

Ourselves, Our organizations, Our society

In two panel discussions and a workshop led by prominent women leaders, conference participants learn: how to improve leadership effectiveness through increased self-awareness, how to lead through complexity, and how to influence wider societal change to enable opportunities for women and others

By **Jennifer Khoo**

Our Society: Influencing wider societal change to enable opportunities for women and others

Though recent momentum behind the global equality movement has been encouraging, we still have a long way to go. From raising awareness of issues and influencing change at home, to readjusting priorities and leveraging their corporate careers; these four panelists share their winning tactics in the battle for social progress.

Raising awareness

Joanna Bowers, Director at Cheeky Monkey Productions Asia, channeled her passion for filmmaking into a Kickstarter-funded documentary project aimed at influencing social change right here in Hong Kong. The documentary - called *The Helper* - will tell just a few of the stories of the more than 330,000 migrant domestic helpers living in the city.

At the very beginning, the project was met with various hurdles, including controversial backlash and a shortage of

funding. Then in 2014, following Hong Kong's high-profile case of Indonesian domestic helper Erwiana - who suffered domestic violence and abuse at the hands of her employer - the issue of domestic helpers was propelled into the limelight, upon which, Bowers says, "doors started opening."

Then one day she found herself at the Domestic Workers' Round Table (DWRT) led by ex-Hong Kong Democratic Party leader, Emily Lau, and academics from Hong Kong University, where Bowers says she came "face-to-face with everyone she would ever need to speak to on the issue."

Financially, things were also looking up. Her Kickstarter campaign for *The Helper* managed to raise over US\$85,000 in total, exceeding her target by over US\$5,000. The success of the fundraising campaign helped to reinforce the importance of the issue and the significance of the project she was undertaking.

With only previous experience developing short-length clips and

commercials, *The Helper* was to be her first full-length feature documentary. Although initially a daunting prospect, Bowers says her previous filming experiences have helped build her confidence for something more significant when an opportunity presented itself.

She says, "The project has captured the spirit and mindset of a global shift towards women supporting women. Audiences are realizing how important these women are and the sacrifices they have made, so that we today can leave home and the children to work on our careers as well."

Influencing change at home

Kathleen Ferrier, Co-Founder of Bright Hong Kong, believes that acknowledging the reality of social inequality and understanding our places in it are the first steps towards enabling change.

"As a child, it is important to understand the implications of inequality and to be grateful to the women - like domestic helpers - who are here taking care of you instead of their own children, so that your mother can do what she wants," she says.

Born and raised in multi-ethnic Suriname, Ferrier was exposed early on to the realities of social injustice despite growing up with privilege. Her late father - the first President of Suriname following its independence - and mother both

worked hard to teach their daughter the value and strength of diversity; a lesson Ferrier is determined to teach her own children, and others as well.

Urging conference attendees, she says, “As parents you are educating the next generation that we do not live for ourselves alone, that we are part of the international community.” In a nutshell, education should begin in the household. “We do not have to wait till we have the money or position to influence change in our communities. Change starts at home,” she adds.

Readjusting your priorities

For Shalini Mahtani, MBE, growing up in a conservative Indian family in white colonial Hong Kong was a struggle. Her early encounters with discrimination eventually led her to start Community Business, a unique NGO that works in Corporate Social Responsibility and Diversity & Inclusion, tackling social injustices in the private sector.

Upon asking successful women leaders during her time at Community Business what they would have done differently in their careers, many of them said the same thing: that they wouldn’t have made certain sacrifices – mostly times with their family, particularly their children.

This is a retrospection Mahtani can empathize with more than most. In 2009, tragedy struck when her three-year-old son Zubin suddenly passed away.

This led her to found Hong Kong-based think tank The Zubin Foundation, which focuses on critical issues that receive little attention such as patient safety, racial integration and special education needs of non-Chinese speakers; and subsequently Hospital-Advisor, a “TripAdvisor for Hong Kong hospitals” which allows patients to review the quality of care in Hong Kong’s hospitals so that they can make informed decisions about their hospital care.

Like many women today, Mahtani juggles family life alongside her career ambitions, though she often wonders at



From left: Joanna Bowers, Kathleen Ferrier, Shalini Mahtani, Vanina de Verneuil and Alia Eyres (moderator)

what cost. “As women, we face many pressures to achieve in order to define ourselves as equals, but what do we give up?” she asks.

Leveraging a corporate career

Upon starting her career, Vanina de Verneuil, Global General Counsel, Reliance Communication (Enterprise) & Global Cloud Xchange, put her passion for humanitarian work on the backburner, determined to succeed in the world of business first.

A former corporate lawyer, Verneuil worked at a legal firm with a pro bono program that afforded her the chance to be a senior prosecutor at the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania. There, she became inspired and realized that her career in law could be an avenue for humanitarian work.

Newly motivated to merge a long-held passion with her career, and to return to Africa for a second and subsequently third, time, Verneuil spoke to her managing partner in Asia, explaining the importance of firm’s pro bono program for her personally,

what she was contributing to the UN, and finally what it meant for him to have someone from his team at the trial.

“How to influence others is to show them how your goals align with theirs, and then being persistent,” she says.

Verneuil acknowledges she has been lucky, and that it isn’t easy to leverage a corporate career to pursue humanitarian work outside of the traditional CSR. In her case, she credits a change in mindset that includes not taking no for an answer. “What would you do if you had no cultural or financial barriers and were fearless?” she asks pointedly.

Corporations, for their part, can reach out to see what their employees are passionate about and create internal opportunities for them to get involved in, she suggests.

All four panelists agree that businesses have a responsibility to demonstrate support for social change through sponsorship and actions, and should exercise their “spheres of influence” to open doors and form partnerships within the community.

But ultimately, the responsibility to influence change lies with all of us. Mahtani says, “You are in a position of privilege, so use it.”

Our Organizations: Leading through Complexity

Being a female leader in the workplace is challenging enough at the best of times. But for these five women, it was amid times of uncertainty that the most valuable lessons were revealed.

When the going gets tough

For Marybeth Hays, Chief Merchandising, Marketing & Supply Chain Officer at Walmart China, the opportunity to lead through complexity was built into the job description.

Within the merchandising industry, Hays has developed something of a specialty in turnaround management, having successfully led four turna-

round situations involving businesses worth between USD2 billion and USD20 billion, annually.

She says one of the hardest aspects of leading an organizational turnaround is making critical, strategic decisions and being unable to see the results of change immediately, but that management can help themselves by simply speaking to their employees.

“People in troubled organizations usually know what needs to happen, but for some reason they either feel that they can’t do what needs to be done, or something is preventing them from doing it,” says Hays. “As a leader, it is your job to either empower them or remove the roadblocks,” she adds.

Predictably however, language and cultural barriers can sometimes get in

the way of strategy execution under foreign managers like Hays working in Mainland China, who often finds herself “lost in translation.” For a leader whose role requires dealing with both top-line management issues and day-to-day operations, exercising a little humility can go a long way, as people at all levels of the organization will be more willing to help you, she says.

Hays’ role also involves leading the company through the global shift away from traditional ‘bricks and mortar’ retailing, and towards online retailing. This presents a challenge in developing countries where Walmart has a presence, like China and India, where ‘bricks and mortar’ retailing is still largely preferred by customers, and the market for online shopping is relatively young as compared to Western countries.

In these situations, she asks, “How do you convince your [local] teams that this is the way of the future when they’ve known nothing else?”

Don’t overlook empathy

Vivian Cheung, Deputy Director of Airport Operations at Airport Authority Hong Kong (AAHK), believes empathy is an important trait to possess when leading change.

Taiwanese-born, US-educated Cheung was involved in developing the technology for the operations behind Hong Kong’s new international airport in 1998. After the success of Hong Kong International Airport, many foreign airports wanted to work with AAHK in the hopes of improving their own.

One project Cheung worked on was the revitalization of Zhuhai Airport in Mainland China. When she and her team went over in 2006, it became clear that they had inherited the city’s ‘white elephant.’ The airport was not only suffering from a lack of business and flights, but its entire workforce was



From left: Sammi Cho, Vivian Cheung, Marybeth Hays, Christina Ma, Daphne Yiu and Anne O’Riordan (moderator)

demoralized and lacking a sense of purpose.

Cheung found that the key to effective leadership during this project was to gain the trust of the local government and airport staff by being empathetic towards them, and demonstrating passion for what she and her team were trying to achieve.

"We made sure each person understood what was trying to be achieved and how it would improve their situation, so now they are all internally motivated to work towards the same goal, and not only when they are being told to do so by the leadership," she says of the Zhuhai airport staff.

In just three years since the start of its partnership with AAHK, Zhuhai Airport has transformed. With six million passengers passing through daily, it is now operated by a motivated workforce who keep things running smoothly.

As a female leader it can be difficult to talk about empathy as we are often under pressure to be assertive and vocal to ensure our voices are heard, says Cheung. The solution is to reeducate communities on the importance of leadership qualities which don't get as much credit, such as empathy, humility and passion, she adds.

No one-size-fits-all

Daphne Yiu, PhD, Professor and Chairperson of the Department of Management at CUHK Business School, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, believes that successful leaders possess the ability to adapt solutions to different situations.

Based on her own research, Yiu says the biggest lesson she has learned is that business and management 'best practices' simply won't work in many parts of Asia due to cultural idiosyncrasies. In Mainland China and other East Asian countries like Korea and Japan for instance, organizational management

styles are very 'top-down' and autocratic, in contrast with the more consensus-seeking, democratic management styles of the West.

Yet many state-owned enterprises in Mainland China have been privatized, internationalized, and even listed, having successfully adapted business 'best practices' to work within their unique structures.

Taobao, China's most popular e-commerce website, is a great example of how a foreign business model was successfully reengineered and adapted for the domestic market. Initially labelled the 'Chinese eBay,' Taobao is now the largest e-commerce website in the world by monthly unique visitors, surpassing even the American e-commerce giant from which it took inspiration.

Taking chances on others

Sammi Cho, Chief Executive HK Branch and Chief Operating Officer of Asia Pacific Region at BNY Mellon, learned a valuable lesson about leadership amid uncertainty after a personal experience with her boss.

Just a day before she went on maternity leave, Cho's boss offered her what is now her current role, which included wider oversight of the Asia region. Unsure of how to respond to him amid a gut feeling she may not want to return to work after giving birth, Cho said she would think about it, thinking that perhaps he knew something she didn't.

True enough, following a few months of what she facetiously referred to as "diaper duty," Cho felt ready to return to the workplace and take on the regional role that was offered to her before she left. Grateful for her boss' foresight and his faith in her, she says, "A good leader is someone who takes chances on others, based on the ability to see what they may not."

Leaving the comfort zone

What Christina Ma, Head of Greater China Equity Sales at Goldman Sachs Asia, learned from her experience as a woman leader, is that leaving your comfort zone amid shifting circumstances is necessary for both personal development and survival.

Prior to her current role, Ma was a trader for seventeen years and enjoyed it immensely, during which the thought of switching jobs never even occurred to her. But towards the end of 2014, she was offered a role "ideally filled by someone male, from the PRC, and with an existing client relationship, to address a shift in the market characterized by a new crop of clients from the Mainland looking to become more active in Hong Kong," she says.

Despite not meeting the traditional criteria for the position, Ma pushed herself to take on the challenge. This was a big transition for her professionally and personally, requiring significant change from her trader's mindset to one that is people-oriented.

Shifting market conditions, evolving technology and an increasingly complex regulatory environment have disrupted the nature of many jobs within the financial services industry, displacing many. Ma says it is crucial to constantly push ourselves to keep up with the pace of change, or risk getting swept away by it.

"The one characteristic that helps people deal with change is the ability to keep learning. The minute you stop thinking about learning about not only the current environment but also anticipating new trends is the day you get taken out of the door," says Ma. "You have to push yourself out of your comfort zone, because only when you push yourself can you anticipate what's coming next," she concludes.

Ourselves: Increasing our self-awareness and leadership effectiveness

As leaders, we naturally anticipate and visualize success, but managing conflict effectively is perhaps the most crucial part of the job. According to the American Management Institute, any effective leader spends about 30 percent of his or her time dealing with and managing conflict.

In a workshop led by Divya Ahluwalia, a communications training consultant at Templar Advisors, and facilitated by Rina Hiranand, Strategy Director at social@Ogilvy Hong Kong, participants learned five tools for success when engaging in a difficult conversation.

- 1) **Be objectives driven** – Make sure expectations are clearly set before the meeting so that people don't feel ambushed and aren't put on the defensive unfairly.
- 2) **Establish a common purpose** – When inviting someone to a difficult

meeting or discussion, don't make it all about your own needs. Be clear about how the meeting will seek to resolve the issue for all parties.

- 3) **Be curious, not furious** – Seek to understand before being understood by asking questions and listening from a place of authenticity. Don't just wait for your turn to speak.
- 4) **Adopt the "Yes and..." stance** – After hearing their story, know that it is okay to tell yours. Create an atmosphere where two opposing perspectives are allowed, and try to avoid using the "Yes but..." phrase which doesn't build a common story or purpose.
- 5) **Use "I" sentences** – Take responsibility and accountability for the issue by framing it in relation to the impact it has on you, rather than attacking or blaming the other person right away.



From left: Divya Ahluwalia, Helene Liu (introducer) and Rina Hiranand

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