

## 30 years in 30 mins: Dr Tang on why Millennials are key to sustainable business in Asia

By Andie Uy

Late last year, I spoke with a fellow Advisor at The Purpose Business, Dr Thomas Tang. As the youngest in our network born at the cusp of Millennials and Gen-Z, I wanted to learn all I could from his 30+ years of experience, notably his views on how sustainability has changed over the years and what the future holds for us in Asia.



### 1. Can you tell me about how you got started in sustainability?

It was back in 1989 when I was doing my MBA in the UK. This was when many national industries, like electricity, water and transportation, were becoming privatised. One of the instances that triggered my interest in sustainability was when a friend told me, "If you are to look at a subject that will be quite dominant in the future, look at the water industry." This led to a lot of questions about how we manage the environmental impacts of privatisation.

With a background in materials and energy, while taking up business topics like finance, strategy and marketing, I was trying to get my head around how to create positive outcomes from science and how to apply these in business.

### 2. So even then, the hope was for businesses to start doing more good by first looking at their impacts on the planet. Which skill did you find most useful in trying to achieve this?

Strategic thinking. It helps you be analytical with the situation while at the same time be empathetic to other people's perspectives and situations. It's about connecting the dots and making this understandable to your key stakeholders. The tendency to get locked into micromanagement and looking at issues granularly calls us to take a step back and see the larger ecosystem that connects all

these things. For example, when you look at climate change, we think of stopping the burning of fossil fuels. But we must also consider poverty, economic development, employment, and urbanisation and how these are all related. With the right strategic lens, we can get to the root causes and tackle them holistically, rather than only treating its symptoms.

**3. I agree, strategic thinking needs us to think big picture and involve your stakeholders to arrive at a sound solution. What was it like when you first entered the world of corporate sustainability? Was there even such a world and how has it changed since then?**

I'll talk about it in two parts. First, when I started out in a consultancy and then later on from the inside when working in-house.

In the first part, you're seeing the organisation from the outside and its position in the bigger picture alongside their competitors within the industry and how it can be a good corporate citizen. Back then, there weren't as much opportunities to implement these recommendations because organisations loved to listen about change but refrained from doing so themselves. That is why one of the most notable changes is that there's more openness now, especially to hear from external stakeholders and engage in dialogue. Companies are less afraid to involve their stakeholders. Though there is still some apprehension, this is where consultancies come in as facilitators of this conversation. More companies are aware that the effective execution of strategies can only be done when they go out and engage with these groups.

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For the second part, once you're inside, it's a different battlefield because you're now dealing with internal stakeholders. Even with blessing from top management to go on and change the company, in reality, it is a big challenge to get the ball rolling. So with the onset of more in-house sustainability officers equipped with a body of sustainability knowledge such as the SDGs, science-based targets, and circular economy, there is a better appetite for these organisations to start asking questions like, "what is our company doing about sustainability?" and better capacity to start answering them. What needs to happen now is getting internal buy-in and building that culture to implement these changes.

**4. It's great to see more companies build up their sustainability capabilities and ask the tough questions. You mentioned the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). How have they impacted businesses?**

The author Jeffrey Sachs wrote a number of books including "The End of Poverty," and he was also involved in the charting of the SDGs. I remember listening to him in a lecture in Malaysia when he explained, "the SDGs are holistic, but not perfect." Implementation on the organisational and individual level still requires thorough analysis and planning to translate the SDGs to make them actionable by businesses, large corporations and start-up enterprises alike.

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The SDGs serve as a guide, but we need to be flexible and adaptable. Though things like poverty, water security, and inequality are still relevant, we are evolving from a labour intensive way of doing business and moving into the age of the fourth industrial revolution with the rise of Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, and the gig economy. It's about being mindful of how the SDGs fit into these changing times.

The SDGs are an invitation to businesses to see their role in this and what they can do about these issues. It's not about force fitting them into their targets and commitments. In a way, mapping the SDGs is an intuitive and iterative process – as you go along, the SDGs have to make sense to the overall strategy, striking a balance between the goals and the company's resources, capabilities, and priorities.

**5. You've seen how we're transitioning to this truly virtual age and how the SDGs can guide businesses. From all your rich years of experience, what's a piece of work you are especially proud of?**

Working in an NGO was very fulfilling. I was working with passionate people who were determined to do something about their situation. One experience was volunteering in a community in the Philippines in Mindanao near General Santos where my church was providing scholarships to the kids there. It was meaningful to have worked with such an engaged group of people.

Another example was working in-house with AECOM. As the Corporate Sustainability Director, I was looking after 20 offices in Asia where we were measuring their impacts and managing their electricity, water usage and carbon footprint. I was also looking at how we could use sustainability to foster innovation. We led a lot of training programmes and saw the opportunity to incorporate sustainability into the business model.

**6. Those are amazing feats, Tom. Working in both non-profit and private bore their fruits! Do you have any advice for people starting out in their career who want to do meaningful and impactful work?**

First, find a purpose to steer your life. Work is more than just about paying the bills. Be part of something that makes a positive change in the world. When your purpose is clear, your decisions will align. If you don't know what that is yet, this leads me to my second piece of advice.

Go out and learn. Beyond university lectures, theoretical knowledge and getting the degree, keep educating yourself to gain that global awareness and see the big picture. Travel – immerse yourself and explore. If you can't go there physically, go on the internet, read and watch to learn more what's out there. Having fluency in two or three languages is a huge advantage. When you get comfortable in different cultures, this is where the empathy comes through – you start to understand where people are coming from.

Be comfortable with data. With the internet and social media, there's a rush of information – statistics, financial, scientific data, that we take in everyday, but it's important to know how to use it in a sensible way. There's no need to be afraid of it nor be driven by it either but live at ease with all the information.

And lastly, go out and do volunteer work. It might just be the most satisfying piece of work you could do in your life. I highly encourage to go and volunteer if you want to see the world differently and make a difference

**7. Thanks for the nuggets of wisdom. These are very helpful particularly for my generation. All the research (and our experience!) tells us that Millennials and Gen Z are more aware of, and value sustainability. How is this changing businesses?**

It's got to be positive. The Millennials and Gen Z are the next generations to take the lead. If they understand the situation, they have to care and do something about it because this is their future. Frankly, us Baby Boomers understand the situation but haven't been doing as much about it. The next generations almost have to reinvent the way things are run. By 2030, most businesses will be

run by Millennials and they're starting to see how the world works and define the impact they want to make.

8. That's right – we are in a way the “stakeholders of tomorrow.” What do you think the future of sustainable business in Asia will look like?

The adage is that Asia is now the powerhouse of global economic growth. Asia holds a lot of opportunity. Where we're going with sustainability is first, leadership, which is why I'm very bullish about Millennials. They understand that resources are finite and recognise the need to manage our impacts more carefully and look at society in a different way.

Another thing is that, the work of the future has to be different from the work of today. People may enjoy what they do but are not always passionate. Successful companies will have people who truly believe in what they are doing. That is how businesses can get far.

The last is respect and trust. With the current events, my hope is that more sustainable companies will put more emphasis on these values and put these at the center.

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