



# ROBERT WALTERS E-GUIDE

REDEFINING THE FUTURE BUSINESS LEADER

A Robert Walters Group Company

ROBERT WALTERS



# Foreword

I founded the Robert Walters Group over 35 years ago with the aim of building an international, specialist recruitment consultancy which puts candidates and clients first. We've grown organically and now have a presence in 31 countries, and over the past three decades we have navigated our way through multiple crises – the early 1990s recession, the 2008 global financial crisis, SARS, and today, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite this, the current crisis is very different to what we've faced in the past because it is a truly global health pandemic affecting every sphere of society and every economy around the world.

Business leaders are having to adapt and innovate as they navigate their organisations through this crisis and while there are already positive signs of recovery in many markets, the fluid and volatile nature of the pandemic limits much of our future visibility.

With so many demands on today's business leader, we have developed this e-book, Redefining the future business leader, to share our observations on how global leaders are navigating the pandemic and evolving to lead in these unprecedented times.

Included within the e-book are a series of interview stories featuring leaders from across the world sharing their perspectives and experiences in leading organisations during this period of uncertainty and into the future. The resilience, determination and resourcefulness these leaders have demonstrated is extraordinary, and we hope their stories will lend strength and provide useful insights, so we can all overcome the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic together.



Business leaders are having to adapt and innovate as they navigate their organisations through this crisis.

**Robert Walters**



# Precis

The COVID-19 global pandemic is but one of the latest challenges businesses and business leaders have to face in their histories and careers. Even as some sectors take a hit, new industry trends emerge, and bring about new ways of working for companies and stakeholders alike. Through this e-guide, we hope you gain new insights and perspectives on how other business leaders are tackling crises and forging ahead for their organisations. More importantly, we hope to provide valuable, practical tips for you to implement in your own organisation to help it and your teams grow and move forward amidst adversities.

**Watch our on-demand webinar to hear business leaders Dharmesh Arora, Kevin Fernando and Tsu Shien Teoh share insights on how they are leading their organisations and stakeholders through an uncertain global environment and into a ‘new normal’.**



**Watch now**



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# Leading in a new world of expectations

The impact and scale of the COVID-19 pandemic was both unexpected and unprecedented. Around the globe, we witnessed leaders having to rapidly change their approach to the way they work, manage, and lead their teams to adapt to ever-changing situations. While many of these changes, such as organisation-wide work from home arrangements, may be a temporary measure to ride out the worst of the pandemic, the global COVID-19 crisis has undoubtedly reshaped the long-term expectations employees have of their leaders. As we move to a new future of work, leaders need to account for these new workplace expectations, and adapt to remain relevant and effective in managing their myriad of stakeholders – be they customers, suppliers, employees, board members, or wider communities.

In this e-guide, we explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted companies and reconfigured stakeholders' expectations of their leaders. We interviewed 9 business leaders from diverse industries across the world, to hear their experience and valuable lessons learnt while steering their companies through the pandemic and the resulting 'new normal'. While each senior leader gave us a unique glimpse into their leadership style and the workings of their organisation and industry, a common picture emerged – to successfully lead businesses, employees and business partners through a major crisis and into a new, uncertain future, four key leadership traits are required:

## **Make fast, informed decisions, even when they're tough**

Amidst rapidly fluctuating infection rates, changing government policies, and closed country borders, how can top decision makers quickly firm up the correct course of action for various markets, despite often being limited by the amount of information they possess?

## **Engage, build relationships and create trust amidst uncertainty**

Remote working and social distancing measures have meant professional interactions have, in many cases, become virtual. How can you build rapport with teams that you have not physically met, and maintain or even boost your external partnerships and ties amidst a crisis?

## **Manage employee well-being during and beyond crises**

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly affected everyone's lives. In such upheavals, how can business leaders ensure their employees' health, safety, and mental well-being are taken care of, while maintaining an effective level of productivity for their organisations?

## **Embrace and encourage change, innovation to move ahead**

While companies should place tackling crises as their priority, can crises in fact, be an opportunity for leaders to redefine their business strategy, solutions and value proposition to better address their customers and employees' changing needs?



# Making swift yet effective decisions in an ever-evolving world

Featuring:

Driving long-term decisions



**Dharmesh Arora**

CEO, APAC  
Schaeffler

Managing with speed and agility



**Tsu Shien Teoh**

President  
Henkel Malaysia



# Making swift yet effective decisions in an ever-evolving world

One key yardstick used to gauge the effectiveness of leaders has always been whether they are able to make quick and effective decisions under the pressure of time and information constraints. This expectation has not changed during the global COVID-19 crisis; instead stakeholders are now demanding even more accurate and immediate guidance, as societies and businesses venture deep into what seems to be a turbulent future.

## New expectations for business leaders

Transiting into a ‘new normal’, business leaders are expected to:



### Speed up decision-making

A 2015 McKinsey report (pre-COVID-19) found that 70% of ‘agile’ companies rank highly in the consultancy’s Organisational Health Index (OHI), which measures companies’ abilities to align and attain their goals for long term success.<sup>1</sup> Post-COVID-19, our Robert Walters global survey revealed that over 1 in 5 employees (20%) across the globe expect more agility and speed in decision processes in future workplaces. Moving forward, the speed factor as leaders make decisions is and will become even more critical to the sustainability and effectiveness of businesses.



### Leverage more data in decision-making processes

Data and its analytics can help business leaders chart more informed courses when it comes to different situations at hand. The most objective and complete picture a leader can obtain of the situation often require the help of good data through various platforms. Resultingly, companies are on the hunt for talented employees with data skillsets – in our global Robert Walters survey of clients and the impact of

COVID-19 on organisations, 31% of clients noted that data analysis/statistics skills will be in demand in their organisations in a post-COVID-19 environment.



### Be transparent and clear when communicating decisions

More than half of clients surveyed (56%) in our Robert Walters global survey said organisation leaders need to have clearer communication skills, especially in virtual environments. On the same note, the top skill that clients surveyed are on the lookout for in a post-COVID-19 world is similarly communication skills (55%). Evidently, business leaders and the teams under them need to further develop and grow this aspect of their professional arsenal, so their messages are understood and have the desired outcome.

<sup>1</sup>Michael Bazigos, Aaron De Smet, and Chris Gagnon, “Why agility pays,” McKinsey Quarterly (2015).

# Making swift yet effective decisions in an ever-evolving world

## How can business leaders evolve?

### ■ Truly trust and delegate to your teams

Don't micromanage. Instead, have regular check-ins to catch up, advise, and ensure nothing is overlooked. This enables you to keep a closer eye on the bigger and more important picture. Decentralise and involve your local leadership teams in your decision-making processes, as they will have a better understanding of their own markets.

### ■ Reconsider the structure of your teams strategically

A flatter organisational structure can work wonders for obtaining more immediate information and executing actions. However, it is essential to ensure new job functions and structures are designed properly and seamlessly. More importantly, check in with your direct reports to make sure they understand and follow the new structure, so that the change reaps its intended benefits.

### ■ Balance crisis management and long-term goals

While tackling crises on hand is important, don't sideline the company's long-term viability or outlook. Dedicate a specific group of employees to focus on the company and industry's long-term future, so that when businesses recover, you're raring to go.

### ■ Be honest, open and precise when conveying decisions, especially tough ones

Don't wait for all the information to be in before you send out the message to your employees. Instead, by keeping your staff updated on the latest information and plans as they come in, you are demonstrating transparency, and that you are willing to tell them whatever you know. If something is confidential, say so – your teams will understand.

### ■ Don't be afraid to reach out

Making quick and effective decisions in a 'new normal' can be a difficult burden to bear alone, so have a trusted advisor on hand or a group of peers to bounce ideas off each other. Try to democratise your decision-making process – but avoid having too large an advisory group as it will only slow you down.



## Find out how

Dharmesh Arora, CEO of APAC, Schaeffler and Tsu Shien Teoh, President, Henkel Malaysia are making tough, informed decisions with agility in these tough times on pages 8 and 10.



# Driving long-term decisions



**Dharmesh Arora**

CEO, APAC

 Schaeffler

Dharmesh Arora was promoted to CEO of APAC, Schaeffler in late 2019, when he moved from India to Singapore. He quickly settled into his new role, and alongside his team, made new plans for 2020 – plans he had to quickly change when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Asia. Dharmesh shares with us how he and his team make decisions at Schaeffler APAC, and how he believes the decision-making process should evolve for the new normal.

## How is the experience of navigating a pandemic while being relatively new to a role?

It is one of the strangest ways to start a new role. There's a lot of great advice out there on what leaders should do in their first 90 to 100 days in a new role, and I had all my own plans laid out, but none of those preparations came

in handy when something completely unprecedented like this pandemic happened. There is no guide or manual for a crisis like this.

Certainly, it's a very different environment, and I was forced to think on my feet. I had to rely heavily on colleagues who have worked in the region for a longer time. This often meant trusting and building relationships with colleagues with whom I hadn't spent enough time in person before. I had to put extra effort in getting to know and engage with my new colleagues, so we could make the best decisions together and in a timely manner.

## How have you managed to make difficult decisions quickly, while still listening to feedback from colleagues around the region?

In a crisis, it is important to maintain performance and protect the business. This is about ensuring sufficient liquidity to run the organisation, making sure they have the right raw materials to continue production and help customers remain in business. It's about business continuity while ensuring employees' health and well-being.

But the natural instinct is to centralise; have all key decisions and governance topics routed through central functions. However, that can be very counter-productive, particularly in Asia, where challenges are so different

between countries. Our colleagues in local markets understand the situation better than anyone else, and given the dynamic nature of the crisis, it would have been naïve to assume someone sitting in Singapore would understand what's happening in India or Japan.

As such, what we did in Schaeffler was to recognise that it is even more important than usual to trust the local leadership and empower them to make decisions based on the dynamic situation and rapid changes. The role of the regional headquarters, under my leadership here in Singapore, is to establish high-level expectations and extend help and support – the first and foremost being to have the highest standards of safety and ensuring the well-being for all our employees. But how these are achieved and what will work in specific geographic areas is something that is best left to local leadership.

## Would you be able to share with us some examples of tough decisions that you and your team have had to make?

One of the examples which comes to my mind is cross-border travel. We were among the first organisations to stop any kind of travel to China as early as February, and that was followed by bans on all cross-border travel towards the end of February.



However, we witnessed an increase in the number of requests for private travel, as restrictions in cross-border travel eased. Many of our colleagues and associates found themselves stuck in different places around the world when the lockdowns and travel bans kicked in. Many have been away from their extended families for a long time.

This is a tough situation for a business and its leadership team – we don't control the private lives of our employees. In fact, we understand and empathise with them. But at the same time, the consequences of their personal decisions may adversely impact the organisation. They might have to be quarantined or find themselves away from their work locations for extended periods of time. What would be the consequences of that decision on their well-being and that of their colleagues? How does that affect our business continuity? This required conversations not only within the region, but also globally across the organisation, because we have to be fair to all our employees.

It was clear to us that we couldn't stop employees from making decisions that were important to them in their private lives – but we had to make it clear that they must bear the consequences of any private decisions. If they do travel, and are quarantined, this would have to be dealt with. It was a tough decision but we had to ensure fairness, and communicate clearly to all employees. Although the decision seems tough, we actually received positive feedback from employees including those who wanted to travel.

### **From this pandemic, what's your one big takeaway that you will use to guide your future decisions in the new normal?**

As both organisations and individuals, we should not compromise long-term success for short-term gains – something that I have always believed in but the crisis has made this even more profound. Partnerships and relationships, be it with our employees, customers, or stakeholders, have become even more important than before, and this is the time to nurture these relationships with care and empathy. The longer-term returns will more than pay off the short-term pains. Fortunately, Schaeffler has done enough in the past years to ensure a strong balance sheet, allowing us to weather the crisis and support our partners effectively.

The second takeaway is about empowering local leadership to make decisions that make sense for their business in the region or country they have operations in. As an organisation, we were already moving in this direction pre-pandemic and the crisis has accelerated the transition. An analogy that my CEO uses would be that of an oil tanker versus a flotilla of ships. It is difficult for an oil tanker to change direction quickly because they are big and heavy. What we're looking to do however, is to operate more like a flotilla of ships. We all share the same long-term direction and governance, but each of these ships are nimble and empowered to react and alter their individual course according to local circumstances at short notice. Through this pandemic, we have learnt the importance of being agile and resilient.



“As both organisations and individuals, we should not compromise long-term longevity for short-term gains.”

**Dharmesh Arora**  
CEO,  
APAC,  
 Schaeffler



# Managing with speed and agility



**Tsu Shien Teoh**

President

📁 Henkel Malaysia

As Country President of Henkel Malaysia, Tsu Shien Teoh found herself in an unprecedented situation. Tsu and her team had to navigate the suddenness of the Movement Control Order (MCO), which was announced two days before a country-wide lockdown. Tsu relates how she and her team made quick decisions to ensure business continuity while ensuring employee safety, and the important leadership qualities for making effective decisions in the new normal.

**I understand you hold dual roles at Henkel – a local leadership role in Malaysia, as well as a regional business leadership role for APAC. How has the pandemic affected you as a leader, given your two roles?**

As Asia Pacific business director for the consumer goods businesses of Henkel Adhesive Technologies, the impact

to the team was much smaller since we are a regional business and our default mode of communication is virtual. We only meet each other a few times a year, so there isn't much impact on that front.

However, as President of Henkel Malaysia, the impact was more obvious to me. We have two plants to operate in Malaysia, and it was our utmost priority to ensure they were approved to run during Malaysia's MCO because many of our clients are in the field of essential services and supplies.

Our headquarters helped by establishing a comprehensive set of guidelines, tools, and a virtual platform to support the countries in managing the COVID-19 crisis and share best practices. Operationally, we also received guidance from our Corporate Health, Safety & Security Asia Pacific team based in Shanghai.

However, even with all the helpful guidance, I wouldn't say it was easy. We had to understand the local situation, digest what was relevant, and implement the measures. The situation was changing rapidly, and regulations evolved accordingly. To deal with the situation, we formed a crisis management team (CMT), led by me and comprising business unit and functional heads, as well as our plant managers. I took it upon myself to thoroughly understand regulations as they were introduced and updated, so that I would be well-informed when making decisions.

Our main challenge was undeniably our plant operations – the concern wasn't just getting them approved to run, we wanted to ensure the environment was safe so we could ease the worries of our factory workers, who were taking risks by coming to work. We had to make decisions about the measures we wanted to put in place, and many of these measures could be difficult and even uncomfortable. For example, even baseline measures of one metre social distancing and wearing masks the entire day were uncomfortable for many factory workers. However, as a leadership team, we had to be firm, and communicate the importance of adhering to these measures.

**As you mentioned, the situation and regulations were changing quite rapidly in Malaysia. How did you and your team come together to make decisions in a swift, but informed manner?**

I try to be collective in my decision-making and listen to the feedback of others. To do this without sacrificing speed, you need to understand from whom you can get accurate facts and information quickly. I've been at Henkel for 26 years, and my understanding of Henkel helped a lot during this time because I know who I can rely on for different advice. I go to two or three experts for their insights to prepare before any calls that require me to make decisions.



This means that when I go into the call, I already know the direction I'm taking – I'm not asking everyone for what they think. Instead, what I'm looking for are perspectives or areas that I may have overlooked. This is important, because we don't want to spend hours on a call mulling over a decision. This helps speed up the decision-making process.

Also, I am conscious that I cannot be involved in every decision. It comes down to understanding which teams require more support in their decision-making, and which teams are able to be more independent.

### **Could you provide an example of how and why you trusted a team in their decision-making?**

For example, many issues we faced during this time were supply chain issues – be it getting raw materials from suppliers, or providing products to our customers. Our supply chain keeps the entire business running, and during this period, there were times when we thought we would not have the needed materials because of delayed shipments or supplier problems.

However, I've worked with the supply chain team before, and I knew I could trust them to bring us through with their contingency plans. I also understood they needed space, time, and trust to do their job – my involvement would only impede their work. Because it is a crucial part of our business, I still check in every few days, to make sure things are on track, if they need additional support, and see if anything has been overlooked.

Being less involved allows me to take care of the bigger picture – which is making sure we are delivering on our customers' needs, while ensuring employee safety and well-being. This has worked for us, and our supply chain team has done a great job in ensuring the business continuity of our plants and operations.

### **What is one takeaway from your COVID-19 experience that you would like to share with other leaders?**

The new normal is going to be all about maintaining high levels of engagement in a virtual or hybrid environment. This engagement will involve your team, your peers, as well as stakeholders. We need to be open to exploring alternative communication channels with everyone, so that we can ensure swift decision-making to manage ever-evolving scenarios.

Additionally, communication skills, specifically the ability to communicate virtually, is going to be more important than before. We will be talking and deciding on important issues with people that we may not have met face-to-face. For example, we onboarded a new head of business in Vietnam during the pandemic, and none of us have been able to fly out to meet him. It's important that we are able to connect and build trust, so that we can make the right decisions that benefit the entire organisation.



“I am conscious that I cannot be involved in every single decision. It comes down to understanding which teams require a bit more support in their decision-making, and which teams are able to be more independent.”

**Tsu Shien Teoh**  
President,  
📁 Henkel Malaysia



# Engaging, building relationships and trust amidst uncertainties

## Featuring:

### Brewing close relationships



**Kenneth Choo**

Managing Director, Asia Pacific  
📁 HEINEKEN

### Fostering new relationships



**Chris Freeland**

Executive Chairman, UK  
📁 RAPP Worldwide

### Keeping close to the ground



**Gareth Pearson**

SVP Chief People Officer, UK & Ireland  
📁 McDonald's





# Engaging, building relationships and trust amidst uncertainties

While leaders often know it is necessary to gain their teams' and stakeholders' trust to successfully execute their plans, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a dent on the usual after-work socialising and bonding activities. In an environment of remote working and social distancing, engaging and building closer relationships and support from your team and business partners can be difficult but not impossible – in fact, leaders would find fostering rich ties with various stakeholders, be it their subordinates or partners, is of utmost importance when it comes to thriving in a 'new normal'.

## New expectations for business leaders

For effective virtual collaboration business leaders need to cultivate strong relationships with their teams and stakeholders. Leaders are expected to:



### Communicate with empathy

With virtual interactions removing subconscious body cues and often keeping messages to the functional, it is important for leaders to consciously and actively reach out, listen, and understand their teams and stakeholders' needs – both professionally and in their personal lives. More specifically, clients surveyed in our Robert Walters global survey rated being empathetic to employees' work-life balance and what it means for different people as the skill leaders need to possess and improve to better drive new ways of working.



### Engage skilfully via screens and in-person

With over 88% of professionals surveyed by Robert Walters indicating they would like to include more work from home time moving forward, the future of work looks increasingly to be a hybrid environment, where employees split their time working in offices and their homes. Among the various forms of virtual communication employed in organisations, our candidate survey reflected video calls are used more often (70%) than other forms of communications – leaders need to ensure they are not just effective face-to-face communicators but also skilled on video calls as well.



### Quickly gain employee and partners' trust

Particularly for leaders overseeing entire regions, virtual communication has become the sole form of interactions between them and their various teams in different markets during the COVID-19 crisis. While forming close working relationships with remote team members is not a totally new concept, it has now become par for the course for business leaders, especially newly promoted ones, who have to rapidly build relationships without first or perhaps, ever, meeting their team members face-to-face.



# Engaging, building relationships and trust amidst uncertainties

## How can business leaders evolve?

### ■ Listen and empathise

Be it your employees or external partners, people want to be assured and feel connected with others who really understand their individual circumstances, needs, and worries. The closest ties are usually formed when push comes to shove, and your support will go a long way towards building loyalty to your organisation in the future.

### ■ Keep your door open

Always welcome employees who need to speak with you, and proactively reach out when no one responds. An easy way to do so would be to regularly offer and remind employees of opportunities and various platforms to privately come to you with their concerns. Also, keep them informed on any relevant progress on the raised issues – you may not be able to make drastic changes overnight but updating them will show that you have listened and care about a solution.

### ■ Relate through storytelling

Use personal stories from your own experience, observations, and life to share key lessons on what worked well for yourself or people you know of, your own mistakes, and best practices that your teams can take away. Provide them with a light-hearted avenue to authentically connect and feel they're not alone. If you need a framework to get started, experts have suggested that a good story always involves an emotional element and a three-act structure (introduction, conflict, resolution).<sup>2</sup>

### ■ Creatively engage with stakeholders

While the pandemic has made it harder for leaders to meet their teams and external partners in person, there is nothing stopping them from finding online alternatives to offline gatherings. Connect with stakeholders on social media, schedule regular casual virtual chats with your teams, host virtual drinks or game nights with your vendors or clients – to build relationships in these times, leaders need to think out of the box.

<sup>2</sup>Darren Menabney, [“How To Use Storytelling To Build Stronger Remote Teams In The New Normal,”](#) Forbes (2020).

## Read how



Kenneth Choo, Managing Director, Asia Pacific, HEINEKEN, Chris Freeland, Executive Chairman, UK, RAPP Worldwide, and Gareth Pearson, SVP Chief People Officer, UK & Ireland, McDonald's is strengthening relationships both within and outside the business in these tough times on pages 15, 17 and 19.



# Brewing close relationships



**Kenneth Choo**

Managing Director, Asia Pacific  
HEINEKEN

Crafting and supplying award-winning beers such as Heineken® and Tiger® for people to gather and create unforgettable moments is what HEINEKEN does. And like many food and beverage businesses, HEINEKEN took a hit when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. As a Managing Director for HEINEKEN in Asia Pacific, Kenneth Choo not only had to adapt to virtual leadership, he had to ensure a fully-fledged operation network was in place to address the crisis and the company's future. We hear how Kenneth and his teams have navigated the pandemic.

## **With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing measures, how are you and your team tackling the situation?**

The pandemic forced us outside our comfort zone. However, even as all the events unfolded we asked ourselves, "When we're in a situation that is uncomfortable how do we get through it? How do we grow stronger?"

We immediately started two different streams. One stream was to navigate the crisis, care for our internal employees' health and safety, and address the immediate business impact. Our crisis team ensured our top priority was to look after people. We set up nerve centers in all the countries we operate to make sure our employees were safe, had access to proper healthcare and to implement and communicate hygiene and social distancing measures such as the distribution of sanitisers and face masks, and office-wide work from home arrangements. The crisis team set up an information "drum beat" to ensure open communication lines to key decision makers.

We have another stream that focuses on the future of our business. With insights from the crisis team, that stream assesses the evolving situation and addresses the opportunities for our business in the longer term. This stimulates a growth mindset in our organisation to become an even stronger company in the future.

## **This framework of navigating the crisis and building the company's future is definitely forward thinking. When it comes to caring for people as a priority, do you consider your external partners as well?**

If you look at the whole value chain of our business, a significant number of people who consume our beers are those who drink at pubs, bars and other food & beverage

(F&B) outlets, and these are our customers. When lockdowns were implemented across different parts of Asia, we had to quickly assess the whole value chain and get in touch with everyone who needed help. We identified available financial resources to extend a lifeline, where possible, to customers including distributors, pubs, bars and other F&B outlets that needed it the most.

One of the initiatives we took was to redirect our advertising budgets to help our customers navigate a period of little to no business. Our Tiger® beer brand for example started the #SupportourStreets initiative to get people to rally behind their favourite F&B outlets and generate cash for these outlets. The #BacktheBars initiative from our Heineken® brand did the same. This strong commitment to our customers has helped us forge even stronger relationships with them.

We were also in touch with various governments. As mentioned, we have nerve centers in each country advising us on the local situation. When we observed the outbreak in China and then the waves of different countries getting impacted, we quickly anticipated and told our teams in other countries what was likely to happen to better prepare for it. And we readily shared this information with several governments around the region, presenting best practice and highlighting additional things that they should look at.



**Internally, as a leader during this period, how have you built and maintained the relationship and trust with your teams?**

In a crisis, the most important lesson I've learnt is to put people first. Drop everything and look at how everyone is doing, implement safety and well-being measures, and address concerns. Above all else, it is the right thing to do and with competition for good talent so tight, walking the talk by committing to our people during crises is one key step in building their trust and confidence.

In APAC, we seek to grow our Asian talent pool, and we have one of the most challenging and rewarding graduate programmes – our Asia Pacific Graduate Programme. For our 2020 intake, we received over 10,000 applicants of which 30 were recruited. Together with our regional leadership team, we decided to continue the programme for our 2021 intake and also welcome mid-career talent. Our regional leadership team takes talent development seriously. All of us are directly mentoring talent on an ongoing one-to-one basis.

Personally, when I look back at my own career, it's not about how much profit I helped the business make but rather, whose lives I touched. The relationships I've built over the years, and the people I've helped nurture are like pearls in a treasure box that I look upon with pride. In fact, one of my proudest moment is when my secretary from when I worked in Thailand became a regional director for Haagen-Dazs. I remember these memories with fondness

and they never fail to put a smile on my face knowing that these people are doing well in their careers and lives.

So along with the business philosophy of caring for your people, it's the little bit of a personal satisfaction that you get when you see how you impact and add value to their lives. And that, money can't buy.



“In a crisis, the most important lesson I've learnt is to put people first. Above all else, it is the right thing to do and with competition for good talent so tight, walking the talk by committing to our people during crises is one key step in building their trust and confidence.”

**Kenneth Choo**  
Managing Director,  
Asia Pacific,  
 HEINEKEN



# Fostering new relationships



**Chris Freeland**

Executive Chairman, UK  
RAPP Worldwide

In the middle of a global pandemic that saw individuals and businesses having to quickly adapt to new ways of living and working, global marketing communications group, Omnicom decided to accelerate the integration of two of its leading agencies within the Omnicom Precision Marketing Group – RAPP Worldwide and Proximity Worldwide. We speak to Chris Freeland, Executive Chairman of RAPP UK on how he and his team navigated a merger during a crisis.

**The merger was announced in the middle of May, just as lockdown restrictions in the UK were gradually being lifted. How was it planning for a merger amidst a global pandemic?**

Unprecedented, I would say. I knew about the merger just prior to lockdown, and the original plan was to work towards one unified UK business by January 2021 with

a formal announcement in the Autumn. The premise of creating an expanded, if not the leading UK Precision Marketing Powerhouse, was incredibly exciting. However, with the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic, the powers that be expedited the plan, and so we worked towards formally announcing the merger much earlier in May.

And the announcement was only the beginning – the next and arguably much harder part, was executing the plan. The first stage was working out how we were going to structure the business, given we had some inevitable duplication in senior roles across both businesses. The priority was ensuring we had the right talent to take this forward, and to sort our leadership construct. We had to go through the necessary process of people applying for their old or new jobs, and I have to admit the experience was incredibly challenging and stressful for all concerned, not least as both businesses already had exceptional existing talent.

And this process had to be done properly, empathetically, and respectfully. We had to ensure we were making the right decisions for the future of the business, whilst also being considerate to those involved. When we publicly announced the merger with a plan that was still being formulated, we knew people would inevitably be thinking, “What does this mean for me? Do I still have a job? And particularly in this exceptional pandemic climate and incredibly unsettling times.”

**How were the internal communications on this managed since you had to announce it when everyone is working from home?**

I’m not going to pretend that it was easy. Even now, looking back, I know we haven’t always got it right. We put a great deal of effort into the announcement to ensure we covered all the salient points, that it was coherent, and that it provided a very clear narrative about what, why and when it was happening.

One thing that I kept in mind throughout this entire time was something that resonated with me whilst on a webinar on the topic of leading in crisis. The speaker, Nancy Koehn, a published author and Omnicom University Professor, said, right now in these unprecedented times, one of the things you have to hold on to as a leader is the notion of being brutally honest and yet providing credible hope – you can’t pretend everything is or will be okay, but at the same time, you can’t live in a vacuum of zero communication irrespective of the on-going state of flux. Your teams need you to be honest and genuine about what is happening and why, but at the same time, they need to know that as we face the various challenges that come our way, we will navigate as best we can and make the decisions needed to help protect the future viability of the business.



During these times, it's been more important than ever to over-communicate – to the point where there may not be anything new to share, but even sharing that is preferable to not sharing any news, where unsettled teams will typically start to fill the void with their own views about what may be happening. In the early days where we would have weekly/biweekly all hands updates, I was initially quite anxious that I had no new news to share, but I've now learnt to understand that even just sharing that, makes a difference, and when there are meaningful updates, they count for even more.

**You mentioned you had to build a new leadership team – how are you forming and nurturing these relationships during a period where we're all interacting via our screens?**

I'd say we cheated a bit. The timing of the announcement of our leadership team came around the time where lockdown measures eased a bit in the UK, so we were able to get all 16 of us in the leadership group together into a physical environment that was also conducive to social distancing guidelines. This allowed us to have our first face-to-face facilitated meeting, where some of the team had never even met, let alone worked together before. I was very appreciative of that, as despite giving the team the option to opt out of a physical meeting, everyone jumped at the opportunity, and that undoubtedly helped to kickstart the forging of new working relationships.

The challenge now is how do we follow up? How do we meaningfully come together in a way such that we don't always have to be all physically together to have a productive team meeting? We're actively exploring different options, including potentially grouping people who don't know each other that well into threes or fours, and getting them to work collaboratively whilst regularly checking in with one another. These smaller, more intimate groups could provide a forum where they can better build their relationships in the short to mid-term. I do think it's important for us to continue to find ways to build these new relationships, even if some of the things we try along the way don't necessarily work out quite as planned. I have no issue with making mistakes, as long as we learn from them along the way and quickly move on.

**What do you think the future brings, and what are the skills that leaders of the future will need?**

Huge amount of adaptability, open-mindedness, and empathy. It's been an incredibly challenging year, but it's also important to continually challenge yourself and be challenged by those around you.

The world has changed so much. We can no longer take anything for granted, and I know now more than ever that I can't do everything on my own. It's become even clearer that I need a strong team who can provide the consistency, reassurance and expertise to keep the business moving. This will in turn allow me to make more time to think about how we can continually pivot as an organisation in an industry and world that is never going to be quite the same again.



“One of the things you have to hold on to as a leader is the notion of being brutally honest and yet providing credible hope – you can't pretend everything is or will be okay, but at the same time, you can't live in a vacuum of zero communication irrespective of the on-going state of flux.”

**Chris Freeland**  
Executive Chairman, UK,  
RAPP Worldwide



# Keeping close to the ground



**Gareth Pearson**

SVP Chief People Officer, UK & Ireland  
📁 McDonald's

Gareth Pearson, SVP Chief People Officer at McDonald's UK and Ireland, had to manage the temporary closure and reopening of over 1,350 McDonald's restaurants across the UK and the Republic of Ireland as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns. To this end, he worked closely with franchisees, different corporate functions, and his teams to keep the McDonald's business running, and its people safe and well. Gareth shares how he managed business continuity on such a large scale, and the lessons learnt during the pandemic.

**During the lockdown, McDonald's had to close over 1,350 restaurants in the UK and Republic of Ireland, and later reopen them after the lockdown was eased. How has the whole experience been and how did you and your teams coordinate this?**

It's been incredibly interesting and challenging for all of us, especially when you consider the scale of the business, the

supply chain, the people, and all those different elements – it's been just a huge logistical operation.

We operate around 1,350 restaurants across the UK and Ireland, and resultingly, we have to manage a number of different governments and legislations. Also, our restaurants are operated by 200 franchisees, and each of them employs their own people, so we absolutely had to adapt to the way in which we work with those guys. We have to take them on the journey and provide that level of reassurance throughout as much as we've been able to, but equally have very transparent conversations around some of the tough decisions that we need to make.

But throughout it all, the leadership team established early on a key principle that we've kept in mind – when we're out of this situation, how do we want to be able to reflect on the way in which we led our teams through the crisis? Holding ourselves to that principle has very much guided our decision-making process through this pandemic.

**Given the number of franchisees and staff involved, how did you manage the communications and ensure information was cascaded down to everyone – whether they are restaurant employees or company staff?**

It's fair to say that we have always been a relationship and engagement-led business, even pre-pandemic. I think that was a strength that we were able to tap into. However,

we've certainly dialed up the level of engagement across all levels of the business during the pandemic, adopting the principle that you can't overcommunicate during a crisis.

For our franchisees, we have been hosting weekly calls with the entire franchisee community, which has enabled us to be flexible and stay close to how things are developing on the ground. We've taken a very similar approach across our office functions. There will be difficult decisions that need to be made and not everybody will agree with them, but if you are seen to be open, transparent and honest at all times, then you build trust.

We also sought to provide certainty wherever we could, in an environment where there is so much uncertainty. If we know something with a degree of certainty, then we share it because it may not be a big deal to us, but the information might matter a lot to someone else. We also try to talk about the future wherever we can because it gives people a sense of optimism. As we were closing the restaurants, we were also sharing our roadmap to recovery, which gave people hope.

**Burnout and mental exhaustion are ongoing concerns for many organisations during this time. What can leaders do to combat this during crises?**

Based on my experience with McDonald's, you would certainly find that there were certain functions that were



really in the heat in certain moments and operating at high intensity for prolonged periods of time, and other functions where business may have temporarily stopped. So, you've got two parallels operating together, and we wanted to see how we could repurpose people's roles to support those that were operating at full capacity. We were really encouraged by how our people were open to moving teams and picking up some of the work of others where they could.

Looking at individuals, I think it's important for leaders to establish some balance and to provide some parameters. I was very keen to demonstrate to my own teams upfront that I understood that this wasn't just a professional crisis; people were managing things in their own lives as well, whether that was homeschooling or looking after elderly parents or family.

So, we had to be very mindful of that at all times, and by naming that and calling it out, we gave permission to people to speak openly about it. We also ensured that we started meetings with a check-in on how people were coping away from the workplace and encouraging people to take time off, which wasn't easy. It's fair to say everybody wanted to be involved and play an important role in handling the situation.

But we always ensured that we looked for those warning signs that perhaps it's becoming a bit much. Certainly, for my leadership team, we speak about the importance of first putting your own oxygen mask on. I've been very keen to stress to them that their own teams need them now more than they've ever needed them. It's really important that they look after their own well-being and

trying to relate that to the wider business so that it has real relevance because sometimes that desire to be part of the solution, to play an important role in a crisis, or sometimes just professional and personal pride, can impact people's judgments.

### **What were your biggest challenges during this pandemic, and what lessons did you glean from overcoming them?**

I think the biggest challenge has been without a doubt the sheer volume of information and activities to be done, while trying to stay connected to people within the broader business leadership team, but then equally within my own leadership team as well.

One thing I think that has come out of this is people have actually become closer, even though they've been separated physically. You're hosting calls in your home and people are seeing you in your home environment; you see people walking around in the background of a call, you're meeting the family and children. You are probably getting to know people better than you did when you physically worked in the workplace with them.

Creating time amongst all the chaos for conversations with new and existing people in the field and in other functions has been the biggest, most valuable investment that in turn, delivered the greatest returns for me over the last few months. I don't think I've had one of those discussions without taking something away that has informed how and what I've done next.



“Creating time for conversations with people in the field and in other functions has been the most valuable investment that in turn, delivered the greatest returns for me. I don't think I've had one of those discussions without taking something away that has informed how and what I've done next.”

**Gareth Pearson**  
SVP Chief People Officer,  
UK & Ireland,  
 McDonald's



# Managing employee well-being during and beyond the pandemic

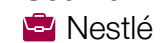
## Featuring:

### Supporting overall well-being



**John Ashley**

Chief Financial Officer, East and Southern Africa Region

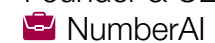


### Founding true balance



**Tasso Roumeliotis**

Founder & CEO





# Managing employee well-being during and beyond the pandemic

From the 2008 global financial meltdown to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen how crises gave rise to drastic changes in professions and people's lives. According to a 2017 independent UK review of employees' mental health and its impact on workplaces, employees' poor mental health (just one aspect of overall employee well-being) costs organisations in the UK between £33 billion and £42 billion annually.<sup>3</sup> How leaders, as heads of their organisations, ensure their employees' physical, emotional, and mental needs are best taken care of, while maintaining business productivity in a rapidly changing environment, then becomes a challenging but necessary business objective.

## E-Guide: Burning the candle - strategies to combat workplace burnout

Globally, people are working longer and harder than ever before - but there's a price to pay for ignoring the stress of the daily grind: burnout. Explore strategies to battle burnout and ensure you and your employees maintain a healthy relationship with their work

## New expectations for business leaders

In a crisis, employees' well-being becomes paramount if leaders want to ensure the sustainability and productivity of their businesses. To achieve a balance between employee well-being and businesses' overall productivity, leaders are expected to:



### Be flexible, especially when it comes to work from home arrangements

Our global Robert Walters sentiment study on COVID-19 revealed that the top change employees expect in their future workplace is more flexibility to work from home (84%). At the same time, organisations themselves noted that the foremost skill that their leaders need to develop is being more empathetic to work-life balance and what it means for different employees (68%). Together, what this means is that business leaders are expected to be more flexible in enabling staff to balance their work and life priorities.



## Pay more attention to employees' mental health

As we progress to new ways of working, 28% of employees surveyed in our global study placed the factor of more emphasis on well-being as one of their top three workplace expectations moving forward. Meanwhile, slightly under half of clients surveyed (48%) revealed that their leaders need to possess better understanding of mental health and well-being. Clearly, both employees and companies know that employee well-being, especially mental health, plays an increasingly important role in future workplaces, and it is imperative business leaders act on this.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Farmer, and Dennis Stevenson, ["Thriving at Work: The Independent Review of Mental Health and Employers,"](#) Report (2017).



# Managing employee well-being during and beyond the pandemic

## How can business leaders evolve?

### ■ Treat everyone's circumstances as unique and adjust expectations

From working parents in cramped homes to isolated individuals, know that everyone has their own struggles when it comes to working from home. Try to tailor possible solutions to individual needs instead of having a one-size-fits-all policy. It is impossible to expect the same level of responsiveness or even productivity across your teams. Be open in communicating this flexible expectation with employees – make sure they know your focus on outcomes and task completion, instead of mandated time spent in front of screens.

### ■ Encourage employees to take time off

Beyond employees' physical health, leaders need to ensure their employees maintain good mental and emotional health. Leaders and their teams might not be aware that stress and fatigue build up over time despite there being no obvious signs of it. Especially in times of crises, drastic changes and new work processes, have employees (and yourself) take time to rest and even if they feel they do not necessarily need it.

### ■ Actively schedule interaction time

Working from home is both socially isolating and time-consuming. If leaders do not specially set aside time to interact with their teams, for example through casual video calls or virtual game nights, employees would inevitably focus more on their tasks. Your teams would eventually find their mental health and productivity declining in the long-run. Book everyone's time so there is an 'official' break for them to relax and not feel guilty about it.

### ■ Keep emphasising organisational culture

Remote working makes transmitting important organisational culture and values among employees even harder, especially in a time and environment where companies' culture and values can help keep employees engaged. Collaborate closely with your HR business partners to ensure employees are reminded of and embedded in the organisational culture, even if they are not physically in the office. Virtual townhalls, videos from leaders, online blogposts, and one-on-ones with HR partners are some effective ways to keep the organisational culture alive despite the virtual distance.

## Read how



John Ashley, Chief Financial Officer of Nestlé, East and Southern Africa Region, and Tasso Roumeliotis, Founder & CEO of NumberAI are placing employees and their well-being at the forefront, as they address the crisis and forge ahead in a 'new normal' on pages 24 and 26.



# Supporting overall well-being



**John Ashley**

Chief Financial Officer, East and Southern Africa Region  
Nestlé

At Nestlé, John Ashley heads a team of nearly 100 finance and IT professionals across the East and Southern Africa region – some of whom he has not met face-to-face because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out less than six months following his promotion to Chief Financial Officer (CFO). In these uncertain times, businesses are counting on their finance function to step up as a co-pilot to ensure business continuity. We ask John how he works closely with his team to adapt to these difficult times, and how he keeps employees motivated and productive in the new normal, all while preventing workplace burnouts.

**I'm sure it's not easy managing a global pandemic while navigating a relatively new role. Can you tell us more about your experience so far?**

I try to view this pandemic as just another crisis that I have to manage within my career. However, it is true that this

crisis is bigger than anything I have ever managed in the past, and it came as a surprise – nobody expected this outbreak to happen and no one had imagined the scale of it. As a company, we quickly realised we had to do things differently from previous crises, and we immediately implemented our business continuity plan. Thankfully, Nestlé already had a strong business continuity plan in place, and we are classified as an essential services company, so as a business, our goal was clear – we have to ensure we are able to continue production and supply of goods, and fulfil our purpose in society.

We are also looking for ways to help our partners, such as our suppliers and customers, who may be in weaker financial positions and going through a tougher time. Risk management is a big part of this, and it is often a delicate balance between ensuring we support our partners who need help, while at the same time assessing how much risk we can actually take on, because in the end we have to ensure our own business continues. This involves quite a lot of difficult conversations and decision-making.

The challenge for me, as I just got promoted into my current role last year, is I haven't yet travelled to all the countries in my remit. There are people I haven't met face-to-face, who I have to work with as a team to ensure everybody's safe and we're able to support the business in continuing production and supply. I do feel like this

pandemic threw me into the deep end but at least I have my team to support me, and I think so far, we've pulled through it fairly well.

**Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw the finance function within companies moving to more of a business partner role, but I am sure the outbreak has further accelerated this transition. How are you helping your team work through the transition, and making them feel supported in their daily work?**

I would say both communication and empathy are essential. We've come to realise our teams work very well from home and on their own, and we haven't actually seen anybody drop the ball – our team members are working hard and adapting to this new situation. I have seen them step up, and I trust them to continue doing so. However, I am conscious about reaching out to my team on a consistent basis to provide support because I know this pandemic affects everyone differently. I try to be genuine with them, and show my own vulnerabilities. There is no hero in this situation, and we have all been affected by the COVID-19 crisis in one way or another – we might know someone who may have contracted it, or feel anxious about the situation, or even worry about how our work and lives are going to be affected. We all go through different emotions.

When I talk to my team, I share with them my own experience – I am transparent and vulnerable in front of them. When they see that, they become more comfortable about admitting their own struggles and concerns because they realise that, “Okay, you’re the head of the function, but you also go through ups and downs.” They feel more supported knowing we all share the same worries and concerns, and this approach works better than me trying to be the superhero and preaching what I know and think is best to them.

It’s not just my personal sharing either. We have a weekly virtual coffee session with the broader finance team, which consists of about 90 people across the entire region. I give a bit of an update on where we are in the business and how we are managing the crisis, before I open the floor for people to share their experience. There are some employees who have pets running around, some people are home schooling, some have to share workspaces with their spouses, and you can see all these scenarios in their video background but that is part of life. Once people start to share their experience, others can better relate because they feel they’re not alone, and only by going through this crisis together, can we manage this situation.

**With social distancing measures in place, people can feel quite isolated. Going forward, how else do you think leaders can support the mental well-being of their teams?**

The health and safety of our employees is of primary importance – and that also includes their mental well-being. I’ve often encouraged people to take time off

during this period. It’s normal for people in a period of crisis not to realise there’s so much anxiety and stress built up. People are juggling multiple realities and the boundaries are being blurred; it’s no longer just work. Some of our team members are working, while trying to home school their children. They have to do more chores because suddenly everyone is at home 24/7. Trying to juggle all of these needs can be stressful, and I told my team to take time off whenever they need it.

We also realised people will not be available at all times of the day so we provide quite a lot of flexibility to our teams. As long as they get their deliverables done, they have the flexibility to manage their time. Some can’t genuinely cope with the regular hours, and they will say, “I have a young child who is doing e-learning at 11am, and I need to be there.” That’s important to them and so we let them do it; they just have to find some other time in the day to work on their tasks. So far, this has worked out for my team and myself, and everyone appreciates this flexibility.

Going forward, I predict many organisations are likely to have a hybrid arrangement, where employees will not be working from home all the time, but definitely more often than they used to. For business leaders, I think the ability to empathise with everyone’s unique situations, the flexibility to allow them to integrate their work and personal lives, and the ability to communicate in a genuine, transparent manner over a screen will be key in helping employees feel connected, engaged, supported and motivated.

“



“The health and safety of our employees is of primary importance – and that also includes their mental well-being.”

**John Ashley**  
Chief Financial Officer,  
East and Southern Africa Region,  
📁 Nestlé





# Founding true balance



**Tasso Roumeliotis**

Founder & CEO

 NumberAI

Tasso Roumeliotis's previous startup boasted a 95% retention rate from its founding to its exit. When Tasso subsequently co-founded NumberAI, members of his previous team joined him. People are at the core of NumberAI, and that is the same approach they have taken to navigate the pandemic. We speak to Tasso on how he and his co-founders have kept their team going strong and their approach towards the new normal.

**A 95% retention rate is impressive, particularly for start-ups. Tell us more about your team, its dynamic, and how you achieved that?**

Hiring the right people who are the right fit for your company is important. Of course, we're a tech company and people's technical competencies are important, so we have tests to ascertain that. However, that's just a baseline test that employees need to pass.

We count on our people to drive us ahead, and this is why 70% of our interview process focuses on candidates' fit for our organisation, and whether their personal values align with our values as a company.

Arguably, our most important core value is what we call 'underdog grit' – the ability to overcome adversity – and that's one of the key things that I interview for. We did a study at our previous company, and found that over 70% of our employees came from immigrant families, where they have had to work hard to get a good education. We found employees who had all the right skill sets but perhaps had a smoother life journey that didn't involve overcoming obstacles typically didn't turn out to be the right fit for us.

So when we hold interviews, we ask our candidates about their life stories, and we talk about the challenges they've been through. We typically only hire those that we feel have demonstrated grit and ability to overcome adversity. We are a diverse team but the similarity in core life values has helped us build a strong sense of togetherness. We have become friends, and friends don't break up with friends.

**I'm sure this grit to overcome adversity has helped your employees during this crisis. How else are you helping your team to stay strong?**

As an office, we've done what other companies have done – we've tried to keep our office traditions alive in different

ways. We used to have cocktail Fridays in the office, and we have moved that online. I am also trying to branch into other things, such as a book club focusing on self-improvement, career development and personal growth.

However, I must say I've found this period challenging. I'm a very personal leader, who prefers one-on-one interactions, so trying to maintain that same kind of engagement with my team has not been easy. Previously when we're at the office, I would see someone and start chatting with them about their personal life and their work. With social distancing measures in place, my team is situated at home, while I come into the office daily.

I've found that while we do get on virtual calls and interact, it's much harder to get that same level of mutual engagement. To overcome that, I've scheduled meetings in my calendar with my team members where we just hang out and talk about their life and what's going on. Without scheduling these meetings, it's easy to get carried away by work and forget about these important personal interactions.

In addition, I've noticed that some of my team members are often cooped up in their houses. Some are lonely, while others are just spending every minute of their day with the same few family members. To help them get out of the house, I'll drive to where they live, and we'll go for a



walk in the park or in a big open area where we're far away from other people. I think getting people out of their house to enjoy some nature and greenery is incredibly helpful to their mental health and well-being.

**Your company culture is an integral part of how you help your team balance work and life. In hybrid work environments of the future, how can you onboard new employees and ensure they assimilate well into your team?**

It's something the leadership and HR team need to work much harder on, and I don't have the answer yet myself. However, I do see it being similar to the classic growing pains that we experience in start-ups. A one-person company is very different from a three-person company, and as you continue to expand to 10, 30, and then 100 people, things are going to change at each stage.

From what I observed at my previous company, at 30 people, we all knew each other. Then you go on to a hundred, and inevitably there will be people who don't know each other. What systems do you put in place then to make sure the company's core values are diffused across the entire team, and the culture remains strong?

I think what's going to happen is that we're going to have to accelerate the systems, and put them in place much earlier. Where teams of 30 in an office may all know each other, teams of 30 in a hybrid environment may not get much chance to interact with each other. We're going to

have to perhaps start implementing the processes and support systems at even smaller scales to get people to talk more to each other, and scale up from there.

**What other tips do you have for other leaders in helping their teams find that balance between work and well-being?**

One thing I've learnt from the pandemic, in terms of operating a company, is that you can no longer assume everybody is in the same situation. During this pandemic, we have employees who didn't have the luxury of living in a big enough house that allows them to work in separate rooms from their spouses; we have employees who have children that need their attention at different times of the day, and we have employees living alone without any company.

I think this is an incredibly important lesson that we need to bring with us going forward. As we transition into the new normal, we need to work with HR to construct solutions that can address many different problems instead of having a one-size-fits-all measure.



“I've learnt from the pandemic, in terms of operating a company, that you can no longer assume everybody who works in the company is in the same situation.”

**Tasso Roumeliotis**

Founder & CEO,  
📁 NumberAI



# Embracing change and innovation

## Featuring:

### Rallying ground-up innovation



**Parag Arora**

Area Vice President Networking,  
Asia Pacific & Japan



### Powering through innovation



**Kevin Fernando**

President, Growth Initiatives Asia,  
Stanley Black & Decker





# Embracing change and innovation

While we have previously seen past incidences of virus outbreaks, impacted economies, and rising unemployment rates, none of the previous crises have affected the global population as much as the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which was termed by the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as ‘the worst crisis the world has faced since World War II’. However, out of adversity comes opportunity – leaders who find themselves not only adapting to but utilising times of great change and uncertainty to reposition themselves and develop new and greater value for their customers and their wider industry, will be the gamechangers and industry titans of tomorrow.

## New expectations for business leaders

To overcome crises, leaders are expected to think creatively to enact both short and long-term measures. Business leaders need to:



### Go beyond cost-cutting measures for long-term sustainability

While freezing and cutting employee headcount and budgets may be unavoidable, it is neither sustainable nor strategic. Where possible, business leaders can and should think of new, creative ways to address the situation and issues at hand. For instance, some organisations are coming up with innovative ways to keep costs low while retaining their employees. In China for example, a group of badly affected hotels, restaurants and cinemas shared and redeployed a significant portion of their workforce to work in Alibaba’s supermarket chain, Hema.<sup>4</sup> When the situation recovers, such organisations would find a ready pool of talent who can quickly retake on the necessary roles, without additional hiring or training.



### Digitalise processes and have a growth mindset

In the face of an increasingly hybrid work environment, leaders have to ensure whatever work tasks and flows, be it hiring, onboarding of new joiners, or tracking of task outcomes and KPIs, or even external business meetings, can be done similarly and effectively online. For that to happen, leaders must convince their teams to change their original mindsets, and upskill to adapt to new tools, interactions, and work approaches.



### Re-evaluate current structure, frameworks and business models

From reducing permanent office space and enabling more flexible work options to changing current team structures and finding new ways to target customers, innovating and adapting to new ways of working have become the crucial lifeblood of organisations in a ‘new normal’, and stakeholders too expect business leaders to place transformation at the forefront of overall business priorities.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Wunker, [“Six Forms Of Business Innovation During The Coronavirus Crisis,”](#) Forbes (2020).



# Embracing change and innovation

## How can business leaders evolve?

### ■ Be personally open to change and adopt a growth mindset

While traditional methods may be time-tested and safe, leaders need to overcome and balance their need for security. The 'new normal' presents a new climate and new opportunities for everyone. Stakeholders will be more understanding if certain measures fall through now, so it is the perfect time for leaders to bravely experiment without too much fear of failure.

### ■ Start small with incremental changes

Coming up with and implementing new, innovative ideas may seem overwhelming, but changes often happen from small steps and in tiny ways before accumulating to more broad and visible outcomes. Encourage your team to take simple, easy steps when it comes to embracing change. This can be as simple as changing twice-a-month meetings to weekly ones, so everyone can feel better connected.

### ■ Create opportunities for greater cross collaboration and upskilling

Set aside time for you and your employees to pick up new relevant skillsets – it can be as official as partnering

with HR to train everyone via internal workshops and webinars, or informal avenues such as internal forums and casual virtual chats to encourage staff from different departments or functions to come together to broaden each other's perspectives and learn from one another.

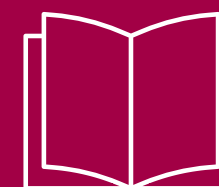
### ■ Foster an ideation culture and feedback loop

Empower and be open for your teams to think of new ideas and try out new things, even if these ideas may not always work. Show that the leadership truly cares for employees' ideas by really listening to them, sharing the ideas across the organisation, and implementing these ideas, if feasible, through small experimental tests.

### ■ Be consistent in driving change

Show your teams that you are committed to change by following up with them. In addition to a clear brief that includes outlining the objectives, strategy, and plans, also be available afterwards to give opportunities for your teams to ask questions, clarify any doubts and discuss issues. Be sure to connect with everyone regularly to check if they are executing the changes as needed.

## Read how



Parag Arora, Area Vice President Networking, Asia Pacific & Japan of Citrix, and Kevin Fernando, President, Growth Initiatives Asia of Stanley Black & Decker are empowering their organisations to better ideate and execute changes on pages 31 and 33.

# Rallying ground-up innovation



**Parag Arora**

Area Vice President Networking,  
Asia Pacific & Japan  
Citrix

In his new role as Area Vice President Networking Asia Pacific & Japan (APJ) at Citrix, Parag is focused on driving growth for the Citrix cloud networking portfolio and cloud services across ADC, SD-WAN, Security and Network Analytics areas in the region. As companies rapidly transitioned towards work from home arrangements, Parag and his teams had to quickly find innovative ways to help their customers in the region scale up their remote working capabilities. Parag shares how leaders can create an environment that encourages innovation and agility.

## **How does it feel to be taking on more responsibilities in the face of a global pandemic, and what changes have you experienced during this time?**

Thank you. Obviously, this isn't a good spot for the world to be in but personally, I always look for opportunities and

reasons to be positive, and I would say it's been a great period of learning for myself. In terms of changes, I would categorise what we've seen within our business into two broad areas.

The first is about redefining our business to really meet customers' needs as their requirements change. How do we reorient our business strategy, our solutions, our value proposition, and re-align them to our customers' needs? We need to rethink strategy, how we sell, and how we communicate our value.

This includes the way we work with our partners. There's a fundamental shift happening now – traditionally, most of our partners sold to customers who would buy and deploy the products on their own data centres or in the cloud. That's changing dramatically because customers now want on-demand solutions, where they can scale up or down rapidly as the situation changes. How can we enable our partners to create solutions and marketplaces where they can deliver these services and solutions on demand?

The second change deals more with the internal teams at Citrix. We often talk about how this period has been a global experiment on working from home for everyone.

Especially for salespeople, this has also been an experiment on inside sales. In the past half a year, every salesperson, regardless of their personal preferences, had to become an inside salesperson because we simply could not go out into the field and meet customers. How do we empower all our salespeople to be equally effective with customers when they are not meeting them face-to-face? That requires a different set of skills as well as maturity and discipline. Enabling our sales teams to become successful inside salespeople has also been a large focus because we see inside sales becoming a larger part of the new normal as well.

## **As a leader, what do you think has been key in implementing these changes to help Citrix navigate the pandemic and the new normal?**

It comes down to empowering people to be more creative and agile in adapting to the new situation. In dealing with this situation, we had to be creative – not just with our solutions, but also how we sell and market the solutions.

On the solution front, on average pre-pandemic, most companies were looking at 10% of their workforce working from home at any point in time, and most of our solutions were designed based on that assumption.



However, during the pandemic, remote working arrangements quickly went up to 100% in a very short amount of time. How do you enable such a rapid shift from a tech perspective? We had to quickly and creatively redesign our solutions into an as-a-service model, instead of selling and deploying as we traditionally did.

But it wasn't just about helping our customers design the right tech that could help their entire organisation work from home. It was also about rethinking our communications; telling a holistic story that helps customers understand how we bring unique value in this situation and as we transition to a new normal.

And finally, agility was important. How quickly you respond to situations like this, how quickly you adapt your messaging, how quickly you connect and show empathy for customers – this is crucial in helping your customers understand that you care. Agility is at the core of the way Citrix works, and it allowed us to develop technical solutions and communications that are relevant to our customers in a crisis.

**As we transition to a new future of work, would you have any advice for leaders to inspire innovation and encourage agility in their teams?**

I am a big believer in customer success, and this is a big part of my work DNA. To me, it is so important that in whatever I'm doing, I need to be thinking about my customers. I've communicated this to my teams, and we've reoriented thought processes to be aligned with this. I find that by cultivating this mindset, we also

encourage innovation and agility because the teams will naturally want to create the best solution for the customer in the shortest amount of time possible.

Of course, this is not at the expense of our employees – and I am only able to be so customer-focused because I know that our employees come first. It is about creating an environment that empowers our employees to deliver the best for our clients.

One of the ways we have done this is to create enablement programmes that help our employees upskill and learn. Beyond these programmes, we hold internal forums for people to share experiences and engage each other in conversations. I think we have been successful so far in making people come together more often to talk, brainstorm ideas and have fun (of course all virtual at the moment), all by really enabling those cross-functional platforms for communication and collaboration.

Finally, it is about showing your teams that the ideas they create matter. This begins with first listening to their ideas. For example, a lot of the ideation processes we have right now are to see how we're aligned with customer needs. This process is inclusive, ground-up and lies across multiple teams and functions. Like this everybody believes in the strategy and everyone has played a part in the process. This naturally creates an environment that is empowering, innovative and agile.



“It comes down to empowering people to be more creative and agile in adapting to the new situation.”

**Parag Arora**

Area Vice President Networking,  
Asia Pacific & Japan,

 Citrix

# Powering through innovation



**Kevin Fernando**

President, Growth Initiatives Asia,  
Stanley Black & Decker

When Kevin Fernando took on the newly created role of President, Growth Initiatives Asia, for Stanley Black & Decker, he thought he would be able to fly to China to meet his new team. Little did he expect after three months into the role, he would still be working out of Singapore. Kevin shares his thoughts on the importance of doing things differently to overcome the complexities of virtual leadership and any challenges the new normal may present.

**I'm sure taking on a new role like this has been very exciting – but also fraught with challenges. What is it like managing your team in a hybrid environment?**

I took on this role thinking I would be able to get to China in the short term but I have been stuck in Singapore trying to learn a new business, new products, and a new team. Building relationships and communicating with my team is my utmost priority, and I now have to do so over

a screen, which requires a very different set of skills. It's not just about having people skills but also how to adapt and get comfortable using digital technologies. I need to empower my team, while setting boundaries and holding them accountable. Things that came as second nature to me, such as going up to someone's desk and talking to them about a project have to be rethought through given the tools and environment we're in.

Despite these challenges, I think the best thing a leader can do is to just jump right into it, and try to make use of all the tools and resources available – particularly those that your team is comfortable with. In my case, as my new team is based in China, I've connected with them via channels such as WeChat. It's interesting that as you use these new platforms, you get to know a bit more about your team via their WeChat feeds, or through seeing their pets that appear during Zoom calls. It provides an opportunity to build relationships and ask them about aspects of their lives that we may not normally talk about. It helps break down barriers and build relationships.

I've also learnt the need to organise smaller group meetings so everyone on a call has the opportunity to talk. In a physical meeting, we often have up to 10 people in a room, and everyone still has the chance to contribute. However, in an online call, I've found the best we can have is 4 to 5 people. I have to be more deliberate about who to involve, how to get them to

participate, and who should be left out, or included in a separate meeting where they can contribute.

This also brings about another set of challenges. Innovation, brainstorming, and collaboration have typically been done through people physically sitting together in groups and bouncing ideas off each other. Now we need to find creative ways for people to collaborate when everyone is virtual, or perhaps in different rooms because of social distancing measures.

**China is one of the earliest countries to lift their lockdown measures and have people return to the office. Could you share more about the transition to this “new normal”, and what leaders should be focusing on during this transition?**

A main focus of leaders as they lead teams out of this pandemic is the redesign of the organisation. We need to consider how we can do things better in the future versus how we've traditionally done it. I've observed many approach this by simply 'moving boxes' and reducing headcount on the organisation chart. However, deciding on a new structure requires more thought to how work will be done, how the customer will be impacted and how the transition will happen. While the goal to restructure is clear, the path to success and its full costs are often not fully considered.



Actions need to be directed by strategy and execution considerations. You need to take the time to communicate the strategy, sequence and plan, and address execution issues. If there is a lack of clarity within your teams, you might find the changes you want to implement falling through. Otherwise, work will often revert to how it was done in the past, just with less resources; employees get frustrated, often the best talent moves on, and customer satisfaction suffers.

Leaders need to be having discussions with individuals that focus on how changes are going to impact how they carry out their day-to-day work – things they are going to do and things they should not be doing. Reorganisation is not just about moving boxes, it is also about relooking at the fundamental job design, working relationships, co-ordination mechanisms and available tools, so that the new structure supports the execution of your strategy.

**In such virtual or hybrid environments of the future, how can leaders ensure their strategies for change and innovation are well-communicated, cascaded down, and executed throughout their organisation?**

I think there's often an assumption among leaders that their decisions and discussions are cascaded down to the next level by their direct reports. However, that doesn't always happen. It requires the leader to go one step further. You need to outline the new behavioral norms that are expected. You also need to sit down with your direct reports, make sure they have thought through and processed the changes.

Be available to discuss how they can operationalise this new way of working in their own teams and environments.

In some cases, you will require a bit more vigilance and auditing – you will need to regularly reach out because you're not in the same physical environment as them where you can monitor the results. In other cases, you can just stay out of their way and let them perform. Holding them accountable with milestones and deadlines, and motivating the right behavior by seeking to understand planned actions. You are indirectly setting expectations and motivating the right behaviour. The more consistent you are, the more the team will realise the new behavioural norms are here to stay. It becomes part of the new operating environment and culture.



“Actions need to be directed by strategy and execution considerations. If there is a lack of clarity within your teams, you might find the changes you want to implement falling through.”

**Kevin Fernando**

President, Growth Initiatives Asia,  
Stanley Black & Decker



# How can business leaders evolve

1

## Make swift, effective decisions

- Truly trust and delegate to your teams
- Reconsider the structure of your teams strategically
- Balance crisis management and long-term goals
- Be honest, open and precise when conveying decisions, especially tough ones

2

## Engage, build relationships and trust

- Listen and empathise
- Keep your door open
- Relate through storytelling
- Creatively engage with stakeholders

3

## Manage employee well-being

- Treat everyone's circumstances as unique and adjust your expectations
- Encourage employees to take time off
- Actively schedule interaction time
- Keep emphasising organisational culture

4

## Embrace change and innovation

- Be personally open to change and adopt a growth mindset
- Start small with incremental changes
- Create opportunities for greater cross collaboration and upskilling
- Foster an ideation culture and feedback loop
- Be consistent in driving change



### E-Guide: Women Who Inspire – 20 Stories From Across Asia

Success looks different to every person. Draw inspiration and learn from the journey behind 20 female leaders, and the ways they are uplifting the people and communities around them.





# About Robert Walters

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- Manufacturing
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- Supply Chain
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