

IN CONVERSATION | CARMEN WEE

Group Chief Human Resources Officer of Surbana Jurong



Carmen Wee is the Group Chief Human Resource Officer for Surbana Jurong, an Asian-based urban and infrastructure consulting firm, based out of Singapore. In her current role, Carmen's major responsibilities include aligning the HR structural changes and capabilities needed to scale the business, implement progressive HR practices, and to transform the workplace culture so that Surbana Jurong can meet its goals and objectives.

In this interview with Leadership Advisory Inc, Carmen shares how the CHRO role has evolved over the last few years especially during times of economic uncertainty and extreme volatility, and to what extent has the pace and breath of change shaped her view on leadership. As a CHRO, Carmen also talks about how she strikes a balance in reconciling the long-term vision against what it takes to get through the next few months. An extended and edited transcript of the interview follows.

Leadership Advisory Inc: You spent more than 2 decades working in global technologies firms. What prompted your move to Surbana Jurong?

Carmen Wee: The Surbana Jurong role provided me an opportunity as a Group Chief Human Resource Officer (Group CHRO), to contribute to a Singapore Inc global company that is looking to scale aggressively over the next few years. It has

a very unique proposition in the space that it plays in, and I felt that it aligned with my professional goals of supporting a growth-oriented company.

For the past 10 years, while working in foreign national companies, I had been very active in promoting the national agenda of

building a stronger Singaporean core in the HR domain. I was part of the National HR Skills Future Council comprising the tripartite teams, in setting the agenda for the HR Industry Transformation Map and the first national HR certification institute, IHRP, which since its inception has certified 2,000 HR professionals. Therefore, I am very passionate about helping a Singapore-based company grow and be successful.

I am also extremely familiar with M&A projects, having been involved in big and small acquisitions for the past 7 years, in leading global due diligence and integration activities.

Surbana Jurong has been very active in this regard, acquiring 7 companies over the past 4 years, so I believe I can contribute in lending my expertise in this sphere.



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Leadership Advisory Inc: You have now been in the Group CHRO role for about 4 months. Is there anything about the job that has surprised you?

Carmen Wee: I have been wowed very much by the capabilities of our talent, who care a lot about their customers and the projects that they undertake for our clients. The magnitude and level of creativity is simply breath-taking.

At the same time, the team relationships are cordial between colleagues and we are generally friendly towards one another.

Leadership Advisory Inc: In an article last year, you spoke about “why future HR leaders need to make the correlation between business strategies and human capital”. How has the role of the CHRO evolved over the last few years, especially during these times of economic uncertainty and extreme volatility?

Carmen Wee: These are critical times for those leading the HR function. Not only must they ensure that the people agenda lines up with the expectations of the Board and the CEO, they must first of all be able to understand as a business leader the full swarth of the business landscape. This includes the industry, the business context, competition, services offerings, partnership ecosystems and future trends pertaining to the evolution of the industry.

With this as the starting point, the CHRO can then contextualise the people agenda and the solutions needed to tackle the short-, mid- and long-term challenges of the company.

With the ongoing disruption of the market through new business models and technology innovations, new competitors will constantly emerge and traditional assumptions and models of human capital management can no longer hold true.

While the current agenda of ‘attracting, retaining and development of talent’ continues to be front and centre in the HR agenda, the ability to scale and build an agile organisation while preserving a healthy dose of culture (i.e. keeping the well-being of employees as a key priority, enhancing reputational brand as an employer, managing a multi-generational workforce, and promoting the diversity and inclusiveness agenda as a business imperative) continues to challenge the HR industry.

Leadership Advisory Inc: To what extent has the pace and breadth of change shaped your view on leadership?

Carmen Wee: To a large extent! The demands being placed on any leader, especially for those managing global responsibilities, are immense. With the constant need to be 'switched on' and available 24/7, it presents very real challenges to meet targets and manage stress. I don't know of any business leader who is not exhausted or on the brink of a burnout due to the incessant work demands brought on by constant travelling and conference calls.



I really believe that in such times, the need to take care of oneself before one can take care of others should be clearly understood and lived out, if one were to be an effective leader. Leaders have families and need a life outside of work and the more we help

them to integrate life and work, the better. In HR, we have a direct influence and role to make that happen.

Leadership Advisory Inc: Surbana Jurong is eyeing to raise its revenue from S\$1.3b to S\$3.8b in a few years. Among the many demands of your job, what are your top 3 priorities?

Carmen Wee: My *immediate challenge* is to ensure while we fly the plane, we are also changing the tyres as we go along. This means that whatever we do in 2019, we must help the company to meet its business goals and objectives. All our strategies and initiatives and time spent with the business should enable and advance this agenda as far as possible.

The *second immediate* goal is to determine the HR structural changes and capabilities needed to scale the business. Today, the team does a variety of tasks and my goal is to further streamline and sharpen our contribution where it matters and make the changes over time.

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My *final goal* is to ensure I establish the credibility of my office and my team. It is extremely critical that HR is not viewed as a 'back office'. That is the old traditional view of some organisations where there is no impact. My goal is to ensure leaders recognise what an innovative, business-friendly and forward-thinking HR function looks like.

Leadership Advisory Inc: One of the key challenges for CHROs is reconciling their long-term vision against what it takes just to get through the next few months. How do you strike that balance?

Carmen Wee: Experience helps! And constantly calibrating our priorities and the needs of the moment is extremely essential in order to help steer the function effectively.

At the outset, I like to create roadmaps which serve as guideposts to our desired destination for the people function. At the same time, detailed plans for the milestones have to be built, to ensure that we do not get lost and side-tracked by the constant immediate demands of business.

Another dimension that is important is listening to the pulse of the business and ensure we are embedded and integrated into the business teams as we don't want to work out of our own 'HR ivory tower' and be prescriptive to the leaders that we work alongside with.

Leadership Advisory Inc: If you look back at your 25-year-old self, what advice would you give her?

Carmen Wee: On hindsight, I believe stepping into HR has been an excellent decision, versus some other career choices. However, it would have been great to secure business exposure in a non-HR role at some point, as that can be transformative. The HR role provides one with many skills in leading and managing teams. These skillsets are foundational to leadership and the HR professional possesses these attributes and can further build on this.

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More than 2 decades ago, I would not have been able to foresee the current disruptive changes in the business landscape nor understood the need for a global mindset, or have deep cross-cultural understanding for effective leadership. Today, for anyone seeking to grow, it is paramount to have energy, the constant need to work on our leadership brand, and the courage to step out of our comfort zones as a way of life, in order to thrive and grow in the coming years.

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

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