

Interview series.

## Leaders making a difference, 2024

International Women's Day Edition



### Cherie Tan

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Formative years in the field have shaped Cherie Tan's career and her approach to sustainability. Now Head, Public Affairs, Science and Sustainability - Asia at Bayer, Cherie spoke with dss+ about the lessons that stayed with her and how she applies these in her daily work, as well as the reasons why she encourages other leaders to head out into the field.

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How did your journey in sustainability begin, and how has it progressed?

How has your interest in sustainable issues influenced your career choices?

At the end of my studies I was looking to go 'off the beaten track' to commence my career. I took an on the ground development role in Haiti working with rural community banks and in microfinance which has significantly impacted my future career and my overall approach, including to sustainability. In particular, I have a strong connection to the agricultural sector which has shaped career trajectory and choices. I've worked in different steps in the agricultural value chain – in procurement at Unilever driving sustainable sourcing of agriculture raw materials and now with an agriculture inputs provider at Bayer working alongside millions of smallholder farmers.

My work in Haiti, and subsequently in Peru also on field assignment, was very grounding and has also given me a unique viewpoint on sustainability. Working directly with rural communities highlighted the importance of investing in those communities and particularly shaped my thinking about the intersection between the environment and the footprint of industries operating in these areas. It also highlights the need to consider equality and how benefits get passed back to the rural communities where these resources are sourced.

More critically, working in the field taught me how to identify pragmatic solutions, how to work alongside communities and to always consider how to make things practical. These solutions-focused skills have sustained me during my career.



Do you think there is a universal

understanding of what sustainability entails in the business world?

Each person's understanding of sustainability will be impacted by their background, cultural understanding and experience and we need to respect that. Ultimately we all know that sustainability is about caring for the environment, being good stewards of the planet and everything that it encompasses.

I often find it concerning when we try to box up sustainability into a matrix to measure or quantify it without recognising that it's okay to be on the journey and to approach sustainability from different perspectives. We also need to remain respectful that different companies are on very different journeys.





What would you say are the current major challenges for us to move to a sustainable future, in Asia and globally?

One of the major challenges for businesses is getting the balance right between the investments you make in sustainability and the investments you need to make to generate the profits to sustain the company. Sometimes this balance is not necessarily easy and, under pressure, the need to generate profits can override the mid to longer term investment in sustainability transformation.

Secondly, and particularly in the APAC region, there is a need to create a more level playing field by understanding how the top tier companies are performing and then benchmarking against them. Creating this transparency around how industry is performing can motivate companies to advance toward best practice.

Finally we need to respect the cultural differences in the way companies approach sustainability and communicate that approach. Various companies may take a more direct approach and communicate policies down the supply chain for suppliers, distributors and customers to follow. Others will prefer to ensure "their house is in order" first, and communicate a thorough approach before they start. We need to recognise there are different ways to communicate and learn from each other.



As businesses evolve, you are going to see roles such as Head of Sustainability phased out as sustainability will be naturally integrated into the way companies do business.



Based on your own experience, what would you say are the top three best practices to accelerate the effectiveness and impact of a Sustainability initiative in your industry?

The intrinsic **mission or vision of a company** is a really useful starting point to guide how to position your sustainability work, how it will be evaluated and how others will evaluate the company's performance. Most importantly, this vision can rally all employees to align toward a common goal.



I've had the benefit of working for some companies with really bold and ambitious visions which really defined the way we thought about things and the decisions we made.





The second practice is to **take the time to consider the transformation of systems** and recognise that to truly transform we need to address the key pain points. For example, in the rice sector which is so important for global food security but is a labour-intensive and unproductive crop, do we have the right innovations to support small farmers in Asia to thrive? What would it really take to transform the rice sector and then other important food crops?

It's also important of **understand the customer**, in my case the farmer, and how they are evolving and changing and the solutions we provide. Let me give you another example: what role should digitisation play in the farm experience when labour is moving away from rural areas and farming populations are aging? How do you support farmers on the transition toward more automation and more mechanisation to continue to deliver food to the world with a shrinking acreage?



Changing mindsets and behaviours across the business is often mentioned as critical in this field. In your opinion, what can make a difference when creating sustainable value?

In business, getting the balance right between annual performance targets and transformation initiatives is critical to success.

It's also critical to listen more – listen to stakeholders, customers and campaigners and really try to understand the essence of what people are saying, without reframing it to retrofit the way we want to do things. Effective listening also allows space for co-creation.

Also, companies often want to come up with the perfect blueprint as a starting point. **Sometimes you just need to get on this journey**, take 'baby steps' because it's the continuous improvement and continuous journey that will evolve the sustainability story.



How can you encourage other functions in your company or your industry - such as Operations, Safety, Risk Management – to help in creating a sustainable business over the long term?

One of the most important lessons from my career that's made me more effective is understanding the data. The data helps you identify your biggest impact and provides insight to understand where you are positioned and what you need to do to improve.

The data also speaks to business colleagues in other functions who can relate better when you speak to the business "numbers" and make the case for sustainability that can also deliver more business value and growth. Developing a thorough foundation understanding of your benchmark or footprint means everyone knows what to focus on.

However, this **data needs to be supported by** stories because it can be hard to quantify how our sustainability efforts are impacting people's livelihoods, empowering marginalized communities or the impact we are making to the environments. I think we are not telling these stories enough and therefore the impact of what we do is not often understood by the mainstream.

It's also necessary to listen – there is a lot of co-creation to be achieved by really listening to all stakeholders to make sure sustainability lands and is anchored where it needs to be.

“It's also important to be patient – don't bring everything to the table right away. The right issue at the right time.”



What's been the most impactful decision or action you've taken in your career that's made a difference and shaped your approach?

I'm proud of the increased focus on personal wellbeing and mental health within the workplace. I think this is so important today when we are inundated with so much information and fear which creates unbalanced lifestyles. By focusing on yourself and being better in yourself, you create that effect across the entire organisation.

However, the most impactful time for me in my career remains my early years in the field. I am very proud of that experience and I really miss it. When you are out there interacting, you get a lot more grounded, learn to be practical and pragmatic, how to build relationships. And it's great to see the impact you are creating. These are the lessons I continue to take with me into the decades.

I think what is also really interesting as I start to think about some of the women who have become very successful in the corporate world – **many of them started in the field and worked their way up.** I think there is still a lot of benefit and insights that sustains you through your mid-career and upwards.

“I like to discourage people from taking a trajectory of learning sustainability from a desk or office. I think they can really benefit from field assignments and I have advised some really energetic women leaders to get out of their comfort zone and head into the field.”

Even now if I am overwhelmed at work, I go out and do a field visit and interact with front lines teams. It gives me perspective and takes me back to recognising why we do what we do – **if you are very anchored in your purpose, it really focuses you.**

Photos courtesy of Cherie Tan.


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