

IN CONVERSATION | Lilian Tan

Chief Human Capital Officer of SATS



Lilian Tan is the Chief Human Capital Officer of SATS. She joined the company in August 2010 as Vice President, Human Capital and was promoted to her current position in April 2012.

Lilian leads the Group Human Capital team and all human capital-related programmes across the SATS Group of companies. She also sits on various boards of SATS' subsidiaries.

Before joining SATS, Lilian held various senior Human Capital appointments in KPMG Consulting Asia Pacific, Singapore Computer Systems Limited, and Singapore Telecommunications Ltd. Lilian has a wealth of experience in the field of human capital and is currently the Treasurer in the Human Capital Board of Singapore. She is a member of Singapore's Institute of Technical Education's Business & Services Academic Advisory Committee and was a recipient of the SHRI Leading HR Leader Award in 2015 and 2019.

The Covid-19 pandemic has elevated the role of CHROs, more than ever, as they are often visibly helping CEOs manage the present and lead their companies into the future.

In this interview with Leadership Advisory Inc, Lilian talks about the essential ingredients for a thriving relationship between CHROs and business leaders, what keeps her awake at night, and the new skills that she looks for in people to adjust to the new normal. *An extended and edited transcript of the interview follows.*

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Leadership Advisory Inc: SATS has been driving both cultural and digital transformation at the same time. In fact, you and your CEO were both recognised in August last year for this, when both of you were awarded the Leading HR Leader and Leading CEO Awards respectively. What is the secret to success?

Lilian Tan: The key ingredient is a relationship built on trust and years of collaboration between the human capital team and business leaders to align common interests, and a vision of wanting to steer the company towards achieving its goal of feeding and connecting Asia.

Leadership Advisory Inc: What do you think are the essential ingredients for a thriving relationship between a CHRO and the business leadership?

Lilian Tan: As with any relationship, each party has a role to play in fostering a positive relationship. At SATS, we are encouraged to embrace the core leadership principles – being outcome-oriented, courageous and open-minded, as well as being a servant leader.

As leaders, we adopt these principles readily, focusing on the outcome that we want to achieve, expressing our ideas courageously while keeping an open mind towards differing views, and always putting our people first.

This approach has worked well for us as we are able to drive the cultural and digital transformation in SATS with these principles as we work towards our vision to feed and connect Asia collaboratively.

Leadership Advisory Inc: The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly elevated the role of the CHRO, more than ever, who is often visibly helping CEOs manage the present and lead their companies into the future. What are the most challenging aspects that keeps you awake at night?

Lilian Tan: While we are not able to predict when the demand for air travel might resume, the management is putting appropriate cost and risk management measures in place during this extraordinarily difficult period, while preserving and

building its capabilities for the future to prepare ourselves for the spike when business conditions improve.

In fact, Covid-19 has accelerated our strategy, and the challenge is how to retain and sustain the hybrid workforce. During the pandemic, SATS had to change the way our people work in more ways than



anyone could have thought was possible. As the DORSCON alert level escalated to orange, business continuity plans kicked in and work arrangements were decentralised in view of safe distancing measures.

The upside – SATS’ swift response to operational demands with the large-scale redeployment of our colleagues and ramping up of training capabilities shows our readiness for change.

With work from home and redeployment measures come new challenges to employee engagement. Although digital touchpoints play a key role in internal engagement, people remain the most essential touchpoint. Over the course of our transformation, SATS remains committed to training and development, while creating an environment conducive for providing cross-functional learning opportunities.



Given SATS' good track record, SATS Academy has been appointed by SkillsFuture Singapore as the training partner for the Pilot Enhanced Training Package for the Air Transport sector. With around 160 in-house training programmes closely mapped to the Singapore government's SkillsFuture framework, our people can tap on this knowledge hub to enhance their operational know-how and continue upskilling to prepare for business recovery.

At times like this, agility, resilience, and maintaining a learning mind-set is critical as SATS moves into a new chapter of growth.

Leadership Advisory Inc: Eventually, there will be a post-pandemic era. And when that happens, organisations need to be ready. This requires leaders to reskill and upskill the workforce to deliver new business models. What are the new skills that you are looking for in people to adjust to this new normal?

Lilian Tan: Aside from equipping our employees with the relevant digital and domain skills to perform their roles, SATS is also cultivating a growth mind-set that focuses on honing entrepreneurial skills where innovation and ideas are welcomed from a bottom-up approach. We have the best people who are subject matter

experts in this industry and understand the gaps in the operations and how best to overcome them. They are well-positioned to help the company innovate so that we keep on getting better at what we do.

“We are also encouraging our people to develop more soft skills such as negotiation and critical thinking skills, cognitive flexibility, and service orientation...”

We should not expect a quick rebound in passenger volumes and aviation catering volumes this year. Hence, we must be prepared to take on new roles and responsibilities to accelerate our digital transformation and be an essential partner for our aviation customers post Covid-19, as well as grow our non-aviation food

business. We are also encouraging our people to develop more soft skills such as negotiation and critical thinking skills, cognitive flexibility, and service orientation through the array of courses offered by SATS Academy, as these attributes will make them more agile and resilient during this challenging time.

Leadership Advisory Inc: This crisis must have put you under great pressure. How do you remain positive and motivated?

Lilian Tan: I enjoy a good run and if I set myself a target to run 10km on that day, although I may be very tired or lack stamina, I would tell myself that if I didn't complete that 10km, I might not be able to conquer a particular challenge I am facing at work. But after I complete that run, I know I can overcome any difficult situation. So far, it has proven to be a fail-proof way for me to manage any challenge.

As for how I stay motivated, I dream! “Dream big, work hard, and make it happen” – this is what I believe in. I love to dream. I never stop dreaming. Dreaming big means empowering your mind to think and plan what you want to do in life, and this stops me from coming up with all the excuses for why it cannot be realised.

When you have big dreams, you set high standards for your life, and set the bar high for yourself. Dreaming big is not what you wish for, but rather, it means you get what you work for. And I work hard, because that is the only way to success. I make things happen, or else, it will just be wishful thinking and dreaming.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Soh, a Managing Partner in Leadership Advisory Inc’s Singapore office.

SATS is Asia's leading provider of food solutions and gateway services. The food solutions include airline catering as well as central kitchens for food service chains and institutions. The comprehensive gateway services encompass airfreight handling, passenger services, ramp handling, baggage handling, aviation security services, aircraft interior and exterior cleaning, as well as cruise centre management.

SATS is present in over 60 locations and 13 countries across Asia Pacific, the UK and Middle East. SATS has been listed on the Singapore Exchange since May 2000. For more information, please visit www.sats.com.sg.



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