

Working together to improve service levels

Semiconductor wafer maker SSMC has been mentoring turbocharger service provider Tru-Marine for a year now. This scheme, organised by Spring Singapore, has been beneficial for both firms, reports **WEE LI-EN**



Partners: Tru-Marine employees being mentored by staff from SSMC. The programme helps SMEs that have already been certified on the business excellence journey to do even better.

ONE company makes semiconductor wafers and the other, services turbochargers. But the two are in a partnership to achieve business excellence.

Semiconductor maker Systems on Silicon Manufacturing Company (SSMC) has been mentoring turbocharger service provider Tru-Marine for a year and is expected to continue doing so for another six months.

According to Tru-Marine's group senior manager Anthony Ong, there are generic business processes that cut across industries which his company can learn about.

"Companies in the same industry tend to have the same blind spots, or are potential competitors," he said.

SSMC vice-president Chia Beng Chye said that the company guides Tru-Marine on providing excellent service to customers.

For example, it shares and coaches Tru-Marine how to develop a customer service culture, manage customer touch points and adopt a compliment and complaint management system for customers.

Both companies were matched by Spring Singapore which organised the mentoring programme. The programme helps small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that have already been certified on the business excellence journey to do even better.

The SMEs are usually mentored by companies which have already won the Singapore Quality Award for business excellence.

Spring helps to pair the mentors and SMEs and oversees the mentoring process.

Main reasons for joining scheme

According to Mr Chia, SSMC decided to be part of the programme partly for altruistic reasons and partly to learn.

"We wanted to fulfil our corporate social responsibility by contributing to the development of enterprise capabilities in Singapore," he said. "We also sharpen our own expert resources as we are also learning while sharing with the SMEs."

Mr Chia said that SSMC meets Tru-Marine about once or twice a month. Each meeting takes about half a day to a full day. But both sides also make many informal calls and send emails.

There are four key phases in the mentoring process. First, relevant management staff of the companies meet to secure commitment to the mentoring partnership.

They will discuss the areas which the SME should improve on and the mentor will share its best practices and experiences on these areas.

The SME will propose solutions to improve on the areas and the mentor provides advice on the proposal. The SME decides on the solutions to be adopted and draws up an action plan to implement them. The SME implements the action plan and both parties will review the progress made and results achieved.

For Tru-Marine, the area which both parties decided to work on was how to get the company to be more focused on its customers.

Mr Ong said that some SSMC directors visited Tru-Marine to show how they developed and integrated their business excellence model to support their daily business operations.

Touch-point solutions

The department heads in Tru-Marine also visited SSMC a few times to learn about their customer service best practice systems.

"We came back and developed our own customer complaint and compliment systems as well as established touch-point solutions for core processes across all major business functions," he said.

One of the things that Tru-Marine has learnt from SSMC is to identify and design desired customer experience at various points of contact with the customer in a systematic approach to create a memorable experience.

"While Tru-Marine is new to this approach, we have learned from SSMC and incorporated using similar outside-in concept to identify customer touch points for our various core processes like freight forwarded and overhaul services," Mr Ong said.

"Most of the policies, procedures, strategies and activities were tested proprietary information that we would not have had access to, if not for mentorship," he noted.

After studying SSMC's systems, Tru-Marine included similar features such as handling customers' emotional needs in its complaint system which it previously did not incorporate to create a positive customer experience.

Tru-Marine's staff who receive compliments from customers now follow up with them to thank them and offer better services.

According to Mr Ong, the managers in his company try to be "good students".

"We do our homework properly and make time for learning even though work can be quite stressful," he said.

Mr Ong acknowledged that it is not easy to coach an SME, and that mentors have to be patient and persevering.

"It takes time for a company of various teams to learn, unlearn old habits and overcome deployment obstacles," he added.