

CONNECTING DIVERSITY USING FORUM IN BUSINESS

*YPOer turns to forum
principles to forge a stronger
virtual team*

■ By Melissa Fleming

WHEN AN ENTIRE WORK TEAM is virtual, finding ways to successfully interact and collaborate can be a challenge. **Thomas Ng** (YPO Gold Southeast Asia At Large) found the answer to this problem for his organization, Genashtim Innovative Learning, by incorporating forum principles that increase trust and transparency, and improve engagement into his business. His impressive efforts were recognized during the first Forum in Business video competition held as part of YPO Innovation Week.

Genashtim Innovative Learning is a second career journey for Ng and it's a life-changing organization for his employees. After retiring from corporate life, Ng joined the board of trustees of a computer school for the blind and visually impaired in Manila, Philippines, where more than 500 students had completed their training but still were unemployed. After trying for more than two years to place the students in jobs, Ng started Genashtim; its inclusive business model uses a virtual work environment to provide sustainable gainful employment to people with disabilities. Currently, 90 percent of the company's employees have disabilities and work from more than 10 countries.

Leading virtual employees who work in different countries can be challenging, Ng says. Successful collaboration with diverse workers hinges on unique logistical and social skills. To facilitate better connections, Ng established six small departments within the company that meet regularly to exchange ideas and experiences and to coordinate work. However, without the benefit of a shared office space,

relationships among the different teams were slow to develop.

"With a work-from-home environment, there were few chances for employees to interact with each other outside of their immediate departments," Ng says. "In a regular office environment, you meet other colleagues by the water cooler or you go out for lunch together. For people working from home, the sense of isolation can be quite significant."

To facilitate more interactions and better relationships, Ng organized specific groups, G-Tribes, that Ng feels act and operate a lot like a forum. Each tribe is comprised of one member from each of the six departments and includes a tribal chief who acts as a group moderator (similar to a forum moderator). Each tribal meeting is strictly confidential to ensure an open and safe environment and commences with each member "smoking the peace pipe," an ice breaker that sets an inclusive tone for the meeting.

"There are several layers of insulation for confidentiality," says Ng. "When needed, the tribal chief escalates issues brought up without identifying who in the tribe raised the issue, and the management committee member brings the matter up without saying which tribe the issue came from. The issues raised are posted on our Yammer online platform for all employees to see. We are very transparent in acknowledging issues and also sincere in resolving them."

Adapting forum principles to strengthen his team, Ng also has ensured that upper management hears regularly from the frontlines of the organization and that his employees feel "empowered, relevant and significant." "G-Tribe has become an integral part of our employee experience," Ng says. "Ask employees to describe the influence of these meetings, and they will likely say it has made them better employees and people."

"Everyone manages to find a solution to the problem," says Windy Gao who works in Genashtim customer relations. "In G-Tribe, we feel like friends and that makes us work better as a team." ▲

Find out how other YPO members brought forum practices into their businesses by viewing the top 11 videos from the Forum in Business competition on the Exchange at www.ypo.org/ForuminBusiness.

Melissa Fleming has previously worked for Catchafire, "Fast Company," "Harper's Bazaar," "Harvard Business Review," "Stanford Social Innovation Review" and "Town & Country."



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