Developing Sustainable Leadership Practices to Improve Employee Engagement through ODI: A Case Study of Thai Family-Owned Business

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Abstract

This paper is a case study of a family owned Thai business, Sitti Yont Group Co., Ltd. As is common in many family owned businesses and particularly in Asian businesses, the father who is also the CEO/owner makes most of the decisions and the various family members have particular influence on the father. The non-family workers often do not feel empowered to make decisions and often appear to be unengaged in their work. That is the case in this company. Also, with traditional working style from old generation, the human resource management seemed to be dated and unsystematic. But it is not only the company growing beyond the human resources of the family, but it is also the need for greater expertise, which requires the greater engagement of its employees. The organizational development question is how can we increase the workers' engagement? Sustainable Leadership practices were considered to increase employee engagement and were considered a good way to develop this Thai business. An organizational development intervention was planned and carried out to increase the use of several sustainable leadership practices and thereby increase employee engagement. Appreciative coaching was the primary method of the intervention encouraging the development of the 5 leadership practices. And it appears to have worked. Employee engagement has improved as measured in the difference in pre and post survey and interview responses. This research intends to apply the sustainable leadership strategy in developing employee engagement with the purpose of generating organization sustainability. The practical impact of this intervention is to smooth the change process in the chosen family business, as well as to create the organization sustainability, together with an improvement in the employee engagement. The contribution to organization development theory and practice is that OD practitioners could benefit from a result of the action research connected between leadership practices, culture awareness and employee engagement for Thai family business. Also, they can see numerous difficulties that the chosen company in this research confronted and how to solve each problem by applying organizational development interventions. Lastly, the contribution of this study to the sustainable leadership practices is assess whether they can be usefully applied in the case of the family business in Thailand that is currently facing with numerous difficulties at present, mainly on human resource management by enhancing employee engagement. Other small and medium family businesses in Thailand could benefit by using the case of Sitti Yont Group Company Limited as a case study for their further ODI applied.

Keywords: appreciative coaching, employee engagement, organization development, family-owned business, organization development intervention, sustainable leadership practices

Introduction

In today's competitive business environment, businesses all over the world have challenges by numerous organizational problems which make the business governance more complicated. All of these become even harder in a family-run business. Davis (2001) reveals in their working knowledge paper about governing the family owned company that it is more difficult than for non-family owned businesses. This is because the leader and business owner is also a family member. Because of the complexity, human resource management in family owned businesses often fail. As pointed out by Davis (2001), what is required to form a well-defined sense of direction and company value is comprehensible and practical policies with suitable people in a timely manner to deliberate and decide when a problem confronts the family business.

Sustainable leadership has been widely and successfully applied in many companies around the world. This is hopeful sign of people who decide to live their lives and lead their companies in ways that are conscious of their influence on the earth, society, and the well-being of local and global economies (Ferdig, 2007). Even though the sustainable leadership can be successfully applied in many developed countries, is it also be applied in less developed countries such as Thailand and other Asian countries? As it turns out the answer is, yes. A study of Kantabutra and Avery (2011), shows that the business practices of Thailand's Siam Cement Group were found to be similar to the Rhineland sustainable leadership practices. These practices can provide sustainable enterprises with the ability to present strong financial performance, carry on in difficult economic and social situations, and sustain a leadership position in its markets. Siam Cement Group is claimed as an Asian model for sustainable leadership implementation (Kantabutra and Avery, 2011). Enterprises in Thailand seeking to sustain their organizational success could usefully adopt the practices included in the sustainable leadership grid elements to guide their practices.

Employees have become essential to enable and drive sustainable business practices throughout all levels of the company (Ernst & Young, 2013). Kantabutra and Avery (2013) and Kantabutra and Saratun (2012) have found employee engagement and sustainable leadership practices to be mutually reinforcing. Employee engagement encourages a collaborative working environment to steer innovation keeping the organization at the forefront of their industry. J (2013) mentions that engaged employees tend to be responsive to their responsibility and inspire colleagues around them to achieve the company's objectives. The positive emotional connection employees build in their workplace lead to exceptional performance. As seen in Luthans and Peterson (2002) and Gibbons (2006), engaged employees have proven to form a positive influence in the organization across individual, organizational, and economic systems.

Background of the Focal Organization

In the chosen family business in this research, the business has been established and operated for approximately 30 years with the owner as a founder. Most of the

employees have been working since the company started-up with a conventional working style. There were three main operating companies; Wireless Business Intelligence Co., Ltd., Thai Intercontinental Group Co Ltd., and Sitti Yont Group Co., Ltd. Recently, all three companies merged into one company named Sitti Yont Group Company Limited which acts as the head office, while other companies have become departments.

The new generation of the family decided to continue running the family business. Beyond the difficulty of conducting the business in a highly competitive market environment, the company faces severe human resource management issues. In the family business working environment, especially in Thai culture, people have anxiety in complaining or commenting on other employees. This makes the work process slower and less efficient. Also, all decision making has been done by the owner since the establishment of the company. Particularly with the growth of the family business, this has lead to the organization structural deficiency of slow and poor decision making. And when changes are attempted to the system, employees tend to reject the changes made by the company. Perhaps most importantly, there has been a lack of employee engagement and sense of belonging among employees in the organization. Employees tend to perform their work as scheduled without showing initiative.

Organizational Diagnosis

Organizational diagnosis is the process of understanding on how the focal organization is currently operating. Moreover, it provides the needed information for offering the effective tool in handling with the difficulties. The researcher applied SOAR analysis, SWOT analysis, McKinsey 7S Model and the Purposive Change model. The results demonstrate that the company has many strengths. The company is established and experienced in their industry. It has an excellent customer base and highly experienced employees. There is "new blood" in a family member who has the energy and knowledge to improve company performance through a revised human resource strategy. If it can bring greater energy and knowledge to its experienced employees, the company has opportunities to expand the business vertically and horizontally. The new human resource strategy can be established by encouraging employees to show initiative, supporting their improvement of skills and capabilities, extending employee engagement, and sense of belonging. The company aims to extend employee engagement and sense of belonging, to have well organized human resource management, to enhance human resource capabilities in order to elevate overall company performance and to avoid resistance to changes from employees, and to improve working process through effective decision-making style and positive attitude to change. The expected result is that employees have engagement and sense of belonging to the company which leads to a willingness to work to accomplish the common goals of the organization for maximum synergy and to make the best decisions for the organization. Secondly, human resource is effectively managed to bring the best to the employees. Next, effective decision is jointly made by everyone in the organization to enhance the overall company performance. Finally, overall company performance improves significantly.

The Need for Action Research

The company is established and experienced in their industry with a many highly experienced employees who have been working for the company for more than 10 years. Also, a new family member with energy and appreciation for modern business trends has recently stepped in to take over the company. However, due to their traditional style of working, the company has an ineffective decision-making style, disorganized human resource management and is deficient in coordinating and harmonizing its various functions. In addition, many employees do not have a sense of engagement and belonging to the company. These four aspects challenge the company to encourage highly engaged employees.

Avery and Bergsteiner's (2011) sustainable leadership will be used to guide our research to increase employee engagement. Action research allows the researcher to test this model and see if they can create the desired outcomes. It should help to understand and observe action when social situation changes. It emphasizes on a positive and collaborative working relationship between the owner as an OD practitioner and everyone in the company which leads to better understanding of the organization change development (Lurey and Griffin, 2002).

Problem Statement

This research aims to assess the sustainable leadership practices in which consensual decision making, knowledge sharing, succession planning, stakeholder approach and cultural awareness leads to employee engagement in the case of the family business in Thailand.

Research Objectives

1. To assess and diagnose the existing situation of the focal company on sustainable leadership practices.

2. To assess and diagnose the existing situation of the focal company on employee engagement.

3. To identify, design, and implement ODI based on the initial organizational assessment relevant to sustainable leadership practices, culture awareness and employee engagement.

4. To examine whether the sustainable leadership practices which include devolved and consensual decision-making, developing people and sharing knowledge continuously, internal succession planning, stakeholder approach, and culture awareness can lead to employee engagement in the chosen family business.

5. To investigate the differences between the pre-ODIs and the post-ODIs of sustainable leadership practices.

6. To investigate the differences between the pre-ODIs and the post-ODIs of employee engagement.

7. To design sustainable leadership model to be applied in a family business.

Research Questions

1. What is the existing situation of the focal company on sustainable leadership practices?

2. What is the existing situation of the focal company on employee engagement?

3. What are the appropriate ODIs to enhance employee engagement in the chosen family business?

4. Is there a relationship between the sustainable leadership practices which include devolved and consensual decision-making, developing people and sharing knowledge continuously, internal succession planning, stakeholder approach, and culture awareness and employee engagement?

5. Is there a difference between the pre-ODIs and the post-ODIs of sustainable leadership practices?

6. Is there a difference between the pre-ODIs and the post-ODIs of employee engagement?

7. What is the sustainable leadership model that can be applied in a family business?

Research Hypothesis

H1o: There is no significant difference of employee engagement in the organization in comparison between pre-ODIs and post-ODIs.

H1a: There is a significant difference of employee engagement in the organization in comparison between pre-ODIs and post-ODIs.

H2o: The sustainable leadership practices which include devolved and consensual decision-making, developing people and sharing knowledge continuously, internal succession planning, stakeholder approach, and culture awareness do not statistically significantly relate to employee engagement.

H2o: The sustainable leadership practices which include devolved and consensual decision-making, developing people and sharing knowledge continuously, internal succession planning, stakeholder approach, and culture awareness do statistically significantly relate to employee engagement.

Review of Literature

Family Owned Businesses

According to Clark (2014), family-owned businesses have been the backbone of the global economy for a long time. Recent studies demonstrate that approximately 35 percent of Fortune 500 companies are family-owned. It includes a variety of company size ranging from small to huge listed company. PWC (2014) reveals that there are approximately 65 percent of family business growth recorded in 2013 and 15 percent are expecting to grow up powerfully over the next 5 years. As said by Davis (2014), the governance of a family-owned business is claimed to be more difficult than for non-family-owned ones. This is because it tends to be controlled and leaded by a key role of the family. There are three main groups involved in family business; family, ownership and the business. Habitually, these three groups overlap which leads to conflicting viewpoints from people in each circle. The family member steps in to manage problems within and across three intersecting groups. This is in line with Bass (2012) and Rodsutti and Makayathorn (2005) who commented that family-owned businesses have knotted business and family interests. Many parties are involved in this type of business which makes the governance more complicated and emotional.

Employee Engagement

There is a great deal of literature which defines the meaning of employee engagement. The first one is Robinson et al. (2004) who define employee engagement as a constructive mind-set of the employee with respect to the company and its value. Employees who have an engagement to the company are responsive to business circumstances and work as a team to enhance organization performance as a whole. As stated by Anitha (2013), employee engagement has been widely considered as an effective device in assisting companies to gain competitive advantage over its competitors. One of the main rationales is that human resources, when they are effective, cannot be easily imitated. Stated differently, human resources are the most valuable asset of the company.

It is necessary for the company to build up and encourage employee engagement which needs a cooperative relationship between the employer and the employee. Similarly said by Dernovsek (2008), employee engagement involves participation with an enthusiasm for work which is associated with a positive employees' emotional connection and employees' loyalty. Moreover, Kahn (p. 137, 1990) gives a meaningful definition of employee engagement which has been broadly used by many literatures which states that it is, "…the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances". It is evidenced in many studies including Wallace and Trinka (2009) that employee engagement takes place effortlessly when leaders are inspiring and encouraging. In most cases, leaders are accountable to communicate to their employees and their efforts which are a main part of overall company success.

Sustainable Leadership Grid Elements

Organizations have continually operated in a highly competitive business environment which is surrounded by complication and uncertainty over the last number of years. In such an incessantly changing market, it is suspicious what kind of leadership is needed for organizations to sustain the competitive advantage. According to Avery and Bergsteiner (2011), in conducting business, it is necessary to consider ourselves as an interdependent part of the world and multiple corporations are needed for business success. These include employees, customers and clients, investors, suppliers, the towns, states and nations. Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) propose a helpful theory to support this idea, Sustainable Leadership. It generally considers that all stakeholders contribute to social wellbeing. Especially with a focus on employees, sustainable leadership requires taking a long-term perspective in developing a skilled, loyal, and highly engaged workforce. The main advantages are getting in touch with people, generating revenues, and balancing life and work value. The 23 practices have been proposed by Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) form into the sustainable leadership pyramid which provide guidelines for an organizational intervention.

As can be seen from figure 1, there are three main levels to be achieved in order to reach the ending outcome. Each level is a foundation in preparation to smooth the progress of the higher-level practices. This is in line with what Lynch (2003) said about organizational change. With the idea of "the butterfly effect", all stakeholders are counted and equally vital for the company. The change in the whole organization can be made from the individual, to the group of employees, to the whole organization, to the community, and to the world towards the end.
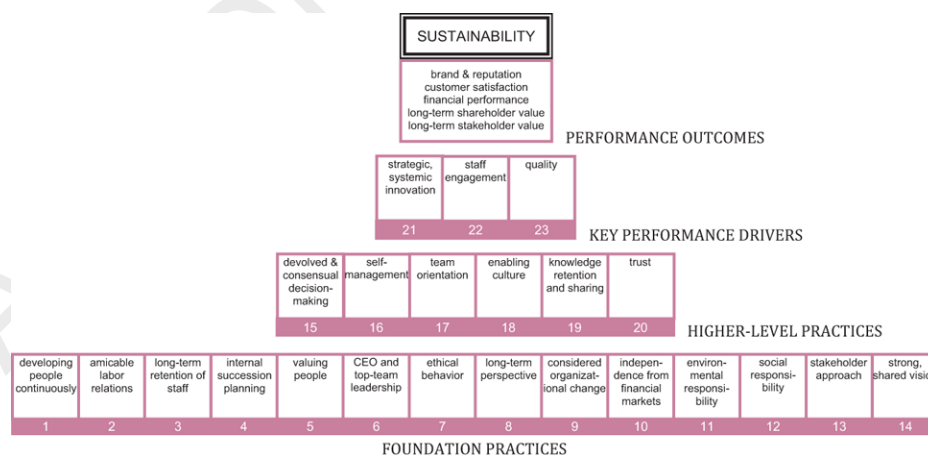

Figure 1: Sustainable Leadership Pyramid (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011)

Conceptual Framework

The review of related literature shows that employee engagement effortlessly occurs when leaders are stimulating and encouraging by strengthening their involvement, satisfaction and interest for work. Twenty-three elements from 6 themes are a guideline

46

for interventions to develop a skilled, loyal, and highly engaged human resource. The conceptual framework has been developed by the researcher by applying Avery and Bergsteiner's (2011) sustainable leadership grid elements as illustrated in figure 2. Four main elements have been chosen and combined. The chosen elements are considered to be suitably applied in the middle-size company in Thailand. Culture awareness has been additionally combined in order to build employee engagement in a midsize family business in Thailand. Thai working culture is distinctive and well recognized for its complexities. In order to understand the Thai working and management style implication, it is necessary to investigate the key characteristics and nature of culture (Pimpa, 2012).
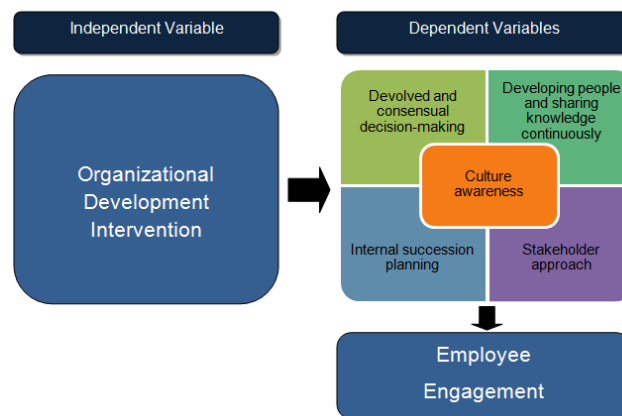

Figure 2. Conceptual framework (Researcher, 2017)

Action Research Framework

The action research methodology has been exploited in this research through the organization development intervention. There are three main stages performed in this research; pre-ODI (Organization Development Intervention), the ODI and post-ODI as demonstrated in figure 3.
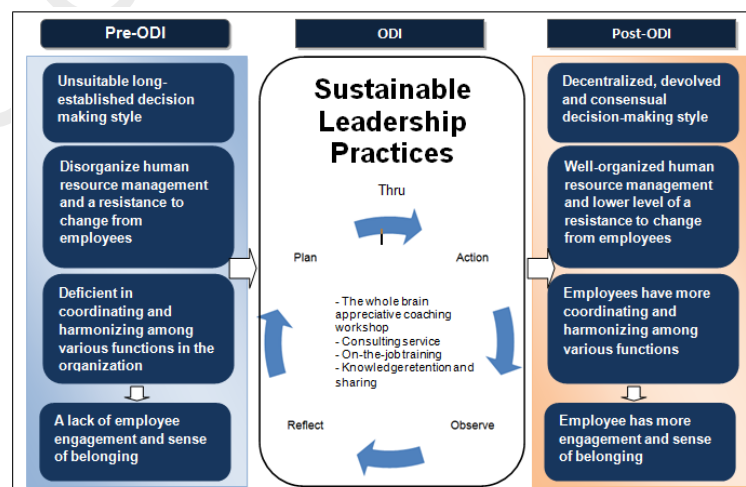

Figure 3. Action research framework (Researcher, 2017)

Research Methodology

The Pre-ODI Process

The pre-ODI process aims for an investigation of the current situation in the company which is expected to offer the effective tool in addressing the difficulties. The initial assessment includes a SOAR analysis, a SWOT analysis, the McKinsey the 7S model, and the purposive change model. Also, there has been an evaluation of employees' attitudes and behaviors thru a survey questionnaire and a focused group interview with semi-structured questions. This has been conducted to as a preliminary reflection and used as pre-data to measure the key performance indicator (KPI) in order to justify effectiveness in applying sustainable leadership practices to enhance employee engagement.

The ODI Process

After the pre-ODI interview session and questionnaire survey, a plan for the intervention has been developed with an OD consultant to appropriately fit with the family business. This stage involves an intervention where all employees participated. Appreciative Coaching (AC) by an expert has been used to construct the OD process. Two main team building sessions were carried out. The OD expert, as a change agent, has been invited to lead the session by applying AC. On-the-job training and knowledge retention and sharing are also conducted.

The Post-ODI Process

After the ODIs stage, a reexamination was performed to assess whether sustainable leadership practices can enhance employee engagement thru questionnaire survey and focused group interview. The researcher then compared the pre-ODIs and post-ODIs result for the related variables.

Subjects of Study and Sources of Data

Action research with current employees who have been working in the family business has been performed to evaluate leadership style and employee engagement. The target respondents for interview were divided into three groups, (1) employees at the management/supervisor level across departments who are family members, (2) employees at the management/supervisor level across departments who were not family members, and (3) employees at the operational level across departments.

For the questionnaire survey, two-third of all Thai employees in the company were polled for a sample size of 20. The company is relatively small with only 30 permanent Thai workers, so we feel the data we captured represents the entire population .

Analysis of Findings

Quantitative Analysis of the Research Variables for Employees with the ODIs and the Leadership

   The collective opinion of the respondents before the ODI is "agree" (mean = 3.68). After the ODIs, the opinion improved to the strongly agree level (mean = 4.66). The mean difference is 0.98. Also, all sub-factors enhanced from uncertain to strongly agree. However, the exception is the first sub-factor which remained unchanged in strongly agree level with small increase in mean.

Quantitative Analysis of the Research Variables for Employees with the ODIs and the Sustainable Leadership Practices

   The average opinion of the respondents before the ODIs was at the "agree" level. After the intervention, opinion has altered to the strongly agree level. Mean of devolved and consensual decision-making, developing people and sharing knowledge continuously, internal succession planning, stakeholder approach, and culture awareness have changed from 3.48 to 4.65, 3.59 to 4.70, 3.42 to 4.57, 3.45 to 4.72 and 3.45 to 4.78 respectively. The ODIs are able to significantly enhance the opinion level of sub-factors.

Qualitative Analysis from the Semi-Structured Interview

   Interviews were conducted before the ODIs to understand what employees currently think and perceive when they are working for the family business.

Key findings from employees in management/supervisor level across departments

- Do you think working in family-run business has an impact on your performance and the whole company success?

   All management employees realized the company was a family-run business. The family members think that everyone in the organization perceives their colleagues like friends and relatives. They have each other. The owner is the one who drives the current friendly working environment. The majority do not think the family-run business has a negative impact on them. Instead, it makes them feel more intimate and relaxed with their colleagues, the person in charge, the owner, and the company. The results are the same for before and after ODIs.

- Do you think current decision-making style which is relatively centralized is effective and suitable with current circumstances of the company?

   Prior to the ODIs, most of the management and supervisor level personnel mentioned that their centralized decision-making style was not effective and not suitable, especially in the current circumstances of the company with the world changing rapidly. As developed through the ODIs, management and supervisor level personnel said that

their work processes have been improved by applying a decentralized decision-making style.

- What do you think about current human resource management and organization structure?

Prior to the ODIs, the management and supervisor level personnel perceived that the company lacked clear and structured human resource management and organization structure. This poor structure leads to numerous problems in operating the company including; no clear roles and responsibilities, poor promotion assessment, imbalanced work load, and confusing supervision roles. As developed through the ODIs, management and supervisor level personnel mentioned that the new generation of the owner made a great deal of progress in constructing a clear organization structure, a clear job description, and structured work process and supervision authority. The rules and structure were considered to helpful in managing people in the company who have different personalities.

- How is the current situation of coordinating and harmonizing among various functions in the company?

Prior to the ODIs, the management and supervisor level personnel found many problems related to coordination and communication among employees within the organization. As developed through the ODIs, management and supervisor level personnel mentioned that coordination and harmonization considerably improved. However, across work section assistance may take a longer time to develop and improve.

Key findings from employees in operational level across departments

- Do you think working in a family-run business has an impact on your performance and the whole company success?

Prior to the ODIs, employees in operational level said that they have been working in a friendly and relax working environment. However, the problem has been found for other family members who also work in the company. These employees think they are untouchable. As developed through the ODIs, employees at the operational level wish to maintain a friendly and relaxed working environment, as well as to be treated like a family. In addition, in their opinion, a more systematic and clear organization structure should help solving family member issues.

- Do you think current centralized decision-making style is effective and suitable for the current circumstances of the company?

Prior to the ODIs, employees at the operational level mentioned that the owner is everything. Their work process was slow. Moreover, there was no standard way of solving the problem. As developed through the ODIs, employees at the operational level

perceived that a more decentralized decision making should allow the work process to be much quicker.

- What do you think about the current human resource management and organization structure?

Prior to the ODIs, employees at the operational level pointed out that there was no clear organization structure and human resource management was unstructured. Most of the employees do not know which department they are in and there is no clear work description and responsibility. As developed through the ODIs, employees at the operational level perceived that a clear and systematic organization structure allows them to work easier, especially across work functions. Everyone knows what their roles and responsibilities. In addition, clear human resource management makes all human resource processes clearer.

- How is the current situation of coordinating and harmonizing among various functions in the company?

Prior to the ODIs, employees at the operational level pointed out that coordination is rarely found among the employees. Common company goals thru harmonization have been overlooked. As developed through the ODIs, employees at the operational level perceived that coordination and harmonization was significantly improved. Employees can bring out the worth from each person to help the company accomplish something.

Hypothesis Testing

To test the first hypothesis whether there is a significant difference in building employee engagement in the organization between pre-ODI and post-ODI, Mann-Whitney Test was run together with the detailed analysis through mean and S.D. of 48 statements to determine employee engagement difference before and after the ODI. From the Mann-Whitney test result, the Asymp.Sig.(2-tailed) of overall employee engagement is 0.0000 which is less than α or 0.05. Therefore, we can reject H1o and accept H1a. There is a significant difference in building employee engagement in the organization between pre-ODI and post-ODI.

To test the second hypothesis whether there is a relationship between the sustainable leadership practices and employee engagement, Spearman Rank Order Correlation was run before and after the ODI in order to compare the results to determine the relationship among the variables. A Spearman's correlation indicated that there was a strong, positive monotonic correlation between the sustainable leader and employee engagement (Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.000) which is less than α or 0.05 in both pre-ODI and post-ODI. It can imply that the sustainable leader is statistically significantly related to employee engagement in both pre-ODI and post-ODI tests with enhanced strength from r_s = 0.714 (strong relationship) in pre-ODI test to 0.802 (very strong relationship) in post-ODI test.

For all variables, Spearman's correlations indicated that there was an improvement to a strong, positive monotonic correlation between all variables and the employee engagement (Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.000) which is less than α or 0.05 in both pre-ODI and post-ODI. It can imply that all variables are statistically significantly related to employee engagement in post-ODI test with an enhanced strong relationship. However, an exception is devolved and consensual decision-making that reveals that there was no correlation with the employee engagement in pre-ODI stage.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

This study shows that with the implementation of the ODIs, sustainable leadership practices and cultural awareness with AC approach has significantly improved the employee engagement in the company. By measuring employee engagement KPIs, there was a significant difference in building employee engagement in the organization between pre-ODI and post-ODI. The results reveal favorable improvement on the employee engagement. All four of the sustainable leadership perspectives and culture awareness were considered by the employees to be improved after the ODIs. The employees can see a significant improvement in all perspectives at the Strongly Agree level. Therefore, the four perspectives in sustainable leadership practices, (1) consensual decision making, (2) knowledge sharing, (3) succession planning, and (4) stakeholder approach, as well as culture awareness, should be implemented as the key perspectives to conduct in the company to build employee engagement. Stakeholder approach and culture awareness are the highest improvement the employees perceive.

Recommendations for the Company and the Industry

The result of the ODIs demonstrates the significant impact on employee engagement for Sitti Yont Group Company Limited by the sustainable leadership practices. Therefore, it is recommended to continuously maintain and improve all perspectives to increase the effectiveness of the employees and the company. Furthermore, it is recommended that the owner should consider changing from being the only decision maker to a more decentralized decision-making model. This was proved from the statistical results and qualitative data that the consensual decision making is important, and it makes employees increasingly engage in what they are doing. Also, a clear and structured organization chart should be set up, along with a clear job description and chain of authority. Additionally, a training and development plan for each employee is crucial. Most of the employees want this to happen. From the statistical results, it is clearly seen that knowledge sharing and succession planning significantly and favorably affects employee engagement.

In addition, an employee assessment process needs to be constructed. Everyone's opinion should be equally counted no matter their position. Employees can realize how important they are to the company and how much management cares for them. Engagement could be improved from this perspective. Finally, greater culture awareness is essential, especially for a Thai company. Those at the management level should be the

52

ones who assess the values of different cultures in the organization and make the best use of the benefits and diminish the cost of these values.

Recommendation for Further Study

Further study could be conducted on other perspectives in the sustainable leadership practices applied in Thai companies, such as team orientation in higher-level practices or quality in key performance drivers. In addition, performance outcome level, such as financial performance, is also remarkable. This could benefit the company and other Thai companies who are interested in leadership perspectives in developing sustainable achievement. Lastly, conducting research with the larger sample size of participants in larger companies should help gain a more profound understanding of sustainable leadership practices.

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