

Do you have what it takes to make your people resilient?

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Interview starts

Alicia Tung speaking

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I love those data because seeing those data, you can see, despite what China has overcome, maybe, the pandemic, but not people's insecurity at the workplace. So all of those data collected from employees explain what is happening today, predict what could be happening next and also see the changes from last year.

Megan Wright speaking

For more than 20 years, Alicia Tung has worked to advise Chinese companies on how to build and retain engaged teams of people. Today, as Chief Operating Officer, Greater China, at Great Place to Work, she is on a mission to establish the standard that defines an attractive and engaging workplace.

I'm Megan Wright, senior editor at Longitude, a Financial Times company, and in this interview Alicia joins me to discuss how the role of HR leadership is changing in China 18 months on from the pandemic.

We'll also discuss the role that data and long-term planning play in ensuring businesses are able to navigate uncertainties.

Alicia says that legacy culture continues to present a challenge for leaders in a world where hybrid and new working models are increasingly the norm...

Alicia Tung speaking

The reason why those managers know they have the power to improve or to change things, but eventually, they choose to go back to work because of a very important mindset that is control. Control in terms of, I want to know whether you are really doing what I'm saying. I want to know whether you take whatever I just order to you as a priority. I want to know whether when you are working, you are really focused and dedicated.

I wouldn't say this is a good or bad. I would say, this is just what they have experienced over so many years.

So that's what they consider the better way, or they consider the way they're familiar with.

Megan Wright speaking

We actually conducted a survey of 300 senior leaders in HR, operations and facilities. And what we found is that 86% of those leaders believe that their role actually equips them to bring a unique perspective to future transformation plans. And actually, among the countries that we surveyed, this was highest among Chinese leaders. So it rose to 93% of Chinese leaders. I'm wondering, with that in mind, what skills do you think will be most critical for leaders when it comes to leading and managing in this new work environment that we find ourselves in, whether it is returning to the office or managing in a more hybrid manner than we have in the past?

Alicia Tung speaking

A lot of managers in new business, they are specialists of their own particular area. I'm an AI guru. I know how to do AI, but it doesn't mean I know how to lead the AI team.

So how can you expand so that people can learn the business, learn the skills and learn how to be a leader in such a short time and particularly without any coaching or mentors? So I would say, leadership overall is missing, seriously missing. And I'm not saying this from my own perspective, I heard this from all kinds of senior leadership, like C-level person, or even younger employees.

They are looking forward to someone who can guide. But most of the time, the younger leader, they are making by their own hands rather than guide the team to get things done. And this kind of skill is okay, when you can still see each other, because you can clarify, you can have a group to talk about what does he mean or what does she mean? But when you are separately in your own place, where if I'm home or whatsoever, the leadership skills missed is actually creating very low performance in the effectiveness of a team.

However, if I can say anything to start with, I'll say to start with something like ask the right questions. Ask the question like, what do you think it will be the better way to do it and why? Or what do you think we can improve from the current box or current issue? Or whoever has a better idea, say it in a specific way.

Megan Wright speaking

It strikes me as well, that in your role, you must have to work with quite a few leaders across the business to really make sure that they are effectively leading in this way. I can imagine as well, that that has major impacts for employee engagement, employee experience, for attracting and retaining talent as well, to your point around what people are really looking for moving forward. Can you talk to me a little bit about some of the ways that you're working to ensure your leaders have those skills and the right tools to be able to bring their team along with them and to make sure that people are engaged in the work that they're doing?

Alicia Tung speaking

In China, a particular way to motivate employees is to give them a big picture of where we are heading to. That works everywhere in organization and the leadership that I've been working with. Even the employee will ask you to share with me more about what am I doing to support our business in three years' time? That specific. Why is that? Because in China, they have five-year plans. Every five years, you have a new plan, and they put this five-year plan like a textbook in the museum.

That is what people are used to. They want to know a little bit further in order for them to be resilient and agile to whatever change is coming in short time. That is how local people manage uncertainties. If I know where we are heading to in five years' time, then I can bear with whatever is unsatisfactory tomorrow.

Megan Wright speaking

Thinking about then, what are some of the opportunities and benefits for businesses that can get this leadership model right? If they're able to create these trusting and I guess, engaged teams of employees, how do leaders and businesses stand to benefit from that?

Alicia Tung speaking

In fact, it pushes the leaders to plan a little bit more thorough and to be more responsible about their planning. And they also help them to do better risk management in events. Okay, pandemic is something really uncertain. But if putting this topic aside, you'll realize that why China can do so many things in 20 years, that is all because they have such a five-year plan type of things. If they consider to next year, they will only to solve things in a quick way, but if they are accountable for five years or three to five years, they will be a little bit more particular about whatever they're planning, because at the end, it is themselves to take the consequence. Right?

For example, supply chain. A lot of people say, "Oh, China has a better supply chain today. Everywhere in the world suffer from supply chain. Why is that?" Because China's supply chain planning, it doesn't start from today. It started from maybe 10 years ago. The harbor construction, the land transportation, the high-speed railway and the logistic transportation, all of those. So it works today.

Megan Wright speaking

What do you think this means for the next, let's say three to five years of business and leadership? With your HR hat on, what are some of the things that will shape leadership as we move forward into the 2020s? And what are some of the things that you are most excited for when it comes to your role?

Alicia Tung speaking

Firstly, I want to say, despite just now seems like I explained the positive side about this bigger picture, five-year plan thing, but there are also constraints and also possible negative impacts from this year because when people are so stick with the so-called five-year plan, that is why people want to go back to the track. That is why people feel like we are over the pandemic, we can go back to the track. But in the equation, there's one very important figure missed. That is when China is back to the track, the whole world isn't. In fact, the five-year plan, you cannot only consider the domestic environment and feel like we can definitely fulfil this one.

I think being agile and resilient is still a very important task and it's different than before. It's a new challenge. In this land, HR people are in one of the biggest impact group, if I may say so, because a lot of things people cannot imagine before and still haven't solved it yet. Everyone is looking for a pair of hands. Missing talents everywhere in the world, in China, in every industry. When you don't have the new blood, you are actually losing your competitive edge.

So HR people, the challenge is, they should be the first group of people facing all of the challenges and to figure out the solutions. But the problem is majority of people still haven't because of the mindset we just talked about. HR people is a group of people who are mostly supportive to the policies and regulations, and at least will lead the changes in this market.

That is actually, in my view, a threat, a threat to actually create a stronger labor and more strategic team to face the uncertain challenges in the future. There are more uncertainties than in 2020 today. I'm saying this because I have been working with so many wonderful organizations and their teams, including HR and the leadership teams.

Megan Wright speaking

So just finally then, tell me about the role that you think data can play in better informing HR teams and leaders right across the business about how to navigate those uncertainties? How to engage their people to create a stronger labor market? And how to ensure their companies retain that competitive edge they need to survive?

Alicia Tung speaking

In our service, we have a core tool named Choice Index that is 60 statements asking about universal values. So there is one very interesting question. We don't have politics and backstabbing in our offices. That's a straight statement, which means you can either say yes or no. The percentage of saying yes to this in 2020 is less than ever in the history. So, there's less politics and backstabbing in the office in 2020 compare with any time in the history. Guess why? Because people are not in the office. So only when you are in the office, you create an environment and ambiance for politics. How interesting is that?

And also, for development, promotions and whatsoever, people also gave a lower satisfaction engagement percentage, because when they don't see the manager regularly, they don't know who they are competing with. Am I competing with my peer or with someone my manager favors?

I love those data because seeing those data, you can see, despite China has overcome, maybe, the pandemic, but not people's insecurity at the workplace. So all of those data collected from employees explain what is happening today, predict what could be happening next and also see the changes from last year.

But most of HR people that I'm helping, they don't see those. That is why I feel I have to help. There's a company, their employee's percentage of working in this company for a long time, it's close to 100 percent, but willing to do extra at work is only 60 plus percent. When I noticed, I was like, "This is a little bit awkward." So I was telling them, "Are you doing everything to your employee?" They say, "Yes, yes, yes. We do everything for them, everything, everything." I said, "Okay, good, good. But why they don't want to give extra?" They don't understand because I also check out ages. They are not ageing physically, we're not talking about 60 plus – we're talking about 35 to 45. So it's really weird.

So when after I talk to them about this, three months later, their entire business in China closed because of competition. They have local competitors taking over their share. So eventually the investment versus their return doesn't balance. So eventually headquarter decided to withdraw. You can see the possibilities from their data already, but they don't see it.

Anyway, I feel one thing good about this market is because it is sizeable, so I have enough data to project, to predict a very clear picture of what is happening now. And I would love to also use it in a positive way to help the organization, to help China speak for Chinese to the world. This is not a secret land. A lot of people consider China very mysterious. Well, somehow, yes, because of different culture and background, but somehow, very exciting because so many things need to be disclosed, need to be discovered by the world.

Megan Wright speaking

Absolutely. And it's been actually a really fascinating and enlightening conversation, Alicia. So thank you very much for your time. I've really enjoyed our conversation today.

Alicia Tung speaking

Me as well. Very much enjoyed.

Megan Wright speaking

This content is part of Sodexo's 'Experience Next' thought leadership series on the work-life transformation.

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