



THE CURRY PUFF EFFECT: HOW SMALL ACTS OF APPRECIATION LIFTED DHL TO THE TOP

Inspired by Chris Ong's panel at HR Connect 360, Nanyang Business School, NTU

AUTHOR



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The ballroom at the luxurious Fullerton Hotel in Singapore was full, with an invitation-only C-suite and senior HR leaders from across multiple industries and sectors. The coffee was still finding its way to everyone's bloodstream.

The HR 360 organized by the NBS morning panel was warming up, and the event theme couldn't be more apt: **"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 corporate survival training mixed with a [leadership](#) masterclass. During the global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009, DHL faced deep 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.

By 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 people feel good about their work and are proud of who they are working with, they show up in full force. They give better service. Customers come back. Profit follows. DHL put this into practice, and the results became impossible to ignore.

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

Under the leadership of Chris Ong, DHL Express Singapore achieved what many believed was out of reach. Employee engagement soared from 60 percent during the pandemic to a jaw-dropping 98 percent now.

DHL Express became the only company named the number one Best Workplace in Singapore five times. At the same time, global profits climbed year after year, reaching over four billion euros in 2022, with the highest margins in the express logistics industry.

But this is not a story about numbers. This is a story about moments. Small ones. Quiet ones.

THE SECRET: INVESTING IN FRONTLINE LEADERS

Chris explained that this “magic” happened when DHL focused on the people closest to where the action is. Empowering the team leaders who manage the small crews working on the ground.

The company invested in training, support, and building a sense of belonging. Uplifting engagement was not floated down from headquarters. It was carried by every supervisor who knew the names, strengths, and stories of their team.



Image Source: DHL Website

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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 crunch, volumes exploded, yet the team kept pace without growing their 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's favourites: DHL Express' Citizen Developer Program in Singapore.

Chris shared how team leads created their own apps and dashboards using simple tools. One leader built a cloud-based damage tracker that saved time and boosted customer happiness. These were not pilots or pet projects. These were frontline innovations that made a real difference.

THE BAMBOO MINDSET: FLEXIBLE, ROOTED, AND RESILIENT

Chris 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 like Asia and Europe, with Singapore becoming a favourite hub for global distribution, especially in tech and life sciences.

When leaders invest in people, people bring results. DHL has an ambidextrous strategy that combines people with purpose and profit to deliver long-term superior business results.

The winds may swirl, the markets may dance, but bamboo still rises.

A BUDGET WITH HEART: SMALL, MIGHTY, AND DELICIOUS

DHL educated these frontline leaders in the fundamental human need for connection and appreciation.

For one thing, DHL taught them to balance feedback with positive affirmation. They were encouraged not only to correct mistakes, but also to acknowledge excellence and celebrate both small successes and consistent effort.

One practical application of this philosophy was giving frontline team leaders a modest appreciation budget. They could use it at their own discretion. No permission required.

They could respond immediately when they saw a worthy opportunity to praise. The company trusted them to recognize their teams in ways that felt authentic, meaningful and sometimes even tasty.

The ability to show appreciation freely without bureaucratic approval created a sense of intrinsic motivation among supervisors. They felt trusted by the organization and empowered to use their judgment. No corporate fanfare or formal review process required. Just meaningful, timely appreciation determined by the supervisor who knew their team best.

DHL discovered a triple benefit of small acts of appreciation. Team members felt more valued, supervisors felt happier and more fulfilled in their roles, and both engagement and business results soared. Small acts of appreciation uplifted both the receiver and the empowered giver.

GRATITUDE THAT SHOWS UP (AND SMELLS AMAZING)

Here's an example of what that looked like:

One supervisor, applying his leadership training, chose to use his appreciation budget to surprise team members with warm curry puffs after particularly challenging days.

No speeches or ceremony. Just a delicious, golden pastry that said "I see your hard work" more effectively than any formal recognition program could.

At first, team members viewed these as a one-time nice gesture. But as the pattern continued, they understood

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the deeper message: *their efforts were seen, valued, and worthy of acknowledgment.*

THE SWEETEST TWIST IS WHEN APPRECIATION COMES FULL CIRCLE

Then, something beautiful happened. The team flipped the story.

After an especially demanding day with outstanding performance, the team members arrived at work with curry puffs for their supervisor.

They purchased these with their own money, not a company budget. Just the joy of giving back to someone who had been quietly lifting them, one pastry at a time.

In a traditional blue-collar environment where delivery metrics typically dominate, DHL discovered the triple benefit of appreciation.

- **The Receivers:** Team members who received the small acts of appreciation felt more valued.
- **The Givers:** The empowered supervisors who delivered genuine appreciation felt happier and more fulfilled in their roles.
- **The Culture:** Engagement, performance, and yes, profits, all climbed together.

DHL's investment in teaching supervisors the power of human acknowledgment transformed both workplace culture and business results.

This proves that when people feel truly seen and appreciated, [everybody wins](#).

THE DELICIOUS LANGUAGE OF APPRECIATION

There is something deeply human about sharing food. It signals care. It invites connection. It says, you belong here, and I thought of you.

Across cultures and generations, food has always been more than fuel. It is how we welcome, how we celebrate, how we comfort, and how we say thank you when words fall short.

HOW DHL TRANSFORMED INTO A HUMAN-CENTERED POWERHOUSE

The Curry Puffs story is inspiring, but it's just the cherry on top of the cake. The real magic lies in how DHL pulled off one of the most remarkable culture transformations in its corporate history.

WHEN SUCCESS BECOMES A PROBLEM

During the 2008 financial crisis, DHL faced significant challenges and exited the DHL Express US domestic business, overcoming its challenges through re-structuring and a renewed focus on its international business.

In certain demanding markets, immediate business targets sometimes overshadowed employee needs. While this approach achieved results, it did not always nurture a culture that people could feel proud of. Over time, engagement levels held steady at around 60 percent, and some employees felt overlooked.

Through investment in its people: In 2009, DHL decided on a fundamentally new strategy to return the company to profit – the FOCUS strategy which is powered by people. It is based on four pillars: Motivated People, Great Service Quality, Customer Loyalty, and a Profitable Network.

THE LIGHTBULB MOMENT: AND, NOT OR

DHL also realized its leaders needed to become ambidextrous, masterfully wielding both performance and humanity with equal skill.

This birthed a game-changer philosophy, "Results with Respect." DHL expanded the definition of respect. Success meant a positive answer to these questions:

- Is your leader motivational?
- Do they inspire you?
- Do they cause you to wake up in the morning and think, "I want to go to work because I am happy to do so."

This shift aimed to build sustainable performance through trust, motivation, and inclusive leadership. Leaders would deliver great business performance while treating their teams as valued human beings who matter.

LEADERS AS MASTER TEACHERS

Here's where DHL got brilliant. While they had an initial help of a consulting firm to co-develop the new leadership training, they insisted that instead of professional facilitators, they turned their own leaders into culture evangelists.

They launched the **Certified International Specialist (CIS) program**. Every leader went through intensive training, then became certified to train others. This program turned senior managers into walking, breathing, and teaching embodiments of "**Results with Respect.**"

Chris Ong was one of the pioneer facilitator leaders to spread the new culture DNA, transforming DHL's

"Big Yellow Machine" into a place where humans could actually thrive.

He shared that the early training sessions were anything but smooth sailing. One of the main challenges was rebuilding trust with anxious and skeptical employees. They would say something, "You have nice espoused ideas, but my manager does not treat me with this kind of respect."



Chris remembers vividly that one of the pre-work questions for the workshop was to think about their leadership role model. The managers realized that they have to embody then role model the behaviors they wanted for their leaders to have.

TWO-WAYS' FEEDBACK

One of the core teachings of the CIS program is to teach everyone how to give and receive feedback. That created open communication both ways.

It all starts with awareness to be on the lookout to spot everything. Not only developmental feedback on what needs to be corrected, but also spot what needs to be appreciated. First, share the observation, then most importantly, explain to them the impact of what they have done, which reinforces the benefits of that behavior.

Chris wears his culture ambassador pin like a badge of honor earned in the trenches. For over a decade, he's been teaching leadership, living by one powerful belief: "**You master leadership when you teach it.**"

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING THROUGH REGULAR CHECK-INS

Another foundational practice is the emphasis on relationship building. On top of monthly structured conversations, DHL expects leaders to hold as frequent as possible check-ins with their team members. Not to micromanage, but to connect, support, and catch problems before they explode.



Chris does it every other day with his SMT (Senior Management Team) to ensure alignment and support. He asks questions of stewardship, such as "How can I support you today?"

This consistency reinforces psychological safety, encourages transparency, deepens relationships, and ensures issues are addressed proactively.

LEADERS DETERMINE THE WEATHER OF THE TEAM

Chris has a powerful metaphor for how leaders should be aware of the energy they bring to the workplace. "Leaders determine the daily weather for their team." Think about it: When your boss walks into the room, does the temperature drop or rise? Do people tense up or light up? Are storm clouds gathering with blame and shame, or is it sunshine filled with hope and possibilities?

I couldn't agree more with Chris. In our Delivering Delight leadership programs, we spend at least half a

day on building leadership awareness and teaching techniques for how leaders can prime themselves to manage and regulate their internal weather.


You're either the office sunshine or the office storm cloud. The good news? You get to choose which forecast you bring. The bad news? Everyone can tell when you're having a bad hair day.

Leaders don't just manage tasks. They create the emotional climate that their teams live in every single day. DHL leaders learned to be master meteorologists, bringing consistent warmth and energy that makes people want to do their best work.

KEEP EVOLVING

Since embracing "Results with Respect", DHL's employee engagement scores have soared. But this isn't a finished story. The transformation keeps evolving, growing, and adapting. They're building internal capabilities, scaling their facilitator army, and maintaining the kind of leadership visibility that keeps everyone accountable.

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From left to right: Kulwant Singh BARDH, our host from NTU; Avi Liran and Chris Ong

About Chris Ong: Chris is the Managing Director of DHL Express Singapore and a leader known for blending 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.