

Aligning strategy and practice through learning agility

In conversation with OCBC

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Isn’t that beautiful?

We adapted it from Jean Piaget. It’s so relevant for our times because, every second day we’re assailed by something that we’ve never seen before, never heard before. We need to be able to not be fazed by everything new that’s coming our way. Learning agility is extremely important for us, not just for now, but the ability to continually flourish and thrive in the face of uncertainty.”

In this series, Alice Spencer, Executive Director for Education at the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL), is joined in conversation with business leaders from around the globe who are redefining business-as-usual through their sustainability ambitions. In this instalment, Alice is joined by Aye Wee Yap, Group Head of Learning and Transformation at OCBC.

They discuss how learning and development is enabling sustainability to be at the heart of OCBC’s strategy, the organisational and personal leadership required when operating in such a complex industry. They conclude with what gives Aye Wee hope for the future.



Aye Wee Yap

Group Head of Learning and Transformation at OCBC



Alice Spencer

Executive Director of Education at CISL

Alice: In CISL, we have a long-term mindset with a sense of day-to-day urgency. We think about what business, policy and finance needs to do today in shaping economies and markets that make sense in a future world of 9 billion people.

Today I’m talking with OCBC, the longest established bank in Singapore. Formed in 1932 through the merger of three banks, the oldest of which was established in 1912, the OCBC legacy demonstrates a remarkable resilience in adapting to a changing world. Of course, Singapore is a globally significant hub for finance with an increasingly busy skyline with international banking logos dominating, but OCBC’s purpose remains rooted in societal value: “enabling people and communities to realise their aspirations”.

I work in education and my guest Aye Wee leads Learning and Transformation, so I’m really interested in what happens in learning and development when a bank like OCBC puts sustainability at the heart of its strategy and purpose.

My first question on this topic is: How does this influence your L&D priorities and what kind of talent are you aiming to attract to work with you?

Aye Wee: Thanks very much for having me here. OCBC was formed from a merger of three banks and back in those days our roots were very much founded in being a part of society. If you ever came to Singapore and you ventured into our banking hall and looked upwards, you would see some stained glass window panels that we salvaged from one of our very old buildings. These were salvaged because they showcase three aspects of society. One depicts a farmer which represents agriculture and the environment. The second depicts a man working a machine which represents industry. The third depicts a man with balanced scales which represents trade. These were our roots, and where we came from: we saw ourselves being very much central to the running and flourishing of society.

If you fast forward to nearly a hundred years later, here we are in the year 2024 talking about sustainability and yet the elements of society are very much what I've just described. We talk about agriculture, we talk about the environment, we talk about trade, we talk about industry. Of course, the world has moved on but through all of this our mission remains the same: What is OCBC's role in ensuring that society continues to flourish?



Listen to
Aye Wee's
responses'

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Looking at the role of Learning and Transformation, which I lead for the OCBC Group, we have always seen ourselves as extremely aligned to the ambition of the organisation. The mission of my team is not just to equip and enable our workforce of almost 30,000 individuals but also to reach beyond our workforce to our ecosystem partners.

Within this context, sustainability is very important to us. If you look at our history books, we talk about long-term thinking, long-term value and building for the future and, to me, that is what sustainability is all about and why it has become so important. It's almost like returning to our roots and reminding ourselves of what we stand for.

Alice: It's so powerful to have that visualisation of OCBC across generations. I guess you don't get to be a bank that thrives from 1912 to 2024 without having a long-term mindset and broader value-add, which is effectively what sustainability is all about.

The next question is motivated by a recent blog from our CEO, Lindsay Hooper, which talks about how education plays such a vital role in enabling leaders to prepare and adapt for the rapidly changing operating context, and ultimately to lead the transition to cleaner, fairer, and more prosperous economies.

What, in your view as a 'learning organisation', are the most important capabilities? What do communities need from banks for the future?

Aye Wee: If you ask me to pick one skill, I would choose learning agility. In our competency framework, which is a conceptual framework that we use to guide our thinking within Learning and Transformation, learning agility is defined as a meta competency. Without this competency you couldn't pick up any other competencies so it's an incredibly vital skill.

If I can dive a little bit more deeply into learning agility: we define it as the willingness and disposition to know what to do when you don't know what to do. Isn't that beautiful? We adapted it from Jean Piaget, and it's so relevant for our times because every second day we're assailed by something that we've never seen before, never heard before, and we need to be able to not be fazed by everything new that's coming our way. It's so important for us to be able to flourish and thrive in the face of uncertainty.

For us, learning agility comprises a few things:

- 1. Growth mindset.** A belief that intelligence and abilities can be developed through effort which creates a love of learning and resilience, which we believe is essential for accomplishment.
- 2. Productive failure mindset.** A belief that failure is an enhancing experience and that, through failure, growth, learning, and innovation can occur. This is especially important in a high performance culture in OCBC or Singapore where failure can sometimes be frowned upon.
- 3. Learning power.** The ability to develop resilience, resourcefulness, reflectiveness, and reciprocity.

In a nutshell, that is the bundle of competencies and mindsets that we believe are most important. We have bundled this into a workshop, and we have been rolling this out in the last two years across the organisation. This is how you build the foundations for a workforce and leaders who have this innate ability to deal with the uncertain and ambiguous situations that come their way. So that would be my top skill.

Alice: That “knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do” really resonates. We are asking people to lead through such ambiguity and you don’t always have the perfect data sets or knowledge to inform decisions, and there may be no precedent in the market. It’s such a big part of our education programmes, creating space for leaders to explore these difficult dilemmas and find alternative routes to deliver different forms of value.

So, we have looked at the connection between individual skills and organisational purpose and you would hope, we all hope as education providers, that there’s a golden thread connecting what we do with real-world impact. Particularly in finance, the sector has been alert for a long time to the incredible opportunities and competitive rewards that can be achieved in getting ahead of sustainability trends.

Is there anything that you can share with us there in terms of the OCBC experience in achieving positive outcomes beyond the bank? Are there any innovations in your learning and development approach pathways that enable you to achieve real world impact?

Aye Wee: One of the things that we quickly realised was that, if we wanted to equip the workforce, our stakeholders and society at large beyond OCBC with the ability and the understanding to deal with challenges being posed, we needed a systemic approach. It was one of the earliest realisations — we needed a different way of doing things. While I would like to take credit for the fact that maybe L&D can claim to be the creator of innovations, the truth is that we really need the entire village for this.

One of the ways that shows up is in how my team works across the organisation in a collaborative spirit. That is not always simple and actually, often, collaboration is really tough because of competing agendas. What we do see with sustainability is that everybody feels the existential threat. There is a rallying of energies and resources.

One of the things that we did as a Learning & Transformation team was to partner with one of our key lines of businesses who look after the small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The SMEs collectively employ about 70% of the Singapore workforce and they make up close to 90% of the companies in Singapore. If we want to make a change, it’s not about OCBC alone making a change: it’s about how OCBC as a pillar of society can use its resources and the network it has at its disposal to make a systemic change.

So one of the things that we did was to equip our clients with the understanding and the competence and the access to capital. We answered questions like:

- *What do all the different dimensions of sustainability mean?*
- *How do I get started?*
- *Could OCBC connect me with some key partners that would help me on my journey?*
- *Finally, could OCBC give me access to capital so I could get started on my journey?*

It's a very important pillar of our overall sustainability strategy: to uplift the capability and the competence of our clients.

Another pillar was to uplift the competence of our relationship managers: the people who were the intermediaries to our clients. We upskilled our workforce and our relationship managers so they could talk competently and sensitively to our clients.

From these pillars we developed one of our flagship programmes: Ecoversity, of which Cambridge is a very important partner. We are governed by a set of principles that's codified in our learning blueprint which include autonomy, agency, flexibility, empowerment, transparency of information, and symmetry of information. These are all design principles that we strongly believe in.

If the individual is not empowered or inspired to regenerate, the organisation cannot regenerate. And if the organisation cannot regenerate, the society cannot regenerate.

Through our Ecoversity suite, we offer extremely high quality programmes to anybody who wishes to take them up. Part of our approach to learning is the idea that we are regenerative. If you look at the trends in the world today, we're going to live healthy, 100 year old lives. So how does an individual continue to regenerate and continually find new meaning and purpose? Because if the individual is not empowered or inspired to regenerate, the organisation cannot regenerate—and if the organisation cannot regenerate, the society cannot regenerate. This sense of purpose and regeneration is extremely important to us.

The other thing that's extremely important to us is to be as diverse in our offerings as possible. We don't believe in equality, we believe in equity and we do believe in breaking down systemic barriers. As an example, any programme in our Ecoversity suite is open to anybody and we've done a couple of things in the past to make that possible. One is that none of our programmes require managerial approval. If I see a topic I am interested in on Campus on Cloud, our learning management system, I can sign up provided there's a seat available. This is what we call agency, and providing autonomy for people. That allows our employees to avail themselves of learning options that meet their needs.

What we are starting to see is what we call 'letting a thousand flowers bloom'. When you get a bunch of people who are intrinsically motivated, it's amazing what they're able to do without being asked or mandated. Because our programmes are autonomous and engender a spirit of innovation, we have seen some amazing bottom-up efforts, that are really interesting and quite philanthropic in nature.

By letting a thousand flowers bloom, you're creating the access to a quality education which is incredibly important to enable that sense of autonomy. Ultimately, sustainability as a topic can create a cohesive force that brings disparate groups with competing priorities across an organisation together with a common sense of purpose.

Alice: There are so many brilliant jewels in what you've just shared. Letting a thousand flowers bloom is a really beautiful way of describing integration of sustainability across organisations and their wider spheres of influence. Making this a bit of everyone's job and also seeing sustainability as a cohesive force that brings disparate groups with competing priorities across an organisation together with a common sense of purpose.

This gets me thinking about the changing context and what it means for us, for L&D professionals and education providers. We are just as affected by the changes we discuss in our programmes—whether it's increasingly severe weather events disrupting our delivery or advancements like AI and other elements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. These developments can both enhance and restrict our ability to provide leaders with the right information at the right time.

How are you navigating that constantly shifting learner landscape as the future comes to meet us?

Aye Wee: You're right, every other day we learn of something new. I think one typical approach is to wear yourself out trying to keep abreast of everything that's going on. I personally don't think that's the way to go because you could never keep up and I don't think that's a very valuable approach in the long run.

As an L&D professional, one of the things we really need to create is an environment of calm and safety.

We must go back to some of the things that make us human. Critical thinking, hope, optimism – L&D plays a critical role in exemplifying and making the case for such an environment.

What I'm seeing is that this change will continue and it will come increasingly faster, as it has in the last decades. What we really need is a different approach. We need to take a step back and ask ourselves: what sort of capability and capacities does an individual, an organisation, and a society need to be able to deal with this sort of situation?

I mentioned earlier that learning agility is one of those skills. Critical thinking is definitely another. And these are not new skills, but I think that they seem to have been forgotten.

An example of where this could be used in the current business landscape is in the conversation around generative AI. Often, I talk to people who want to learn about generative AI and all the different use cases for it, and usually that is because of the fear of what generative AI will change about our current context. It's useful to a certain degree, but it's not useful in helping you allay the anxiety that you would feel or reposition yourself in a world where AI becomes the dominant landscape. One of the things I'm starting to see a lot of is people look at all the change and they're immobilised.

I sit on many panels talking about generative AI and one of the questions that inevitably comes up from the audience is, will AI take away our jobs? I think that speaks to a very real fear that is present in society and I certainly see in our workforce. This then leads on to what leadership capabilities are important, because leaders need to be able to lead the way into a future that most individuals can't even begin to comprehend.

As an L&D professional, one of the things we really need to create is an environment of calm and safety. We must go back to some of the things that make us human. Critical thinking, hope, optimism—L&D plays a critical role in exemplifying and making the case for such an environment.

In terms of how we are navigating the shift in the learner landscape, there isn't any change in pedagogical approach. The change is that the problems we are trying to address now are bigger than they have ever been and I think now we need to enable people to understand the problem that we're trying to solve before we go about solving it.

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Alice: Absolutely. I think a lot of what you have highlighted is very much in line with our own Leadership for a Sustainable Future framework. One of the main pillars there is courageous leadership and you've really touched on the need to be courageous when we're facing into an impossible tangle of multiple complex and interacting systemic challenges.

The "over analysis leading to paralysis" is not something that we can afford when we need to move forward with such pace as we do at this stage. So it links very nicely actually to my final line of questioning, which is around personal leadership.

I'm really interested to hear from you, Aye Wee, as a female leader in OCBC, after 15 years in Singapore Airlines: *What is your personal mission? What continues to inspire and drive you to create lasting change?*

Aye Wee: I'm an eternal optimist. When I was younger, I was in a choir and we sang this song from South Pacific called "Cockeyed Optimist"—and I think that describes me perfectly. We spoke about courageous leadership. It's important, but I think optimistic leadership is important too.

I hope that my style of leadership not only shows the way, but I hope that people can see me living out these values and my personal beliefs. When all looks bleak, and when all looks intractable, it's a Gordian knot.

I hope that when my team sees me tackle challenges head on, fearlessly, optimistically, I hope that I can give them the inspiration to tackle challenges in the same way. The world needs more of this. Leaders can come from anywhere and anyone, and we need to think of the future we want to create for our children, and the spirit which they engage with in the future. The future is worth living for.

Alice: So from one eternal optimist to another, I'd like close on a point of optimism and ask: *What gives you hope? I think we need a little hope right now!*

Aye Wee: Did I mention that I have three dogs? I'm pretty big on rescuing. Actually, my home is a real zoo. Two of my dogs are rescues and one of them, Gracie, had been chained all her life. And to me, her transformation is one of hope and optimism. When she came to me, she was completely matted and she was fearful. Three months down she's transformed with a bit of love, care, affection and safety. To me, that is a story of the incredible resilience of life, right? There is always hope.

Alice: Creating the right environment allows us to thrive, that's so lovely and not unrelated to our conversation. I'd really like to conclude by going back to your points on leadership that have really stuck with me. I've been thinking about the leadership capabilities required and I'm constantly inspired by how conversations like these can motivate new ideas.

So I've written down **optimistic leadership**. This is an optimist's game, and you need to nurture that optimism. You have to put your own oxygen mask on first and make sure you're looking after yourself so you can then move forward and radiate that out to the teams that you're inspiring.

I've written down **agile leadership** from one of your earlier points around knowing what to do when you don't know what to do and just that ability to find a pathway through in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous context.

I've written down **contagious leadership**. The ability to inspire change just by embodying the vibe that you bring into different situations beyond the doom and gloom, making this a really attractive proposition and a contagious thing to talk about leading change in a different way.

Lastly, I've written down **authentic leadership** because I think you have brought an inspiring level of authenticity in your response to these questions.

I really do thank you very much indeed for that and for the menagerie of noises coming from the background in your house with all the birds and other animals joining in this conversation. It's been an absolute delight. Thank you so much.

Aye Wee: Thank you so much, Alice.

For 30 years CISL has been working with stakeholder across business, government and finance to accelerate action for a sustainable future. Our work with the finance sector seeks to unlock how financial institutions and regulators can enable capital flows to deliver to more sustainable economies and markets, and lead a transition that builds resilience into their institutions commercial performance.

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