



WomenCorporateDirectors
A Foundation Inspiring Visionary Boards Worldwide

Member Profile

An Interview with WCD Member Su-Yen Wong

By Judy Macdonald



**Chairperson, Nera Telecommunications;
Director, Yoma Strategic Holdings,
MediaCorp, CPA Australia, NTUC First
Campus; Member, Singapore Chapter**

Q1. You are currently Founder and CEO of Bronze Phoenix, a premier provider of solutions that help organisations and individuals reinvent themselves, and you

have extensive experience in human capital and leadership development. What do you believe are the vital skills global leaders need to have today?

Over the years, I have encountered numerous leaders who, despite being highly effective in their local markets, found themselves ill-equipped to operate internationally. In order to make the leap onto the global stage, I believe global leaders need to complement their core leadership toolkit with three key skills.

The first is sensemaking, from the standpoint of market and competitive dynamics, customer behavior, and geopolitics, across a patchwork of local realities.

The second is cultural agility, and by this I include an understanding of the historical, philosophical, religious, and cultural constructs that will help leaders navigate the intricacies of each environment.

Last but not least is the ability to build trust and forge win-win multi-stakeholder partnerships in the midst of divergent interests.

As businesses expand beyond their domestic borders, boards need to be attuned to these dynamics and put in place leaders that have the requisite skills to succeed globally.

Q2. You have been a champion of diversity on corporate boards. How does diversity of thought, gender, and age contribute to the operational success of companies, both large and small?

Diversity forces us to confront the reality that there may be perspectives that differ vastly from our own. It helps provide a counterbalance to confirmation bias, to which we as humans have a tendency to succumb.

In my experience, and numerous studies make a similar point, diversity fosters an environment that is more open to challenging the status quo, and tends to breed innovation (which often takes place at the intersection of seemingly unrelated domains).

This is of paramount importance given the complex and disruptive world that businesses - regardless of size - operate in today. And of course, the same holds true at the board level. So while I certainly would like to see 20%, 30% or even higher female representation on boards, I'm equally passionate that diversity needs to reflect minorities and different ethnic profiles, functional skill sets (yes lawyers and accountants are important, but so are HR, digital, and cyber folks), age, and increasingly nationality as companies evolve the mix of their business.

Q3. You are an independent director on two public company boards, Yoma Strategic Holdings and Nera Telecommunications, two private companies, MediaCorp and NTUC First Campus, plus a number of not-for-profit membership organizations. Can you describe your path to the boardroom?

I believe everyone's path is unique. For me, it has been a multi-year journey. In my case, I first started contemplating the possibility of a non-executive director role about ten years ago. In 2010, I was asked to join the board of the National Kidney Foundation which is Singapore's largest charity with over US\$200 million in reserves.

Three years later, I had the opportunity to serve on the Board of Nera Telecommunications - a telecom and IT solutions provider operating in Asia, Middle East, Europe, and Africa, eventually moving into the role of Chairperson.

MediaCorp - Singapore's leading media company and national broadcaster; NTUC First Campus - the largest provider of childcare services in Singapore; and Yoma - a diversified conglomerate in Myanmar, followed. And I have recently joined the board of CPA Australia.

At each juncture, it was more often than not a man (or sometimes multiple men) who made the decision, took a chance on me, or supported my path to the boardroom. I emphasise this point because men are absolutely critical to moving the needle on diversity. Put simply, it's a numbers game - men dominate the boardroom and while women need to show up for the party, he who has the keys to the house needs to unlock the door.

I am heartened by the growing number of men who see the opportunity - and responsibility - to champion a world which welcomes their daughters and granddaughters in the boardroom, should they choose to pursue that path.

Q4. We are living in a time of profound disruption. How can board members best prepare for the unknown?

I believe this starts at a deeply individual level. We need to constantly challenge ourselves to get out of our comfort zones, be it physically, mentally, or emotionally. If we are comfortable with discomfort in our personal lives, that ability to navigate in unfamiliar territory will cross over to the boardroom.

Q5. In 2017, you gave a commencement speech to students graduating from Linfield College, in which you asked them to stay curious, be resilient, and to think of a career as a marathon instead of a sprint. Have you applied your own advice as a board member and corporate leader?

Very much so! Curiosity is core to my leadership philosophy. For example, when confronted with situations that do not go as planned, my focus is on uncovering the circumstances and root causes that led to it, rather than on who is to blame. Failures (and successes) are usually a confluence of multiple factors, and the greatest value is in learning from each experience.

On resilience, I think it's important as a leader to have a combination of a thick skin, good eyesight, and acute hearing. One needs to push forward with conviction, yet remain observant and listen carefully to detractors who may help us uncover blind spots.

Early on in my career, I have to admit I was much more of a sprinter. With the benefit of hindsight, I've come to realise that the journey is as important as the destination. The taller the building, the stronger and broader the foundation needs to be. As a corporate board member, for me, this is about intentionally honing a portfolio of skills through a broad range of experiences, over time.

Q6. What has surprised you the most as a corporate board member?

Many people, myself included, have made the mistake of thinking that being a corporate board member is simply a natural extension of one's executive role. While much of our prior experience is, of course, relevant and leverageable, the reality is that being a director is quite unlike being a CEO. It's the difference between being in the control tower and being the pilot.

Q7. What are the qualities you most desire in fellow board members?

I appreciate and respect fellow board members who are open to views that differ from their own, who want to make a difference, and who check their egos at the door.

Being open to differing views enables more robust discussions and ultimately better decision making. Wanting to make a difference is about being engaged and adding value. Lastly, a well-functioning board should be like a jazz ensemble. Each director might have his or her turn in the spotlight, but on the whole, it needs to be balanced. Any director - including the chairperson - who demands centre stage the entire time, is likely preventing the board from doing its best work.

Q8. What do you like to do for fun and relaxation?

I love to travel - particularly to locations that are off the beaten path (I have yet to meet another person who has travelled to Timbuktu...) My husband and I like to explore destinations that some would consider unconventional, and have been rewarded for it with many surprising and unforgettable experiences. A few that stand out are sailing through the Antarctic glaciers on a rubber dinghy in absolute stillness, witnessing a mystical festival with masked dancers and chanting monks in Bhutan, hiking through lush forests and marveling at rock hewn Orthodox churches in Ethiopia, and driving through the desolate Namib desert - with two flat tires in one day to show for it!

Q9. Do you have any books that you would recommend to others?

Drive by Daniel Pink, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century by Yuval Noah Harari, Factfulness by Hans Rosling, and Tools of Titans by Tim Ferriss.