



THINKSPACE

PERSPECTIVES ON

Leadership in a Post-Pandemic World

AN INTERVIEW WITH DEANNA ONG,
CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, GIC

14 DEC 2020



Deanna Ong, GIC's Chief People Officer, shares her views on the impact of COVID-19 on organizational work arrangements and team dynamics, and the leadership qualities needed for organizations to thrive in the post-pandemic era. This was part of the [stars Leadership Dialogue series](#), hosted by David Erne, stars' Director of Programmes & Communication.

HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED YOUR WORK ROUTINE? FOR GIC AS A GLOBAL ORGANIZATION, WHAT HAVE BEEN THE BIGGEST CHANGES CAUSED BY COVID-19, FROM A HR PERSPECTIVE?

Change can happen faster than we expect, but I believe the human spirit is stronger than you think.

GIC, like all organizations, has been forced to take drastic measures with getting our employees to work from home and setting up different operating arrangements. Countries have now imposed travel restrictions that were unimaginable just a year ago.

Hence, for many of us in the corporate setting, the biggest change has been the prolonged work-from-home arrangement. Based on recent workplace surveys, we expect this trend to continue post-COVID, into the new norm. From GIC's perspective, we must ensure the safety and wellness of our people. We carefully monitor the local advisories of our 10 offices, including Singapore, and take note of what local authorities are saying and how to keep our people safe in all these jurisdictions.

At the same time, we need to deliver on our fiduciary responsibilities to our Client – the Singapore Government – by making sure we sustain investment performance and manage the reserves to continue generating good long-term returns for our Client.

We also need to stay in touch with our business partners, and adopt industry best practices for business continuity, across our investments and corporate functions.

For organizational engagement, I am happy to share how we go about enterprise communication, upholding leadership

expectations in managing change, and looking after the mental wellness of our people.

You asked, from a HR perspective, what are some of the things we have been thinking about?

While we value the flexibility that working from home provides, one of the biggest trade-offs is the impact on culture and team bonding. It means that employees have to self-manage and KPIs are more outcome-driven, which is a good thing. But if you are in a situation where you need to be online all the time to show that you are visible and working, this could mean working even longer hours at home versus in the office. This also means a blurring of lines between work and rest, which affects work-life balance.

In addition, for new hires and other colleagues who may stand to benefit more from team guidance, establishing social connections, and informal “water cooler” interactions, the work-from-home model reduces the chance collisions that happen in the workplace and contribute to strengthening working relationships.

WORKING FROM HOME, OR WORKING REMOTELY, HAS BEEN A KEY FEATURE OF DOING BUSINESS DURING THE PANDEMIC. WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCE OF LEADING TEAMS REMOTELY? WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS THAT MAKE REMOTE TEAMS SUCCESSFUL?

These unusual conditions impose more demands on leaders, on teams, and on individuals. The way we engage people in times like these is to be more personal in our communications, and to provide clarity on the priorities to be delivered in each role, to ensure that high-performance is sustained. At the same time, it is also about showing more care and equipping people to do their work well.

We think about it at different levels. For leaders, it is about exercising situational leadership more, which includes being open to the perspectives of others to make the right decisions as a group. We are all trying to navigate uncertainty and look beyond well-trodden paths, considering different scenarios and possibilities, as well as figuring out how to identify opportunities to enable us to adapt to changing world realities. This requires courage from leaders to take risks, innovate, remain agile and know that we do not have all the answers. As such, leaders need to harness the collective knowledge from teams and bring them along the journey.

We also need to show empathy to our people, and support them in building resilience. During periods of high stress, we need to show understanding and care to our teams, encouraging them to be their best when they are working, while knowing that they may also have to manage different priorities at home.

We emphasise wellness and energy in various dimensions. Physical wellness; mental wellness to focus on decision-making and things we have to do; and emotional wellness, which is about establishing connections with people and ensuring they do not feel isolated. It goes back to asking ourselves, *“What is our purpose in life and in the workplace?”* The short answer is knowing that we are able to deliver well on the mission of the organization, while managing personal and family priorities.

For teams, it is also important at the individual level to understand *“why”* we need to respond to changing times, *“what”* is required from individuals, and *“how”* this can be done – by leveraging the strengths of each individual to make a difference. If we are clear and aligned on team priorities, we will be able to say what success looks like and works towards it collaboratively.

At GIC, we have talked about how we can operate in the new norm, and value our people as part of the journey. It is important to build good culture and working habits. Have honest conversations and solicit different views in order to make the best decisions as a team; ensure continuous

learning through after-action reviews to reflect on what is going well and what is not; and adapt and experiment along the way as we navigate uncertain times together.

Additionally, maintain high-trust relationships, show respect for people, ensure inclusiveness of different views. These are things we would do in good times, and even more so in not-so-good times.

We also put out a playbook to support our employees, when we found that during the period of lockdown and restricted mobility, people were working longer hours at home, while simultaneously dealing with the stresses and anxieties of caring for families.

Our playbook describes the *A, B, C, D, E* principles that we view to be important:

- *A* – Adaptable. We adapt to new circumstances and embrace new ways of working to sustain high performance.
- *B* – Balance. We set boundaries for ourselves, strive for work-life balance, and understand when we need to switch on and off, to ensure that we keep well.
- *C* – Connecting with others. This is important as it has an impact on culture and team relationships. When working from home, we use platforms like Zoom not just for meetings and discussions, but also to stay in touch, and come together for a chat or a drink, or play a game. We even had a “bring your pets to work” session on Zoom. Switching on our videos so that you can see each other’s faces is also uplifting.
- *D* – Delivering on outcomes. We have to ensure that goals and priorities are clear, that we continue to provide regular status updates, manage time well, and equip ourselves with the right tools and technology to stay productive and connected.
- *E* – Energy. We believe that this allows us to stay well and develop resilience. There

are four dimensions: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. In particular, spiritual energy revolves around having personal values to guide and anchor the way we work, live and connect with one another, and being authentic.

WHAT FEATURES OF DOING BUSINESS IN THE COVID-19 ERA DO YOU EXPECT TO SURVIVE INTO THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA?

Through good and bad times, *we have to stay anchored on our values and purpose*. For GIC, our PRIME¹ values remain a compass for how we make decisions, how we think, and how we act.

This crisis has heightened awareness of GIC's purpose, given our role in preserving and enhancing Singapore's reserves. It has brought out a deeper meaning in the way we understand how the returns generated in the portfolio make a difference to the Singapore Budget, especially in rainy days like these, and how it provides support for the community.

These are the things that do not waver – our values, purpose, ambitions as an organization, and how we ensure resilience as an organization.

We also value *taking a long-term perspective* – in the way we manage the portfolio, navigate personal plans, and prioritise actions to take. There are times we focus on tasks that seem urgent but are less important; it is good to also take a step back to think about what is important but less urgent, and make time for it.

As leaders, it is about extending care to others, growing talent, as well as ensuring that we multiply performance through our team members, to make a difference in their career journeys as well.

Life is a long-term journey. In times like these, it has made me reflect more on the things that we should value more in life. I have learnt to smell the roses, notice the plants around me, and engage more with others.

“
WE HAVE FOUND THAT SUCH ENGAGEMENT AT THE TEAM AND ORGANIZATION LEVELS, LIKE STAYING IN TOUCH AND REINFORCING AND STRENGTHENING TEAM CULTURE, HAS MADE A DIFFERENCE FOR GIC.

YOU HIGHLIGHTED THE IMPORTANCE OF PUTTING THE WELL-BEING OF PEOPLE FIRST. TO KEEP EMPLOYEES HEALTHY, IS GIC CONSIDERING ADDING A CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER TO THE LEADERSHIP TEAM, OR IS THAT AN ADDITIONAL DIMENSION TO YOUR JOB AND RESPONSIBILITY AS CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER?

Yes, it is certainly my role, but also the role of every people manager.

For all people managers, how you deliver performance is actually through people. It is important that we ensure teams stay resilient. This is about making sure individuals are equipped with the right skills and tools, and they have the space and time to innovate, in order to do their work better. We think about this in terms of building capabilities for the future and ensuring that our people are always well-equipped to learn and grow.

SOME ARGUE THAT THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA DEMANDS A DIFFERENT KIND OF LEADERSHIP. DO YOU AGREE?

The demands of leadership are always there, but the unique situation of a pandemic places more emphasis on situational leadership. This means adapting to change, flexing our capabilities and taking courage, even though the future is more

¹ GIC's PRIME values are Prudence, Respect, Integrity, Merit and Excellence.

uncertain. How do you make the best decisions in a climate that is uncertain? How do you operate, knowing that there is ambiguity and uncertainty, yet needing to stay agile?

In a VUCA² world, things are unpredictable; COVID-19 has certainly brought this challenge to life. To figure out our next steps, we need to understand the things we know, and the things we do not know. We must be able to always connect with our people and harness their collective energy, skills and knowledge, to maintain our competitive edge.

Leaders also need to *leverage the strengths of others*. If we can see the strengths of each individual, we can best deploy them to areas where they can blossom and grow. Essentially, it is about harnessing the diversity of teams for better results. As leaders, if we only choose to work with people similar to us, we may end up with groupthink and miss things due to blind spots. But if we pick team members with complementary traits, it expands the possibilities of what we can do better. Diversity of experiences and perspectives, can really make a difference in performance, creativity and innovation.

Finally, inclusion is also important during times like these. This mean valuing the voices of others and encouraging them to share their views. We must *be risk-aware* to manage pitfalls, and put different ideas on the table, to discern the best way forward.

IS HAVING A CLEAR VISION AND VALUES EVEN MORE IMPORTANT IN THESE TIMES, AND WHAT ARE THE ADDITIONAL SKILLS LEADERS NEED TO EMPOWER PEOPLE?

At a time when things are changing, our vision and values remain our anchor for how we make decisions. For GIC, our PRIME values ensure that we are the best of ourselves as a team. These are the evergreen qualities we live by everyday.

Empowerment is also powerful because we cannot do everything ourselves. In a world where

knowledge and skills are distributed, empowering others also requires trusting them to do more. That is the way to unlock performance in the organization and build talent for the future. As a leader, if you do not let go and empower your people, they will not get the experience and exposure they need to learn and grow.

Trust is essential for empowerment. I am reminded of a formula introduced by David Maister in his book, *The Trusted Advisor*, which outlines how we earn trust through credibility, reliability, and the intimacy of our working relationships.

In the numerator of the formula, you have *credibility, reliability and intimacy*. Credibility with our peers and bosses is built through knowing our work well, holding ourselves accountable to address issues and adopting a growth mindset. Reliability means taking actions, staying with our commitments, and keeping our promises. Intimacy is a function of the relationships that we build, and being open and authentic in our relationships to enable honest conversations.

We then divide all of this by *self-orientation*, which is the only denominator in the formula. If a person is self-interested, they only think about promoting their own views and building their personal agenda. That is too self-serving and does not build trust.

I use this formula to think about how I can build trust with others around me, and this helps to encourage empowerment because we believe in multiplying performance through others.

“ WE WANT TO TRUST AND BE WORTHY OF TRUST. THAT IS A POWERFUL PART OF OUR GIC CULTURE, AND IMPACTS HOW WE WORK TOGETHER TO DELIVER LONG-TERM PERFORMANCE. ”

² VUCA stands for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

ACROSS YOUR CAREER, WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSONS LEARNT FROM YOUR PERSONAL LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE?

One lesson is caring for others and enabling people for growth and performance. This is about supporting and cultivating future leaders, in order to leave a better legacy for the organization. What we do to nurture others and prepare for the future beyond ourselves, is very meaningful work which aligns our purpose as leaders, to the organization.

Another lesson is that as leaders, we have to make decisions with our head, our heart, and even our gut. The head represents logic and analysis, while the heart represents emotional intelligence – how you influence others to come along. You cannot be a leader if you do not have followers. The gut represents the courage needed to make tough decisions, recognise gaps and take timely action.

We have to put our best foot forward, assess situations realistically, and learn to let go. When we plan and prepare for the future, we have to be prepared for setbacks and failures. But we also have to be willing to go on adventures, embrace change and use judgement to anticipate and decide on the best course of action, in the face of ambiguity. This requires courage and conviction.

Change can be refreshing as it enables us to learn and try new things. We must keep our spirits up and stay anchored to our values, so that we can deal with what is ahead, recommit to our goals, and support one another to make a difference to the community.