



ABAC ODI JOURNAL Vision. Action. Outcome

ISSN : 2351- (print) , ISSN: 2408-2058 (electronic)

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ABAC ODI JOURNAL Vision. Action. Outcome Vol 10 (2) pp. 453-470

[www. http://www.assumptionjournal.au.edu/index.php/odijournal](http://www.assumptionjournal.au.edu/index.php/odijournal)

Published by the
Organization Development Institute
Graduate School of Business and Advanced Technology Management
Assumption University

ABAC ODI JOURNAL Vision. Action. Outcome
Is indexed by Thai Citation Index and ASEAN Citation Index

Strategy for Creating Empathetic Organization Culture through Servant Leadership: A Case of Prudential Myanmar

Cho Yee Swe Myint¹, Maria Socorro C. L. Fernando²

¹Corresponding Author, Chief Human Resources Officer, Prudential Myanmar,
Email: laura@laurachointernational.com

²Lecturer and Program Director, MMOD and PhDOD,
Graduate School of Business and Advanced Technology Management,
Assumption University, Thailand
Email: mlfernando@gmail.com

Received: 2 January 2023

Revised: 13 February 2023

Accepted: 23 February 2023

Abstract

The global pandemic and political situation in Myanmar put leaders in the organizations to keep well-being of the employees as their priority. Prudential Myanmar encourages their leaders to be more empathetic with the employees being as servant leaders and provides necessary support to the employees throughout these years in challenging situations. Creating an empathetic organization culture is critical for the organization to become an employer of choice so organizations need to know what kind of strategy to be used to build the culture. The research was conducted to develop the strategy to create empathetic organization culture through servant leadership by using SOAR analysis and Appreciative Inquire framework to discover the strengths of the leaders and organizations and to explore the shared aspirations of employees. In this study, qualitative methods were applied, and data were gathered via structured interviews. Twenty informants from different level positions who are more than one year with Prudential Myanmar were selected to participate in the research. Data from interviews were analyzed by using content analysis with three coders consisting of the researcher, another coder from outside of the organization and one from the informants. The components of strengths include perceived organization support, perceived supervisory support, and rewards. The aspirations include future of organization, employees' contributions, success of organization and difference between now and future. Finally, the strategy for creating an empathetic organization culture through servant leadership is formulated based on the strengths and aspirations of employees. There are common elements that informants from Prudential Myanmar would like organization to implement under organization support, supervisory support, and rewards while servant leadership serves as a foundation of the strategy to create an empathetic organization culture at Prudential Myanmar.

Keywords: SOAR, appreciative inquiry, servant leadership, perceived organization support, perceived supervisory support, rewards.

Introduction

Building an organization culture is critical for any organization to succeed in the market as employer of choice. Different organizations built their own culture mainly based on their core values. Prudential Myanmar, international insurance company originally from U.K, has five core values: Ambitious, Courageous, Nimble, Curious and Empathetic which were launched across the organization in 2020. According to the focus-group discussion across the organization, Prudential Myanmar needed to improve on empathy especially in the leadership. Since its finding, different initiatives have been launched to promote awareness among leaders and employees how to be more empathetic in the workplace.

At Prudential Myanmar, organization and leaders have shown empathy to employees during COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 by providing medical assistance to employees and family members, working-from-home arrangement, and sending dry rations to the employees' homes. When a coup d`etat in Myanmar happened in 2021, all leaders across the organization embodied servant leadership for their employees with empathy by listening to the needs of team member, and providing the safety and well-being support to the employees etc. Servant leadership and empathy are two key elements for Prudential Myanmar to become an employer of choice.

This research is a case study of Prudential Myanmar focusing on the servant leadership and empathetic organization culture especially during crisis in Myanmar in 2020 and 2021. The experience of employees in the workplace is key data contribution used in this study.

Statement of the Problem

In 2020 and 2021, there were two crises in Myanmar in terms of global pandemic and political situation. Any organization which operates in any crisis situation requires empathetic organization culture through servant leadership and drives the engagement of the employees with that culture. Therefore, this research was conducted to formulate the strategy to create an empathetic organization culture through servant leadership by understanding the theories and concepts related to servant leadership, perceived organization support, perceived supervisory support, and rewards.

Significance of the Study

This study is important for Prudential Myanmar to design strategy to create empathetic organizational culture through servant leadership because they can find out what factors affect

empathetic organizational culture. The findings of this study will provide useful information to the management in creating empathetic organizational culture for employee engagement and higher retention.

Research Objectives

1. To explore how employees define servant leadership, perceived organization support, perceived supervisory support, rewards and empathetic organization culture at Prudential Myanmar
2. To discover how servant leadership plays an important role in developing empathetic organizational culture.
3. To explore the roles of rewards, perceived organizational support and perceived supervisory support the development of an emphatic organizational culture.
4. To formulate a strategy for building empathetic organizational culture through servant leadership at Prudential Myanmar Life Insurance based on the findings.

Research Questions

1. What are the definitions of servant leadership, perceived organization support, perceived supervisory support, rewards and empathetic organization culture?
2. What is the role of servant leadership in developing an empathetic organization culture?
3. What are the roles of rewards, perceived organizational support and perceived supervisory support the development of an emphatic organizational culture?
4. What strategy may be formulated for building empathetic organizational culture through servant leadership at Prudential Myanmar Life Insurance?

Literature Review

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is different by giving direction, development of the others, showing humility, authenticity, support, and guardianship (van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leadership who genuinely takes care of their team members and followers becomes role models for them (Chon & Zoltan, 2019; Liden, Wayne, Liao & Meuser, 2014). According to Hu and Liden (2011), effective servant leadership can support to create equal culture, service commitment and serving the community which impact on team performance and efficiency. Servant leaders support their subordinates to develop their career and help acquire new skills, and empower them (Liden et al., 2014).

Servant leaders are different from other leaders because they are ethical and authentic, they inspire their followers through their leadership style (Autry, 2007). The role of servant leadership is to empower their followers through building trust and supporting their development, which motivates employees which contributes to the success of the organization (Keith, 2015; van Dierendonck, 2011). Researchers identify the most essential principle of servant leadership is that these leaders emphasize their team members' development as a priority rather than their self-interests (Dierendonck, 2011; Ehrhart, 2004; Lapointe &

Vandenberghe, 2018). Servant leadership's essence is that these leaders drive organizational success by fostering their followers' development and well-being through the process of meeting the needs of their followers (Liden et al., 2008; Mayer, 2010).

Perceived Organizational Support

Perceived organizational support is the support provided to the employees from the organization to perform their roles efficiently and effectively (George, 1993). Organizational Support Theory (Eisenberger, 1986) defines three factors which influenced perceived organizational support, i.e. job conditions and rewards; support from the managers and humanity. The study (Cropanzano, 1997) showed that perceived organizational support is impacted by the organization's policies, and the implementation of those regarding employees. The relationship between employee and manager affects perceived organizational support. The positive relationships with the management and the manager increase the perceived organizational support and the negative relationship have an impact on decrease perceived organizational support. (Kottke & Sharafinski, 1988; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

As per the study (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), perceived organizational support is specifically composed of three factors (i.e. positive job conditions and organizational rewards, fairness and managerial support) which bring job satisfaction and organization commitment. Perceived organizational support is a resource for the employees to achieve their goals (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015). In general, employees receive organizational support from their managers, the culture, and ways of working of an organization (Eisenberger, 1986). The organization's behaviors and activities may have an impact on employee perceived organizational support (Aselage, 2003, Eisenberger, 1986).

Perceived Supervisory Support

Perceived supervisory support refers to how supervisors make their employees feel with regard to their well-being and how they are appreciated for the job they have done (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). When employees are encouraged by their supervisors to use their skills and knowledge to perform their roles, employees feel safe and more engagement happened which promote work-life balance (Russo et al., 2016; Talukder et al., 2018). In the research of Hong et al. (2021) and Yasir et al. (2019), it indicated that the support from the supervisors helps nurses to manage not only their professional matters but also their life matters.

The extent of the support and encouragement from the supervisors has an impact on the perception of the employees on the care of work-related and non-work-related activities whereas not all supervisors provide the same level of support (Hammer et al., 2011; Kossek et al., 2011; Mansour & Tremblay, 2016). JD-R theory mentioned that there is a relationship between perceived supervisory support and the work-life balance of the nurses. This support is key for the employees to achieve work-life balance (Haar et al., 2019; Hammer et al., 2011; Lambert, 2000).

Rewards

There are mainly two types of rewards: extrinsic and intrinsic rewards where extrinsic rewards refer to tangible monetary incentives such as salary increment, bonuses, promotions, or paid vacations (Hau et al., 2013, Bock and Kim, 2002; Nguyen et al., 2021). Intrinsic rewards refer to intangible non-monetary incentives such as recognition rewards (Malek et al., 2020), verbal praise (Donnelly, 2018), or reputation feedback (Hung et al., 2011; Nguyen & Malik, 2021; Choi et al., 2008). Extrinsic rewards can make employees' satisfaction on lower needs and intrinsic rewards satisfy employees' esteem needs by providing recognition and reputation feedback (Yan et al., 2016).

Total rewards refer to the combination of benefits, compensation and rewards which include monetary and non-monetary rewards including wages, salary, bonuses, recognition, flexible working arrangement and career advancement (Garner, 2022). Total rewards have an impact on employee attraction, retention, and employee engagement. Management of a total rewards system quality maintains the level of success of employee attraction, motivation, and retention and its suitability for employees which drive business results and performance (WorldatWork, 2003). There is also an effective reward distribution mechanism which is a data-driven and objective system to avoid biases, subjective, and stereotypes (Cissell, 1987). In general, researchers identified that there are various types of rewards both psychologically and strategic related to employees' performance result.

Empathetic Organizational Culture

The elements of behavior, values, well-being, and change make organizational culture (Watkins, 2013). Organizational success depends on a healthy organizational culture (Carson et al., 2014; Giles and Yates, 2014). The role of empathy in organizational culture is not explored by many researchers (Holt and Marques, 2012). Understanding the elements of empathic culture requires a theoretical conceptualization of empathic organizational culture and the connection with employee well-being. There are various factors that shape organizational culture (Thanetsunthorn & Wuthisatian, 2018). In any organization, leadership traits and acknowledged values shape the organizational culture so when a leader focuses on empathy, its members may emphasize this behavioral trait. As an aspect of empathy, showing care and concern is important in the organization (Faldetta, 2016).

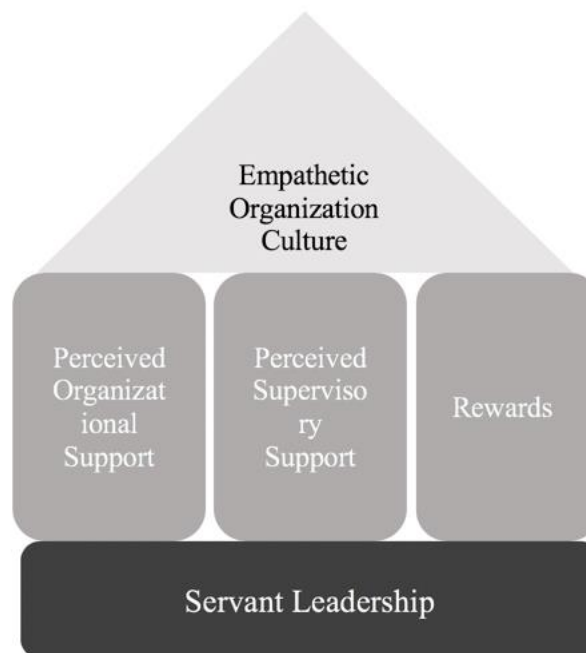
When employee commitment and moral of the organization create employee emotional well-being (Cooper et al., 2014). The relationship with empathy among organizational members is more interactive, innovative, and compassionate (Pavolvich & Krahnke (2012). Hofstede et al., (1990) identified that the relationship among employees, their work and the external people shape organizational culture. Gregory et al. (2009) mentioned that organizational culture has an impact on employee's behaviors in any organization. Empathetic workplaces create better collaboration, lesser stress, and higher motivation, and the resilient of their employees are higher to bounce back faster from any difficult situations. By providing an empathetic organizational culture within the workplace, leaders can identify the areas which employees are struggling with or to improve in a caring and supportive nature which is the best for the employees and the business.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was developed based on the review of theoretical frameworks from previous studies. It includes the factors governing the empathetic organization culture. Servant leadership builds a foundation in building an empathetic organization culture. Leaders play an important role shaping the organization culture in every organization. The support from the leaders has a great impact on the employees' commitment and productivity in the organization. Perceived organization support perceived supervisory support and rewards serve as pillars to build an empathetic organization culture.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Note: Developed by researcher (2022)

Research Methodology

Research Design

The qualitative research method was used, and data were collected from various departmental representatives at Prudential Myanmar via MS team and in-person structured interviews. The selection criteria of the participants for the interview are (1) employees who are more than one year in the organization, (2) management level employees who are managing two or three subordinates and (3) employees who are working in different roles and levels in the organization. Open-ended questions were used in the interviews and the interview data were extracted from the essence of participant's perceptions about the organization.

Research Instruments

Developing Questions

The questions were developed based on previous studies related to rewards, perceived organization support, perceived supervisory support and servant leadership. In this study, a quick SOAR Appreciative Inquiry framework was used. As this study is focusing on strengths and aspirations of the organization, the research questions were developed mainly based on those two aspects of SOAR framework.

Item Objective Congruence

Before conducting interviews, the reliability of questions was done by experts' evaluations of Item Objective Congruence (IOC). All three experts from the Assumption University were requested to evaluate the developed questions whether the questions are congruence with research objectives and conceptual framework. The criteria for the IOC evaluation are +1 = Congruent, 0 = Questionable and -1. According to Jushoh et al. (2018), if the average ratings is less than 0.5, the question is not acceptable, and it should be removed from the research.

Below are the questions used in the interviews based on Appreciative Inquiry framework.

Part I (Define) : To find out the understanding of servant leadership, perceived organization support, perceived supervisory support, and rewards.

1. What is the meaning of servant leadership for you?
2. What does rewards mean to you?
3. What is the meaning of organizational support for you?
4. What does supervisory support mean for you?
5. Please define empathetic organizational culture in Prudential Myanmar for you?

Part II (Discover): To find out the experience of each individual through their memorable events in their work life.

1. Please share one best experience when you felt most supported by your leader.
2. How did you feel supported by your supervisor through servant leadership?

3. What was the greatest support that you received from your organization?
4. Based on your experience, how does Prudential Myanmar create empathetic organization culture?
5. What role did rewards play in empathetic organization culture?

Part III (Dream): To find out the aspiration of each individual through their contribution to achieve organization success.

“Imagine that Prudential Myanmar is awarded as one of the Top Employers in Asia ~~in~~ for having empathetic organization culture through servant leadership.”

1. What do you want to see Prudential Myanmar put in place creating empathetic organization culture?
2. What three best servant leadership qualities do you want leaders in your organization to have?
3. What contribution are you willing to do for Prudential Myanmar to attain this award?
4. What will success look like for you as an employee in this organization?
5. When we have achieved this recognition award, what do you see different for the organization, in terms of rewards, supervisory support and organizational support?

Target informants in this study

In Prudential Myanmar, there were 120 employees and 20 employees from different level positions were selected to participate in the research regardless of gender and age range. Table 1 represents the details of the informants.

Table 1

Research Participants (Informants) from Prudential Myanmar

No.	Job Levels of informants	Number of informants
1.	Senior Management level employees	3
2.	Manager level employees	5
3.	Assistant Manager level employees	5
4.	Executive level employees	4
5.	Officer level employees	3
	Total	20

Data Analysis

The data and information gathered from the interviews were analyzed by using content analysis. The medium of interviews was Myanmar native language, and the answers were translated into English. Three coders including researcher herself, and another two coders have done the manual content analysis. One coder is an MMOD student and one from outside of the organization were requested to participate as coders.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Data

The demographic data shows that 20 numbers of Prudential Myanmar staff participated in the research. Based on the gender, number of female informants are higher 13 (65%) than male informants 7 (35%). The gap % between male and female is high, therefore the research is found as gender imbalance approach. Regarding the age group, the highest number of informants group is 26 – 30 years old (40%) followed by 22 – 25 years old (30%) and 31 – 35 years old (30%). The positions of informants are divided into five groups and consist of management level (15%), manager level (25%), assistant manager level (20%), executive level (15%) and officer level (25%), respectively. (Table 2).

Table 2

Summary of Demographic Data

No.	Categories	Group	No. of informants	Percentage %
1.	Gender	Male	7	35
		Female	13	65
2.	Age	22 – 25 years old	6	30
		26 – 30 years old	8	40
		31 – 35 years old	6	30
3.	Current Position	Management level	3	15
		Manager level	5	25
		Assistant Manager level	4	20
		Executive level	3	15
		Officer Level	5	25

Based on experience received throughout their career journey, Prudential Myanmar employees defined and shared their views on servant leadership, perceived organization

support, perceived supervisory support, rewards during the individual reviews. The common themes received from the informants are described as follows.

Servant leadership: According to the informants, servant leadership refers to leaders have open communication with their team members and provide empowerment to the team when assigning the tasks with the statement saying “my leader provided empowerment to me. asking "WHY" whenever I presented my idea to her so that I could have clear understanding of what I need to do”. Informants also mentioned that “Servant leadership is about providing emotional and physical support to the team members. Leaders need to get to know their team members personally and professionally so that team members are ready to support their leaders when required. My leader supported me for my career development and mentored me in my previous job”. It also means that leaders provide emotional support if needed and support for well-being to the team members. The informants also mentioned that servant leaders are always willing to support the career development of their team members with mentorship, listen and receive feedback from the team and understand each team member to fulfill their requirements.

Perceived organization support: In this study, the informants believe that organization support means the organization in which they work provides support for their career development and skill development with learning opportunities mentioning by informants saying “Organization support means providing support for skill development for employees’ careers and providing different learning platforms”. The informants also stated that “Prudential Myanmar not only provided support for employees but also for their family members by sending dry rations, medicine and offering counselling resources” which mean arranging support for mental health and well-being, providing benefits for the employees and their family members and providing resources to perform their roles and responsibilities. The informants also want organization support as providing a sense of security and safety to share their ideas openly with others in the organization.

Perceived supervisory support: The informants stated supervisory support as the clear direction and empowerment provided by the supervisors to their team members to perform the responsibilities when assigning the tasks with the statement saying, “Supervisory support means that providing clear direction and motivation to do the job well and provides recognition when the job is done well or appreciate for what have been done”. It also means that supervisor provides guidance, coaching and mentoring for career development of team members. The informants valued the trust that their supervisors provided to them and listened to their feedback having open communication. The informants mentioned that “Supervisory support means asking for advice from the supervisor when I am in need of help and providing solution and support even if I make mistakes” which means the most important aspect that team members wanted supervisory support as providing psychological safety and emotional support to make them feel supported whenever they need.

Rewards: The informants define rewards as recognition which is given to those who do extra work well beyond their scope. They stated that there are two types of rewards: monetary and non-monetary and the first one includes salary, bonus, cash, or incentive etc. and

the latter means appreciation for the job well done or giving certification and recognition saying “Rewards mean monetary and non-monetary such as life insurance etc. Recognition is a part of rewards and whether it is big or small, it has a great impact on employees”. All informants preferred receiving recognition from their supervisors and organization by simply saying thank you or sharing their good performance in front of their colleagues with the statement from informant saying, “Rewards mean monetary or non-monetary and personally I prefer recognition like a pat on the back which means a lot to me and leaders can simply say thank you for the good job that team member has done”.

The role of servant leadership in developing an empathetic organization culture.

From the individual interviews, the informants commonly stated that servant leadership is important in creating an empathetic organization culture because building a culture should begin from leaders in the organization. They shared their experience of servant leadership as emotional support and a sense of safety from their leaders. The informants mentioned that servant leaders know their team members well understanding the needs of everyone and always willing to support to them by saying “Whenever I ask for help, my leader supports me and also provide opportunity for career development”. Empowerment and guidance are two common aspects that the informants expected from their servant leaders with the statement of “My leader acts as servant leader having empathy to provide clear direction and guidance whenever assigning job and also give empowerment to the team”.

To build an empathetic organization culture, the informants from this study defined three best servant leadership qualities that leaders need to be equipped with. It includes having trust to team members and listening with empathy saying, “Servant leaders need to have empathy while listening to their team members without judgement and provide trust”. They also stated that servant leaders need to be approachable and have active listening skill being a role model. The informants mentioned that “It is important to have open communication between team members and leader to have transparency and servant leaders also need to take care of the career development of their team” so they agreed that having open communication and transparency with the team members and providing guidance for career development of team members are another skillset that servant leaders need to have.

The roles of rewards perceived organizational support and perceived supervisory support in the development of empathetic organization culture.

The informants defined the role of supervisory support in developing an empathetic organization culture as providing clear direction when assigning the task to team members and having open communication with feedback culture in the team saying “My manager always provides clear instruction to do task whenever he assigns to me and always willing to listen to feedback having open communication”. The informants mentioned that “I always feel supported by my leader whenever I need help or when I face any challenge to ask for guidance and support” so it emphasized that the supervisory support should make them feel that their

supervisors are always there for them to give guidance when needed and have interest in their career development.

From the experience of the informants the role of organization support is critical in building an empathetic organization culture especially during the crisis periods like COVID-19 and political unrest. The informants appreciated the support that they received from Prudential Myanmar during the last two years during crisis when the organization support included providing medical and ration support to the employees and their family members, providing mental health and well-being support, and a sense of security working for Prudential Myanmar sharing that “Prudential Myanmar not only takes care of its employees but also its employees’ family members by sending dry ration, medicine and other support during COVID-19 and crisis period so it feels safe to work for Prudential Myanmar”. The informants mentioned that any organization can build an empathetic organization culture through organization support by creating an environment where employees understand and listen to each other with empathy and promoting open communication and collaboration across different functions in the organization.

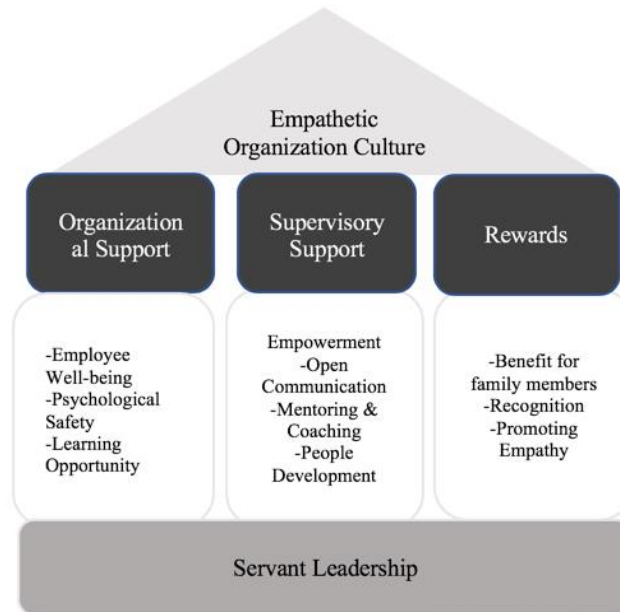
In this study, the informants defined the role of rewards in building an empathetic organization culture as recognition to those who embody core values of the organization and those who go extra miles to help their colleagues with empathy being a team player stating that “Rewards should be given to employees who practice our core values and support their colleagues beyond their scope”. The informants stated that rewards need to be transparent, measurable and fair and it can be either financial or non-financial rewards. The informants preferred recognition and appreciation for their performance from their leaders and the organization with saying “I personally prefer recognition and appreciation from my manager for the job well done in front of my colleagues”. They also mentioned that rewards can motivate people to drive to achieve a desired culture of the organization.

Formulating a strategy for building empathetic organizational culture through servant leadership.

Based on the findings of research, the researcher has formulated the strategy for building an empathetic organization culture through servant leadership based on the strengths, shared and preferred aspirations. Common themes from the content analysis confirmed that servant leadership is a foundation of empathetic organization culture supported by three pillars: rewards, perceived organization support, and perceived supervisory support. With these findings, the strategy for building empathetic organization culture through servant leadership was developed and described in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Strategy for building empathetic organization culture through servant leadership



Note – Developed by the researcher (2022)

The strategy was developed based on three common themes received from the interview sessions and the content analysis. Based on the findings, strengths and aspiration are major components in the strategy for creating an empathetic organization culture. The strategy for creating an empathetic organization culture involves three key components: organizational support, supervisory support, and rewards which are based on the foundation of servant leadership. The organization provides psychological safety to the employees creating a safe space for open communication. Employees value the support from the organization for their well-being with employee assistance programs, sending dry rations to their homes, medical support for family members and financial support. In terms of supervisory support, employees want supervisors to have open communication, provide mentoring and coaching, empowerment, and interest in people development. In building an empathetic organization culture, organization needs to reward employees with benefits for family members, reward to those who go extra miles to support others and having empathy understanding colleagues in the organization. All these above components should be based on the servant leadership as a foundation. Leaders need to practice servant leadership skills for their team members providing coaching, mentoring, listening, and providing feedback to team members to perform their roles well. Servant leaders need to behave as a role model who listens to the feedback from team members and provides guidance for career development.

Implications

The implications received from the research are managerial implications and organizational implications. The management level employees must be trained with servant

leadership qualities to enhance leadership capabilities. Prudential Myanmar, as an organization, must have organization implications to create, promote and maintain the initiatives to continue building an empathetic organization culture.

Conclusion

Prudential Myanmar has been facing challenges during COVID and Coup in 2020 and 2021 same as other organizations in Myanmar. Throughout these crises, Prudential Myanmar puts its employees' safety and well-being as priority and always comes up with new initiatives to support employees and its family members. With the commitment to people-focused organization and become an Employer of Choice in Myanmar, Prudential Myanmar always listens to its employees and provides resources and trainings to leaders to improve its organization culture.

One of the main objectives of this research is to explore the definitions of servant leadership, rewards, perceived organization support, and perceived supervisory support understood by the employees. The researcher also finds out the strengths which the informants consider as necessary in their experience of building an empathetic organization culture. Shared aspirations of employees were also explored are resonated among employees. The strategy for creating an empathetic organization culture through servant leadership is generated based on the strengths, shared, and preferred aspirations for building an empathetic organization culture. A total of 20 informants out of 140 employees participated in the interviews and majority of informants were in the managerial level.

The findings of the qualitative research show that servant leadership is necessary for creating an empathetic organization culture and strengths and aspirations are key elements to achieve empathetic organization culture. Under challenging situations, empathy is important in the organization for the employees to have a strong organization culture. The strengths of organization support, supervisory support, and rewards comprised with different components will help organization to achieve empathetic organization culture becoming a top employer. In conclusion, the researcher has developed the strategy for creating an empathetic organization culture through servant leadership which could be used for any organization to become an employer of choice.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the current situation in Myanmar, the current research was done only with Prudential Myanmar's employees using qualitative research. Future quantitative research should be conducted for in-depth learning of strategies for creating an empathetic organization culture if situation permits in future. For the future studies, the researcher would like to suggest having gender balance in the informants and focusing on more employees in the organization. The researcher emphasized only four variables because of limited time so would like to suggest exploring other variables in future study. This may present greater and better research and may receive different outcomes.

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