

Integrating ‘Sejahtera’: A Holistic Approach at Agoda

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Abstract: *The case describes a practical approach adopted by a young Customer Service Specialist, Amalina Basir at Agoda, one of the world’s fastest growing online travel agencies. With a humble start in 2018 as a frontliner who managed calls, emails, and expectations between customers and their bookings, Amalina developed her career at Agoda. In 2021, Amalina was promoted as a Knowledge Management Specialist. Amalina often faced a compelling dilemma to find balance between giving the best services to the customers and maintaining the company’s best practices. Guided by an indigenous Malay concept of ‘sejahtera’, Amalina navigated her budding journey at Agoda in a holistic and balanced manner. Amalina’s ‘sejahtera’ principle was enhanced when she enrolled in an elective course on ‘Sejahtera Leadership’ during her studies in part-time Master of Business Administration (MBA) at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Sejahtera Leadership taught Amalina to give a holistic view on the ten interconnected elements (i.e., SPICES) and find balance between the elements towards achieving a ‘sejahtera’ state and sustainable services in online travelling business.*

Keywords: *Sejahtera; Leadership; Travelling Agency; Business Administration; Malaysia*

THE BEGINNING

In November 2018, Amalina Basir joined Agoda, an online travelling agency (OTA) headquartered in Singapore, with several offices globally, including Malaysia. The agency employed more than 4,000 staff in 30 countries. Agoda is one of the e-commerce companies that dedicated to leveraging the best technology to make travel easy for everyone (Octavia & Tamerlane, 2017). After a few months working as a frontliner with a customer service team at Agoda Malaysia, Amalina faced a compelling dilemma.

What she should do to strike a balance between giving the best services to the customers and maintaining the company’s best practices, the former exceeds the company’s expectations.

Initially, Amalina concentrated on performing her tasks, i.e., managing calls and emails from customers around the globe who made travel bookings through Agoda. In short, her primary goals were to fulfil customer's requests and resolve their complaints as soon as possible. In this way she would achieve above average customer satisfaction scores. These were the best practices implemented at Agoda as well as other service-based organizations in general (Kankam-Kwarteng et al., 2021).

During the course of her work, Amalina started developing stronger connections with the customers. She realized that her work involved more emotional dimension than mere dealing with technicality of the bookings. She had to listen to the customers' personal problems in the midst of attending the booking issues.

Amalina constantly reminded herself that she had to build trust with the customers, be sensitive to their needs, and nurse the emotions of the people involved in her work. These efforts required Amalina to focus more on the people aspect than the other theoretical aspects of the service marketing mix on product, price, promotion, place, process, and physical environment (Elgarhy & Mohamed, 2022).

Amalina felt that she should approach the meeting of targets in the marketing plans harmoniously. She would strive to meet the targets by building a good relationship with customers and others including team members, business partners and stakeholders. In this way, she would ensure that all parties involved in a transaction will be satisfied. This outcome has made Amalina enjoyed working with Agoda. Although she had to work by shift, sometimes into the evenings and during the weekends or public holidays, Amalina faced the challenges comfortably.

In retrospection, Amalina realized that she is the same, yet slightly different Amalina. An introvert English Language graduate had ironically been transformed into an extrovert. She did not talk much except in formal conversation during her university days and the first few months of working with Agoda. She had not been overly concerned about matters not related directly to her. Her work at Agoda molded her to be more open and responsive. Her tasks made her adapt herself to varying personalities and their specific needs. She realizes that being defensive would only aggravate but not solve any problem. As Guo et al. (2018) argued that an authoritarian personality – such as asserting authority, control, and command – inhibits creativity and encourages defensiveness in the workplace.

THE INTERVENTION

In early 2019, Amalina began to reflect more seriously on how to combine two expectations in her work as Agoda's frontliner, i.e., to integrate her '*sejahtera*' values with Agoda's best practices. '*Sejahtera*' refers to a state of well-being in a person and anyone and any being that a person interacts with. The word '*sejahtera*', pronounced as "se.jah.te.ra" is an indigenous term used in the Malay language. *Sejahtera* means safe and prosperous, happy and peaceful, and protected from disasters such as distress and disturbance (Institute of Language and Literature, 2005).

Amalina was formally introduced to the concept of '*sejahtera*' when she signed up for a course entitled '*Sejahtera Leadership*' in her MBA program at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) with a specialization in strategic management. The course was offered for first time at the university. '*Sejahtera Leadership*' is built upon the meaning of an indigenous word '*sejahtera*.' The objective of the course was to inculcate balanced values of

well-being and practices among learners. The overall meaning of *sejahtera* will complement the shared values of peace and harmony. According to the Rector of IIUM, Professor Emeritus Dzulkifli by understanding the concept, the learners should be able to facilitate actions for individual's professional performance, organizational productivity growth and adaptable community happiness by finding the balance between the needs of the employees, organization, community, and the planet (Dzulkifli, 2020).

The course was offered in September 2020 in the middle of COVID-19 pandemic, timely enough to help leaders navigate complicated issues faced by individuals and organizations in finding balanced solutions for all. Businesses related to the tourism industry were among the most affected industries by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hao et al., 2021). Like other online travelling agencies, Agoda experienced a significant downfall in sales during the pandemic (businesswire.com, 2021). It was natural for Amalina to relate the holistic leadership approach of '*Sejahtera Leadership*' in her decision-making processes at Agoda.

At about the same time Amalina enrolled in the MBA program, she was assigned a new leadership role, i.e., a project coordinator. She supervised between five to 18 support agents for a certain project depending on the extent of the market scope and coverage. Amalina was given flexibility in supervising the agents through a quality assurance system such as using tracking notes, incident tickets, and contact records. During the Movement Control Order (MCO), i.e., a series of national quarantine measures implemented by the Malaysian government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Amalina and her team members worked from home and had a weekly review session to update the project status.

She desired to combine the *sejahtera* values with her previous experience in customer service management to coordinate the company's resources more effectively. '*Sejahtera Leadership*' emphasizes ten elements of values, summarized by the acronym SPICES. The SPICES elements comprise: (1) spiritual, (2) physio-psychological, (3) intellectual, (4) cognitive, (5) ethical, (6) emotional, (7) cultural, (8) societal, (9) ecological, and (10) economic. While achieving Agoda's bottom line is an obligation, Amalina believed that combining the bottom line with social responsibility and sustainability would only add value to her employer. She could easily relate elements of ethical, cultural, societal, and ecological to Agoda's being socially responsible and sustainable.

THE ADVANCEMENT

Amalina's first duties at Agoda had been managing the booking and resolving issues related to customers' accommodation needs. Recently in April 2021, she was promoted to a knowledge management specialist. Amalina had to equip herself regularly with sufficient operational and management information across levels. This is compatible with her role from being a frontliner to the mid-level executive, acting as a buffer between the frontline agents and Agoda's operational and project management team. Her current position provided her with a broader perspective and a bigger role in providing knowledge support to everyone related to the core business process. That said, Amalina was able to contribute to the enhancement of her company's customer relationship performance by integrating knowledge management practices (Al Utaibi et al., 2019).

Exposure to the '*Sejahtera Leadership*' has made Amalina evaluate matters not only from the bottom line's perspective but also from various elements of SPICES (see Figure 1). She would ensure that her decision achieved a balanced outcome. She would comply with the company's standard operating practices, whilst ensuring that she delivers optimal services to

her internal and external customers. Amalina focused on three out of ten elements: (1) *cultural* because Amalina dealt with customers from diverse global markets and she needed to be aware of their sensitivity, (2) *intellectual* due to the knowledge acquisition on products, systems, and work processes, and (3) *emotional* since Amalina attempted to balance between different customers' personalities and commitment levels.

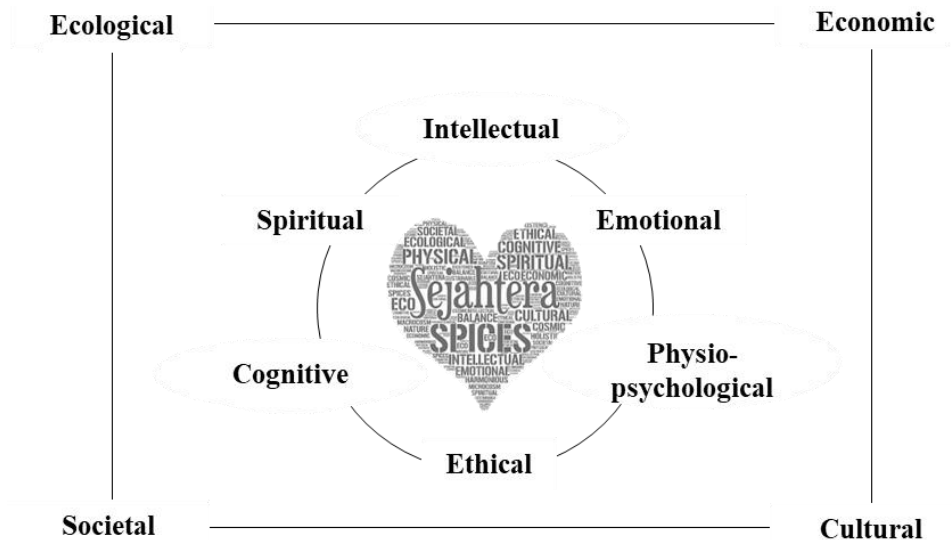


Figure 1: The SPICES elements of 'sejahtera'
Source: Adapted from Dzulkifli (2020)

Amalina reminisced that Agoda's work environment had converted her from being an introvert to an extrovert, and her MBA studies transformed her from being more bottom-line pursuer to a holistic practitioner. She was amused to relate her current orientation with the results of a personality test that she completed in the 'Sejahtera Leadership' course at IIUM. The personal Life Orientation Instrument (LOI) tested Amalina's orientation in terms of achievement, relationship, leadership, learning and nurturing with a primary aim to shape a balanced individual. Amalina is now able to relate her inner self-value, her relationship with people and the environment more consciously than she had been in the past.

Before leaving the office for her MBA class, Amalina read an excerpt from one of her assignments during the 'Sejahtera Leadership' course:

Cultivating holistic self-development and self-reflection approaches allow people to develop and check their progress in life [...] It helps to avoid people losing themselves to the pressure of keeping up with the pace of our advanced yet dynamically challenging era and adapting to different phases of life where we are required to manage more things comprehensively [...] one needs to be able to see within himself, uphold his belief and ready to modify belief to adapt changes in improving lives.

Amalina thought that she should complete her MBA and then pursue doctoral research on the subject matter to satisfy her passion for the 'sejahtera' concept.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the business nature of Agoda? Explain two key strategic factors demonstrated at Agoda for its sustainability.
2. Explain two (2) possible ways a frontliner at Agoda could deliver quality customer services?
3. Does Amalina's personal development clash with her professional performance at Agoda? Take a position (agree or disagree) and justify the position.
4. Do you think that combining both profit and corporate social responsibility objectives are sustainable for Agoda? Take a position (agree or disagree) and justify your answer based on Agoda's perspective as a firm.

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