OPINION

A customer commends a worker

Tommy (not his real name) is a customer service representative who has been with us for more than 12 years without being promoted. Recently, our chief executive officer (CEO) received a letter from an important customer citing Tommy's work, which the customer says saved his organization millions over the years. The CEO passed on the letter to Tommy's department head and to human resources (HR) for proper action. HR has recommended that Tommy be given an appreciation plaque. However, the department head opposed the idea as Tommy is not known for his hard work. He suspects that such a letter could be easily solicited from any customer. Also, he argued that Tommy's last performance rating was "below average" due in part to at least two complaints from customers. How do we resolve the issue? — Yellow Submarine.

IN THE WORKPLACE
REY ELBO

ELBONOMICS: A forged commendation letter is the ultimate insult to the receiver.

It's possible that a commendation letter could be easily solicited from customers, especially by those employees who have long-standing and positive work relationships with them. So what can you do? If you're the department head, don't ignore the commendation letter. But take it with a grain of salt.

Trust but verify, because you don't want to make a mistake that could lead to a serious workplace conflict.

First, let's make clear what we mean by a solicited commendation letter. It's a letter that did not arise from the sender spontaneously. It is meant to help another person who may have requested it to gain a possible reward or recognition, even when undeserved.

The employee may have not done anything monumental for the customer, who could be willing to help his contact person earn a reward. This is dangerous. It means that the employee-customer relationship has been compromised. It's also a good reason for Tommy to be reassigned to another customer or to other tasks.

Conversely, what if the letter is valid and unsolicited? Surely, you would not want to ignore such a written commendation that attests that Tommy is an excellent worker. More importantly, you don't want to ignore a commendation letter from a valuable customer.

TRUST BUT VERIFY

Once again, the perpetual lesson is — trust but verify. Don't betray any doubts about the sincerity of the commendation letter. Offer an alibi, like trying to distill lessons from the episode that can be disseminated to other workers.

It's important to not reveal your agenda or to allow your inner thoughts to surface in unguarded moments. Once the customer suspects something, the worst that could happen is the termination of the customer relationship. Therefore, consider the following options and weigh their short-term and long-term implications:

One, phone the customer immediately. Be happy and positive. Thank the customer right away for acknowledging Tommy's assistance. Be careful not to sound insincere. Then propose to arrange a meeting with the customer to discover how exactly things happened. Explain that you want to learn more lessons from Tommy's "exemplary" behavior to determine whether his example could be replicated with other customers.

Two, arrange for a meeting with the customer. If the customer accepts, bring Tommy to that meeting. The more details you can get from the customer, the better you can assess the commendation letter's veracity without Tommy or the customer suspecting anything. The underlying idea is to find ways to do more business with the customer.

Consider a lunch meeting with the customer to learn more about how Tommy has helped. This is an opportunity to evaluate the letter sender's body language. If circumstances require, you may need to bring Tommy along to the meeting.

Three, consider the letter-sender's rank. How high is that person in their organizational hierarchy? Is he a department manager, a vice-president, or a more senior official? The higher the position, the greater the likelihood that the commendation letter was not solicited. The opposite may be likely if the sender is lower-ranking.

Still, allow for possible exceptions to this rule of thumb.

Last, assess Tommy's work with the customer. Interpret his performance in the proper context. How much did sales increase by when Tommy handled the client? Plot Tommy's performance vis-à-vis the gross revenue generated by the customer.

Is Tommy truly a hard worker? If average, then what makes his performance exceptional in the customer's eyes? What were the specific reasons given by the customer for commending Tommy? What does Tommy do with this customer that can't be found in other accounts he handles?

Whatever you do, perform your investigation in secret. This means keeping HR out of the loop as much as possible. Be optimistic but realistic, because you don't want to be fooled by an insincere commendation letter. But even if you discover that it's a solicited letter, don't rock the boat too much.

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SC says illness must be tied to work to justify payment

THE Supreme Court (SC) has upheld an appeals court decision that rejecting a seafarer's claim for permanent disability benefits after he was diagnosed with sleep apnea, hypertension, diabetes and tonsilitis.

In a 28-page decision released Jan. 27, the tribunal said Raegar B. Ledesma failed to prove that his medical conditions were caused by work.

"It is not sufficient for seafarers to merely allege that their illness is listed as an occupational disease under Section 32-A of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration-Standard Employment Contract (POEA-SEC)," Chief Justice Alexander G. Gesmundo said in the ruling.

The chief justice said an employee must provide substantial evidence that their illness or injury is directly connected to their work to claim entitlement for compensation.

Mr. Ledesma cited the findings of a company-approved physician that found that his poor lifestyle and high-salt diet contributed to his illnesses.

In September 2014, he signed a seven-month employment contract with C.F. Sharp Crew Management, Inc. to work as the chief fireman on the *M/V Regatta*.

A few months into his deployment, a ship doctor diagnosed Mr. Ledesma with sleep apnea, hypertension and congestive heart failure after he reported drowsiness, lightheadedness and shortness of breath while on duty.

Upon arriving back in the Philippines on April 13, 2015, a company-approved physician concluded that his illnesses were not work-related or work-aggravated.

Mr. Ledesma then went to see a private cardiologist who deemed him unfit to perform his job as fireman and a seafarer due to his erratic blood pressure and constant drowsiness.

He filed a complaint against his employer for permanent disability benefits before a panel of voluntary arbitrators, which ruled in favor of the seafarer and ordered his employer to pay him $60,000.

The panel said Mr. Ledesma's illnesses were specifically listed in the POEA-SEC's list of occupational diseases.

The Court of Appeals overturned the decision since none of the medical reports showed that the illnesses were work-related.

It added that Mr. Ledesma should have consulted a third doctor after the physicians arrived at conflicting conclusions.

Under the POEA's rules, the company-designated physician has the authority to determine if a worker sustained a permanent disability during employment.

Seafarers may consult with their own physician for a second opinion, and a third in case of conflicting assessments between the two doctors.

"The entitlement of overseas seafarers to disability benefits is a matter governed, not only by medical findings but also by law and contract," the tribunal said citing the Court of Appeals' decision.

"In sum, for the failure of the petitioner to prove by substantial evidence that his illnesses were work-related or work-aggravated, his complaint for permanent total disability benefits should be dismissed," the court ruled. — **John Victor D. Ordoñez**

Cost of living crisis tests striking French workers

PARIS — French railway worker Franck Viger-Brunet says he and his comrades have to count carefully the costs of going on strike to force President Emmanuel Macron to back down on plans to hike the retirement age by two years to 64.

"We pay for the days we strike. I have budgeted for the last month to be able to strike for a month (against this reform)... We've got to keep going," the 58-year-old CGT union member said at a march in Paris on Tuesday during a second nationwide strike against the reform.

In what could prove a prolonged standoff, unions and their members are seeking to minimize the impact on personal finances already strained by the worst cost of living crisis in decades.

For 55-year-old nursery worker Said Bellahecene that meant working on Tuesday morning in order to be able to go on strike in the afternoon to avoid losing a full day of wages.

"I've got two kids and rent to pay, but I'm ready to lose a few weeks (of pay) and bring the country to a halt rather than lose two years later (under the reform)," he said at the demo.

More than 1.2 million people took part in Tuesday's action, slightly more than in a first show of force on Jan. 19, though firms including state rail operator SNCF and state-controlled electricity group EDF reported fewer workers going on strike.

That means keeping up the pressure will be a challenge as the reform rumbles through parliament over the next two months.

STRIKE FUNDS

While unions have so far displayed rare unity, hardline CGT leader Philippe Martinez raised the specter of rolling strikes despite the financial sacrifice that means for many workers.

"The government wants to downplay the outrage, we've got to shift up a gear," Mr. Martinez said on France Inter radio on Wednesday.

So far unions have tried to space strikes out to minimize wage losses. The next strike is due only on Feb. 7 and unions have also called for nationwide demos on Saturday Feb. 11, which would allow more workers to protest without having pay docked.

French unions generally do not have permanent strike funds to help members cope, though some will set up occasional kitties financed by donations for a specific cause.

One notable exception is the CFDT, France's biggest union, whose members' dues help maintain a "union action" fund that BFM TV reported recently had swollen over the decades to €140 million ($152 million).

While it is generally used to cover legal fees and compensate workers in local strikes, members are now clamoring for it to help cover lost pay during the pension strikes.

"We're getting a ton of questions about whether there will be some help," CFDT head for the public service Mylene Jacquot told Reuters. — ***Reuters***

FULL STORY
Read the full story by scanning the QR code with your smartphone or by typing the link
<bit.ly/France020323>

Property,
from S1/1

"Colliers believes that demand in the pre-selling market should partly be sustained by the continued inflow of overseas Filipino workers' (OFW) remittances," it said.

Developers should also further test the market for luxury and ultra-luxury residential projects, which accounted for 34% of take-up last year.

"In Metro Manila, previously, it was the mid-income and upscale segment that dominate, from P3.2 million to P8 million per unit but now the norm is the P8 million dominating the demand," Mr. Bondoc said.

"In less than three months, developments by companies like Rockwell and Arthaland registered almost 30% take-up. So you could just imagine the take-up in the next twelve months. And remember these are projects that breach the P500,000 per square meter mark."

Mr. Bondoc said the retail and hotel segments are also expected to continue their recovery amid "revenge spending, traveling and dining."

"We are positive about retail. Vacancies are dropping, mall operators are now reverting to pre-pandemic rates, meaning they are now charging full mall lease rates," he said.

Hotel occupancy rates are expected to rise as travel restrictions have been further eased.

"Our projection is that it will break 60% occupancy rates in 2023. Previously, we were only seeing 20% in 2020, then in 2022, 51%, but definitely that will breach more than 60% in 2023," he added. — **J.I.D. Tabile**

Debt,
from S1/1

Domestic debt slipped by 2.3% to P9.21 trillion as of end-December from the P9.43 trillion in November. Year on year, it was up by 12.7%.

"The lower level of domestic debt was due to the net redemption of government securities amounting to P217.95 billion," the BTr said. "Moreover, local currency appreciation against the US dollar trimmed P1.63 billion from the peso value of foreign currency denominated domestic debt."

As of end-December, the peso strengthened by 1.4% to P55.815 against the dollar from its close of P56.598 at the end of November, based on figures from the BTr.

The government prefers to borrow from local sources to mitigate foreign currency risk.

Meanwhile, foreign debt dipped by 0.1% to P4.21 trillion as of end-December, from P4.22 trillion in the previous month. Year on year, foreign debt jumped by 18.3%.

External debt consisted of P1.88 trillion in loans and P2.33 trillion in global bonds.

The BTr said foreign debt was lower than the end-November level due adjustments on foreign currency debt valuation.

"This offset the net impact of third-currency fluctuations against the US dollar amounting to P34.07 billion and the P18.54-billion net availment of foreign loans," it added.

The government's guaranteed obligations went up by 2.8% month on month to P399.05 billion. Year on year, it declined by 5.9%.

"For the month, the net availment of domestic guarantees added P26.19 billion while the net effect of currency fluctuations increased the value of external guarantees by P1.58 billion. This was tempered by net repayments on external guarantees amounting to P16.72 billion," the BTr added.

Rizal Commercial Banking Corp. Chief Economist Michael L. Ricafort said the Philippines' global bond issuance in January, which raised $3 billion (P162 billion), "could add to the National Government's outstanding debt stock."

Analysts said the government would need to prepare for the impact of a potential global recession on the economy.

"Global headwinds (are) expected to be more pronounced toward the middle of 2023, a stronger fiscal support may be needed and that may put pressure on higher fiscal requirements," Mr. Asuncion said.

"The government would need to anticipate and be able to buffer the economy from external challenges and along the way secure economic growth for the year," he added.

Ms. Velasquez said the government should raise revenues by implementing progressive taxation.

"Luxury taxes will help. We hope to see more initiatives in the next few years. Additionally, administrative efforts to improve tax collection should also increase tax efficiency," she added.

Mr. Ricafort said tax and fiscal reform measures should raise revenue collections, and help further bring down the debt-to-GDP ratio.

"Faster economic growth, together with tax and other fiscal reform measures to further structurally increase tax revenue collections and combined with more disciplined spending would help further reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio to below the 60% international threshold to help sustain the country's favorable credit ratings," he said in a Viber message.

Growth,
from S1/1

While inflation is seen to peak this year, it will still remain a challenge for developing economies, Mr. Banerjee said.

"These have impacted the purchasing power of low-income households, who spend a great portion of income on food and energy. This rise in cost of living will push many of the poor to poverty and amplify concerns on food security and malnutrition," he added.

The UN forecasts Philippine inflation to average 4.3% this year, higher than its initial 3.4% projection. It also sees inflation easing to 3.2% in 2024.

Philippine headline inflation averaged at 5.6% last year, a 14-year high. This year, inflation is seen to average 4.5%.

"Depreciating currencies mean that imports in the region are more expensive, which is another spur to inflation. On top of this, many countries witnessed weather related events which added to upward price pressures," Mr. Banerjee said.

Developing countries are facing significant risks due to rising interest rates and global tightening conditions, he said.

"In the developing world, the key impact is on debt vulnerability. As we know, rising interest rates make the cost of debt in developing countries higher and make it harder for them to have debt finance growth and roll over existing debt," he added.

The UN said in the report that governments should strengthen their debt sustainability measures.

"Several governments are gaining additional room to maneuver by gradually discontinuing pandemic-related emergency measures. This effect is particularly relevant for middle-income countries, for example, Brazil, Malaysia, Mexico, the Philippines and Turkey," it added.

The UN recommended revisiting rigid inflation targets for policy flexibility and implementing fiscal consolidation measures.

"Governments will need to reallocate and reprioritize public expenditures to support vulnerable groups through direct policy interventions, it said. "This will require strengthening social protection systems and ensuring continued support through targeted and temporary subsidies, cash transfers and discounts on utility bills, which can be complemented with reductions in consumption taxes or custom duties."

It also said governments should target private investment in critical sectors, improve tax collection and get support from international sources to solve debt stress. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**