THE SWEETEST TWIST: CURRY PUFFS COME FULL CIRCLE

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CHANGE THAT STICKS: TRUST OVER TECH

And then, something beautiful happened. The team flipped the story. After a particularly intense day with outstanding results, they arrived at work with curry puffs for their supervisor. No budget. No directive. Just the joy of giving back to someone who had been quietly lifting them, one pastry at a time.

About Chris Ong: Chris is the Managing Director of DHL Express Singapore and a leader known for combining sharp business acumen with deep people-first values. With a calm presence and a clear vision, he champions a culture where trust, pride, and purpose drive performance. Under his leadership, Singapore became DHL's global benchmark for engagement, innovation, and frontline empowerment.

About the Author:



Avi Liran ***is an economist, author, humourist, writer, C-level mentor, and one of Asia's top motivational and inspirational keynote speakers. Avi is a thought leader and expert in creating delightful customer and employee experiences, positive cultures, fostering appreciation, and building authentic resilience.***