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Mentorship takes SMEs to new heights

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Mentorship takes SMEs to new heights

Mr Sanjeev Menon, founder of StitchMob. Photo: StitchMob

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SINGAPORE — When SkillsFuture consultant Ms Jenny Low first looked at the restructuring and expansion strategy of one of the most well-established homegrown companies, it took her no time to identify the missing links in the firm's elaborate growth plans — it all boiled down to the management.

Without mincing words, Ms Low told the company's owners that their plans would not take off — or even if they did, would soon fizzle out — if the management did not first set its house in order.

"You may have the best of strategies or plans to set the company on an expansion mode. But the question is, do you have the right set of people at the right jobs with the right mindset to execute the plans?" Ms Low told TODAY in an interview.

The biggest challenge is that business owners want to have quick-fix solutions with guaranteed results, said the consultant who works with enterprise development agency Spring Singapore to mentor small and medium enterprises (SME) seeking

With more than 30 years of experience in the field of human resources, Ms Low has mentored four local companies under the Government's SkillsFuture SME Mentors programme. Most SMEs are open to investing in technical training but not so much in training employees in soft-skills development, she noted.

"Companies fail to realise that their top technicians also need to be good leaders and that behavioural skills are equally important. It requires a major perception change, and for business owners in Singapore, it is a long way ahead," Ms Low highlighted.

Moreover, since such investments are not directly related to immediate output in terms of sales or profits, business owners choose to put it on the back-burner, more so during tough times or business downturns.

Local distributor Seng Hua Hng Foodstuff, which produces the Camel brand of peanuts, has tapped the SME Mentors programme and capability development grant to improve productivity and get organisational training and development.

In June 2016, the company embarked on a nine-month human capital empowering journey that involved Ms Low mentoring the company's managers and supervisors.

The company now trains its new employees in half the time it used to require, and productivity has increased as staff are able to multi-task more effectively with better guidance from supervisors and clearer work processes.

"We have moved away from a specific-function approach to a more holistic and systematic process-driven approach," said Mr Poh Ah Seng, CEO of Seng Hua Hng Foodstuff.

The firm has seen a 5 to 7 per cent revenue growth in just one year, and is now on an expansion drive. It plans to double its production capacity to export to some 100 countries.

For start-up company StitchMob, which produces custom-printed children's apparel, the mentorship programme was a shot in the arm. After tapping on the StartupSG Grant administered by Spring Singapore, the firm was referred to the Action Community for Entrepreneurship (ACE) mentorship programme.

designers source for their own buyers while StitchMob offers help in production, logistics and customer service.

An experienced venture capitalist was assigned as the company's mentor, who gave advice on how to develop and position the company's business operations and online presence. For instance, a part of the grant was used to redesign the firm's online platform and its client interface. The mentor also offered valuable advice on the start-up's business expansion plans.

"It helps the founders shape up business better and faster while ensuring checks and balances through their journey in establishing and operating companies with limited resources," said StitchMob founder Mr Sanjeev Menon.

CORRECTION: In an earlier version of this story, we reported that the StartupSG Grant is administered by the Action Community for Entrepreneurship (ACE). That is incorrect, the StartupSG Grant is administered by Spring Singapore. We apologise for the error.

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