



“In a world characterised by rapid disruption, shifting opportunities and intense competition, Cindy presents personal branding not as a means of getting ahead, but as a way of anchoring on your authentic self in order to seize the right opportunities for yourself. Purposeful branding is both outward-facing and inward-facing—aligning the value you create for others with the fulfilment you seek personally. *Own Your MAGIC* illustrates how Cindy and others had developed their personal brands, and how you can do so too. It is a handy spellbook for anyone looking for greater purpose and impact, in work and in life.”

Kenny Tan

Deputy Secretary (Workforce), Ministry of Manpower, Singapore

“Cindy weaves her personal and professional experience with wisdom from other cultures and contexts, to create a powerful framework for purposeful personal branding in an Asian context. This book will resonate with anyone who wants to channel their inner self through the MAGIC framework and portray their true self to the outside world. It is a simple but powerful read peppered with powerful messages and anecdotes from various leading personalities—and Cindy herself. An absorbing read indeed!”

Vinod Kannan

Senior Vice President, Sales and Marketing, Singapore Airlines

“At Accenture Song, we help businesses grow through the power of creativity, data, and technology but the real differentiator is always human. In today’s fast-changing world, professionals are being challenged to not just keep up, but to stay grounded in who they are. *Own Your MAGIC* meets that moment. It offers a deeply human, actionable framework that empowers individuals to lead with authenticity, purpose, and care. These are qualities that are becoming just as critical as technical skills. This book is a timely guide for anyone looking to grow with intention, lead with meaning, and unlock their unique edge in an age of reinvention.”

Vincent Martin

Managing Director, Data and AI, Accenture Song Indonesia





“If you have ever wondered why your work does not always speak for itself, or struggled with how to be visible without feeling like you are showing off—*Own Your MAGIC* is the book you need.

Cindy’s *Own Your MAGIC* gets to the heart of the inner doubts many of us carry but rarely admit out loud. Especially for those of us from cultures or environments where modesty is prized and self expression can feel risky. For anyone navigating visibility without losing authenticity, this book is refreshingly honest and deeply empowering.

What makes *Own Your MAGIC* so powerful is how real it is. Cindy offers something practical: a thoughtful, culturally attuned framework—MAGIC: Manifestation, Activation, Gift, Interest, and Care.

This is not a guide to creating a person. It is an invitation to become more of who you already are—on purpose, with consistency, and on your own terms.

If you are going through change, feeling unseen, or ready to level up while staying true to yourself—read this. You already have the MAGIC. Cindy simply shows you how to own it.”

Ryan Lim

Founding Partner at QED, Bestselling Author of *Business of Networking*

“As a dentist, I’ve navigated an industry that has been tethered to convention and conservatism, where professionals often shied away from the spotlight. Despite this, I’ve recognised the power of personal branding and its necessity in our current age. Cindy’s book, *Own Your MAGIC*, resonates and captures the essence of this phenomena. It’s not just about professional success; it’s about the courage to grow and express yourself at large. *MAGIC* provides practical strategies and will inspire you to overcome self-doubt and embrace personal branding as a journey of self-discovery I highly recommend this book to those who want to cultivate a strong personal brand and live a life of confidence and impact.”

Dr Andrew Lui

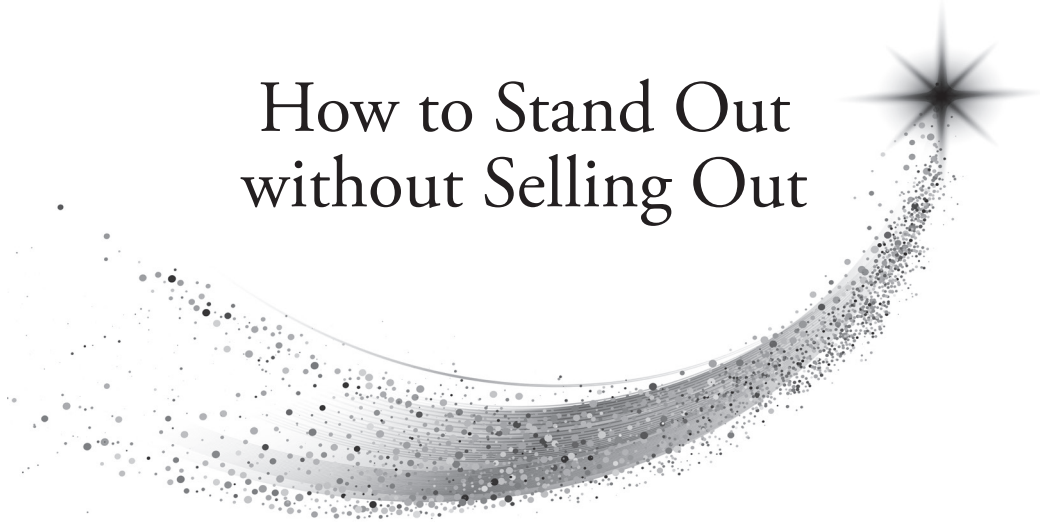
Founder, Dental Essence





Own Your MAGIC

How to Stand Out
without Selling Out



CINDY TAN

 **World Scientific**

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"For my family, whose love and support have been the foundation of everything I do. Thank you for helping me find my magic. And to all my mentors who believed in me and gave me the opportunities to grow, you were my power sources, lighting my path to find courage and wisdom."





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Foreword

We are living in transformational times marked by rapid technological advancement, political uncertainty, and a world in flux. As scepticism clouds relationships between nations, particularly in Asia and America, individuals are left wondering how best to adapt.

Amidst these constant shifts, two essential steps stand out.

Firstly, invest time in continuous learning and self-development to remain relevant in a constantly evolving landscape. Secondly—and perhaps less intuitively—focus on building your personal brand.

Creating a personal brand is not merely about visibility. It involves defining your core values, cultivating meaningful connections, and showcasing your unique abilities. In an era where knowledge becomes obsolete faster than ever, we must all operate as “companies of one,” even when embedded within large organisations.

To navigate this landscape, it is crucial to develop a reputation for expertise, collaboration, craftsmanship, and care. Personal branding, when done with intention, helps us remain resilient and adaptive amidst uncertainty.

This is precisely where *Own Your MAGIC* by Cindy Tan proves invaluable. The book not only emphasises the importance of developing a personal brand but also provides a clear, actionable pathway to do so using a five-step approach:





x Own Your MAGIC

- M – Manifestation:** Gaining clarity on your goals and defining the foundation for your personal brand.
- A – Activation:** Translating your brand vision into tangible actions that others can see and appreciate.
- G – Gift:** Tapping into and showcasing your unique strengths.
- I – Interest:** Fostering curiosity and engagement to build authentic connections.
- C – Care:** Practising bold and empathetic care for yourself and others, even when it goes against societal norms.

Through personal stories, practical case studies, and hands-on exercises, this book offers readers tools to:

- Identify and nurture their unique talents
- Build resilient personal brands suited to their cultural and professional contexts
- Cultivate meaningful relationships
- Unlock new avenues for growth

One of the book's key strengths is its adaptability to Asian cultural contexts, where traditional norms often discourage standing out or self-promotion. Cindy balances this with universal insights that are applicable to a global audience, showing how it is possible to embrace individuality without compromising cultural values.

Having known Cindy for years, I have always admired her as an accomplished leader and an exceptionally successful figure in the marketing and digital landscape. She is a rare individual who seamlessly blends strategic thinking with empathetic leadership. What excites me most about this book is its grounded, practical approach, shaped by her extensive experience. It uniquely addresses the challenges faced in Asia—





where humility, deference and restraint are often emphasised over self-promotion—yet its insights resonate universally.

As someone who learnt the importance of branding through years of trial and error, I wish I had access to this book earlier in my career. It would have saved me time and clarified that:

1. Building a personal brand is not boastful—it is about refining and showcasing your craft.
2. It is about combining your roots with a bold willingness to explore new possibilities.
3. At its core, branding is about giving generously, connecting meaningfully and leaving a positive impact.

This book is an inspiring and practical guide for anyone seeking to unlock their full potential. I encourage you to read it, rediscover your inner magic, and share that magic with the world.

Rishad Tobaccowala

Author of *Rethinking Work* and former Chief Strategist
and Growth Officer, Publicis Groupe

Named by *BusinessWeek* as one of the top business leaders
for his pioneering innovation and dubbed by TIME Magazine
one of five “Marketing Innovators”. One of only 300 people
selected to the Advertising Hall of Fame in 75 years.





Prologue

Find Your “MAGIC”

“Your brand is the single most important investment you can make in your business.”

Steve Forbes

I was quite the whimsical child growing up. I loved playing fairy, fashioning a cape out of a blanket as I soared through the house on a broom, blessing everyone and everything with a magical wand! If I encountered a fortunate family member, I'd bestow wishes, and for objects, I would invent whimsical transmutations — turning them into fantastical versions of themselves. That was the purest expression of my belief in my power within.

We lose this magical self-confidence as we grow into adults. It is the sense of confidence that comes from knowing that you are different yet capable, and that there's value in what you do, what you deliver, and what you stand for. We lose this magical touch as we begin to lose our sense of self. Our belief in our personal power gradually erodes with each setback or each time our uniqueness is chiselled away to fit the moulds and expectations of society, our teachers, parents, and even our peers.

Our belief in our power wanes when our power sources—family, friends or other support networks—begin to give us less energy, believing





our growth no longer requires their sustenance. The truth is, as humans, we can never get enough of positive affirmations which nourish us like water, sunlight, and nutrients nourish plants. The belief others place in us nourishes our core, creating a feedback loop that nurtures our beliefs in ourselves.

I want to help people to find that power within themselves and to find the magic that helps to build self confidence which, in turn, unlocks opportunity. This is the flywheel effect¹ applied to personal and purposeful branding: a virtuous cycle where cultivating a confident, uniquely defined personal brand reaps great professional rewards. We must find that magic, own it, and then leverage it for success.

You may, at some point, have thought about your personal brand or were given feedback on the need to develop it. But what is personal branding? Purposeful branding, my spin on the idea of personal branding, requires time and effort. We are not products for display nor can we launch large TV campaigns to broadcast our merits. This is where MAGIC, the framework I've developed, comes in. While books and podcasts on the topic often share common threads, what distinguishes this book are two key things. Firstly, I'm sharing a framework to anchor the personal branding skills and ideas.

Before we delve deeper in Part 2 of the book, MAGIC is an acronym that stands for **Manifestation Activation Gift Interest Care**. Central to this framework, both literally and in importance, is "Gift". Just as in my childhood fairy fantasies, I believe that every single one of us has a unique gift that we just need to unearth and nurture. And you won't need a fairy godmother for that because this book will help you find it.

Secondly, this book addresses the significant gap in personal branding content tailored to the Asian context. Most of the personal branding books I've read and the podcasts I've listened to, are heavily American or Western-





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centric. Asian cultural nuances realistically require a different approach as our business interactions differ from Western norms. An understanding of, and appreciation for, the Asian cultural view is important. We are, by cultural conditioning, more reserved and susceptible to worrying about how we will be perceived by the community.

In speaking to people about this topic, some have even voiced concerns, calling it a “very risky walk”. They feel that by putting themselves out there or stepping into the limelight, they would be risking a whole lot more than just personal embarrassment. Instead of seeing opportunity and growth, they envision the opposite happening. They fear being seen by their bosses, colleagues, and friends as a blowhard or coming across as a show-off. I will show ways to overcome the negative aspects of this conditioning and share how to be comfortable, natural, and authentic, instead of simply trying to meet others where they are. It’s not about contorting ourselves to fit into another culture’s norms. We want to avoid living out someone else’s ideas and forgetting who we are meant to be.

The MAGIC framework, detailed in the subsequent chapters, is designed to provide Asians or the introverted actionable insights to formulate their own personal branding.

Accept Thyself, and Thy Uniqueness

I could have been a different person, with a different name. In my early teenage years, I changed my name several times because I believed that our names reflect who we are. Though I was born “Cindy”, I went by “Karen”, subsequently “Sherlyn”, and then “Felicity”, before finally returning to my birth name.

Looking back, I find it fascinating that I believed something as simple as a name could change who I was. A strange thought now, but then, I





crafted new personalities to match these names I asked others to call me. Think about divas like Beyoncé and Mariah Carey who use alter egos to get their game faces on when they perform onstage.

But name changes weren't the only thing that I did before finally accepting myself. In my early career, I had many mentors whom I looked up to and found myself attempting to replicate. Very quickly, however, I learnt that as much as I have a lot of respect for their work and would have loved to follow in their footsteps, they are unique individuals and duplicating them completely just did not make sense. They were also not the real me. It was tiring trying to keep up the façade with these personas. They were fake, based on what I believed would attract people, and at their worst, came across as insincere and inconsistent.

It wasn't until much later in life that I began to accept myself for who I am. It started with getting comfortable with "Cindy" and really seeing what makes me different and unique. This built deeper confidence which led to new opportunities and stronger networks of friends both in my personal and professional life. This, in turn, helped unlock career opportunities, a virtuous cycle, all because I became more confident in putting my whole self out there. This is what I mean by purposeful branding becoming the flywheel for your career. Having this confidence in yourself, in a world of fabricated "truths", helps bring out your authenticity that others truly appreciate.

It's funny, in my early years, I thought that "Cindy" was such a common name, and because I felt that it was not unique, I went on a whole journey to find a unique name just to stand out. But ironically, it was when I finally accepted my name that I realised my uniqueness had nothing to do with it. Hundreds of Cindys exist, yet each is distinct—we're humans, not clones!







CHAPTER 1

The MAGIC of Personal Branding

Jeff Bezos once said, “Your brand is what other people say about you when you’re not in the room”. On many different occasions, others have remarked that I am different than they thought. These impressions had neither relevance nor truth to who I am or wanted to be. In fact, at that young age, it hadn’t occurred to me that a “me” brand was important. I was simply going with the flow.

People define “you” based on observations and judgements of your body language, tone of voice, experiences, your role, and many others. First impressions are powerful; research suggests that people form first impressions in just seven seconds². These rapid judgements can hinge on appearance, body language, and initial interactions—things often beyond conscious control. If that’s not already nerve-wracking, consider this: a study³ found that it takes only 100 milliseconds for people to judge someone’s trustworthiness just by looking at their face.

These first impressions can even be long-lasting, affecting how people see you long after that initial contact. According to another study⁴, these first impressions can last for months! Now, think about that when you are job hunting. It has been said that 33% of hiring managers know if they will hire someone within the first 90 seconds of an interview⁵. Furthermore, a study (as early as 1958) in the *Canadian Journal of Psychology*⁶ indicates





85% of hiring decisions are influenced by first interview impressions. This clearly shows how important your demeanour and presentation are, as those are often the starting points for snap judgements—whether people realise they are making them or not.

Satya Nadella's journey as CEO of Microsoft offers a compelling example of leadership transformation. When he assumed the role in 2014, the company grappled with a perception of stagnation and uncertainty about its future in a rapidly evolving tech landscape. Nadella, a Microsoft veteran since 1992, was celebrated for his technical expertise, yet his public persona was more understated, a contrast to the more flamboyant leadership style of his predecessor, Steve Ballmer. Early on, some felt he lacked the typical charisma often associated with tech leaders.

Recognising the importance of communication and personal branding, Nadella proactively worked on honing his leadership presence. In his book *Hit Refresh*, he recounts his understanding of the need to connect with his audience, both inside and outside Microsoft. Nadella worked with communication coaches to enhance his speaking style, focusing on clear, concise delivery and more engaging body language. He also embraced a more genuine and open communication style, sharing personal anecdotes and demonstrating a sincere commitment to his team and the company's vision.

Over time, these conscious efforts bore fruit. Nadella's transformation as a communicator mirrored Microsoft's own resurgence. His speeches became more engaging, his body language more approachable, and his overall tone more confident. Under his leadership, Microsoft's stock price tripled, and the company regained its leadership position in cloud computing and AI—a testament to the impact that self-awareness and purposeful personal branding can have on both a leader's effectiveness and the success of their organisation.





Nadella's story underscores the importance of first impressions and the value of refining one's personal brand and communication style. It reveals that with deliberate effort, a leader can reshape both how they are perceived and their company's trajectory, proving that leadership extends beyond technical prowess to encompass how you communicate your vision and inspire others.

I cannot stress enough how crucial it is to be intentional about the image you project. Without careful consideration, you risk unintentionally conveying an impression or assumption that doesn't align with who you are. If you find yourself disliking a particular image or persona that others have of you, you need to purposefully create one that reflects your authentic self. People make assumptions—that's human nature—and sometimes you may not even know the reasons behind them. But if you want to present an identity that you genuinely resonate with and want to share with the world, you need to take deliberate steps to craft it.

Purposeful branding isn't natural; it does not happen organically. In fact, you also need to understand that your identity isn't static. Purposeful branding should be dynamic, suited to the context and environment you're in and the different stages of your life and career. You evolve throughout your life and career journey.

If you're unsure about how to navigate this process, later chapters will introduce practical tools, such as "word cloud" exercises, to help you discover and define your authentic self.

In the Asian cultural context or for the more introverted, making yourself highly visible and putting yourself out there may not be the most comfortable thing to do. We've been brought up to value humility and to be self-effacing. So if this all feels a bit much, think about it this way: purposeful personal branding isn't about creating visibility for yourself just for the sake of it, it is about finding out who you truly are so that you





can authentically present yourself to others. It is also about exchanging ideas and learning from your peers.

Imposter syndrome is well-documented, especially among women, and even among women at the highest levels of their careers. I've even had a touch of it while writing this book, that little voice asking, "Who wants to read this?" But this is where you hear that voice, set it aside, and find your power source that gives you the push to believe in yourself.

What gave me the power to continue with this book was reading Nadella's *Hit Refresh*. He shared that he initially thought of writing a book only at retirement, but three years into his job at Microsoft, he took on the colossal challenge and completed it. He wrote it because he hoped his experiences could help readers facing similar challenges. I felt like he was talking to me! Our power sources can come from anywhere: your friends, colleagues or family. In my case, it came from a book.

Feel the fear and do it anyway. Doubts are natural and they make us human. But more than that, they help you to clarify and create clarity. When you have doubts, you relook what you're doing which leads you to refine your idea and improve upon it. Don't think of your fears—that little voice in your head—as weakness. They're good opportunities to reflect on what you're doing and to take steps to improve them.

I hope you leave this book with valuable insights that enhance your purposeful journey. May you believe in the MAGIC within you, comfortably and authentically. This isn't another book or framework telling you one more thing that you have to do or learn. Instead, it aims to clarify something you already know deep down: You possess the capacity to achieve this. I want to gently nudge your subconscious to realise that activating your MAGIC requires just one extra step.

We are going to embark on a journey of small, manageable steps, rather than tackling a big daunting task or throwing yourself into a stressful certification course. My goal is to integrate the MAGIC framework into





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your daily life. I've laid it all out for you in the following chapters; all you need to do is read, take it all in, and allow your subconscious to activate the magic. And most importantly, have fun! These aren't chores or homework; this is your life!





CHAPTER 2

.....

From Childhood Dreams to Global Executive

My first job was a serendipitous find. “Fun, entertainment, music”—those words in a tiny classified ad caught my eye. This was before the age of LinkedIn; you had to scour physical newspapers, flipping to the back for classifieds ads. Space was sold by the line, and the ad I immediately responded to was a mere two lines: “Fun, entertainment, music” followed by “Apply” and a telephone number. Cheap and direct.

I called, turned up at their office in a short skirt, and landed a job in media. It was the time of my life because we were launching Singapore’s first entertainment magazine. I did hardcore sales which became the bedrock of my career. My tenacity and sales expertise were forged on the streets. I wasn’t just cold calling; I was standing in front of shops, knocking on doors, and saying, “Hi, I represent this magazine. Do you have a minute?”

You needed thick skin to endure the pressures of a sales job long enough for that work to yield its rewards. But one criticism really burrowed under my skin and left a mark I carried for years.

One day, while speaking with my editor, he suddenly interrupted me, exclaiming, “My God, Cindy, you have such poor grammar and vocabulary!” I was so taken aback that I couldn’t respond. I don’t even





think I reacted beyond the sheer shock of his bluntness. How do you process feedback like that? An awkward silence stretched between us before I mumbled a resigned, “Yeah, that’s true. I do have poor grammar and vocabulary.”

I grew up in a Chinese-speaking family. I was really into Chinese music, spoke Mandarin with my parents, and ate, breathed and dreamt in that language. My school holiday job was at my mum’s garment factory where I listened to loud Chinese music while snipping threads from finished garments. Lunch was with the other “aunties” at the factory, our conversations entirely in Mandarin. In short, I wasn’t immersed in the English-speaking world. My bosses at that magazine hired a 20-year-old girl, fresh out of school. They should have known what they were getting into.

Joking aside, my editor’s comment left a deep impression. I accepted it then, but it lingered in the back of my mind for years. It wasn’t until my role at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) that I truly grasped the English language and could articulate myself better. Who knows how I landed that job at the BBC, it might have been another case of dressing sharply!

From Local to Global

Joining the BBC marked my second regional role and my first overseas posting. I hadn’t realised how small Singapore was until I landed in New York, looked up, and thought, “Oh my God. How can buildings be this tall and roads this wide?” Singapore felt like a village then.

I lived in a duplex apartment next to one of New York City’s most popular clubs. But instead of enjoying the city, all I did was work. In my free time, I hung out at my apartment with my TV and boxes of Chinese





takeout. This was my first time living abroad and I was clueless. I created my own limitations, choosing comfort over adventure. To this day, I still wonder about the many what-ifs. What if I had allowed myself to be brave, to go out, network, meet people, and open up? Could my career trajectory have been different or accelerated?

After New York, I was transferred to Hong Kong where I decided to live differently. I rented a walk-up apartment. In Hong Kong, even though an apartment is listed as Level 6, it's not six flights of stairs. They start from G, to 0, to 1, and each level is a tall flight of steep steps. This means at least seven flights for Level 6. Every time I lugged my luggage up those stairs, I regretted my decision!

My role at the BBC was to rejuvenate the Hong Kong business and open up the Chinese market. I could have declined the opportunity as I knew nothing about the Chinese market or working with Chinese counterparts. But I took it anyway. China was highly sensitive about the media, but it was also signalling its openness to the world. My opportunity came when China launched Boao Forum for Asia, and they were looking for a strategic media partner. I recall entering a room filled with senior Chinese officials to pitch "Why BBC". I truly believed it was a combination of the BBC's trust and my genuine approach to building a successful partnership that secured the deal. In the following years, the BBC's highest growth came from this market.

By my seventh or eighth year at the BBC, I felt restless. I believed digital was the future, but while the BBC was venturing into digital platforms, it remained heavily focused on television. I wanted to jump into the burgeoning digital economy. So, when TripAdvisor called, I was intrigued.

It was during TripAdvisor's early days. They were establishing a headquarters in Singapore and sought someone to help expand their





market presence. Despite my growing enthusiasm for the digital economy, I initially hesitated, questioning why anyone would research travel online. Back then, people went to travel agents, drawn by glossy brochures and consultants who would plan out every step of their itinerary. But the allure of the digital economy was strong and the scope was exciting, so I took the leap. Little did I know that this gamble would pay off, as digital exploded, as we all now know.

The entire travel economy transformed. And I'm proud to say I was a part of the team that drove the consumer shift from analogue to online travel research. After eight years at TripAdvisor, I grew restless again. I had taken on global roles, sales business development, and even launched a new business globally. I was ready for my next challenge.

I have always been passionate about education and paying it forward. I wanted a role where I could offer support. Coincidentally, a company contacted me, seeking a Chief Recruitment Officer managing Global Sales Recruitment, Operations and Digital marketing as part of their ExCom (executive committee). Their business revolved around helping students gain admission to universities in the United Kingdom (U.K.) and United States (U.S.). I thought it was a perfect fit, so I accepted. Then COVID-19 hit.

Beyond admissions, our priorities shifted to supporting students and teachers both mentally and physically. Borders closed and students attended classes at home, sometimes with 8 to 12-hour time differences from their schools. Both students and teachers were overworked. Parents were concerned about learning quality. While challenging, the situation fuelled our team's creativity.

As borders reopened in phases, we found accessibility solutions. We chartered our first flight from the students' destination to their schools. Imagine the excitement when that plane landed!





We could have continued business as usual, teaching behind Zoom screens. But we didn't.

We rewrote our safety protocols, not because governments demanded it, but because we genuinely cared about the health of our students. We elevated our policies to reassure parents and students that schools were safe. We chartered flights to bring students back to schools, allowing them to resume their student lives.

Steve Jobs once said, "The ones who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do". I would add, "The ones who care enough to act despite fear are the ones we remember."

Years from now, no one will recall your job title. But they will remember the thread you wove into their story: the time you chose courage over convenience and humanity over habit. That's how magic becomes legacy.

I could not have imagined doing any of this before that role.

Towards the end of COVID-19, Meta reached out, offering an exciting role to lead their e-commerce business in Asia Pacific (APAC). I remember this quote from Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google, to a young Sheryl Sandberg who was ruminating over joining Facebook: "Don't be an idiot. Get on a rocket ship. When companies are growing quickly and they are having a lot of impact, careers take care of themselves. If you're offered a seat on a rocket ship, don't ask what seat. Just get on." And that's how I approached it.

Because opportunities don't come with guarantees; they come with possibilities. Today, I'm again part of the next technological revolution, shaping change, not just witnessing it.

But here's the truth: these moments don't just happen. They result from years of preparation, leaning into discomfort, and making small bets on yourself when no one is watching. I've never waited for opportunity—I trained for it. When I wanted to move into digital, even though the BBC





wasn't fully digital, I sought every chance to immerse myself. I worked on projects that pushed me closer to the space I wanted to be in, so when TripAdvisor called, I was ready, not scrambling to prove it.

Opportunities don't wait for us to feel ready.

In the next part of this book, I will delve deeper into my MAGIC framework. Here, I'd like to touch on the 'M'—Manifestation. It is about *who* you want to be, *what* you can do, *where* you can be that person, and *how* you can do it.

Manifestation helped me because I had an idea of the *what*, while I was seeking the *where*—opportunities. Where could I fit? Then, it was about *how* to apply it practically.

You'll never know which company will come knocking. Explore opportunities in your fields of interest, then prepare for them. Be ready to answer when opportunity knocks.



**“The ones who care enough to
act despite fear are the ones we
remember.”**

**Years from now, no one will
recall your job title. But they will
remember the thread you wove
into their story: the time you
chose courage over convenience
and humanity over habit. That’s
how magic becomes legacy.**







GUEST ESSAY

Navigation Through Structure

Kenneth Siow

General Manager (Singapore/Malaysia) and Regional Director, Southeast Asia, Tencent Cloud

Growing up as a third-generation Singaporean of Chinese descent, my life bridged cultural worlds spanning Singapore, China, and Malaysia. Born in the 1970s, I was shaped by an environment that both nurtured and constrained me—one deeply rooted in traditional Asian values emphasising academic excellence, discipline, and prescribed paths to success, and a fast-growing Singapore that was ever ready to embrace and ride the benefits of globalisation.

Singapore's education system defined my early years. As a Chinese Special Assistance Plan (SAP) school student who only became fluent in English at 17 (I never spoke much English until I went to Junior College), I felt a constant pressure to conform, fall in line with everyone else, and excel. Given my parents' very busy working schedules, I had little to no coaching by anyone other than tuition teachers and schoolteachers who seemed more interested to get paid and get through lessons quickly, emphasising exam





preparation over the nurturing and coaching styles which we hear of in systems like those of Scandinavia or Australia.

Rather than thriving, I often found myself merely surviving—doing reasonably well to pass but struggling to keep pace with more competitive peers and seldom being the top student in my cohort. My O-level results got me a place at Catholic Junior College, where I sheepishly chose a path into science and maths, primarily out of a sense of practicality, not passion.

At 20, after mandatory military service, I faced a crucial decision regarding university. Convincing my parents to let me study in Australia marked my first step toward autonomy. My mother's support, despite my father's hesitation, opened the door to transformation.

Australia became a crucible for my personal growth. For four years, I navigated life on my own, learning everything from cooking and laundry to building resilience without immediate family support. Initially shy and unsure, I pushed myself to step out of my comfort zone. I interacted with people from different cultures, gradually finding my voice and building confidence.

The experience wasn't without challenges. I faced a personal crisis when I became involved with a Fundamental Church group with extreme religious views during my first year at university. The group's rigid doctrines and ultra-fundamentalist worldview, coupled with my own idealistic fervour, left me feeling stifled, burned out, and disillusioned eventually. This, coupled with failed relationships and a sense of betrayal from friends who didn't understand my departure from the church group, forced me to confront my underlying beliefs and emotions. That period laid the





foundation for a more nuanced understanding of our Creator, of faith, and of relationships.

From Following to Leading

Six months before my graduation, I took massive action to look for opportunities in preparation for my future career. I applied for a Management Trainee role as part of the campus recruitment exercise. One step led to another, and I found myself among 30 trainees, selected from 2000 applicants across Australia's universities, with a job lined up in Singapore upon graduation. My journey in Shell marked the beginning of my professional life and a shift in my mindset. No longer content to be a follower and following the status quo (just because my friends were pursuing a career in programming or in banking didn't mean it was right for me), I embraced critical thinking and started asking questions. I learnt to balance my natural curiosity with newfound courage, transforming my non-confrontational nature into a strength.

During my time at Shell, I worked in challenging environments, including a three-year secondment to the U.K. office. Learning how to survive, build relationships from scratch, and forge new pathways reminded me that unless I was proactive (planning, strategising, and coordinating) and resilient, I would not be able to thrive in a city of 15 million people.

I also pursued a sabbatical to work on a special non-government development project where I spent six months in the harsh winters of Mongolia. I witnessed extreme poverty in the Mongolian slums and its impact on the society's emotional and mental wellbeing due to the country's lack of sustainable people and infrastructure





development. (Note: Mongolia in the early 2000s was extremely poor as it evolved slowly from 80 years of Soviet influence. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Mongolia found itself on its own and heavily dependent on foreign aid). Living in a foreign land, learning new languages, and building new relationships, again reminded me that without action and planning, I risked physical, emotional and mental isolation. On the contrary, if I opened up my mind to new ideas, new cultures, and new friendships, I could emerge fulfilled and empowered with renewed passion, power, and purpose.

These experiences tested my resilience and adaptability, helping me break free from the constraints of my upbringing. I discovered that the more I pushed my boundaries, the stronger I became.

I also realised that life is often about perspective. If you want to experience success and riches, you need to experience hardship and pain. If you want to know prosperity and financial freedom, you need to experience lack and poverty. It is only by knowing hunger that you can truly appreciate fullness.

A defining moment came during a reflective day at a Hong Kong beach in my late 20s. I drew a timeline of my life, mapping out where I wanted to be at 40 and 50. I observed I was already subconsciously following a path I had always wanted to pursue. The next 20 years may be full of ups and downs, but I needed a “North Star” to guide me. This included pursuing post-graduate degrees, transitioning from technical roles to sales and business development and roles which drive growth, as well as aligning my life with purposeful living based on values and aspirations. That goal-setting exercise gave me clarity and purpose. I told myself it was time to move to the next phase, building upon my engineering background and





international experiences to drive growth and create market change through sales and development.

Embracing Leadership and Growth

As my career progressed, I transitioned into roles that allowed me to develop both personally and professionally.

At Intel, I achieved a breakthrough as a top sales performer and received a top contributor award for forging a strategic alliance and delivering tangible results for Intel and Microsoft. I successfully closed several cutting-edge deals, including the first major transformation technology migration contract between a top German automobile manufacturer in China involving Intel and Microsoft technologies, as well as the first RFID (Radio Frequency ID) technology R&D lab built by Intel, and a railway-focused software powerhouse. These wins underscored the fact that we are never a one-man show; every success and win is often a function of collective partnerships with stakeholders with clear goals in mind. To build collective partnerships, you need to make friends and influence people quickly.

Similarly at Cisco Systems, I built and led a diverse team across APAC and consecutively received outstanding contribution awards by developing and executing strategies that achieved incremental revenue and profitability growth, reduced operational costs, and increased efficiencies. These successes were made possible by mentors and great leaders who taught me invaluable lessons. They reinforced my belief in the importance of mentorship, strategy, and collective success.

The same principles apply to all aspects of life: being proactive,





forging new partnerships and friendships, rallying stakeholders toward a common cause, and celebrating victories collectively.

Joining Google further sharpened my entrepreneurial mindset. In a startup-like environment, I learnt to think on my feet, honed my skills in influencing and uniting people toward a shared vision, and fostered psychological safety within teams. Creating an environment where individuals felt safe to speak up and share ideas was transformative. It unleashed creativity and passion, reshaping my approach to leadership.

I was always conscious about my “North Star”, ensuring my actions added value and contributed to my personal goals.

Lessons for the Next Generation

Reflecting on my journey, I’ve come to understand that finding your inner magic requires intentional effort. Here are some key lessons:

- **Set Goals:** Without clear goals, you risk being a ship without an anchor, drifting aimlessly. Goal setting gives you direction and helps you rally resources to achieve your aspirations.
- **Push Boundaries:** Growth happens outside your comfort zone. Whether it’s initiating conversations, taking on new challenges, or questioning the status quo, pushing boundaries is essential for self-discovery.
- **Embrace Continuous Improvement:** Life is ever evolving. Like a tree that must grow or die, we need environments that allow us to reach for the stars. When you feel constrained, seek new opportunities to grow.





The Magic Within

Almost two decades have passed since my self-reflection on that Hong Kong beach.

I've come to see that the magic we seek is already within us. It's shaped by our experiences, choices, and mindset. My journey from a shy, reactive, and non-confrontational student to a confident leader and entrepreneur is testament to the power of self-discovery and resilience. The question isn't whether you have the magic; it's whether you choose to uncover it and let it shine. Understanding *your personal Goals* and the "**Why**" (why you want to achieve them) will help you determine the "**How**" (how to reach them and align your values with your "why") and the "**What**" (what steps, big or small, are needed).

Finally, I live by a number of mottos and ethos which I recite almost on a daily basis:

- When the going gets tough, the tough get going.
- No one owes you a living.
- If you are not growing (in career and in life), you are stagnating and in danger of dying (mentally, and becoming a "Career Zombie").
- Continuous and never-ending improvement is the only way to grow.
- Develop visions and goals: nothing happens by chance.
- If you don't live by your goals, you will end up living someone else's.
- Run the race against yourself and your limitations, and celebrate your victories.
- If you never try, you'll never know (including goal setting).





- Time and tide wait for no man: in the end we go back to where we started (so, is it worth your effort to do A or B; does it matter 100 years from now?).
- Be curious—that's what makes life interesting and fun.
- The past doesn't define us. Our past (good and bad) must be acknowledged; it teaches us (through pleasure and pain) for our future.
- Our future is what we define it to be.

To sum it up, learn to love ourselves more: do not be too harsh on ourselves, and let laughter be your best medicine!



CHAPTER 3

Authentic Adaptation

In the early years of my career, I admired and respected my mentors, often trying to emulate their approach. It wasn't until the last couple of years that I realised that I, too, had unique qualities to offer.

Nevertheless, I am deeply grateful to these individuals for shaping who I am today. Each mentor provided valuable lessons at different points of my career. In my early role at the magazine, there was an amazing editor and saleswoman. She was impeccably dressed, creative, engaging, and articulate. As a newcomer to the business world, I saw her as the gold standard. I aspired to be like her—a sharp dresser, a skilled communicator, and someone who commanded attention the moment she enters a room.

Having been bluntly criticised as inarticulate, I gravitated toward her as a powerful role model. Perhaps her influence played a part in helping me secure the job at the BBC.

Another amazing mentor was incredibly driven and passionate about her work. She commanded the room with her intelligence, empathy, and deep knowledge, treating everyone on her team as equals and genuinely caring for their well-being. I also had a male mentor who fearlessly executed his decisions with unwavering conviction, powering through any obstacles because he firmly believed in the rightness of his choices—a true mark of leadership. These mentors shaped who I am today.



So while it's true that I learnt to embrace my unique self later in my career, learning from others by adopting some of their traits is a natural part of forming our identities and self-discovery.

My global experiences have given me a deep appreciation for the rich tapestry of cultures, business expectations, and ways of thinking that shape diverse markets. Over time, I've learnt not only to navigate these differences but to embrace them, understanding that success in a global arena lies in adapting without sacrificing authenticity, rather than imposing a singular approach.

Consider it akin to being a skilled musician. You may play the same instrument, but the way you perform changes depending on the audience. In some settings, you need to be bold, commanding attention with a solo. In others, you focus on harmony, blending seamlessly into the ensemble. The key is knowing when to lead and when to listen.

This is particularly true when comparing Western and Asian markets. In the U.S. or Europe, business culture often values directness—speaking up, asserting opinions, and making an impact in the room. It's like playing a lead guitar riff; you must stand out to be heard. In Asia, the melody shifts—relationships, trust, and respect take centre stage. Influence is cultivated over time, and collaboration is often nuanced, like an orchestra where each instrument plays in unison.

So how do you stay authentic while working across these diverse landscapes? By recognising that adaptability isn't inauthentic; it's a skill. Just as a great musician adapts their performance to their audience, a great leader flexes their approach without compromising who they are.

Let's dive deeper into navigating cultural nuances in a global business world. Buckle up, we're in for an exciting ride.





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CHAPTER 4

Going Global: Navigating Cultural Differences and Biases

In my early years abroad, being alone in my first posting felt like a daunting “me versus the world” scenario. It was an incredibly scary and lonely experience. I lacked clarity and constantly questioned my motivations. Each night, after every minor setback, I wondered why I was even there. I had a lot of doubt about my place in the world in those early years.

But like most people who move to a new country, I eventually started meeting people and built my network, cultivating my own power sources. Things started looking up as I struck a healthier balance between work and personal engagement.

Navigating Cultural Landmines

My global experiences profoundly enriched my career, exposing me to a world beyond the local and familiar. They opened my eyes to the diverse and, sometimes, surprisingly similar ways people operate across cultures and environments.

Navigating the intricate landscape of global business has been transformative, deepening my appreciation for cultural nuances and their impact on professional interactions. This understanding is supported by





research. For example, a study highlighted in the *International Journal of Business and Management*⁷ highlights that cultural differences in thinking patterns, value systems, and communication styles significantly influence international business negotiations.

In my career, I've observed these cultural distinctions firsthand. Early on, while collaborating with Western colleagues, I noted a preference for direct communication and individual assertiveness. This aligns with Erin Meyer's observations in her book *The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business*, where she notes that Western cultures often value explicit expression and egalitarian organisational structures.

In Asian markets, I encountered a contrasting approach. Business interactions were more nuanced, with a strong emphasis on relationship building and implicit cues. Meyer describes this as high-context communication, prevalent in many Asian cultures, where messages are often conveyed indirectly, relying heavily on context.

These experiences taught me the importance of adaptability. It's akin to being a versatile actor who adjusts their performance based on the audience and cultural setting, ensuring the message resonates authentically. By understanding and embracing these cultural differences, I've fostered more meaningful and effective collaborations across diverse markets.

In Hong Kong, the BBC Worldwide sought to enter the Chinese market and the initial relationship-building was very much with the Chinese government; I found myself thriving as our societal values are quite similar. North Asian markets, in general, felt familiar, characterised by similar meeting protocols, ways of following up with appointments and tasks, and a strong emphasis on relationships and trust.

In North Asia, meetings don't begin with immediate business discussions. Instead, you build rapport and relationship, taking time to





understand their business, motivations, and personal backgrounds before diving into details. It's not just about what you can sell to them but why you should be working together, and how you can both be successful in the long run. In Chinese, we call it *guanxi*⁸, a term that, while old, remains relevant across industries. Or in Japan, the concept of *Wa*. Here's a prime example:

I was involved in a client meeting in Japan where we had to salvage a business relationship. They were a critical stakeholder in the ecosystem and working with them would have generated great incremental revenue and other lucrative opportunities. During the first meeting, the client expressed anger over unsupportive actions of past leadership, claiming broken promises and unfair penalties imposed upon them during their time of greatest hardship. They were furious about the previous leadership team's partnership approach, convinced that we were only interested in a one-sided deal that benefitted us.

How did I fix this? My approach, both then and in subsequent meetings, was to listen, understand, and inquire. I did not defend or sell. I genuinely empathised with their situation and focused on learning the friction points, continuously seeking feedback on how we could do better the next round. I also aimed to craft early, small wins for them. Gradually, the conversation shifted. Without prompting, the client began asking about our solutions and how we could help them scale their business. The partnership turnaround not only secured one of the largest multi-year global deals for my company but also enhanced brand equity for both firms across Japan as we expanded our partnership to include social impact initiatives. The client trusted me, both as a representative and as a person, simply because we paved the way first together by *not* getting down to business straightaway.

Working in America was a whole different ballgame. Sure, relationships





were important, but the emphasis was on getting things done—efficiency, effectiveness, and quick returns. It was more about, “What can you do for me and what can I offer?” Business was the priority, and things moved quickly, compared to North Asia. That made the relationships feel more transactional. Conversely, my North Asian partnerships, rooted in mutual trust and the desire to win together, frequently blossomed into genuine friendships.

I’m not advocating for one approach over the other. What I am trying to highlight is the importance of adapting to cultural environments and nuances, both as a sign of respect and to facilitate good business. My accent, for instance, changes to suit my audience from different markets. I tend to slow the pace of my delivery in Japan and South Korea and speed it up a notch when I’m connecting with colleagues in the U.S. or the U.K.. This code-switching is not about trying to impress others but an accommodation for better understanding. If I were to speak to my U.S. or U.K. colleagues with a full-on Singaporean accent, they will never be able to understand me. If I were to use local references, they’d be equally lost since they lack local context.

On the flip side, I’ve been in meetings where others have desperately tried to impress with trendy Gen Z lingo or sophisticated technical jargon. These attempts were not particularly helpful as they did not improve communication or first impressions. In fact, they created a painfully awkward atmosphere. The best way to communicate is to simplify and clarify, breaking down complex concepts for universal understanding. Using big, bold words does not make communication better. Interestingly, when you try to simplify, you will find greater engagement from the other person.

Genuinely understanding your partners and market dynamics, and doing the legwork to achieve this, is crucial. When entering a new





environment, you can't expect others to hand you all the information on a silver platter simply because you're new. Even as a foreigner, people are more receptive when you've taken time to establish a basic understanding before seeking deeper insights. This parallels how locals are far more welcoming to tourists who make an effort—learning basic phrases, respecting cultural customs, or understanding traditions. These small gestures signal a desire to connect, not just extract.

Let me give you another analogy. Imagine managing a new football team. You might have studied the playbook, mastered strategies, and even coached successful teams before, but instructing players how to perform without first observing and understanding their individual skills and teamwork dynamics would be a mistake. The best coaches take the time to recognise each player's strengths, respect the team's chemistry, and collaborate closely to execute a shared game plan—that's when the team truly starts scoring goals.

This principle was put to the test when I moved to New York with the BBC. By then, I had a solid grasp of the company and its ethos, but it would have been naïve of me to assume that I could simply transplant my experiences elsewhere and expect the market to operate in the same way. Entering a new team and declaring, "This is how it's done—follow my lead!" would have been a recipe for disaster.

Instead, I navigated the challenge of cascading knowledge and expertise in a way that made sense for them. Each team had its own perspective, rhythm, and ways of working. If I had forced my approach without understanding theirs, I would have met resistance. Instead, I listened, observed, and adapted. I absorbed their insights, pivoted when necessary, and found ways to bridge their understanding with mine. That's how real impact happens—not through imposition, but through integration.





Research and preparation are valuable, but practical learning is essential. The key is to show up prepared, stay adaptable, and earn the right to lead through understanding, not assumption.





GUEST ESSAY

Finding Your *Ikigai*

Robert Gilby
CEO, Blue Hat Ventures

Everyone has a Gift; a natural talent that can help them stand out. Discovering and nurturing that gift is not always easy. Some identify their gift early in life and pursue it with admirable intensity. Most, like me, discover it as life progresses. That journey can often mirror the story structure of “The Hero’s Journey” found in iconic tales like *Harry Potter* and *The Wizard of Oz*.

My story began with a simple childhood on a small island off the south coast of England. Born into a science family, I balanced analytical thinking with a passion for creativity, performing, and writing music. At university in London, I discovered the incredible diversity of Asia and also my intuition for business, particularly marketing. All these experiences would eventually come together to fuel my talents and skills, or my Gift.





The Call to Adventure

After university, I joined accounting firm PwC in London, and soon moved to Hong Kong, starting a 30-year adventure in Asia Pacific. At PwC Hong Kong, I chased my interest in marketing and creativity by joining the Entertainment, Media & Communications industry group. The partner leading the group rapidly became a mentor, continuously challenging me and encouraging me to learn.

I was hungry to progress and keen on business growth, so I considered leaving to do an MBA. Sharing this ambition with my mentor, he offered a new job skipping the MBA, instead sending me to Tokyo to establish the Entertainment & Media Group for PwC Japan's Strategic Consulting practice, a role I aspired to after the MBA. Manifestation in action!

Moving to Japan was pivotal. I arrived with bold ambitions but underestimated the cultural differences and experienced many challenging moments that became immense learning opportunities. Ultimately, the Japan experience was one of the most rewarding in my career, teaching me the importance of humility, adaptability, respect, and persistence.

Feeding the Fire, Lessons Learnt

Returning to Hong Kong, the spark for Entertainment & Media had become a burning flame. Keen to get closer to decision-making, I joined Turner Broadcasting and later, The Walt Disney Company in leadership roles. It was an exciting time as we navigated market shifts and constant business reinvention. At every twist and turn, I sought mentors in my supervisors, peers, team, and close friends.





This was also the period when I understood why I love this industry and why it had become my talent. Over the years, I had developed a toolkit of skills including strategy, finance, commercial negotiation, marketing, and technology. I'd been empowered to deploy these skills to create experiences that engaged, delighted, entertained, and moved people across multiple settings: TV, movie theatres, social video, games, retail, and immersive exhibitions. My adventure took me all across Asia, immersed in local cultures, and with a deep passion for the consumer, audience, and fans!

I had found my superpower.

Yet, there was one more talent that I had not anticipated. As I took on more senior roles, my positions required building, aligning, and mobilising talented leadership teams to achieve bold missions and deliver improved performance. Initially, this was a latent talent, untrained and needing much guidance from mentors. I worked hard to improve, utilising a simple framework: Experience, Exposure, Education (the Three Es). Let me share three personal stories that use the framework.

Find Your Voice—"Experience"

At Disney, I hosted a small group of Singapore filmmakers for a private coffee chat with George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*. One of the filmmakers asked how, in such a small market as Singapore, they could create impactful movies. Lucas' response was inspiring. He advised them to stay authentic and find their own voice. Authenticity connects meaningfully with the story. He also advised working with universal truths, as these cross cultures.





Nurture Relationships—“Exposure”

During my time at Disney, our sub-region was combined with several markets under the most senior leader in the region. This leader had a proven record for nurturing talented leaders and became an influential mentor and friend to me. Along the way, he provided exposure to unique thinking and principles, partnering me with the Disney Japan leadership team, and working together even after we both left Disney. Our relationship has endured business successes, challenges, and learning together. Talent needs to be nurtured, and we can all benefit from a helping hand. I’m grateful.

Structured Mentoring—“Education”

Sometimes, intervention is needed to provide a growth accelerator for talent at critical stages in their career. When leading Disney Southeast Asia, I became concerned that our leadership team did not reflect the diversity of our markets and our people. So, working with our HR team, we developed an original Next Generation Leaders programme with structured learning, networking, mentoring, and real-world case studies for a more diverse pool of future leaders. Many leaders who participated in the programme went on to senior roles across Disney and other businesses in the region.

The Mousetrap

Leaving Disney after 12 rewarding years, I faced a personal branding crisis. I had defined myself by my job and the powerful Disney





brand. I was asked by a new potential business partner, “What do you actually do?” They wanted to know my value, and how I could be useful to them. You will encounter this a lot in your career — in job hunting, career progression, business partnerships, investors, stakeholders, and many more. Knowing and clearly articulating your personal brand, emphasising the value of your unique gifts to the person in front of you, is an incredibly important skill. As someone wisely shared with me, “If you don’t manage your brand, others will.”

After Disney, I reflected deeply on my gift and its value using the Japanese framework of *ikigai*: What do you love? What are you good at? What does the world need? What can you be paid for?

Ikigai isn’t a rigid definition but a useful tool to understand the connection and tension between these elements. It serves as a compass, guiding towards a greater purpose and lasting satisfaction.

The Long and Winding Road Back

Having defined my value more clearly, I energetically pursued new ways to learn and focus my gift, embracing risk, failure, and resilience. I established an investment and advisory business for start-ups and rapidly growing digital media companies and later joined transformative companies such as a global EdTech and Nielsen. With a thirst for continuous learning, I also attended the Stanford Executive Program.

Life came full circle when, through a mentor introduction, I joined Japanese group Dentsu as CEO APAC, combining my passions for creativity, technology, and consumer insights. This role





allowed me to build and mobilise teams, move customers and stakeholders, and lay foundations for future growth and innovation. One step closer to my *ikigai*!

The Reward and Call to Action

I could never have pictured the journey ahead when I was growing up on a small island off the south coast of England. Fortunately, I discovered my gifts and talents through a combination of adopting a growth mindset—open, curious, adaptable, and resilient—and the generous mentorship from many leaders, friends, and colleagues.

Consider your own journey with these suggestions:

- Find your voice—believe in your *ikigai*, your personal gift.
- Foster a growth mindset, be open and curious to learning. Continuously invest in developing your gift.
- Nurture mentor relationships that help you grow, ideally together.

Remember, “if you want to travel fast, travel alone, but if you want to travel far, travel together.”





CHAPTER 5

Criticism Sparked Branding

Being a small Asian woman in a room where most people were the complete opposite came with its own set of challenges. New York wasn't just a city of towering skyscrapers and wide avenues; it was also filled with people who seemed larger than life, both in presence and stature. I used to wear super high heels, not just as a fashion choice, but as a way to make myself feel a little taller, a little more confident—like I was physically stepping into the space I knew I deserved.

These days, I don't bother. Partly because years of wearing heels have taken a toll on my back, but mostly because I no longer feel the need to make myself “bigger” to prove that I belong. But back then, I did. I felt I had to.

It wasn't just the big, obvious challenges. It was the small, subtle things that made me feel like I had to fight harder to be seen and heard. In rooms filled with senior executives, I often noticed that conversations with me were shorter, more surface-level, as if I was being pandered to. And it wasn't just the men; sometimes, even other women in leadership unintentionally did the same. These micro-inequities—small, often overlooked acts of exclusion or bias—can convey a lack of respect or recognition, making it harder for women to assert their authority and be taken seriously in professional settings.

In my professional journey, I have been advised to adopt a more aggressive approach to assert my value. Research indicates that when male





employees feel their gender status is threatened, they may respond negatively, potentially engaging in deviant behaviour or becoming less collaborative. Conversely, women expressing similar threats might face heightened scrutiny or be labelled as emotional or difficult. This disparity underscores the challenges women face in navigating workplace dynamics, where assertiveness can be misinterpreted due to entrenched gender biases.

I never faced blatant discrimination, but the moment that truly cut deep came when I was pitching an idea to a global chief executive who sat on the board. Instead of engaging with my proposal, he simply dismissed me with a sharp remark: “Look, I’m from MIT. We’ve done this many times.”

It was a single sentence, but it landed like a punch. Here I was—a senior executive on the management team—being made to feel small, irrelevant, and unqualified. I went home that night feeling absolutely lousy. I probably cried a bucket, thinking, “Perhaps I’m stupid—an Asian woman executive who never went to MIT”.

It took me a long time to process that moment. Worse, his words haunted me, creeping into my mind at the worst possible times: before presentations, during high-stakes meetings. But eventually, I reframed it. I realised his words weren’t a reflection of my ability, but of a fundamentally different way of viewing expertise.

In another part of her book *The Culture Map* mentioned in the previous chapter, Erin Meyer talks about how different cultures value expertise differently. In the U.S. and other Western business environments, credibility is often tied to institutional pedigree—degrees from Ivy League schools, top consulting firms, big-name credentials. In Asia and other parts of the world, expertise is typically demonstrated through real-world experience and results. My career wasn’t built on classroom theories. It was built on execution, delivering in multiple markets, and navigating complex business landscapes.





**I wish more leaders understood:
you need a personal board of
directors not just at work, but in
life. Find those power sources.
Build your village. Because when
the criticism comes—and it will—
you'll have the foundation to
stand strong.**



In the end, I made peace with that moment. He was entitled to his perspective, and I to mine. He had his way of working, and I had mine. If he chose to dismiss my viewpoint, that was his loss, not mine. True authority isn't about where you studied; it's about what you build, what you lead, and what you achieve.

Over time, I realised my real power didn't lie in seeking validation in every room. It came from the credibility I had earned through years of dedicated work and from my own board of directors, my personal village of support.

Indra Nooyi, former CEO of PepsiCo, once shared that even at the highest levels of leadership, she faced scepticism about her capabilities. Ursula Burns, the first Black female CEO of a Fortune 500 company, spoke of being frequently underestimated. What helped them push through? A strong support system, people who reaffirmed their worth when the world cast doubt.

For me, that support came from my family. Returning home after the MIT incident, my husband reassured me that my value wasn't defined by one person's dismissive remark. My children still thought the world of me, as did the people who truly knew my work.

This is an important lesson I wish more leaders understood: you need a personal board of directors not just at work, but in life. Find those power sources. Build your village. Because when the criticism comes—and it will—you'll have the foundation to stand strong.

Yes, I have experienced failures and successes. I have worked across diverse markets. And those experiences give me the authority to own my voice. While criticism may have sparked doubt, it ultimately ignited something stronger: my brand, my confidence, and my ability to lead without seeking permission.





CHAPTER 6

The Power of Purposeful Personal Branding in a Changing World

“In high-performing organisations, at certain levels, everyone is exceptional. To clearly differentiate your values and what you bring to the table, you need to do more than have a good reputation. You need to have an outstanding personal brand.”

This quote from a *Harvard Business Review*⁹ blog by *New York Times* bestselling author and executive coach Harrison Monarth encapsulates the importance of purposeful personal branding.

Need more convincing? From a 2019 study published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, researchers summarised that, “the findings confirm that personal branding leads to greater career satisfaction, fully mediated by perceived employability. [...] These findings highlight the importance of personal branding as a contemporary career technique in promoting one’s personal brand identity to achieve beneficial career outcomes.”¹⁰

In this chapter, let’s dive into the power of “purposeful” personal branding, and why you should utilise the MAGIC framework that I will reveal in the subsequent chapter.





Insights from an Industry Veteran

Having spent time in education during the COVID-19 years, and with two young daughters in school, I truly believe that the future of education is undergoing dramatic change. The traditional path of university degrees leading to guaranteed employment is no longer a certainty. In today's dynamic job market, a university degree alone doesn't ensure employment. Employers increasingly prioritise a combination of formal education and essential "soft skills" such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability. This shift is driven by rapid technological advancements and the evolving demands of the modern workplace.

The World Economic Forum's *The Future of Jobs Report 2023* highlights that analytical thinking, creative thinking, and proficiency in AI and big data are among the top in-demand skills projected for 2027. Additionally, leadership, social influence, curiosity, and lifelong learning are expected to see growing demand. For job seekers, it is crucial to recognise that while a degree provides foundational knowledge, developing 21st-century skills is essential for career success. These skills encompass:

- **Critical thinking:** Enhancing problem-solving and decision-making abilities
- **Creativity:** Fostering innovation and adaptability in various solutions
- **Collaboration:** Working effectively in diverse team settings
- **Communication:** Conveying ideas clearly and listening actively
- **Digital literacy:** Navigating and leveraging modern technologies proficiently

Developing these competencies can make candidates more attractive to employers who value adaptability and continuous learning.





Purposeful branding plays a pivotal role in this context. It involves showcasing one's unique skills, experiences, and values to stand out in the job market. By effectively communicating their brand, individuals can demonstrate how their combination of education and 21st-century skills align with an organisation's needs, thereby enhancing their employability.

In the future of work, what companies are looking for aligns with what the International Labour Organisation (ILO)¹¹ has laid out. Chapter 4 of their paper, *The ILO Core Skills for Life and Work in the 21st Century*, describes the skills needed in our modern world and immediate future. As ILO Director-General Guy Ryder stated, "There is an increasing need for cognitive skills, a readily adaptable workforce, which coupled with the growing complexity of job tasks will increase the demand for workers with strong core skills and motivation to learn and adapt throughout their professional careers."

These skills are divided into four sections, but for the sake of this book and its audience, I've narrowed them down to two relevant sections below:

Social and emotional skills	Cognitive and metacognitive skills
Communication	Foundational literacies
Collaboration and teamwork	Analytical and critical thinking
Conflict resolution and negotiation	Creative and innovative thinking
Emotional intelligence	Strategic thinking
	Problem-solving and decision-making
	Self-reflection and learning to learn
	Collecting, organising and analysing information
	Planning and organising
	Career management



A degree alone won't provide all these skills. I also believe the demand for specialised skill sets, which can be obtained through micro programmes, is increasing. For example, aspiring data scientists can pursue focused programmes on data science application, and AI creators can take specialised AI courses. Micro-programming is gaining ground because companies are looking for specialised skills. Of course, you can further build on that education with advanced training. But my point is that traditional university programmes often lack this level of focused micro-programming.

Adapting to the AI-Driven Job Market: Strategies for Future Employment

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the global job market, automating routine tasks while creating new roles that demand advanced technical and human-centric skills. To remain competitive, individuals should focus on acquiring skills that complement AI technologies, such as digital literacy, creativity, and emotional intelligence. Engaging in continuous education through online courses, workshops, and certifications can help professionals stay adaptable and resilient in this evolving landscape.

Industry leaders emphasise the importance of embracing AI as a tool for augmentation rather than viewing it as a threat. Anima Anandkumar, a Caltech professor and former AI leader at Nvidia and Amazon, advises young people to cultivate curiosity and problem-solving skills, noting that AI can enhance human capabilities but cannot replace the need for human insight and innovation.





In essence, the future of work demands a blend of traditional education and specialised, adaptable skills. In the chapters to come, I will introduce the MAGIC framework, a tool to help you navigate this changing landscape and build a brand that truly stands out.







GUEST ESSAY

Embrace the Power of Purpose

Tawana Murphy Burnett

Head of Top Accounts and Agencies, APAC, Meta

Purpose often reveals itself over time, like a puzzle coming together piece by piece. Early in our careers, we are driven by the need to prove ourselves—seeking validation from others to anchor our sense of worth. But as we grow, the focus shifts inward. We begin to see that purpose isn't about what we achieve; it's about who we are and how we align our work with the values that guide us. This realisation sets the stage for redefining success and discovering a more meaningful path forward.

Defining success is the first step to understanding purpose. For years, I measured success by external standards—promotions, accolades, and the approval of others. But I learnt that true success is deeply personal. It's about having the courage to set your own yardstick. I remember a young creative who dared to share an unconventional idea. Though it was dismissed, his intent wasn't to please others—it was to challenge the norm and express his unique





perspective. His story taught me that success isn't about universal agreement; it's about staying true to your vision and pushing boundaries that align with your purpose.

Beyond the Résumé: Personal Growth Through Failure

Early on, I believed my worth was tied to my résumé, tirelessly refining it to showcase my achievements. But over time, I realised that personal branding is not about what is on paper—it is about the values you embody, the consistency you bring, and the courage to embrace vulnerability. Real growth happens when you let go of the fear of failure and use setbacks as opportunities to learn. Only when I stopped trying to “prove” myself and started focusing on living my purpose did my career gain deeper meaning.

This process of self-reflection revealed another insight: the power of self-awareness. For years, I doubted I had any extraordinary abilities. But through journaling, introspection, and listening to my inner voice, I began to recognise patterns in my life. Gifts aren't always innate—they often emerge when we take the time to cultivate them. Self-awareness is like a mirror reflecting your strengths, challenges, and opportunities for growth. The more I leaned into this practice, the clearer my purpose became.

Trusting Yourself: The Power Within

With self-awareness came a deeper trust in my inner voice. While feedback from others is valuable, no one else has the full context of your journey. I realised that discovering purpose is about observing your own patterns, experimenting, and learning. Feedback can guide, but the most meaningful insights often come from within.





Trusting yourself is an act of courage that allows you to embrace uncertainty and grow authentically.

Learning from the East: A Leadership Evolution

This trust in myself was further reinforced by learning from diverse perspectives. My Western training emphasised assertiveness and directness in leadership. But when I immersed myself in Eastern cultures, I discovered the power of trust, subtlety, and mutual respect in both personal and professional relationships. These lessons expanded my understanding of leadership, showing me that purpose is often about adapting and learning from the world around you.

Leadership is not just about personal growth—it is also about understanding your environment. As an African American navigating corporate America, I learnt to adapt to different contexts while staying true to myself. Thriving in new environments requires a balance: recognising the unspoken rules and expectations while maintaining your authenticity. Adaptation isn't about losing yourself; it's about equipping yourself to succeed on your terms.

Finding Your Tribe: The Strength of Community

Purpose and success do not exist in isolation—they are amplified by the people you surround yourself with. Finding your tribe, a community that shares your values and vision, is essential. Whether boldness or subtlety defines a culture, the importance of connection remains universal. Your tribe is a source of support, inspiration, and accountability, helping you navigate challenges and celebrate victories.





Purposeful Leadership: Aligning Values with Action

Ultimately, purposeful leadership is about harmonising who you are with what you do. It's not just about your career; it's about the legacy you build through the care you show for yourself and others. Purposeful leadership requires patience—with your growth, your failures, and the process of discovering your gifts. By aligning your actions with your values and embracing the lessons in every experience, you can create an impact that reflects your true self. Purpose is not just something you find; it's something you live, every day.





GUEST ESSAY

When Luck Meets Purpose and Effort: A Leader's Journey of Resilience and Saying Yes

Shai Ganu

Managing Director, Global Leader
Executive Compensation and Board Advisory, Willis Towers Watson

Although I talk for a living, I really don't like talking about myself. Growing up in an Asian family, humility was instilled in me from a young age. Talking about one's achievements was seen as prideful, and we learnt to let our actions speak louder than our words. I often reflect on how this shaped my approach to life and work—striving hard, staying grounded, and trusting that good things come through karma and effort. My grandmother, a deeply spiritual woman, believed in the Hindu-Indian philosophy that good deeds come full circle, bringing blessings to those who come after. I'd like to think that her acts of kindness somehow paved the way for some of my own good fortune.

When I started my career, I carried these values with me, focusing on hard work and learning from those around me. Early in my consulting career, I had the opportunity to work closely with four experienced partners. I soaked up every bit of knowledge they





shared, thinking this would be the foundation of my growth. But within six months, all four left the firm—some joined competitors, and others became entrepreneurs. Suddenly, there was a void, and I found myself stepping into larger responsibilities. I wasn't fully prepared, but I said yes because there was an urgent need. It wasn't a planned move; it was simply a matter of being there at the right time. This experience taught me my first big lesson about luck in the workplace—sometimes, growth happens not because we are ready, but because we are willing to take a leap when opportunity arises.

Luck and Timing

As I continued to navigate my career, I realised how much luck and timing had influenced my path. Another pivotal moment came while I was volunteering with a non-profit board. I joined the board out of a desire to contribute to the community, wanting to make a difference outside of my professional work. One day, a fellow board member approached me and asked whether I would be interested in interviewing for a commercial board that was looking for my skill set. This was a serendipitous example of being in the right place at the right time. This opportunity wasn't something I had actively pursued; it found me simply because I showed up. Competence is essential, but sometimes, having the opportunity is pure luck.

However, I quickly learnt that luck and timing are just part of the equation. To succeed and grow, I needed a deliberate approach to my own development. Early on, I believed that working more hours would lead to faster advancement. I remember one particular





year, I billed 2,000 hours—which was twice my target—and was convinced that my overperformance would be rewarded with a promotion. Instead, my performance review revealed an unexpected truth: while my current work was exceptional in my current role, I hadn't yet shown growth in the skills needed for the next level. It was a turning point that taught me a powerful lesson: more isn't always better. Growth comes from taking on different types of challenges, not just more of the same.

The Importance of Being Strategic

From then on, I became strategic about my development, choosing roles that would expand my skills and taking on engagements that would help me gain experience in new areas. This shift required me to develop what I call a “wet clay” approach to leadership—staying adaptable, open to change, and willing to mould myself based on the needs of the moment. I believe that in leadership, it's essential to pivot between styles. Sometimes, a leader needs to take bold and decisive actions and lead from the front; other times, they need to step back and empower others. Like clay that remains soft to be shaped, leaders thrive when they can adjust while remaining rooted in their core values.

I am inspired by leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew who had the vision for a thriving Singapore, and the courage to make difficult long-term decisions for Singapore's benefit. This mindset of “do good, do well, do right” further steels my resolve to serve as a steward—a custodian of collective potential, there not to command but to elevate others.





Conviction and Resilience

The importance of conviction and resilience was reinforced when I encountered the story of Kiran Bedi, India's first female police officer. Bedi faced intense pressure, including threats to her life and sacrifices in her personal relationships, as she fought against corruption and political coercion. But her commitment to her values gave her strength. When someone asked if all her sacrifices were worth it, Bedi simply said, "These aren't sacrifices; they're choices." Her words resonated deeply with me. Viewing tough decisions as conscious choices rather than burdens reframes how we think about them, empowering us to take on challenges with purpose rather than reluctance. I've learnt that resilience comes from a place of inner conviction—of knowing why we do what we do and staying true to those principles, no matter the cost.

Over time, I have realised that exemplary leaders serve as stewards of assets entrusted to them—to protect and enhance value for the long term. I firmly believe that it is more important to build "star teams" rather than just "teams of stars". Strong teams share responsibility, lifting each other up rather than competing for the spotlight. I have always had a goal for myself to measure how many of my colleagues exceeded their own goals.

Hard work is a given (everybody works hard!), and competence is table-stakes—but as I look back, I realise that my journey has been shaped by a blend of luck, resilience, and the courage to say yes to the unknown. While I couldn't predict or control every opportunity that came my way, I could choose how to respond.

And whilst by no means do I feel I have accomplished anything worthy of note, whatever small successes I've found, aren't solely





through effort, ambition, or strategy. Joy in life and work is through meeting each moment with openness and enthusiasm, and the belief that we are capable of growth, no matter the circumstances. Luck may open doors, but it's conviction, adaptability, and a sense of purpose that allow us to step through them and thrive.







CHAPTER 7

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Beyond Worker Drone

Companies are increasingly sourcing talent globally, not just within the market they operate in. If a company finds a skilled engineer who prefers to work remotely from wherever they are, location becomes irrelevant. This raises crucial questions for those looking to join the workforce: How do you distinguish yourself? What unique value do you bring? How do you demonstrate that you are the one to pick over someone else in a different country? You are no longer competing locally; you are up against global talent, potentially available at a lower cost and with a greater drive to succeed.

In today's interconnected world, distinguishing oneself in the job market is paramount. The competition is no longer confined to local talent pools; it's global and intensifying. Finding your "magic" and articulating your magical self will become increasingly important.

A memorable quote that encapsulates this sentiment is by Dan Schawbel:

*"Brand yourself for the career you want,
not the job you have."*

How will your résumé stand out from the pile? How do you effectively present yourself to secure a second interview?





Anyone who gets that first interview probably already qualifies based on their experience. They've read your résumé and have a clear idea of your job qualifications. You're on their shortlist. So, what will make you memorable to the interviewer or hiring manager?

Experience is, of course, still key. But assuring the hiring manager that you are the person who can do the job is important. Who are you as a person? What do you care about? What do you enjoy doing? What are your interests, and how have you developed yourself personally? What challenges have you overcome? What ideas have you brought alive and scaled? These are the things that make you who you are. Share your pet project; for example, I have a passion for baking and am a fitness enthusiast. These interests make Cindy a much more interesting person than just Cindy, the person who could probably do the job.

The Importance of Life Outside Work

Your hobbies and your life outside work make you far more memorable. When someone walks away from a conversation with you, you want them to recall something distinctive about you beyond your résumé. People won't remember, for example, that I've worked in various markets or have extensive experience in a role. They won't be able to articulate those details. Instead, their feedback will likely be, "Hey, I met this great candidate. Great experience, but she's also so interesting. She is a baker and a fitness enthusiast. She loves tennis like I do!" That is what will make people remember you.

Some people believe that soft skills are inconsequential or that they don't add value to their work. I consider that a counterproductive perspective. Baking, for example, has far more similarities to my work than I ever anticipated.





***“Brand yourself for the career you
want, not the job you have.”***



Let's use the baking analogy. In business, especially in tech, we use A/B testing to determine product market fit. For instance, is green more effective than yellow? Are people more likely to click on green or on yellow, or even, which specific pantones? We conduct A/B testing to find the "right" colour. That's similar to baking. You test different brands of butter to determine which is superior. Will kosher salt work better than Himalayan? Then there's product design and development. You use those same skills when designing a cake or a tart, considering height, the colour, ingredients for the desired flavours, and so on.

That's me doing product development, the same process I would use for design planning. I conduct work mapping and market research before I launch my baking store because I want it to be unique. I consider my speciality and my target market, just as I consider my beachhead market and audience in my professional work.

I hope this chapter has you raring and ready to go to learn about my MAGIC framework so you can navigate the 21st-century job market more effectively. Let's get on with it!



CHAPTER 8

Manifestation: Uncovering Your Authentic Self

J.K. Rowling's journey to becoming one of the world's most successful authors is a powerful example of manifestation and uncovering one's true self. In the early 1990s, Rowling was a single mother struggling with depression and living on welfare. Despite her challenging circumstances, she had a burning desire to write and a vivid imagination filled with magical stories.

The idea for Harry Potter came to her during a delayed train journey in 1990. Over the next several years, while facing numerous personal and financial hardships, Rowling continued to work on her manuscript. She believed in her story and her ability as a writer, even when confronted with multiple rejections from publishers. This unwavering self-belief and persistence were key to manifesting her dreams.

In 1997, Bloomsbury agreed to publish *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The book's success surpassed anything Rowling had imagined, leading to a seven-book series that has sold over 500 million copies worldwide. Through this journey, Rowling not only manifested her dream of becoming a published author but also uncovered her true self as a storyteller with a unique voice that resonated with millions. Her story demonstrates how perseverance, self-belief, and staying true to one's passion can lead to the extraordinary manifestation of one's dreams and true self.





What Do You Want to Represent?

Cast aside your pre-conceived notions about “manifestation”. We’re discussing the MAGIC framework here, and while there might be some association with the social media version of “manifestation”—utilising New Age beliefs to bring your goals into reality—we’re talking about something completely different, even if I do use the terms “magic”, “wands”, and “spells” quite liberally in this book!

The first step in building a purposeful personal brand is to **Manifest**. Manifestation is the process of discovering who you are, defining the person you want to become, and ultimately aligning these two to build a purposeful and impactful personal brand. It’s the bridge between self-awareness and self-actualisation, where you take deliberate steps to project the best version of yourself into the world.

Why Do You Want to Represent These Qualities?

I find this quote from Aristotle most illuminating. “Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.” It is no wonder, then, that the Delphic maxim “Know Thyself”, inscribed on the Ancient Greek Temple of Apollo, is the best known in the world. It emphasises the importance of self-awareness, which is the cornerstone of a strong personal brand. Here’s how you can embark on these self-revelations:

- **Clarity of Identity:** Manifestation forces you to reflect deeply on your core attributes. It helps you gain clarity on who you are today and who you aspire to be.
- **Guided Purpose:** When you understand your attributes and the image you want to project, you can make intentional choices that guide your professional and personal journey.



- **Authenticity:** Manifestation ensures that the brand you project is grounded in genuine self-awareness. This authenticity is crucial for building trust and credibility.
- **Alignment:** It aligns your actions, goals, and relationships with your values and aspirations, creating a coherent and consistent brand story.
- **Inspiration:** Manifesting the best version of yourself can motivate and inspire others, amplifying your impact and influence.

If you want to stand for something, you need to understand why it truly matters to you at a deep, intrinsic level. Surface-level motivations won't sustain you when challenges arise. Take climate activism, for example. If your reason for becoming a climate champion is simply that you've noticed the weather getting hotter, that's not enough. Do you think Greta Thunberg is leading a global movement just because she feels a little uncomfortable in the summer? Of course not. Her conviction comes from a deep sense of urgency, responsibility, and an unshakable belief that the world is failing future generations. That's what fuels her relentless pursuit of change, despite criticism, backlash, and seemingly insurmountable opposition.

The same principle applies to anything you're passionate about. What truly dictates your motivation? What are the values that ground you? If your foundation is weak—if your motivation is just about chasing trends or reacting to surface-level discomfort—you will waver when the going gets tough. But if your purpose is rooted in something fundamental to who you are, it provides an anchor. It makes you unshakable.

So, think about what truly drives you. If you want to be a leader and want to create change, don't just latch onto an issue because it's convenient. Find the deeper reason, the values that form your core, and build your





foundation on that. Because when your motivation is built on something unshakable, so are you.

What Will Help You in Representing Those Qualities?

So you've identified the skills, the experiences, and the resources. The next step is to figure out how you can represent these qualities. Whether in meetings or on platforms like social media, ensure consistency in identifying, conveying, and showcasing your personal brand.

Michelle Obama, for example, the former First Lady of the U.S., embodies the concept of manifestation. She consistently presents herself as a passionate advocate for women's and children's rights, which aligns with her personal values and professional background in law and community service. Her personal brand is a combination of her advocacy and authenticity.

Steps to Manifestation

Step 1: Engage in Self-Discovery

Reflection: Begin by asking yourself foundational questions:

- What are my core values?
- What motivates me?
- What do I stand for?

Feedback: Gather input from trusted friends, colleagues or mentors. Ask them to share your key attributes or defining characteristics.





Step 2: Define Your Aspirations

Visioning: Write down what you want to be known for. Be specific about the qualities, skills, and impact you aspire to have.

Attributes Gap Analysis: Compare your current attributes (self and external perspectives) with your aspirational ones. Identify gaps and areas for growth.

Step 3: Embrace Acknowledgment

Accept both strengths and areas of improvement as part of your journey.

Acknowledge that personal growth is a continuous process, and setbacks are natural.

One way to discover these qualities is to do the above exercise, using the questions to uncover your true self. Another is to write down all your qualities. In the left column, write who you aspire to be. For example, I aspire to be someone known for great business outcomes. On the right column, write your qualities. Then, try to see if you can match your qualities to what you aspire to be. If I want to be known as a climate change leader, but on the right side I'm still using plastics or running my air-conditioning round the clock, those values don't align with my aspiration.

You need to think about your real-life practical values. You cannot connect the dots if you're a hypocritical climate change leader, for example. You need to see a match between your left and right column attributes.

Self-assessment can also be greatly enhanced by using various tools in the market to help you explore different facets of your personality and aspirations:

- **Emotional Tools:** Use personality quizzes and emotional intelligence assessments like 16 Personalities or the free Emotional Intelligence Test.





- **Narrative Tools:** Engage in journaling or storytelling exercises to understand recurring themes in your life. Free platforms like Penzu offer secure digital journaling tools.
- **Intellectual Tools:** Reflect on your strengths and problem-solving approaches with tools like Gallup's Clifton Strengths Assessment.

You can also conduct this as a group exercise using a word cloud. A word cloud exercise is a collaborative activity where participants submit words or phrases in response to a question, and the responses are displayed visually as a word cloud. Word clouds are useful for icebreakers, presentations, team building, and more.

How it works:

1. Ask a question about yourself.
2. Participants submit their responses.
3. The responses are displayed as a word cloud.
4. The words displayed will offer a clear representation of how you are perceived.

Finally, I like the idea of developing a personal statement. Crafting your personal brand statement is much like creating an elevator pitch: a quick, clear way to communicate who you are and what you do best. If someone asks, "Cindy, who are you?", my instinctive answer might be, "I'm a baker, a fitness enthusiast, and a strong commercial leader." But arriving at that statement took reflection and practice—much like perfecting a sourdough loaf or sticking to a workout routine.

If you're struggling to nail your 60-second pitch, think of it as a recipe you'll refine over time. Start with the core ingredients—your passions, strengths, and values—and adjust until it feels authentic and impactful. Once you find the right mix, express it openly. Let it guide your conversations at work and in your everyday interactions.





**Crafting your personal brand
statement is much like creating
an elevator pitch: a quick, clear
way to communicate who you are
and what you do best.**





Here's an example of a more detailed brand statement:

Over the years, I've had the privilege of leading teams and collaborating with talented individuals to drive meaningful outcomes. Whether it's developing data-informed strategies or fostering a supportive team culture, I approach each challenge with a mindset of continuous learning and genuine care. Balancing my professional responsibilities with raising two wonderful children has taught me the importance of empathy, resilience, and the value of nurturing potential in others. I believe in creating environments where people feel valued and empowered to grow, and where success is a shared journey.

This example blends professional acumen with personal touches, showing how your "Who" can weave together different facets of your life. Keep refining yours until it feels natural, then watch how it helps you confidently share your story.

Examples of People Who Have Done This Well

1. Oprah Winfrey

- *Personal Brand Snapshot:* Empathy, empowerment, and education.
- *How It Shows:* From her talk show days to her OWN network, magazine, and philanthropic work, Oprah's brand consistently focuses on lifting people up through shared stories and emotional connection.

2. Richard Branson

- *Personal Brand Snapshot:* Adventurous, forward-thinking entrepreneur who challenges the status quo.
- *How It Shows:* Through the Virgin Group, Branson embodies fun, risk-taking, and innovation—attributes that have become synonymous with his personal brand.

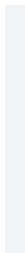
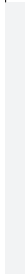




3. Simon Sinek

- *Personal Brand Snapshot*: Inspiring people to find their ‘Why’ and lead with purpose.
- *How It Shows*: He’s widely recognised for his “Start with Why” framework, and he consistently communicates this philosophy in his books, talks, and social media content.

Each of these figures consistently communicates who they are, what they believe, and how they bring value to the world. That clarity reinforces their credibility, attracts the right audiences, and guides their choices about what to create or get involved with next.





GUEST ESSAY

Manifesting and Activating Your Leadership Potential: Planning Two Jobs Ahead

Ng Tian Chong
CEO, Singtel

As I look back on my journey from an ambitious young professional to a senior leader in a global organisation, I am struck by how crucial two key elements have been to my success: what I have come to call Manifestation and Activation. These are not just buzzwords; they are the fundamental pillars that have shaped my career.

As I navigated through my career at Hewlett Packard, one of my favourite CEOs of HP Inc, Dion Weisler, introduced me to the concept of planning two jobs ahead. At first, it seemed premature, even presumptuous. But as I have progressed through my career, I have come to realise the immense value of this forward-thinking approach.

Manifestation, in essence, is about clearly envisioning your future and articulating your aspirations. It is not daydreaming; it is strategic foresight. I remember sitting down and really thinking





about where I wanted to be. Did I want to be a people manager? Did I aspire to run a country or regional operation? Did I dare to dream of becoming a CEO? This exercise forced me to look beyond my current role and consider the skills, experiences, and networks I would need to reach these goals. It was not always comfortable. But here is what I have learnt: without a clear vision of where you are going, you will never get there. Manifestation is about giving yourself permission to dream big, then breaking that dream down into actionable steps.

The Necessity of Courage and Activation

Of course, a vision without action is just a daydream. This is where Activation comes in. Activation is about taking concrete steps to turn your vision into reality. It's about pushing yourself out of your comfort zone, acquiring new skills, and actively seeking opportunities for growth.

As Asians, you grow up in a culture where you do not speak unless spoken to or speak only if you have something better to share. The idea of public speaking can be daunting, but it is only through communication that we influence and get things done. The first time you force yourself to speak up in a high-level meeting, your heart could be racing, palms sweating, and you are probably really terrified of making a fool of yourself. But what if no one laughed and they listened instead? A way to approach this could be to focus on delivering just three key points while remaining attuned to the flow of the conversation. It may not be perfect, but it is a start.

This small act of courage is your turning point. I have come to realise that if I wanted to progress, I had to push myself to the edge





of my comfort zone, time and time again. Whether it was taking on challenging assignments, volunteering for high-visibility projects, or seeking out speaking opportunities, each step built my confidence and expanded my capabilities.

The Unexpected Leadership Laboratory: National Service

When I reflect on the formative experiences that shaped my leadership journey, I cannot overlook the profound impact of my time in National Service. Many might view mandatory military service as an interruption to their career path, but for me, it was an invaluable leadership laboratory.

As a Brigade Commander, I was thrust into a position that demanded a unique set of skills. Managing a large brigade meant working under intense pressure, coordinating diverse teams across different functions, and planning complex projects. The challenge was immense, but so was the opportunity for growth.

What made National Service particularly enriching was the diversity of the people I led. These were not career soldiers, but individuals from all walks of life, with varying backgrounds, motivations, and skill sets. The question that constantly challenged me was: How do I rally this diverse group and unite them towards a common goal?

This experience honed my ability to communicate effectively, to inspire those with different perspectives, and to create a cohesive team out of a group of individuals. It taught me the delicate balance of asserting authority while also earning respect and trust. These are skills that have proven invaluable throughout my corporate career.





Moreover, National Service instilled in me a deep sense of purpose and service. It reminded me that leadership is not just about personal achievement, but about contributing to something larger than oneself. This perspective has consistently influenced my approach to corporate leadership, driving me to consider the broader impact of our business decisions on society.

Activation in Action: My Transition from HP to Singtel

My move from HP to Singtel is a prime example of how Manifestation and Activation work together in career development. At HP, I had risen through the ranks and gained valuable experience. But as I looked ahead—remembering the advice to plan two jobs ahead—I realised that to achieve my ultimate goal of running a company, I needed to broaden my experience and network.

This realisation was the Manifestation part—identifying where I wanted to go and what I needed to get there. The Activation came in the steps I took to make this vision a reality.

First, I began to actively expand my network beyond my industry. I joined different networking groups and took on roles as a non-executive director in non-conflicting organisations. These moves served multiple purposes: They broadened my perspective on business leadership, exposed me to different industry challenges, and significantly expanded my professional network.

I also started to educate myself about the unique aspects of leading Singapore-listed companies. I recognised that to be considered for top leadership roles in such companies, I needed to be part of that community. This meant understanding the





governance structures, the stakeholder dynamics, and the broader economic context in which these companies operate.

It was through this deliberate network expansion that the opportunity at Singtel came to my attention. Had I not signalled my readiness for a new challenge, this opportunity might never have presented itself.

Overcoming Cultural Barriers and Flexing Different Leadership Styles

As an Asian leader in a global business environment, I have had to confront unique challenges. Our cultural upbringing often emphasises harmony and respect for authority, which can sometimes be misinterpreted as a lack of assertiveness or leadership potential in Western corporate settings.

Often, we hear about the need to have “executive presence” or “gravitas”. This is not about changing who you are at your core, but about learning to communicate your value and vision effectively in diverse contexts.

It has been a journey of self-discovery, learning to balance the strengths of my cultural background such as a collaborative approach and long-term thinking with the more assertive communication styles often expected in global business settings.

If there is one thing my career has taught me, it is the value of adaptability. The business world is constantly changing, and the leaders who thrive are those who can adapt their style and approach to different situations.

Using tennis as an analogy, you cannot rely solely on your





forehand. You need to develop a well-rounded game, including a strong backhand, volleys, and serves. Similarly, in leadership, you need to be comfortable with different leadership styles and know when to deploy them.

A Call to Action for Aspiring Leaders

As I reflect on my journey, I want to encourage all aspiring leaders, especially those from diverse backgrounds, to embrace both Manifestation and Activation in their careers.

Dare to dream big, but do not stop there. Take concrete steps towards your goals, even when it feels uncomfortable. Seek out mentors and sponsors who can guide you and open doors. Be open to feedback and continuous learning.

Remember, leadership is not a destination; it is a journey of constant growth and adaptation. Every experience, whether a success or a setback, is an opportunity to learn and refine your leadership skills.

To the organisations nurturing the next generation of leaders: recognise the immense value of diverse leadership. Actively create pathways for emerging leaders from all backgrounds. The future of global business depends on our ability to develop leaders who can navigate the complexities of our interconnected world.

In closing, I urge you to take some time to reflect on your own leadership journey. Where do you want to be two jobs from now? What skills and experiences do you need to get there? Once you have that vision, activate it. Take that first, perhaps uncomfortable step. Your future self will thank you for it.





Remember, great leaders are not born. They are manifested and activated through vision, hard work, and unwavering commitment to growth.







CHAPTER 9

Activation: Strategically Building Your Personal Brand

Rihanna's personal involvement and authenticity, showcased through behind-the-scenes videos and beauty tutorials on the Fenty Beauty YouTube channel, helped build a strong connection with consumers. Fenty Beauty leveraged social media to achieve remarkable success by implementing a strategic and inclusive approach. From the outset, Fenty Beauty utilised platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter to engage with a diverse audience. The brand's Instagram account, boasting over 12 million followers, features a mix of promotional content, memes, tutorials, and user-generated content, which enhances social validation and relatability.

A key element of Fenty Beauty's social media strategy was its focus on inclusivity and diversity. The brand's campaigns prominently featured models of various ethnicities, genders, and body types, resonating with a wide range of audiences. This commitment to representation was further amplified through user-generated content and hashtag campaigns, encouraging customers to share their experiences with Fenty products. By celebrating diversity and addressing the lack of representation in the beauty industry, Fenty Beauty created a loyal and engaged community. Through these strategies, Fenty Beauty effectively harnessed the power of social media to build a strong, inclusive brand that resonated with consumers worldwide.





Your Online Brand

Activation is the strategic representation of your personal brand, both in the digital and physical realms. Today's social media platforms are your microphone to the world, showcasing who you are and what you do. That's really leaning into today's interconnected world and managing your personal brands across multiple platforms.

In today's world, your online persona often makes the first impression, especially for people who don't know you yet. Think about it: What's the first thing you do when you meet someone new? Google them? Alright, maybe you don't. But haven't you heard numerous accounts of people sabotaging themselves and their careers by publicly criticising, abusing, insulting, or posting other unsavoury content on social media?

People will judge you based on what you post or write. So, be sure that you are putting across exactly what you want to represent. Don't forget, though, that the online world isn't everything. Your offline interactions also support and sustain your online activities.

Balancing these two facets is important and is the key to your holistic personal brand. "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken," said Oscar Wilde, and no truer words have been spoken.

I've said to be mindful of what you post, but that's not to say that you must adhere to a specific type of persona. If ranting, or appearing "unlikeable", feels authentic to your brand, then fire away! Gordon Ramsay, the internationally renowned chef, television personality, and entrepreneur, is infamous for his abrasive and often confrontational demeanour, especially on cooking shows like *Hell's Kitchen* and *Kitchen Nightmares*. His cutting remarks and sharp criticisms, delivered with a fiery passion, have become a hallmark of his brand.





**“Be yourself; everyone
else is already taken,”**

Oscar Wilde



This abrasiveness works in his favour because:

Authenticity: Ramsay's tough-love approach feels genuine and rooted in his high standards for culinary excellence. Audiences perceive that his outbursts come from a place of passion and a desire to push others to do their best.

Entertainment Value: His fiery personality makes for compelling television. His blunt honesty and dramatic flair have made him a cultural icon, with memes and viral moments adding to his popularity.

Authority and Expertise: Ramsay's no-nonsense attitude reinforces his credibility as a world-class chef. People respect his authority in the kitchen because they know he demands perfection and has the credentials to back it up.

Distinctive Personal Brand: His abrasive persona differentiates him from other celebrity chefs, making him memorable and unique in a crowded space.

While Ramsay's approach might seem harsh, it aligns with his reputation as a perfectionist and a master of his craft. His authenticity and larger-than-life personality have been integral to building his global brand empire.

That's him being authentic. It's hard to be consistent if you're not authentic.





CHAPTER 10

Holistic Activation

Activation is about building an engaging online and offline presence. Choose platforms that align with your professional field and audience, and remember that consistency is key. Ensure your message and visual branding are consistent across all platforms. This also applies to the content you put out.

In offline brand activation, seek opportunities for networking and public speaking to articulate who you are and what you represent. Speaking at events can enhance your credibility and visibility.

Consider Gary Vaynerchuk, a prime example of effective personal branding online and offline. He began by taking over his father's wine business and then, created YouTube content about wine. These days, he focuses on motivational content, marketing tips, and personal insights. His consistency, now centred on the hustle culture and entrepreneurship, resonates with his broad audience. Offline, he's equally dynamic. As seen in videos, he exudes 110% energy. In person, he's the same. He's a sought-after public speaker and people can relate to him.

You don't have to be as high energy as Gary V., but think about how you can be consistent and authentic to your true self across both the digital and analogue worlds.

Activation is fundamentally about creating and leveraging opportunities. By engaging with others and showcasing your value, you

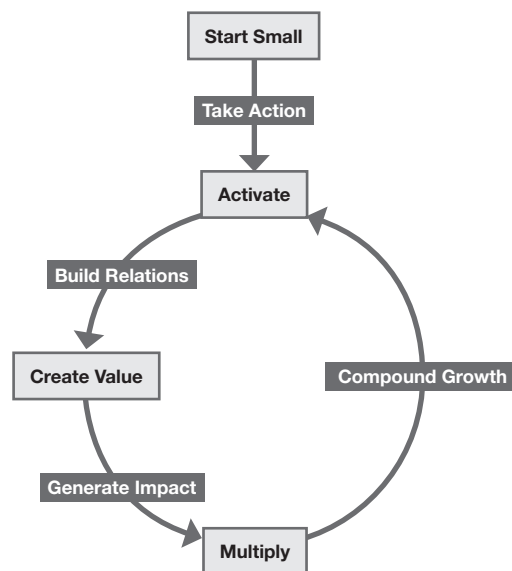


increase the chances of serendipitous encounters and strategic collaborations.

Each interaction is an opportunity to leave an impression. Activation helps you grow your influence organically, turning connections into advocates who amplify your persona. Activation transforms your personal brand from an idea into a tangible force. By maintaining a consistent persona, actively engaging with others, and seeking opportunities to showcase your value, you unlock the full potential of your personal brand. The math is simple: the more connections you build and activate, the more opportunities you create.

It may seem daunting at first or tiring. Start with small goals. Maybe one event per quarter, but it is important to start today. The magic lies in taking small but consistent steps to activate your network and manifest your personal brand manifesto in the real world.

Network Activation Growth Effect





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GUEST ESSAY

Embrace Challenges to Activate Your Personal Brand: Turn Obstacles into Strengths That Define Your Leadership and Success

Nadir Zafar

Chief Experience Officer, Human Capital Leadership Institute.
Director, Singapore Leaders Network

My journey in leadership began in a publicly listed global transportation company, where I started as a management trainee. This early experience taught me valuable lessons about perception, opportunity, and the hidden value in seemingly mundane tasks.

As a young talent, I was given the opportunity to work in different departments for the first year and then did an overseas stint in the India office for the next year. On my return to Singapore, I was promoted and given a role in a newly set-up department. Shortly after, I was promoted again and given an extraordinary opportunity to work directly with the Group CEO of the company. This was a transformational experience. My job in the Group CEO's





office was akin to a Chief of Staff. It put me in direct contact with the senior leadership of this multi-billion-dollar company and exposed me to its inner workings. I was a part of every senior leadership meeting where decisions on strategy and other high-level matters were made. This gave me unprecedented insights into how decisions were made in the boardroom, an experience that would prove invaluable throughout my career.

The Value of Perseverance: Turning Challenges into Strengths

While it was a high-profile role, one part of the job involved taking minutes during the weekly senior leadership meetings, a task I found tedious but persisted with. It was only years later, as I progressed in my career journey, that I began to reflect on the hidden value in that exercise. It shaped one of my unique strengths: active listening. It trained me to capture not just words, but the essence and implications of what was discussed. I learnt to listen hard and summarise long discussions into concise points. Another task I had was to follow up on all action points with the respective leaders after each meeting, and that was a helpful exercise in learning how to get things done when not in charge. It is easier if one has the authority to get work from others, but it is far harder when one is a junior staff member. This is a skill I learnt.

This experience became a crucial lesson throughout my professional journey: Sometimes, the tasks you initially dislike turn out to be the most valuable for your future growth. It is a principle I have carried with me and often share with younger colleagues who feel stuck in roles they think are too mundane.





Diverse Experiences: Shaping a Versatile Leader

As my career progressed, it took me through various roles and industries, each contributing to my evolving leadership style. After my MBA, I took on a position that seemed crazy at the time—jumping into a new function (business planning), industry (media), and country (UAE) all at once.

I worked for a highly respected British executive known as the “Godfather of Television” in the Middle East, who brought Hollywood shows to the region. My role was multifaceted—part operational, part strategist, and involved helping with balanced scorecards and various other tasks. This experience taught me the importance of business planning, setting clear targets, and working in a multicultural environment.

Throughout my career, I have had the privilege of working with exceptional supervisors from the German Group CEO of the transportation company, the British executive at the media company, an Emirati CEO of a global schools operator, a Canadian CEO of an edtech company, and an American CEO of a leadership institute.

These leaders, while very different, share a common trait: they are all very decisive. Once a decision is made, it is all about execution, and that is where I found my strength. The exposure to different leadership styles has helped me understand the importance of clarity in decision-making and the power of effective execution.

The Power of Effective Execution

The significance of effective execution cannot be overstated in leadership. I have learnt that a great idea is only as good as its implementation. Many leaders can come up with innovative





strategies, but what sets exceptional leaders apart is their ability to turn those strategies into reality. Effective execution requires clear communication, proper resource allocation, and the ability to motivate and align your team towards a common goal.

In my various roles, I have seen firsthand how proper execution can make or break a project. It is not just about giving orders; it is about creating a roadmap, anticipating challenges, and being agile enough to adapt when unexpected obstacles arise. Effective execution also involves holding yourself and your team accountable, celebrating milestones, and learning from both successes and failures.

Moreover, I have found that the ability to execute effectively builds credibility and trust within your team and organisation. When people see that you can consistently deliver results, they are more likely to buy into your vision and follow your lead in future endeavours.

The Core of Leadership: Authenticity, Integrity and Respect

As I reflected on these experiences and the lessons learnt from executing various strategies, I began to delve deeper into what truly constitutes effective leadership. This introspection led me to understand that while decisiveness and execution are crucial, there are even more fundamental elements at the core of great leadership.

I came to realise that true leadership is built on a foundation of authenticity, integrity, and respect. This was a pivotal insight in my leadership journey, shifting my focus from merely achieving results





to how those results are achieved and the impact on the people involved.

Authenticity, I discovered, sometimes comes with a cost. It often means being direct and not sugar-coating the truth. Being authentic means being true to oneself and others. This transparency, coupled with a tolerance for failure, creates a safety net for my team. When people know they would not be blamed for honest mistakes, excuses disappear and trust flourishes.

Integrity is very important. It means doing things the right way. I believe the buck stops with me and when things go wrong, I take the hit. When things go right, I give the team the credit. Over time, this approach has built a foundation of trust that is invaluable.

Respect, as I have observed, is not always tied to likability. There are those who are not always the most liked person, but who command immense respect because they stand by their convictions.

Navigating Difficult Decisions: The Role of Intuition and Diverse Perspectives

One of the most crucial lessons I have learnt in my leadership journey is that leaders often have to make difficult decisions, and these decisions are often between two 'right' choices rather than a clear right and wrong. As a leader, you cannot avoid making these tough calls—it is part of the responsibility that comes with the role.

I have found that in these situations, the right decision often comes from gut instinct and intuition built on years of experience. This may sound less scientific or data-driven, but experience counts. They are the culmination of countless interactions, decisions, successes, and failures.





My experiences and intuition are built from the many interactions I have had working with and dealing with different leaders from various backgrounds and industries. I never form an opinion based on one-sided commentary. Instead, I make it a point to seek out alternative viewpoints before making tough decisions, an approach I find useful.

This practice of seeking diverse perspectives not only informs better decision-making, but also fosters a more inclusive and well-rounded leadership style. It is a reminder that as leaders, our decisions impact many, and it is our responsibility to consider multiple angles before charting a course forward.

Harnessing Individual Strengths:

The Key to Team Success

Another crucial lesson I have learnt is the importance of harnessing the unique strengths of each team member. I once had a team member from a top university who excelled at writing reports and theses. When he left, his replacement had a completely different skill set—more entrepreneurial and business-minded. Instead of trying to force the new person into the same role, I realised my job as a leader was to adapt the role to fit their strengths.

Final Reflections and Advice

Embrace every experience, even those that seem mundane. They often hold valuable lessons that you may only realise years later.

- Authenticity is an asset. Be true to yourself, be transparent, take responsibility, and create an environment where your team feels safe to innovate and even fail.





- Recognise and harness the unique strengths of each team member. Leadership is about bringing out the best of the team, not micromanaging.
- Cultivate a personal brand based on your genuine strengths and values. Let your authenticity shine through in your leadership style.
- Never stop learning. Leadership is a journey of constant growth and adaptation.

Remember, leadership is not about being liked; it is about being respected and trusted. It is about creating an environment where people can thrive, innovate, and grow together. Stay true to your values, seek out diverse perspectives, and always lead with authenticity and purpose.

Your path to authentic leadership will be uniquely yours, shaped by your experiences and the lessons you learn along the way. Embrace the journey, learn from every challenge, and never underestimate the impact you can have as an authentic leader with integrity.







CHAPTER 11

Gift: Showcasing Your Distinctive Talents and Expertise

From a young age, Rossana Ladaga Llenado displayed an entrepreneurial spirit. At just six years old, she began selling candies, stickers, and stationery at her school to afford gifts for her loved ones. This early venture not only ignited her passion for business but also honed her skills in understanding market needs and customer preferences.

Rossana's childhood experiences laid the foundation for her future endeavours. After completing her education, she recognised the growing demand for innovative learning solutions in the educational sector. With a vision to enhance educational experiences, she founded her edtech company, focusing on creating engaging and accessible learning tools for students.

Her passion for education and commitment to improving learning outcomes drove her to develop a platform that integrates technology with traditional teaching methods. This approach not only appealed to students but also gained the attention of educators looking for effective teaching aids. Under Rossana's leadership, her company has successfully launched various products that have transformed the way students engage with learning materials. Her ability to leverage her early experiences and passion for education has positioned her as a leader in the edtech space in the Philippines.





Rossana's story is testament to how using one's gifts—be it entrepreneurial spirit or a passion for education—can lead to significant success. Her journey from selling small items at school to leading a successful edtech company illustrates the power of following one's passion and adapting it into a viable business model.

Find Your Gift and Flourish

In primary school, I participated in storytelling competitions that my aunt entered me in. That was my first formal introduction to the art of storytelling. I'd buried that memory, only uncovering it years later when I went through the MAGIC framework myself. Little did I know that it would have such a great impact on me, despite having remained in the back of my consciousness for so many years.

That is one of the gifts or talents that I nurtured at a young age, and it was only when I leaned into it that I realised how much easier things flowed in my life. It is important to find that gift, or those gifts, within you and then work at showcasing it to the world.

Imposter Syndrome

Women (and some men!) are prone to something called the imposter syndrome, causing them to doubt their abilities and accomplishments despite factual, objective evidence of their competence. When asked if they can do a job, most women will say they can't unless they believe they can do 80% of the job. But when you ask a man if they can do even 50% of it, they confidently say, "I can definitely do the job."

And this is consistently reflected in statistics. Data from SEEK¹², conducted by Nature, which interviewed 4800 Australians, showed that





“26% of women are unlikely to apply for a job if they didn’t have all the skills listed in the job ad, compared to 12% of men. While 53% of men feel confident negotiating different aspects of a role, just 45% of women feel the same way.”

This is often referred to as the “gender confidence gap” and has real-world consequences for the labour market and the participation of women in the upper echelons of business, academia, government, and so on.

Within the Asian cultural context, I feel there are times when we tend to underrate ourselves more than our counterparts from other more outspoken and confident cultures. Even for simple things like voicing our opinions or sharing our personal thoughts. Unless I’m 110% sure that my comment would be valuable, I’d keep it to myself.

So, to me, that gift is about finding your voice. Find that gift and know that there is value in everything you say and do. Somewhere along the way, we lose that confidence whether from personal or professional setbacks. Take, for example, the MIT incident. Not going to MIT doesn’t diminish my worth, does it? Of course not.

Gift is about finding what is special about you and owning it. Don’t let fear or anyone tell you differently. And you’re going to find people who will tell you differently. You’ll face situations where, if you speak up, you might get bruised and battered. Push on nonetheless. Eventually you’ll get to the greener path.

There are two parts to this. First, discover that gift within you—dig deep. I was a storyteller when I was young and perhaps that shaped my ability to craft stronger stories now. So dig deep into your past, find what those gifts are, and bring them forward. Give them space to grow and develop; work on them.

Second, ensure that the fire within you doesn’t die out. The winds might be strong, and things might feel shaky, but keep going. An oft-quoted





but also often misattributed quote—so much so that it's been lost to time who first said it—that I like is, “Face the sunshine, and your shadow will fall behind you.” Remember that when the going gets tough.

Another way of thinking when fear or imposter syndrome sets in is this: a gift isn't just about bragging personal excellence—it's about excellence that creates positive ripple effects in the world. Let me illustrate with a few examples:

Consider a highly skilled accountant who's excellent with numbers. But their true gift might be their ability to explain complex financial concepts in ways that empower small business owners to make better decisions for their communities. The technical skill is the foundation, but the gift is how that skill transforms lives.

Michelle Obama is a brilliant lawyer by training, something she does extremely well. But her real gift emerged when she channelled her communication skills and empathy into advocating for children's health and education. Her “Let's Move!” campaign wasn't just about applying her skills; it was about using those skills to create meaningful change in childhood obesity rates and school lunch programs.

Or think of José Andrés. He's an exceptional chef whose true gift revealed itself when he founded World Central Kitchen, using his culinary expertise and organisational skills to feed people in disaster zones. His gift isn't just cooking great food; it's mobilising food as a solution to humanitarian crises.

The distinction matters because:

- It shifts focus from personal achievement to impact.
- It connects individual excellence with community benefit.
- It gives purpose to expertise.
- It transforms skills from a way to make a living into a way to make a difference.





**When you frame your gift in
terms of its positive impact on
others, it becomes harder to
dismiss its value.**



When you frame your gift in terms of its positive impact on others, it becomes harder to dismiss its value. You're not just "good at public speaking"; you're good at helping people understand complex ideas in ways that improve their lives. You're not just "good with children"; you're good at helping young minds develop confidence and creativity that will shape the future.

The key question becomes not just "What am I good at?" but "How does what I'm good at serve a greater purpose?" This reframing helps recognise gifts that might have been overlooked because you were earlier focusing solely on skills rather than impact.





CHAPTER 12

Tell Your Story

Why is storytelling so important? It helps people get invested in the narrative. If you're reading a good book, it will surely have hooks, twists, and turns that keep you reading and engaged. You want to invest time in reading the book. You will not have the same experience if you simply read two pages of bare, boring prose. Storytelling, to me, is really about creating that connection. How do I pique someone's interest, how do I get them to invest in me and inspire them to come along on my journey?

By sharing narratives, you create a sense of shared experience and understanding, which fosters familiarity and openness. Stories have the unique ability to evoke emotions and engage listeners on a deeper level, making your message more impactful and memorable. This emotional connection helps people relate to you and become more invested in what you're saying.

Personal stories are particularly effective in conveying your values, experiences, and insights. They demonstrate authenticity and humanity, making you more approachable and relatable. Moreover, storytelling appeals to diverse learning styles and creates vivid mental imagery, making your words more engaging and easier to remember.

As you lead a team, you need to be able to share that vision, tell that story, so that you can bring your team along on that journey. It allows listeners to imagine themselves in similar situations, enabling vicarious





learning without personal risk. By sharing both successes and challenges, you present a well-rounded picture that inspires curiosity and encourages others to want to know more about you.

It always starts with the hook. Think about what your hook is. How can you use it to showcase your gifts? For me, I think the ending may not be immediately obvious. In fact, I think once you have that hook and embark on your journey, the ending can unfold in so many different ways.

The next essential element in good storytelling for personal branding is the use of metaphors. I love metaphors, as you probably can tell. I find that they truly help to elucidate an idea and resonate more deeply when you provide a visual manifestation of what you're sharing. Tone, body language, and confidence are just as important.

Practical Steps to Gift Activation

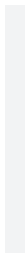
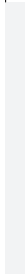
- **Document Your Victories:** Keep a 'success journal' recording moments when your natural talents created positive outcomes.
- **Seek Feedback:** Ask trusted mentors and colleagues what they see as your unique strengths.
- **Create Safe Practice Grounds:** Find low-stakes environments to experiment with expressing your gifts more boldly.
- **Build Support Systems:** Surround yourself with people who believe in your potential and encourage your growth.





**Stories have the unique ability
to evoke emotions and engage
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making your message more
impactful and memorable.**







GUEST ESSAY

From Personal Resilience to Brand Authenticity

Annette Lee

Filmmaker, Actress, Musician

Growing up, I watched my father battle polio without ever letting it define him. His quiet strength and unwavering determination taught me that resilience is not about the challenges we face, but how we choose to face them. This mindset became a guiding principle, one that would later influence my approach to building brands and connections in the creator economy.

My childhood was not without its struggles. At home, my parents fought often, and my sister and I coped in different ways. I turned to humour and creative endeavours like music and comedy as outlets for my emotions and a way to navigate loneliness. These experiences not only honed my creativity but also taught me the importance of finding productive ways to express oneself and manage emotions. In hindsight, these were the building blocks of my journey into the world of my personal brand creation.





Authenticity and the Creator Economy

In today's creator economy, authenticity has become a buzzword, but its true value lies deeper than many realise. Through my journey, I have learnt that genuine connection happens in the spaces between perfection and chaos. While many creators chase an idealised image, the most meaningful engagement often comes from sharing our human moments—the struggles, the learning curves, and the small victories.

Social media has given creators unparalleled opportunities to shape their own brands. However, standing out requires more than just playing it safe. In a space where many aim for security and conformity, I have found value in exploring the nuances of authenticity. People appreciate when you are not overly curated; they connect with the real, messy, and human aspects of your journey. This does not mean abandoning professionalism but rather finding a balance between relatability and aspiration.

Pretending to be someone you're not might draw attention initially, but it will not create sustainable, meaningful relationships. True brand building requires more than just consistent content creation—it demands purpose.

Creative Experimentation: The Key to Longevity

In my previous company, we often analysed data to understand what content worked best. While trends can offer valuable insights, they are fleeting. A piece of content might go viral once, but repeating the formula does not guarantee continued success. Trends shift, interests evolve, and audiences grow more discerning. This





taught me an invaluable lesson: while trends can inform our strategy, they shouldn't dictate our identity.

This is why constant experimentation is essential. I have seen young creators lose patience when their content does not immediately take off, yet some of the most impactful work comes from persistence and a willingness to adapt. Even in moments of success, I am always thinking about what is next. This mindset is not about chasing trends but about staying curious and open to new possibilities.

Building Purposeful Brands

At the heart of any successful brand is a clear sense of purpose. My journey into sustainability, for instance, was not just about promoting recycled bottles or eco-friendly practices—it was about living those values. If you are not authentic in your purpose, your audience will see through it. This is especially true in the creator space, where audiences value transparency and integrity.

The value of building purposeful brands will also naturally lead to higher premiums because they resonate on a deeper level. They are not just selling products or services; they are aligning with values that matter to their audience. For creators, this means understanding our unique attributes and being purposeful about the type of collaboration that defines those values versus just chasing compensation.

Value of Faith and Mentorship

Throughout my journey, I have been fortunate to have mentors and





friends, especially within my church community, who supported me both mentally and spiritually. Having faith gives me extra hope and resilience, especially in tough times. Whether dealing with personal challenges or professional hurdles, I have found solace in knowing that I am part of something larger than myself.

Mentorship has been equally invaluable. I have always believed in surrounding myself with people smarter and more skilled than I am. One of my co-writers often disagrees with me, and I cherish those debates. It is not about who wins the argument; it is about ensuring the best idea prevails. This collaborative approach has not only improved my work but also reinforced the importance of humility and continuous learning.

On this journey, I have also developed my skills in empathy. Empathy has been a cornerstone of my approach, both in personal relationships and in my professional life. Whether helping someone navigate a difficult situation or crafting a brand message that resonates, it is about understanding others' needs and emotions. However, empathy does not mean enabling. It's about offering practical solutions and encouragement to help people move forward.

Finding balance is an everyday challenge. Life is full of nuances, and the middle ground often provides the most sustainable path. This philosophy extends to all areas of life—from managing emotions to navigating professional relationships to creating content. It is a delicate dance, but one that leads to more meaningful connections and authentic outcomes.





The Power of Authentic Expression

In all things, authenticity and purpose are key. People are drawn to passion and integrity, whether it is in the content you create, the brands you build, or the relationships you foster. By staying true to yourself and embracing the unique gifts you bring to the table, you not only find personal fulfilment but also inspire others to do the same.

The journey is not always easy, but it is worthwhile. Invest in your brand, both personally and professionally. Take risks, experiment, and surround yourself with people who challenge you. In doing so, you will not only create work that resonates but also build a legacy that truly reflects who you are.





CHAPTER 13

Interests: Infusing Your Passions and Values

David Petersen, a software engineer from Colorado, has an unusual and fascinating hobby: He creates intricate miniature treehouses. What started as a simple project to build a birdhouse for his wife in 2013 has evolved into a passion for crafting incredibly detailed, tiny arboreal dwellings.

Petersen's treehouses are not your average miniatures. Each one is a unique work of art, often taking months to complete. He uses a variety of materials including wood, clay, and found objects to create these miniature marvels. The treehouses feature intricate details like tiny furniture, working lights, and even miniature books. Some of his creations are as small as six inches tall yet contain multiple rooms and levels.

What makes Petersen's hobby particularly interesting is how it combines his technical skills as a software engineer with his artistic vision. He often uses 3D printing to create custom pieces for his treehouses, bridging the gap between technology and traditional craftsmanship. His work has gained significant attention on social media, where he shares photos and videos of his creations. Petersen's unique hobby not only provides him with a creative outlet but also brings joy to thousands of people who follow his work online, inspiring others to explore their own creative passions.





Be Interesting

What drives you? What do you do when you're not working, taking care of the family, or managing your day-to-day living? What fires you up? What are you interested in?

You must be more than just your profession or what school you attended. You must have an opinion about something, a special interest that makes you want to learn everything you can learn about it, an interest that leads you to enthusiastically sharing it with others. These are the things that ignite our lives and fill them with such magnetic joy! Have you had a conversation with someone so passionate about their interests? Could you feel that infectious enthusiasm, even if it's something you're not personally interested in? Think about the bubbly, babbling child who just learnt something new at school. Aspire to that.

In an ideal scenario, you need to find interests that align with the persona that you're trying to build, or the person you are. Generally, I think this will fall into place naturally. For example, I am focused on business outcomes, so I tend to have a very entrepreneurial mindset in everything I do. I'm always thinking of and focusing on the results.

That includes baking. When I first started baking, I encountered the egg problem. I bought several different brands of eggs, and I probably used about 300 eggs. Then came the machine problem, and I changed several machines. Then it was the flour, and so on. I kept tweaking the different variables throughout my baking journey to find the most ideal set of conditions that will bring me a fruitful outcome.

If you asked me what's the best machine to whip a buttercream frosting into shape, I could tell you that. If you asked me what's the best way to make a frangipane tart, oh boy, get ready because I could wax lyrical for hours!

Naturally, you need to find something you're passionate about. If I'm





not interested in tennis, it will be quite hard for me to feign it. So find those interests and then amplify them. It just makes you a much more interesting person when someone knows that you have more to you than just your profession. And when you have interests, you will be able to find your network and expand it. If I'm interested in baking, I'd be able to find fellow bakers who will come together and become my network. And then that leads to other opportunities. Such as finding the best source of the purest French vanilla bean pods. But I digress (see what I mean?!).

In today's hyperconnected world, being excellent at your job is just the baseline. The most memorable and influential people are those who bring their whole selves to the table—including their diverse interests, passions, and curiosities. Think of yourself as a book: your job might be the title, but your interests are the chapters that make the story worth reading.

Why Interests Matter: The Hidden Power of Being Interesting

Research published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*¹³ demonstrates the positive relationship between non-work creative activity and the studied employees' recovery from work and performance at work. When you engage in activities outside your professional sphere, you create neural pathways that enable innovative thinking and unique perspectives.

Consider the story of Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn. While known primarily as a tech entrepreneur, it was his deep interest in philosophy and game theory that set him apart. His undergraduate studies in symbolic systems and philosophy at Oxford didn't directly relate to social networks, but this background helped him understand human



connection in unique ways. These interests became conversation starters with potential investors and partners, leading to some of LinkedIn's most crucial early relationships.

Interests as Brand Differentiators

When you develop diverse interests, you start seeing patterns and connections others miss. Take Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors. Beyond her automotive expertise, she's known for her interest in design and technology. These interests helped her lead GM's transition into electric vehicles and autonomous driving, seeing patterns from multiple industries that others might have missed.

Your interests become your unique conversation starters. They're the bridges that connect you to unexpected opportunities and relationships. Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba, credits his passion for tai chi as a crucial element in both his business philosophy and relationship-building. What started as a personal interest in martial arts has become a powerful connection point with other business leaders and a source of business insights. Ma frequently incorporated tai chi principles into his leadership talks, practiced with tai chi masters publicly, and even starred in a tai chi short film, *Gong Shou Dao*, alongside martial arts stars. This seemingly unrelated interest has helped him build relationships across cultural boundaries and demonstrate a depth of character beyond his business acumen. His ability to discuss both high-level business strategy and the philosophical aspects of tai chi has made him a more compelling and relatable figure in both Eastern and Western business circles.

Lee Kun-hee's story is equally compelling but different. The former Samsung chairman was known for his extensive art collection and deep appreciation for traditional Korean culture. This wasn't just a hobby—it





**Think of yourself as a book: your
job might be the title, but your
interests are the chapters that
make the story worth reading.**





influenced Samsung's design philosophy and corporate culture. His interest in art and aesthetics pushed Samsung to move beyond purely functional design to create products that were both technologically advanced and aesthetically pleasing.





CHAPTER 14

Work Connections

In the work context, try to find a common interest with the person you're trying to connect with. That makes it so much easier to sluice the gates. Do your research well before you meet them and connect. Of course, if it's a chance encounter, then you'll have to rely on finding common ground by being curious and asking about them. Expand your mind and worldview by reading up on things you didn't know about. Be curious and who knows, you might just find your next passion project or even become that person who knows something about everything.

Having a broad variety of interests naturally expands your conversational topics. But when you are passionate about something and can speak with authority about it, it's also very mesmerising. Even when I know nothing about F1, if someone who loves it shares their detailed, enthusiastic descriptions, I'm drawn in. They might explain car design, racing tactics, tire choices, track conditions, driver drama—it's compelling. It's not a dry lecture; it's the sheer joy of their passion flowing outward.

It's also beneficial for your personal growth to have diverse interests and cultivate hobbies¹⁴. They bring more joy to your life, make you more engaging at work and in your personal life, and support your mental health. That's a win!





Turning Interests into Opportunities

Sometimes, interests evolve into unexpected opportunities. Take Ben Silbermann, Pinterest's co-founder. His childhood fascination with collecting—insects, stamps, anything really—directly influenced Pinterest's core concept of visual discovery and collection.

Your interests can:

- Generate fresh perspectives in your primary field
- Create unique selling points in your personal brand
- Open doors to unexpected collaborations
- Build resilience through diverse skill sets

Your interests shouldn't be forced. They should be genuine expressions of your curiosity and passion. When authentic, they become powerful tools for:

- Building meaningful connections
- Demonstrating depth of character
- Creating memorable personal brands
- Generating innovative insights

Remember: in a world of specialists, it's often the generalists with diverse interests who make the most interesting and impactful leaders. Your interests aren't distractions from your success—they're catalysts for it.



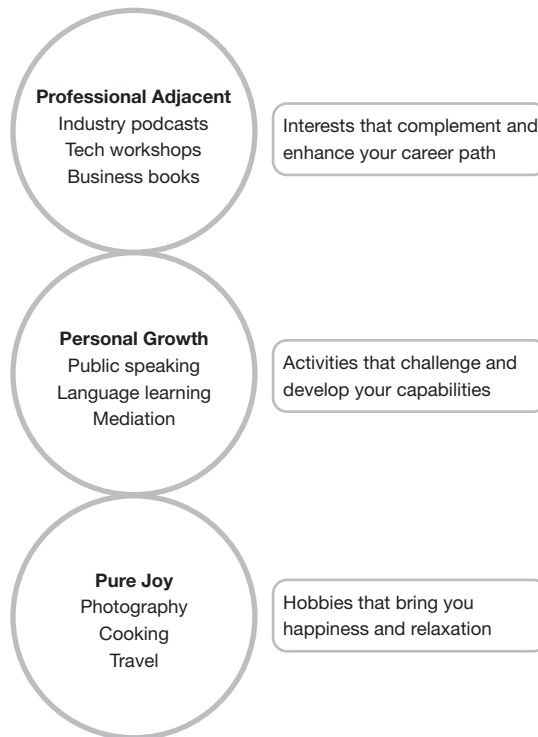


**In a world of specialists, it's often
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Building Your Interests Portfolio

The Three-Circle Strategy



Finding Your Interests

How do you find your interests? Use these questions to help you discover them if you're truly stuck:

- **Revisit Childhood Passions:** What did you love before adult responsibilities took over?
- **Follow Your Curiosity:** What topics make you lose track of time when reading about them?
- **Embrace the Unexpected:** Try activities that seem completely different from your usual routine.





CHAPTER 15

Care: Cultivating Meaningful Relationships and Networks

In 2014, New York City bus driver Artie Rascher performed an extraordinary act of kindness that sparked a chain reaction of goodwill. On a cold winter morning, Rascher noticed a barefoot homeless man on the sidewalk. Without hesitation, he stopped the bus, called out to the man, and gave him his own shoes. Rascher then continued his route, driving the bus in his socks for the rest of his shift.

A passenger witnessed this and shared the story on social media, where it quickly went viral. People worldwide were touched by Rascher's selfless act, and many began sharing their own stories of kindness and generosity. The story caught the attention of a local shoe store owner, who offered to donate a new pair of shoes to him. However, Rascher asked the store owner to give those shoes to someone in need instead, further extending the chain of kindness.

Inspired by Rascher's example, many in the community and beyond started looking for ways to help others. Some donated shoes and clothing to homeless shelters, while others volunteered their time at local charities. This simple act of care set off a ripple effect, demonstrating how one person's compassion can inspire others to care and pay it forward, creating a cycle of kindness that extends far beyond the initial act.





The Power of Collective Care

Care is probably one of the most important parts of the MAGIC framework. We started by talking about being your authentic self, especially in a world where there are many fabricated truths. People appreciate those who are genuine. And care is the factor that truly connects the dots in relationship-building. When you offer extra care to another person, it elevates the conversation and creates warmth.

Care also flows from the idea of paying it forward. It's like dropping a pebble of kindness into still water: the ripples spread in ways you can't foresee, yet they eventually circle back. When you offer something genuine to the universe—without expecting a reward—you often receive surprising benefits in return. I've seen this play out in my own life and, by chance, in the lives of others. It's a quiet reminder that every selfless act carries a ripple effect with the power to uplift us all.

Care, for me, also helps to build credibility. If I've committed to showing up for simple things like appointments, then I must show up. That's caring for the other person and respecting their time.

The concept of care has distinct dimensions. Care in offering your genuine self, which I believe is always appreciated. Care in paying it forward, which the universe tends to reciprocate, and then care in respecting your partners and anyone you work with, because it builds your reputation as a credible and trustworthy leader. It's also about little gestures: infusing warmth even in your digital communication, and of course, minding your Ps and Qs!

These may be seemingly small acts, but they are what people remember most, especially if you're doing them when no one else is. It's not the flashy achievements, like coming from this or that school, that matter. It's about fundamental humanity. As human beings, we are social creatures, and for the longest time, our species¹⁵ thrived because of the concept of care.





***“I’ve learned that people will forget
what you said, people will forget
what you did, but people will never
forget how you made them feel.”***

Maya Angelou





This is, quite simply, what allowed our species to survive harsh environments, to proliferate and conquer the natural, and it's what drives individual success.

I'd like to leave you with one of my favourite quotes on care:

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Maya Angelou





CHAPTER 16

Courage to Care: Building Personal Brand Equity Through Selfless Action

In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, the concept of care often finds itself constrained by time, pressure, and societal norms. While caring is seen as a noble virtue, the forces of modern life—relentless change, competing priorities and unpredictable challenges—have diluted its prevalence. To address this, the focus must shift from simply *caring* to embodying the *courage to care*. It is this courage that forms the foundation of authentic personal brand equity, demonstrating not just values but the strength to act on them, especially when it matters most.

Forces Shaping an Inward-Looking Generation

The world we live in today is defined by its unpredictability and rapid evolution. This VUCA environment creates immense pressure to focus inward—on survival, stability, and personal success. In such a climate, people can sometimes prioritise self-preservation, leading to a withdrawal from communal responsibilities and an erosion of collective empathy.

However, the courage to care calls for a different response. It requires prioritising humanity over self-interest, standing by values despite





uncertainty, and extending support even when it feels risky or inconvenient. It asks us to move beyond self-protection to foster transformative connections and align our actions with a greater purpose.

The Role of Courage in Personal Brand Equity

Building a purposeful personal brand is not just about visibility but also about creating meaningful impact. Demonstrating the courage to care signals strength of character and authenticity—qualities that resonate deeply with others. This courage manifests in:

- **Advocacy for Others:** Standing up for those who cannot stand for themselves, even in the face of volatility or opposition. This positions you as a leader who values collective success over personal gain.
- **Resilience in Uncertainty:** Courageous care demonstrates an ability to navigate complexity with empathy, offering stability and support to others in turbulent times.
- **Value-Driven Action:** When care aligns with core values, it transforms from an abstract ideal to a lived reality, solidifying your brand as purposeful and principled.

If we succumb to the pressures of the VUCA world and remain inward-looking, we risk perpetuating isolation, disengagement, and a lack of collective growth. The absence of courageous care hinders not only societal progress but also personal fulfillment. True success lies in the balance of self and society—cultivating an ecosystem where individual growth complements communal well-being.





**Demonstrating the courage to care
signals strength of character and
authenticity—qualities that
resonate deeply with others.**





Courage to Care: A Guiding Principle

To thrive as a society and as individuals, we must embody the courage to care. This means:

- **Challenging Norms:** Defying societal expectations that prioritise competition over compassion
- **Prioritising Time for Others:** Recognising that moments of care, however small, have transformative power
- **Acting with Intent:** Deliberately choosing to stand for what matters, even when it's uncomfortable or uncertain

Courageous care transcends superficial acts. It involves extending a hand to those in need, standing firm in the face of adversity, and nurturing the values that make us human. By doing so, we inspire others, leave a lasting legacy, and contribute to a better world.

Thriving Through Care

As you reflect on your personal brand and its impact, remember that the courage to care is not just a virtue; it is a strategy for enduring relevance and influence. When you stand for others, you build trust. When you lead with empathy, you inspire loyalty. And when you act with courage, you forge a brand that transcends individual achievements to create lasting, meaningful change.

The Economic Value of Courageous Care: A Business Perspective

Embracing the courage to care not only enriches personal brand equity but also drives tangible economic benefits for organisations. Companies





that integrate care into their core values often experience enhanced employee engagement, improved customer loyalty, and a stronger brand reputation—all of which contribute to sustained profitability.

For instance, Patagonia, an outdoor apparel company, exemplifies how socially responsible actions can lead to economic success. In 2022, founder Yvon Chouinard transferred ownership of the company to a nonprofit, the Holdfast Collective, ensuring that all profits would be directed toward environmental causes. This bold move reinforced Patagonia's commitment to sustainability and resonated with consumers who value ethical business practices. As a result, Patagonia has maintained strong financial performance, with consistent revenue growth and profitability, demonstrating that a purpose-driven approach can be both morally and economically rewarding.

Unilever's Project Shakti is another prime example of how integrating social initiatives with business objectives can yield mutually beneficial outcomes. Launched in 2001, the program aims to empower women in rural India by providing them with entrepreneurial opportunities to distribute Unilever products in their communities. As of the latest reports, over 200,000 women, known as "Shakti Ammas," have been trained and are actively engaged in this initiative across 22 states. This expansion represents a significant increase from previous years, highlighting the program's growing impact and success.

The economic benefits of Project Shakti are evident. The program has not only improved the livelihoods of these women but also expanded Unilever's reach into previously underserved rural markets. By fostering entrepreneurship and financial independence among women, Unilever has enhanced its brand presence and customer loyalty in these regions. This approach underscores the company's commitment to social responsibility while simultaneously driving business growth.





These examples underscore the notion that “doing good” and “doing well” are not mutually exclusive. As Michael Porter and Mark Kramer assert in their concept of Creating Shared Value, businesses can enhance their competitiveness while simultaneously advancing social and economic conditions in the communities in which they operate.

In essence, the courage to care is not just a moral imperative but a strategic business decision. By integrating care into business practices, companies can foster innovation, build trust with stakeholders, and achieve sustainable growth.





GUEST ESSAY

Care as the Catalyst

Kay Pang

Independent Director, Grand Banks Yachts Limited
Director, Kay Pang Law Practice LLC

When I think about the MAGIC framework, it resonates deeply with me. I often have clear and precise ideas of what I want to achieve (Manifestation); I am action and results-oriented (Activation); I enjoy playing to my strengths (Gift); and I bring passion and enthusiasm to everything I do (Interests). But the last element—Care—stands out to me in a quiet yet powerful way.

I've noticed that even in teams of highly capable and talented individuals, I am often chosen for stretch assignments, unique opportunities, or promotions. Curious about this, I once asked my managers why. Their response was simple yet humbling: *it's because I care*. They said I lead with empathy and foster trust, which inspires confidence that the team I lead will feel supported. For me then, Care is the element that sets one apart.



Building My Personal Brand

The idea of a “personal brand” is relatively new to me; I first heard about it only a year ago. To me, it’s similar to “reputation”, but with added intention and purpose. That said, I’ll admit that I never set out with a strategy to build one. My brand evolved naturally, shaped by the lessons I learnt and the values I upheld as I grew.

Growing up, my reputation in school and university was likely as someone who was “hardworking, fun-loving, kind, and helpful”. Academic success came naturally to me, and my teachers often asked me to help struggling classmates. I was happy to do so, as my mother, a teacher, modelled this generosity of spirit. It felt natural to follow her example.

When I was about 15, I read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Atticus Finch’s courage in standing up for the oppressed left a lasting impression on me. His character made me realise how much good a kind and principled lawyer could do. I saw the possibility of using my intellect and skills to amplify the voices of those who couldn’t speak for themselves. That realisation inspired me to pursue law.

After law school, I moved to Singapore to practice as a litigator at Shook Lin & Bok and Drew & Napier, while also volunteering with the Law Society’s Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS). Those years left a deep imprint on me.

I still vividly remember many of the clients I defended. They were accused of crimes ranging from white-collar fraud to blue-collar offences like theft, gang-fighting, and drug possession. My youngest client was a 13-year-old boy; my oldest, a man in his sixties. Each case came with a unique and often heartbreaking story. There was a kleptomaniac woman caught stealing odd items late at night,





a man who was beaten by pimps for assaulting sex workers, and a father-son duo arrested for gang-related violence.

The most poignant memory was of a repeat offender who kept stealing the same brand of milk powder. When I asked him why, his answer was simple: “My baby ran out of milk, and I couldn’t afford more.” Each case reminded me that behind every charge was a person with a story, a family, and a future that, for a time, rested in my hands.

These experiences taught me the profound importance of listening without judgment and offering empathy. I sought to be not just their legal representative but also their voice, their bridge to the court, and their mediator with loved ones. Years later, some of their families still send me updates, photos of sons and husbands who’ve turned their lives around.

Care as My Brand

Looking back, what drove me in those moments was Care. At its core, my work reflected a genuine concern for people, fairness, and justice. I wanted to give my best—just as Finch did in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

When I transitioned to being an in-house technology lawyer, that sense of care continued to define my work. Business partners often introduce me by saying, “Kay isn’t your typical lawyer—she understands our business and she cares.”

Their feedback reinforced something essential: my personal brand wasn’t just about being smart or hardworking—it was about showing empathy. By listening intently to my colleagues’ challenges, I could align legal strategies with business goals. My willingness to





care created trust, allowing me to navigate complex situations and bring people together for solutions.

Over time, my personal brand solidified, shaped not only by what I believed but also by how others experienced me.

Care as the Catalyst

To anyone aspiring to build their personal brand, I encourage you to begin with Care. I firmly believe that it is the catalyst for everything else.

Start by listening—truly listening—not just with your ears but with your heart. Understand what others need and let them know you genuinely care. When people feel your care, they pay attention. That's when the magic begins. It opens the door for you to share your Interest, showcase your Gift, Activate your potential, and Manifest your dreams. With Care at the foundation, you can manifest your MAGIC in ways that are both authentic and impactful.

I'll leave you with my favourite quote from President Theodore Roosevelt:

"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."





GUEST ESSAY

Care: The Cornerstone of Future-Focused Leadership

Belina Lee

CEO, Mandai X

In the fast-paced, often cutthroat world of business, we've long been conditioned to believe that showing care is a sign of weakness and inappropriate for the working world. We're told to leave our emotions at the door and to be "professional" at all costs. But what if this paradigm is not just outdated, but actively harmful to our organisations and society at large? What if care, far from being a liability at work, is the key to unlocking our full human potential to build a better future?

The Power of Care in Personal Experience

My own journey in understanding the importance of care in leadership began early in my career. Back in the 1990s, during the Asian Financial Crisis and fresh out of university with a philosophy honours degree, I faced numerous rejections and cynicism from hiring managers. The consistent responses were almost scornful of





my decision to have studied “a highly unpractical degree”. The contrast was stark when I finally interviewed with a globally renowned company and pride of Singapore, whose senior leadership showed genuine empathy and respect during the interview process, leading to my eventual hire. This experience laid the foundation for my understanding of what care in business can mean in its simplest yet most powerful form—that of concern, empathy, and respect for others.

Subsequently, as I progressed in my career, I was blessed to receive care from numerous bosses and mentors, both directly and indirectly. Whether it was diverse stretch assignments to grow my core strength as a strategic generalist or exemption from business travel when I became a parent without domestic help, these decisions stemmed from care for me as an individual, in consideration of my unique profile and circumstances, and a proactive effort to address my needs and challenges. What this means is that a culture of care at work fosters a positive environment, where employees feel valued as individuals and receive support for their well-being and growth, thereby motivating them to give their best.

Challenging Conventional Wisdom

In an Asian context, we have been taught that displaying emotions, in general, is inappropriate and unprofessional in the workplace. As a result, even though care is the essential ingredient for building strong relationships and a positive work culture, it is widely frowned upon as potentially leading to over-involvement and favouritism. With leaders withholding care because of such dated beliefs and concerns, and in the absence of care, employees gradually feel





emotional neglect in an environment where their well-being is not supported, leading to a downward spiral in terms of morale, engagement, productivity, and eventually turnover.

But this view about the role of care is fundamentally flawed and counter to human nature. Humans are social creatures by nature, with care for one another being the connective tissue that holds people together with a desire for mutual success as a community. Everyone who comes to work must juggle and balance both personal and professional challenges. Instead of ignoring and pretending these realities do not exist, embracing care is the key to helping our people flourish.

Throughout my career, maintaining an open dialogue with my team has been key to understanding them as individuals, not just a “collective we”. Trying to nurture them to the best of my ability is not always easy, nor do I always succeed, but the sheer effort of trying reflects my deep belief that everyone matters. Over the years, there have been many team members whom I have nurtured, and one individual remains top of mind for me. I had been promoted into a new position and had inherited a team with a low-performing member whom my boss had put on notice. Instead of proceeding to dismiss him, I requested six months to evaluate and support his development, eventually finding out that his challenges at home were impacting his performance. Working together to address these while delivering upon his work commitments, his transformation was subsequently recognised as the top-performing employee of the year for his rank globally. Without embracing care, this turnaround would not have been possible.

Also consider Singapore’s founding father Lee Kuan Yew, one





of the most passionate and professional leaders in history. His fearless leadership was rooted in deep care for the survival of our nation and our people and is a perfect example that care and professionalism are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they're mutually reinforcing.

Care as the Foundation of High Performance

To build a high-performing team, care is not just a nicety, but an essential component. So what does care look like in practice?

In a workplace where care is abundant, it transforms into a cohesive unit, akin to a "second family". When team members genuinely care for each other, they foster a culture of trust, collaboration, and open communication. This, in turn, encourages psychological safety, active listening, and a willingness to take risks, leading to increased innovation and creativity. A culture of care also prioritises well-being and resilience, acknowledging that employees' physical, emotional, and mental health are crucial to their success. As leaders, it's essential to recognise the importance of care in the workplace and make a conscious effort to cultivate it.

Leaders need to walk the talk in terms of demonstrating care, by taking the very important step of spending quality time to get to know their people, both in a professional capacity and beyond, so long as it is appropriate based on societal norms. Understanding each individual unlocks the key to supporting their development so that they can bring their best selves to work and flourish. Ultimately, care creates a sense of belonging, inspiring team





members to contribute their best work where they feel valued, respected, and supported.

Caring also entails a very important component of managing tough conversations, especially when honest and constructive feedback is required to improve individual and team performance. As an Asian, giving such feedback is an area that I have struggled with for many years, especially when I was younger. I used to hesitate to address such situations, for fear that team members would not receive the inputs with the right mindset. This was especially so with colleagues who may be older in age or more tenured in service. Leveraging the idea of radical candour by Kim Scott was pivotal for me. The core idea that feedback that is kind, clear, specific, and sincere is rooted in caring for the individual's development. This change in perspective has been incredibly powerful in giving me the courage to share feedback openly and consistently with respect, because it is anchored in good intentions for the positive development of my team.

Expanding the Circle of Care

Many issues of the world often arise from a limited view of care in terms of beneficiary and time frame. When a leader focuses only on a very narrow definition of beneficiary (personal gains) and time frame (short term gains), this significantly impacts decision-making with far-reaching consequences for organisations and beyond.

At my work in Mandai, I have the opportunity to deeply appreciate the interconnectedness of all people and life on our





planet, and caring about causes beyond personal or immediate success. As leaders, we have the responsibility and the opportunity to be role models, expanding our circle of care from self-care to care for our teams, for our communities, and ultimately, for humanity and the natural world.

Advocating for this more expansive view of care is critical for addressing the complex challenges we face as a society. Be it climate change, biodiversity loss, social inequality, or geo-political challenges, these issues require leaders who can think beyond short-term profit and consider the long-term wellbeing of all stakeholders.

As we look to the future, it's clear that care-centred leadership will be more important than ever. The leaders who will thrive in the coming decades will be those who can:

- Inspire and galvanise people around a shared purpose of care
- Create psychologically safe environments where creativity and innovation flourish
- Build strong, resilient teams who trust and support each other through rapid changes
- Navigate complex ethical dilemmas with empathy and wisdom
- Foster diversity and inclusion by truly valuing each individual's unique perspectives





These are not soft skills; they are the hard skills of the future. And they all stem from a foundation of genuine care.

To my fellow leaders and to those aspiring to leadership roles, I offer this call to action:

Embrace care as a core leadership value. Reflect on what you truly care about and how you will make the world a better place. Use these insights to stay true to yourself and to lead with authenticity.

Have the courage to show concern, empathy, and compassion for your team members, and be invested in their well-being, growth, and success.

Remember that your ability to care deeply and show it openly is not a weakness; it's your greatest strength as a leader.

The future of business, and indeed of our world, depends on leaders who have the courage to care. Let's build that future together, one act of care at a time.





GUEST ESSAY

Lessons in a Career in HR

Raunak Bhandari

Regional HR Leader, APAC, Google Asia Pacific

Care is the component from the MAGIC framework that resonates most deeply with me. In HR, my role revolves around nurturing talent and creating a supportive environment. I believe that genuine care for employees not only fosters trust but also cultivates a culture where people feel valued and empowered. This focus on care guides my decision-making and interactions, establishing a strong foundation for my personal brand.

A pivotal moment for my personal brand occurred when I spearheaded a comprehensive employee wellness initiative in my organisation. Recognising the growing need for mental health support, I proposed and implemented programmes that offered resources, workshops, and open forums for discussion. The success of this initiative not only improved employee morale and engagement but also positioned me as a leader who prioritises well-being and holistic care, significantly enhancing my brand reputation within the organisation and beyond.





My Unique Value Proposition

I identified my unique value proposition through a combination of self-assessment and feedback from peers and employees. My background in psychology allows me to understand employee motivations and behaviours deeply. I realised my niche is in blending strategic HR practices with a strong emphasis on emotional intelligence and employee engagement. By honing in on these strengths, I've positioned myself as a thought leader who advocates for a people-first approach in HR.

Personal Brand Visibility

To enhance my personal brand's visibility, I adopted several strategies:

- **Content Creation:** I regularly write articles and posts on LinkedIn about HR trends, employee engagement strategies, and leadership development. This not only showcases my expertise but also provides value to my network.
- **Networking:** I actively participate in HR forums, webinars, and industry conferences, which allows me to connect with other professionals and share insights.
- **Mentorship:** I've taken on mentorship roles, sharing my knowledge with emerging HR professionals. This not only strengthens my brand but also reinforces my commitment to developing others.





Challenges

One significant challenge was overcoming the stereotype that HR is purely administrative. Initially, I found it difficult to convey the strategic importance of HR in driving business outcomes. To overcome this, I started documenting and sharing success stories where HR initiatives directly contributed to business growth, using data and metrics to highlight our impact. This approach helped shift perceptions and reinforced my position as a strategic partner in the organisation.

Maintaining Authenticity and Consistency

To maintain authenticity, I adhere to my core values of empathy, integrity, and transparency. I regularly reflect on my values and ensure that my messaging, whether in presentations or social media, aligns with them. Consistency comes from having a well-defined personal mission statement that I revisit periodically. By ensuring that my actions and communications are aligned with my values, I can present a cohesive brand across all platforms.

Impact of Personal Brand on Career Opportunities

My personal brand has significantly influenced my career trajectory. For instance, my focus on employee engagement led to my selection to lead a strategic task force aimed at improving organisational culture. Additionally, my visibility in the HR community resulted in invitations to speak at national conferences, which further established my credibility and expanded my network. These opportunities have not only enhanced my career but also allowed me to influence the HR field positively.





Advice for Aspiring Professionals

For those starting to build their personal brand equity, I recommend:

- **Know Yourself:** Begin with introspection to identify your values, strengths, and passions. Understanding what you stand for is crucial.
- **Engage and Learn:** Build relationships in your industry by attending events, participating in discussions, and seeking mentorship. Cultivating genuine interest in others is key.
- **Share Your Journey:** Don't be afraid to share your experiences, both successes and failures. Authentic storytelling resonates and builds connections.
- **Be Consistent:** Establish a consistent presence across platforms, ensuring your messaging reflects your brand. Regular engagement keeps you top-of-mind in your network.
- **Prioritise Care:** Always focus on how you can uplift others. A brand built on genuine care will foster loyalty and trust in your professional relationships.



CHAPTER 17

Embracing the MAGIC of Being True to Yourself

We all possess an invisible magic wand, one we often forget or tuck away, never attempting to use. When we were young, we felt special, supported by family, friends, and teachers—a constant chorus of praise rallying behind us.

But then, as we grow, those supporters begin to fade, believing that adults require less encouragement. We're expected to operate independently, and we start to lose those precious supporters.

As life progresses, we begin to face increasingly difficult decisions. We start to lean heavily on our “board of directors” or “power source” to propel us forward—assuming we have one. Without that support, we begin to lose our magic, questioning our own uniqueness and our ability to communicate our true selves.

And because we feel that way, our confidence drops, and things start to unravel. But don't worry. This book will equip you with strategies to rediscover your MAGIC.

My hope is that readers will come away, recognising we are all magical in our own ways. We all have that magic wand; we just need to learn the spells—the techniques I've shared in these preceding pages. The MAGIC framework is both a potion and a spell that will help you recreate that magic and wield your magic wand whenever you need it.



On Confidence

I've come across peers, students, seniors, and mentors who are highly confident, bulldozing their way through any situation. Then there are those who are less confident, unsure of what to do or even what they can do. Regardless of where you fall, having a framework always helps. Even the most confident individuals can stumble without a purposeful approach.

Having unbridled confidence, without considering regional nuances or context, can come across as brash or abrasive, hindering connection. Conversely, if you lack confidence, this framework provides a purposeful path to build it. It'll help you find an approach that is comfortable for you and the environment you're in.

Your Personal Evolution

Your interests can and may evolve over time. If they didn't, life would be incredibly dull, wouldn't it? Imagine a 30-year-old with the same interests as their three-year-old self! It's essential and helpful to do check-ins at different points in your life. At this point, baking could be my passion, but four years from now, I could develop a diehard obsession with tennis. If that happens, trust me, I'll have way more to say than just "I play tennis once a week!"

An Annual Personal Audit

Apply this process to each new chapter of your life. Treat it like an audit or even a P&L statement. It is good to keep a journal of your current self, and another when you're ready for your audit. You could do it like a P&L statement to assess your gains and losses over the years. Think of your "profits" as new interests and "losses" as abandoned ones. For example,





**We all possess
an invisible magic wand.**



something that I considered a profit was communication. But because I haven't nurtured it over the last couple of years, it has become a loss.

As you look at this personal P&L balance sheet, and if your losses outweigh your profits, something needs to change. Perhaps, this audit can also help you identify your true assets or, using the equity analogy, determine how you could get others to invest in your strengths. This approach is particularly helpful for those who are financially trained.





CHAPTER 18

The Regrets of Lost Opportunity

I dearly wish that I had something like the MAGIC framework when I was younger. I could have experienced so much more simply by having the confidence to seize the world by its horns. I was severely limited by my lack of courage.

I'm an entrepreneur at heart, and in my early years, I often had countless ideas about what I believed could sell. I even came up with proposals in my mind, but I never had the courage to share them with a wider audience. They remained trapped in my secret little book.

If only I had known that sharing those ideas was the first step to manifesting and activating them. I could have then found networks and communities to accelerate those ideas. If I had recognised my entrepreneurial gift—perhaps inherited from my serial entrepreneur mother—and my storytelling ability, I could have pitched those ideas to venture capitalists. If I had understood the power of amplifying my interests, I could have turned my entrepreneurial dreams into reality.

But I never seized those opportunities. I kept everything locked up in that secret little book because I was so afraid, and I had lost that magic.

Years ago, I conceived an idea called Agent Smith. It was supposed to be an AI agent or application that could provide all the facts and figures about a location, a statue, or an object just by standing in front of it. I didn't pursue it, and guess what? It's now a reality with all the AI applications on the market. With a touch of smart glasses, I can learn everything I need





to know about a building in Rome, for example. I had this idea 10 years ago! If I had the MAGIC framework, if I had the confidence to act on the idea, even if I failed, I would have, at least, gained invaluable experience that would have gone on to shape me further.

Ideation is Not Innovation

I recently came across a great phrase, “ideation is not innovation”. This happens to many people. We have all brilliant ideas, but we keep them locked in our heads, afraid to take the next crucial step to make them a reality.

Believe that you have *it*. There is something magical within you, regardless of your current state or stage of your life journey. If you’re doing well, great. Continue to cultivate that magic. If you’re not doing so well, **don’t give up**. Use the framework to understand your situation. An annual audit, or even a simple pros and cons list, would be helpful.

And if you’re a parent reading this, I hope that you extend the MAGIC framework to your children. I believe that kids at their tender age—filled with innocence, belief in themselves, and a valuable community of supporters (including you!)—are at the perfect stage to embark on this journey. Nurture them, encourage them to keep believing in themselves so that when the opportunity comes, they can grab it with open arms and eyes, hold on to it, and turn possibilities into reality. Believe!





“Ideation is not innovation.”







GUEST ESSAY

Beyond the Comfort Zone: Risks, Resilience and Empowering Growth

G Saravanan

Group Chief Information Officer, Thomson Hospital

At 46, I find myself reflecting on a journey that started with a serendipitous twist. In 1999, Motorola was looking for talent to join them, I attended the interview by chance—and was recruited. I was fresh out of Johor, joining a company that was, at the time, riding high on its global success.

Motorola taught me many lessons, not just about business but about the pitfalls of success. In its heyday, it was a giant, synonymous with innovation and dominance. But then Nokia arrived, putting the internet onto the phone, and the industry was shaken. Motorola, for all its processes and scale, struggled to adapt.

Lessons from a Titan's Fall

The five years I spent at Motorola, including a life-shaping stint in India and the U.S., taught me what not to do as a leader. As the company grew, it became a monolithic structure—rigid, slow, and





detached from its origins. Processes, while necessary, became an obstacle rather than an enabler.

This experience instilled in me a belief that agility and inspiration are non-negotiable. Processes should support creativity, not stifle it. Employees should feel inspired, not bound by bureaucracy.

I saw firsthand how innovation can falter. Nokia's strategy, for instance, focused on the customer experience—changing the exterior of a phone while reusing the same circuit board. Meanwhile, Motorola's relentless focus on its own systems and technology left it unable to pivot quickly.

The Leap into Entrepreneurship

By 2004, I was living what many would consider an ideal life—earning a top-notch salary, travelling the world, and owning a home in Kuala Lumpur. But something felt off. I realised I had finished my work by lunchtime and was constantly asking myself, “What's next?”

This internal restlessness led me to take a bold leap. While juggling a corporate role, I began a part-time project that eventually generated more revenue than my full-time job. That was when I discovered my passion for educating others and realised that sharing knowledge is the best form of marketing.

Entrepreneurship wasn't just about building a business; it was about embracing risks, stretching my potential, and creating something meaningful. It wasn't easy transitioning from flying business class at an MNC to ensuring payroll for a team. But it was fulfilling.





Broadening Horizons in Healthcare

My journey took an unexpected turn when I entered the healthcare sector. My first client's project aligned with my earlier experiences in Motorola's 3G use cases for healthcare. This shift opened up a world of opportunities to combine technical expertise with human impact.

In 2017, I was recruited as a consultant in Qatar's Ministry of Health—a role I never imagined I would take. Working alongside foreign nationals in the Middle East taught me invaluable lessons in planning nationwide healthcare initiatives and addressing systemic challenges like budget constraints.

These experiences underscored the importance of using my knowledge to benefit not just my career but my community and country.

Realising Human Potential

Throughout my journey, one principle has stood out: the need to realise and stretch human potential. Whether it's completing a gruelling military-style boot camp at 6 a.m. or taking a professional risk, growth lies outside our comfort zones.

However, this realisation comes with a responsibility. If your success only benefits you, it's a selfish pursuit. True leadership lies in uplifting others—helping your communities, your teams, and your country.

In many Asian cultures, discussions about personal success often overshadow conversations about national or community contributions. In contrast, my time in the Middle East highlighted a deep sense of collective purpose. It inspired me to think about





how I could give back to my country and help others see the opportunities around them.

The Road Ahead

Healthcare, unlike fintech or telecommunications, remains an underexplored frontier in many regions. I want young leaders to see the untapped potential in this sector. There's immense opportunity to create impact, innovate, and build solutions that improve lives.

As I reflect on my journey, I urge young leaders to embrace risks, stretch their potential, and think beyond individual success. The world needs leaders who inspire, innovate, and contribute to the greater good.

Your journey might start unexpectedly, as mine did, but where it leads depends on the risks you're willing to take and the impact you're determined to make.



GUEST ESSAY

The Alchemy of Reinvention: A Journey from Sustainability to Legacy

Isabella Huang Loh PBM

FSEng, FCMI, FSID, SID-SRAD, Vice Chair GEN, Chair SEC, Board Director, Certified Chair™,
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Sustainability has been woven into my DNA from the very start. Born in 1960, Kuala Lumpur, I was raised in a world where survival meant adaptation, and resources were never taken for granted. Growing up in a post-colonial, rapidly industrialising Malaysia, I witnessed firsthand how human ambition and environmental change were inextricably linked.

When I chose to study aeronautical engineering, it was not just about designing aircraft—it was about engineering sustainable systems. Aviation pushed the frontiers of efficiency, aerodynamics, and renewable materials long before sustainability became a corporate buzzword. From my first engineering equations to my corporate leadership years, I have always approached problems through the lens of sustainable design—efficiency, longevity, and minimal waste.





At 14, driven by an insatiable curiosity and a belief in designing my own future, I scoured a weathered UK school almanac with a classmate. We found a Catholic boarding school in Yorkshire, convincing our conservative parents with practical reasoning—remote, affordable, and part of the Commonwealth system that charged low fees. My journey toward self-sufficiency accelerated when, at 16, I earned a scholarship to study BSc (Hons) aeronautical engineering at Imperial College London. At 22, I took a chance and arrived in Singapore with just \$300 earned from waitressing in Australia. My only one successful job application landed me a role at ST Aerospace (formerly Singapore Aerospace).

From day one, I was solving for sustainability—retrofitting old aircraft, re-engineering fuel efficiency, materials engineering, and maintenance longevity. But my journey didn't stop at aviation. Sustainability, in all its forms, would define my entire career.

The Chameleon Years: Engineering Sustainable Industries

By 1986, I was balancing two roles—an aerospace engineer and a senior officer at the Economic Development Board—on a single salary. Investment promotion in aerospace and defence shaped my thinking as a strategist, under the mentorship of Philip Yeo.

Boston was my next proving ground. Posted there as the first female EDB Centre Director at just 30, I stepped into the roaring engine of America's defence, IT and infocom revolution, sitting on startup boards and negotiating deals with CEOs, convincing boards to place investments in Singapore. Sustainability was always my underlying approach: building systems that lasted, forging





partnerships that endured, and designing economic models that balanced growth with long-term resilience.

A decade later, armed with an MIT Sloan Master's degree in Management Science (Boston), I returned to Singapore and spent the next chapter of my career leading industries that defined modern sustainability with Sembcorp Industries:

- Marine & Energy: Spearheading centralised utilities and energy efficiency projects
- Integrated Logistics: Engineering just-in-time supply chains to reduce waste
- Environment Management: Managing WTE infrastructure and integrated waste management in 17 Asian cities

After another decade, Shell came calling; I had already built a reputation for integrating sustainability into every business I touched. Leading Shell's global marine division across 87 countries, I wasn't just optimising profits; I was engineering efficiency—reducing the global footprint to 45 countries, redesigning operations, and cutting waste while maintaining revenue growth at US\$9 billion.

Yet, the higher I climbed, the more I saw the price of unsustainable systems—both in business and in life. Frequent flights, endless boardrooms, missed family moments. At 50, I made a decision; it was time to engineer my next transformation.

The Gig Economy and the Sustainability of Reinvention

Retirement at 50 wasn't an exit—it was an evolution. My late husband George Huang CY joked that I have perfected the art of “retiring into well-rehearsed purpose.” I dedicate all my rounded





talents I had acquired to his wise mentorship. I became a “gig CEO”, investing in bio-fertilisers, advising clean technologies adoption, and environmental startups. I never stopped learning and relearning. Reinvention meant embracing failures as design flaws to be corrected, not endpoints.

Women began seeking me out, voicing doubts, “Am I ready? Do I belong?” My answer was simple: You build your own destiny. No one hands it to you.

Early in my career, I had seen the contrast between women in corporate suits mimicking male leadership models and those who built empires on their own terms. Why conform when you can create?

Leadership isn’t about playing by outdated rules; it’s about standing firm in your values which include ethics. Mine have always been clear: sustainability in work, in leadership, and in life.

The Trimesters of Life: Engineering a Sustainable Legacy

A woman’s life unfolds in three acts:

- 1. Learning & Exploration:** Curiosity fuels sustainable growth. Engineering equations by day, budgeting scarce resources by night—this phase taught me resilience and adaptation.
- 2. Building & Contribution:** This is the tightrope phase—balancing boardrooms and family, scaling industries while maintaining relationships. I led Shell’s marine division through different time zones, a weary global role that consciously was hard to juggle unless one has a supportive family structure that evenings can be sacrificed for global dial-ins from Europe.





- 3. Legacy & Reflection:** Impact outlives achievement. Now, I focus on mentoring, investing in green tech, and shaping sustainable board governance, even perfecting my other hobbies—*Guqin* and Chinese brush painting. My husband jokes that I’ve perfected the art of “retiring into well-rehearsed purpose”.

The Engineer’s Mindset: Turning Crises into Sustainable Solutions

I’ve survived near-misses that could have been turning points in history books:

- Escaping a carjack during an attempted kidnapping in Boston
- Climbing to safety as the 2004 tsunami crashed into my hotel beachfront
- Evacuating minutes before an IRA bomb shattered a Wimpy restaurant where I was in London.

These moments reinforced my belief that I have to stay longer for purpose. Sustainability isn’t just about business; it’s about survival. SARS and COVID-19 reaffirmed this. While others panicked, I saw systems to fix: outbreak isolation, supply chain resilience, and community-driven solutions. Engineers don’t see obstacles; we see problems waiting for elegant, efficient, and lasting solutions.





The Final Rebellion: Redesigning the Blueprint for Success

I laugh at job descriptions demanding “10+ years in male-dominated industries”. The problem isn’t women; it’s the outdated criteria. Companies still measure success against a 1980s template of male-centric roles, failing to see that the future belongs to adaptable, purpose-driven, and sustainable leaders.

To every woman whispering “I can’t”, I say: You’ve managed budgets and businesses, crises and careers. You are not here to fix a broken system. You are here to design a better one.

The Alchemy of Choice—Recalibrate. Regroup. Return.

Sustainability isn’t just about the environment—it’s about designing a life that endures and evolves. My journey didn’t end in Shell’s boardroom or with a biotech startup. I continue to give back, mentoring leaders, and recalibrating the conversation subtly around sustainability purpose.

Magic isn’t innate; it’s a series of choices:

- To walk away from what no longer serves you
- To rebuild when structures crumble
- To fight—not with resistance, but with reinvention

I began in a post-riot Kuala Lumpur, uncertain of my place in the world. Decades later, I find myself at the intersection of leadership and the legacy of sustainability. The work is never finished, and the path is never linear. As my late husband George once described my dedication to equanimity: “Live for the present, look to the future, and never forget the past — for the past holds lessons for the present, and the present makes the future.”





EPILOGUE

Empowering the Next Generation—A Letter to My Daughters

“With every word we utter, with every action we take, we know our kids are watching us. We as parents are their most important role models.”

Michelle Obama

Dear Sarah and Leia,

As I write this letter, my heart swells with gratitude, love, and hope for both of you. You are my daily inspiration, the light that guides me, and the reason I strive to grow and improve every single day. Through your laughter, your curiosity, and your unwavering belief in possibilities, you have taught me more about myself than I could have ever imagined. You have shown me how to love fiercely, to see the beauty in small things, and to stand tall even in moments of uncertainty. Simply put, you—my beautiful daughters—have made me a better person.

This book, *Own Your MAGIC*, is more than just a framework or a guide for building a purposeful personal brand. It’s a reflection of the lessons I’ve learnt on my own journey, lessons that I hope will empower you to embrace the unique magic that each of you carries within. This magic is not something that anyone can give or take away from you; it is yours alone. You already hold the magic wand—the power to shape your future, to inspire others, and to create a meaningful impact in the world.





You are extraordinary, not because of what you do, but because of who you are. You bring a light into this world that no one else can replicate, and it's this uniqueness that I hope you always treasure and protect. You are not just daughters to me; you are creators, dreamers, and change-makers in the making.

As you read this book, I want you to see it as a mirror—a reflection of the limitless potential within you. Manifest your dreams, activate your passions, and gift the world with your talents. Infuse everything you do with your values and interests, and above all, care deeply for yourself and the people you encounter on this journey. These principles form the MAGIC framework, but they also form the foundation of a life lived with purpose and fulfilment.

Whenever you doubt yourselves or face challenges, I want you to remember this: you have everything you need to succeed within you. Trust your instincts, honour your values, and never let the noise of the world drown out your inner voice.

This book is my gift to you—a reminder of how much I believe in you and your infinite possibilities. May it serve as a guide, a source of encouragement, and a symbol of my unwavering love and faith in who you are and who you will become.

Always remember, my dearest girls, that you are my greatest achievement and my most cherished treasure. Your magic is your own, and it has the power to make this world a brighter, kinder, and more inspiring place. Believe in yourselves as much as I believe in you, and never forget the impact you can create simply by being true to who you are.

With all my love,
Mom





APPENDIX A

MAGIC In a Nutshell

Make the spell easier with takeaways from this book:

Explore infinite possibilities



**Prepare for opportunities before they
come knocking**



Emulate first while figuring yourself out



**Adapt to the market but don't forget
about being authentic**



**The real you is a multifaceted individual
with different roles, but your essence is
the constant**



**Understand the cultural differences and
nuances underlying the business
environment you're in**





**Do your research so that you are
well-prepared but, at the same time,
learn to adapt and pivot as you
encounter new things**

Prioritise learning from each experience

**Things can get tough, so have your
power source of people to recharge
from**

**Do not let cutting remarks tear down
your self-worth; remember who you are
and your essence of MAGIC**

**The world has changed; degrees are
something everyone has**

**Figure out how you're going to stand out
from the crowd**



**Do not discount soft skills;
work on them**

**Work on your life outside of work, and
share them proudly. There will be
commonalities and interchangeable
skills between your passions and
your work**

**Manifesting is more than just showing
up; it is about presenting your true self**

**Figure out who you are and what you are
through the exercises in this book**

**Make sure who you are is aligned with
your aspiration**

**Craft a brand statement that can work
as an elevator pitch**





**Be yourself, but also, be mindful that
you make your first impressions across
the digital platforms you're on**

**Be sure that your brand is consistent all
around**

**If you have a unique style and can make
it work, go for it!**

**Don't forget the offline world; find
opportunities to activate your personal
brand in the real world too**

**Set aside your imposter syndrome; know
that you are capable**

Uncover your gift and find your voice

**Use your gift and showcase your talents
to the world**



Tell your story; it is worth it

The art of storytelling involves your whole being

Interests make you a more fascinating person

There should be more to you than your career

An interesting person speaks with passion and authority about what they like

You can't fake interest, so look for what you truly care about

Having interests is good for your general well-being



**Care about the other person, no matter
how fleeting the relationship**

**Pay it forward, even if you do not gain
anything immediately**

**Caring helps build your credibility as a
person**

Mind the tiny details

**Caring is not weakness; it is
fundamentally human**

**Project your true self; don't rely on
facades**

**Do an annual audit, or each time you go
through a milestone**





**Start as early and as soon as possible.
Don't let the MAGIC wither**

Ideation is not innovation

**Get your kids to try out the MAGIC
framework to figure out their personal
branding**

This appendix distils the essence of MAGIC—a guide to personal and professional success—into key takeaways. It emphasises the importance of preparation, adaptability, authenticity, and continuous learning. Success extends beyond mere skills or degrees; it's about standing out, embracing your multifaceted identity, and crafting a compelling personal brand. This guide encourages self-discovery through practical exercises, leveraging storytelling to connect with others, and prioritising holistic growth—both professionally and personally. Above all, it highlights the power of caring, resilience, and embracing one's unique MAGIC to thrive in an ever-evolving world.





APPENDIX B

My Favourite MAGIC Quotes

*“You can’t connect the dots looking forward;
you can only connect them looking backwards.
So you have to trust that the dots will somehow
connect in your future. You have to trust in
something – your gut, destiny,
life, karma, whatever.”*

Steve Jobs

*“All of us need to understand the importance of
branding. We are CEOs of our own companies:
Me Inc. To be in business today, our most
important job is to be head marketer for the
brand called You.”*

Tom Peters

*“Knowing yourself is the beginning
of all wisdom.”*

Aristotle



*“No matter what you do, your job
is to tell your story.”*

Gary Vaynerchuk

*“It has been my observation that the happiest of
people, the vibrant doers of the world, are
almost always those who are using—who are
putting into play, calling upon, depending
upon—the greatest number of their God-given
talents and capabilities.”*

John Glenn

*“Passion is energy. Feel the power that comes
from focusing on what excites you.”*

Oprah Winfrey

*“I’ve learned that people will forget what you
said, people will forget what you did, but people
will never forget how you made them feel.”*

Maya Angelou





*“Being yourself means shedding all the layers of
looking good, wanting to be liked, being scared
to stand out, and trying to be who you think
people want you to be.”*

Jeff Moore





Endnotes

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To my mentors, who have generously shared their wisdom and experiences: You have shaped my thoughts, guided my decisions, and provided invaluable insights that have helped refine this work. I am profoundly grateful for your guidance, which has not only been instrumental in shaping this book but also in shaping me as a leader and individual. Thank you for being my North Star when the path blurred.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to my colleagues, peers, friends, and my mentees who have believed in the message this book aims to share. Your support, feedback, and collaborative spirit have been vital to this process. Special thanks to Pearlin whose expertise and hard work helped bring this book to life.





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To my readers: I hope that the ideas, lessons, and stories shared within these pages resonate with you and inspire you to continue your journey of self-discovery and growth. Without your curiosity and desire for knowledge, this book would not have a purpose.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to the many incredible individuals and thought leaders who have inspired the ideas shared within this book. Your work, dedication, and passion have been a guiding light, and this book would not be what it is without the countless people who have shared their experiences and wisdom with me.

Thank you all for your unwavering belief in me, in this project, and in the future we are all working toward.

About the Author

Cindy Tan

Cindy Tan is a seasoned business leader, thoughtful author, and purpose-driven mentor with over two decades of experience across some of the world's most influential organisations, including TripAdvisor and the BBC.

Currently Managing Director of Global Clients at Meta, she advises Fortune 500 brands on how to scale with purpose across Asia Pacific's fast-changing digital and ecommerce landscape. She also leads Meta's global *English as a Second Language* community, championing non-native speakers in the workplace. Throughout her career, Cindy has led businesses to strong and sustained growth from opening new markets, transforming teams to delivering results in complex, competitive environments. Her leadership is defined by quiet strength, strategic clarity, and a human-first approach — bridging empathy with performance, and purpose with results.

Born and raised in Singapore, Cindy has lived and worked across the US, UK, and China. A global journey that has shaped her nuanced lens on leadership, identity, and culture. Whether opening new markets, leading business mentoring future leaders, or serving on boards, she brings a deep understanding of what it means to lead across cultures without losing authenticity.



To learn more about the MAGIC framework, log on to
www.ownyourmagic.ai

