

# Fostering entrepreneurial leadership to reimagine our careers, companies and community

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## *Reflections on the Hong Kong Management Association's 2018 conference*



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I have a lot of conversations in my day-to-day work. I counsel individual leaders on their career paths and personal growth, and advise the top teams of companies on how to find, develop and inspire the leadership talent they need to succeed in a fast-changing world.

Recently, however, I had the privilege to facilitate a much bigger conversation on leadership at the annual conference of the Hong Kong Management Association, which was attended by 1,000 delegates. They included executives from Hong Kong's largest companies, along with management students who represent the next generation of leaders.

Some of the most successful business leaders in Hong Kong and China joined us as keynote speakers and panelists at the conference. They included Ming Mei, CEO of the fund manager GLP; Jessica Tan, Deputy CEO of Ping An; Louisa Cheang, CEO of Hang Seng Bank; Gary Liu, CEO of the South China Morning Post; and Leonie Valentine, a Managing Director of Google Hong Kong.

It was a privilege to invite these executives to debate the big questions of leadership and talent. For me and everyone else in the room, it also provided fresh opportunities to reflect on the future of our city, our companies, and ourselves as individual managers. Will we be marginalized by the disruptions of technology and the phenomenal growth of the rest of China—or will we embrace this chance to reinvent ourselves?

The answer to that question, as the discussions at the conference made clear, will depend on the mindsets we adopt. If we cling to old routines and hierarchies, we and our organizations will indeed be disrupted. But with an entrepreneurial outlook, we can embrace today's growth and technology trends both to build extraordinary business value and to make a hugely positive impact on the lives of our customers and communities.

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Consider the example of Ming Mei, who at the age of 45 has built GLP into a giant fund manager with assets under management exceeding \$60 billion. He embodies an entrepreneurial, progressive approach to leadership. For example, he remarked to the conference that he has no headquarters and no office. Instead, he travels with laptop in hand between GLP's offices in eight countries, and sits among his colleagues. That enables him to engage authentically with people in every part of the company—and constantly elicit their ideas.

Mei also exhibited remarkable humility. As he told the conference: “When I was younger I thought my success was all due to my effort. Now I think it's more due to luck.” When asked what creates the kind of luck that has given rise to GLP, he suggested three factors that we would all do well to pay attention to. The first is “be a good person”—in other words, stay true to your values. The second is to seek to build mastery of what we do. And the third is to “stay hungry and don't be complacent”.

Jessica Tan has certainly not been complacent in helping build Ping An into a massive financial services company that has embraced technology to extend way beyond its origins as an insurer. In just a few years, Ping An has gathered nearly 500 million online users and created 11 new digital platforms across industries, spanning ecosystems from banking to healthcare to housing.

At the conference, Tan reflected that such transformations begin mapping a bold long-term vision and challenging oneself to create true differentiation. She emphasized that Ping An's growth has required the commitment to make major, ongoing investment in both technology and talent. She herself has devoted considerable time and energy to integrating that talent and fostering a culture of agility and entrepreneurship.

Those themes were underlined in a panel discussion between Louisa Cheang of Hang Seng Bank, Gary Liu of the South China Morning Post, and Leonie Valentine of Google. All three of them emphasized the critical role that leaders have to play in inspiring and empowering their organizations. In today's disruptive times, they said, the role of leaders is to set the context and purpose of the organization, and shape a story for



*Jessica Tan receiving the award from Catherine Zhu*



*Ming Mei receiving the award from Catherine Zhu*

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transformation around two key questions: why are we here, and how will we be relevant to our customers and stakeholders?

They also spoke to the importance of engaging with teams in more authentic and inspiring ways. Louisa Cheang told the conference that, when she joined Hang Seng Bank as CEO, people treated her as a god: they would go silent when she got into the lift, and never dare approach her directly. To build a culture of openness and entrepreneurship, she had to challenge that traditional hierarchy directly. For example, she started holding regular brown-bag lunches with diverse groups of staff to break down barriers and foster exchange of ideas.

Google prides itself on its open culture, but Leonie Valentine has nonetheless taken similar steps to build engagement with her teams. For example, she often stands at reception in the morning and greets employees as they arrive for work. She was mistaken for the receptionist more than once, but has seen the benefits of that approach in more authentic connections with team members. The South China Morning Post went further and created a totally new office environment that fosters interaction and innovation in open-plan spaces. Gary Liu told the conference that that has turned the media company into a tourist destination, as other companies visit its new offices to seek inspiration to transform their own work environments.

I asked these leaders what they value most in talent—and their answers provide a wake-up call not only for us as individual managers and professionals, but also for Hong Kong as a whole. Above all, they seek people who are curious, proactive, and committed to constant learning. As their organizations innovate at an unprecedented rate, these leaders are looking for people who can try new ideas, be willing to fail and learn from that failure, and have the resilience to carry on and try again. Those are the qualities that our education system should be nurturing in Hong Kong's young people—and that each one of us can foster in our own lives, here and now.

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*The great panel - left to right, Catherine Zhu, Gary Liu, Louisa Cheang, Leonie Valentine*