



#### TURNING BACK THE PAGES

The writer talks about her book, 'Wonderland Through Caroline's Looking Glass', which represents her attempt at sharing some of the things picked up from 30 years in HR told as a 'whimsical tale'.

**T**HROUGHOUT my career in HR, I have come to realise that two things can make or break an organisation – the first being its culture and the second being the quality of its leadership.

Leaders drive organisations, but it is culture that drives performance.

As our highly connected world becomes ever more competitive and the pace of change quickens, leaders of quality and how they evolve and enhance great corporate culture may prove to be a defining advantage for any organisation.

Highly hierarchical "command and control" organisations with top-down systems no longer have an edge in today's ever-changing and crowded markets.

Today, it is the organisation that can move quickly enough to adapt to changing paradigms that sees farther, runs faster and aims higher.

The many articles highlighting the importance of achieving high employee engagement bear testimony to the rising awareness of the role of culture in business success.

The right culture can create an environment where employees are engaged, energised and empowered... the fuel for long-term success of an organisation.

I like how the concept of culture has been quite wryly described as what people do when no one's looking.

As for leadership, an analogous description would be that the true test of a leader's worth is what actually happens when the leader is not around.

## Culture, leadership hold key to success

While leaders are the driving force in the corporate world, culture shapes the organisations that they run, says **Caroline Lim**

High quality leadership extends beyond the physical presence of the leader. It effects positive changes, sets the pace for good organisational culture and serves as a model for desired behaviour.

Many people are aware that leaders and change agents can help shape the collective mindset that forms the basis of a company's culture.

However, I have also come to realise that not many have had first-hand experience in transforming organisational culture.

This led to the writing of my first book, *Wonderland Through Caroline's Looking Glass*.

The book represents my attempt at sharing some of the things picked up from 30 years in HR.

The main narrative is a whimsical tale set in Wonderland, borrowing characters from *Alice in Wonderland* to weave together culture change journeys relevant to many organisations.

Alongside the fictional yarn are

side-boxes of "Tips", "Tools" and "Traps" that offer practical guidance – "Tips" being advice on what works, "Tools" being specific applications and "Traps" being pitfalls to avoid in any culture change journey.

The story begins with a human resource executive thrust into the middle of a turning point for Wonderland, as she follows an anxious white rabbit down an improbable route to this fairytale setting.

Along the way, she meets a Black Queen, who rules with an iron fist, unconsciously manipulated by an ambitious, "round" upstart, Humpty Dumpty; a Red Queen, whose over-emphasis on the positive has undermined her effectiveness, and a host of other fantastical but purposeful Wonderland creatures.

In this tale, as in life, it is the leader's special job to facilitate communication, address the unspoken issues and transform the culture of Wonderland.

While the characters in the story are fictitious, they are symbolic representations

of leadership derailers that we sometimes encounter in a real-life corporate setting.

The issues are reflective of challenges that leaders, human resource practitioners and individual employees may face in their daily working life.

The whimsical fairy-tale and accompanying illustrations seek to remind readers that creativity, fun and an ability to deal with the unexpected are also critical ingredients in being a successful change agent.

It is my hope that with the help of the "Tips", "Tools" and "Traps", readers of the book will be inspired to step up and become change agents in their various organisations.

These side boxes outline actions that can be taken or avoided, to lend tangible help in what can be the abstract landscape that is culture change.

For instance, a useful "Tool" highlighted in the book is what I sometimes call the main IDEA (Integrate, Develop, Engage and Acquire). The key to a great organisational culture is alignment – ensuring vari-

ous elements across the organisation are in support of the overarching business goal and strategy, the desired future of the business and in sync with one another – we need to Integrate (build common platforms, systems and identity), Develop (introduce holistic initiatives to support employees, coupled with appropriate incentives and structures), Engage (reinforce the vision via various channels), Acquire (select for desired behaviours). Alignment ensures clarity, focus and long-term sustainability.

Interwoven in the story, one challenge faced by the Black Queen is a "Trap" that questions whether to prioritise on "People or Bottom-line". This trap is inherent in the very question itself, which predisposes the individual to believe that it is a case of either or. It creates a false dichotomy by assuming that one should come before the other. Instead, the question can be reframed with a view to the long term – striking a balance with the understanding that one supports the other. The decision-making that flows from this change of mindset opens up whole new avenues of choice that were once closed.

On "Tips", a key one for change agents to bear in mind is what I titled "A Brave Few". It is based on the common experience encountered by change agents – resistance to change. In the face of this almost inevitable resistance, leaders should not feel that they act alone, but should look out for independent thinkers of high integrity, who display qualities such as the courage to speak out. These corporate "renegades" may be the "Brave Few" who can be charged with helping to drive and sustain the change in culture.

The adage "change begins with me", has never been truer.

For an organisation to enjoy sustained success, it is not only necessary but critical for it to recognise and support these positive change agents.

There is no false choice for companies between their people and the bottom-line, because companies cannot achieve their bottom-line without their people.

Neither can companies care for their people if the bottom-line is not taken care of.

On a personal note, the creation of *Wonderland* has been a wondrous journey of self-rediscovery.

From conveying the world of *Wonderland* to the readers, all the way to drawing the accompanying illustrations, creating this book has been an invigorating experience.

A thought struck me as I wrote and reflected upon the things that I have learnt over the years.

We can seek to create only a reality that we are able to see in our minds.

A dream home, a wonderland of a workplace – all these things rest on our ability to dream, our capacity to hope and our courage to change.

A man far wiser than I once said that "Imagination is more important than knowledge", and for this reason I truly believe that anyone can aspire to change worlds, as long as he or she can imagine it and infect others with his or her vision of Wonderland.

☞ The writer is PSA's Global Head of Human Resource & Corporate Affairs