ANTHEA ONG



Former Nominated Member of Parliament for the 13th Parliament of Singapore, Author, Entrepreneur
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Anthea is a former Nominated Member of Parliament for the 13th Parliament of Singapore. and a passionate entrepreneur with 25 years of C-suite experience who has founded and grown various social enterprises and community projects. Anthea is also a Mental Health Advocate and author of the book, 50 Shades of Love: Unearthing who We Are, where she penned 50 short stories on how love in different forms has lifted her through different periods in her life.

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INTERVIEW

You have had a range of different roles, could you tell me more about your earlier roles as an MD at the New York Institute of Finance (NYIF) and in TTS Asia Learning Solutions?

In 1996, I was handpicked by the founder and group managing director of the international company to set up a new regional financial training brand called Centre for Applied Finance in Sydney after being a Managing Director in their Jakarta office. It became rather successful so we started discussing a possible merger or partnership with New York Institute of Finance (NYIF). This partnership was NYIF's first venture outside of America, and the opportunity to be their first Asia Pacific Managing Director was a huge honour for me at 29.

During my time at NYIF, I was given many opportunities to realise my potential. I took on the role of an "entrepreneur" starting NYIF's first APAC entity and building my team from scratch. I was grateful for a great team; 3 years later, the thriving business was sold to a UK-listed conglomerate and I continued on as its Managing Director. This is despite the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 which saw our business plummet but I decided to seek out the Middle East in search of new business opportunities beyond Asia. I successfully brought back business

from the Middle East, which was why my responsibility expanded to becoming Managing Director of APAC and the Middle East. Additionally, the dotcom boom took place during my time at NYIF which gave me the opportunity to be part of the team that helped to digitise our programmes. All in all, these experiences reaffirmed my interest and competency in entrepreneurship, including starting new businesses for multinational corporations (MNCs).

After I left NYIF in the early 2000s, I was headhunted to join TTS Asia Learning Solutions, an up-and-coming e-learning company, as its Managing Director by their mainboard-listed investor to help them expand regionally. This role exposed me to the digital world, allowing me to become a pioneer in an emerging global trend, where I had to be creative, adaptable and curious to thrive in an uncertain environment. There was no playbook to go by in a new sector.

As a young entrepreneur, what were some of the challenges you faced?

I was an "entrepreneur" in NYIF and TTS Learning Solutions in that I was starting something from scratch, though I was still operating within a larger system. This meant that I was able to innovate and start projects from scratch, with financial security as I was drawing a regular income. But when, at 33, I set up my own company, Knowledge Director, I used my own money, didn't pay myself for 4 years, and reinvested everything earned into the business.

Both experiences are similar in that you need to be curious, courageous, and have much grit and perseverance. But emotionally, they were quite different. It takes a whole other level of emotional and mental resilience to be an entrepreneur when you have to worry about feeding yourself. This worry could either cripple you – you're constantly stressed out and would make less risky decisions, or it could allow you to be daringly determined given that you are spending your own money. For me, it was thankfully the latter.

I started my full entrepreneurship journey in my early thirties when I had some savings, much trust capital accumulated and extensive networks. That said, I do encourage those who want to give entrepreneurship a go to do so in their twenties so you don't have such a high opportunity cost as I had when I gave up a C-suite job and a nice paycheck (even though it was completely worth it for me!). I also had more financial obligations at that age.

So if you start early as an entrepreneur, you have more energy and less opportunity cost, but also less experience and resources. If you start later, you have more resources and networks, but also more obligations and less energy. There's no right or wrong, just what's your story.

Also, whether working in an MNC or being on your own as an entrepreneur, I do think both come with their unique challenges.. Neither provides more security than the other since jobs are not guaranteed to last; it comes down to your risk appetite in that season of your life and whether you know your "why" in doing so.

Is your desire to make a positive change why you have set up many social enterprises and community projects?

Absolutely! I often question my comfort with the status quo because I think there is a responsibility that comes with the privilege of being a leader, or having been given so many opportunities to grow. I believe strongly that those who have must do something that will change the world for those who have less. I am grateful to be able to make a difference, and see those changes happen even within the corporate sector.

As a leader, I am also always fascinated with the future, a better future. I love my country and know that Singapore and Singaporeans can do so much more. We have come far in what we have achieved in such a short time - many call us an "economic miracle". But we have the resources and responsibility to lead the world in becoming a mentally healthy nation amidst a global mental health epidemic, and sustainability efforts to address the climate crisis. We must show what reducing inequality looks like as well as what it takes to make Singapore a welcoming place for migrant workers to work and live in. Needless to say, we must surely do better in gender equity and inclusion of people with disabilities too.

It's why the projects I have been fortunate to initiate focus on nudging us towards become more human - whether it's Hush TeaBar, which hopes to bring the worlds of the hearing and deaf together with a silent experience so we can listen to ourselves and understand the Deaf ; A Good Space Co-operative which brings together diverse changemakers across Singapore to collaborate and do more to address societal challenges and support vulnerable communities, together; Welcome in My Backyard, which aims to increase our understanding of migrant workers to remove discrimination; or WorkWell Leaders which challenges CEOs and leaders to see the wellbeing of their people as a fundamental responsibility and strategic priority, to see the human in employees not merely as resources.

What have you learnt after having experienced such a wide range of career paths?

I hold deep gratitude for the gift of this extraordinary journey in such a short time of my life. Human potential is multidimensional, we are not meant to just do well in one job for the rest of our lives - that's not it. I've learnt that by not labelling myself and limiting myself to only the things I think I am good at, I allow myself to be curious about my own potential and to explore these different paths that appear before me.

I also believe that we must allow ourselves to be vulnerable even as we stay determined and resilient, because we are human. Thinking that we must do no wrong or need to strive for perfection all the time is not accepting ourselves as humans, and that can in fact lead us to shortchange our potential. I see my past "failures" as growth markers, because I now see how with every failure, I grew so much more. I have also learnt that it's important not to focus only on the goal, but to also allow myself to enjoy the process.

Ultimately, we decide what kind of story we are going to write for ourselves. If we are just borrowing someone else's story because that person looks happy on the outside, then we run the risk of not being happy because that is not our story.

What do you think are some skills or traits that students need to have to be successful in the world today?

To answer this question, we need to define, or maybe redefine, success. I now define success as (1) being useful to society, (2) being joyful – taking joy in the things I do and doing things that make me feel alive; and (3) being able to realise my potential and purpose in this one life that I have.

For me, one key trait to be successful in these 3 ways is to be curious. Ask as many questions as you can, and be open to new perspectives. Just because you have not experienced a different reality, it doesn't mean those possibilities don't exist. Empathy is another important trait - it allows you to see another's perspective and experience which help you to connect with them. Integrity is probably the most important trait for me – it's not just about honesty, it's also about being congruent with our thoughts, words and actions. Another way to look at integrity is authenticity. The last trait I would say is humility. Own up to your strengths and accept compliments from others because not doing that is fake modesty, but at the same time, always remain grateful and humble so you continue learning. These four traits are also my personal values, and I think are especially important in these volatile and uncertain times we live in, now and into the future.

I used to define my success and who I am by material wellbeing because that's what societal expectations are - titles, paycheck, possessions but when I lost everything in 2006 in what I call my "colossal collapse", I found myself. It's not the value of things, but our values that define who we are, and who we are to one another.

Any last words?

I do think we are very fortunate to be part of NUS Business School. I have used what I learnt in school well - whether working with MNCs or as an entrepreneur because the Business programme I did was broad-based, relevant and meaningful. But university life is not just about the course, I learnt much from the diversity of relationships and co-curricular opportunities to hone my life skills. I do encourage all students to enjoy themselves in the course; don't shortchange yourselves by merely focusing on the results - enjoy the learning process too. Learn beyond the books - learn about the world, learn about the people around you, and most importantly, learn about yourself (your values) and your own "why".