

Asian-Australian Leadership Summit

Next Gen Day Thursday 12 September 2019

Opening Remarks – Ken Woo

Good morning, distinguished guests (including those from the ANU, AsiaLink and of course, PwC), ladies and gentlemen. It is my honour to present the opening remarks for the inaugural Next Gen day of the Asian–Australian Leadership Summit, a milestone in the pursuit of cultural diversity in leadership in Australia.

Being Asian

To begin, I believe I should provide some obligatory comments on being Asian.

Firstly, my heritage – I am Korean. For those wondering, from the South. My wife is Hong Kong Chinese. So I tell our kids they are 50% Korean and 50% Chinese, to which they respond, “*no we are 100% Australian*”. A different perspective on what it means to be Asian-Australian than I had, growing up in the exhaust fumes of the White Australia Policy.

I’ve been fortunate, my brother became a doctor, which took the pressure off me. As kids, we wanted certainty in life. As far as we could research, there were only two certain things in life: death and taxes. So when he became a doctor, I became a tax adviser.

My mother was recently in hospital. When I visited, it was evident that she had been speaking to the lady next to her. “*Oh I see your son has come to visit.*” After a quick pause she then asked: “*Is he the doctor?*” My mother replied no, which was greeted by disappointment: “*Oh I see, it’s the other one*”.

Recently, my mother was speaking to me and suddenly lowered her voice. “*Ken*” she said. “*Don’t ever go to North Korea.*” After decades of hearing the evils of the Korean War, how could she ever think I would go there? “*Because if you go, you won’t come back*”. Okay, thanks mum.

Elephants in the room

So having offered my obligatory Asian stories, let me now go straight to the ‘elephants in the room’. For those who don’t understand, I will explain. These are matters which we know of, yet dare not speak about. There are three that I see in the room:

1. How do we deal with the small number of people who seek easy competitive advantage by side-lining the outnumbered? What if they are psychopaths? Are we prepared with a strategic response?
2. How do we deal with sub-optimal Asian-Australian role models? When observers see them, do they conclude there is a valid reason why leadership eludes Asians? “*It’s not so much the ‘bamboo ceiling’, maybe it’s more the ‘talent ceiling’.*” We need the A team!

3. Quite aptly, this event is called a summit. And in climbing to the summit we begin at 'sea level' and first proceed to 'base camp'. A trek traversed many times. So, are you (yes, YOU) here today to repeat the sea level to base camp trek, or are you here to 'move the conversation', beyond base camp towards the summit?

How do we skillfully engage leaders when the issues readily disengage leaders? Another way of describing this might be:

How do we present an 'M' rated movie to a 'G' rated audience?

Imagine if the Avengers movies were G rated. I guess they would be pretty lame, fairy tale like cartoons. This may explain why the pursuit of cultural diversity in leadership is mostly about food, festivities and feel-good, self-help workshops.

A reality check on activity today

Here are my observations and warnings about popular change. Change that may at times seem more fake than real.

1. Is it volunteer driven? Must those who benefit volunteer their efforts as 'out of scope' activity, that distracts them from meeting their KPIs? If business is serious about anything, it will fund it. Accordingly, is the reliance on volunteers a form of exploitation, one that ironically serves to reduce diversity in leadership?
2. Is there an unwritten rule that communication (about the lack of diversity in leadership) must be G rated? Is this an insidious form of suppression called 'self-censorship'? We may never properly diagnose the issues, because we are forbidden from examining '*the truth of the present*'. So how then may we progress beyond base camp?
3. Is every approach the wrong approach? I call this the '*Brexit syndrome*'. No approach is the right approach, which results in paralysis. In my experience, those declaring every approach to be wrong seem to live lives of privilege and advantage. So we need exceptional communication skills to navigate through self-interest.
4. Self-help workshops. Do these begin with a starting point of disadvantage and therefore serve as some form of consolation or 'advanced loser therapy'? I appreciate that some may need to tranquilise the poor prognosis for career progression. But this should not be mistaken for change. Even the highest quality feel-good window dressing is still that, window dressing.

Career advice

So in the context of advancing leadership, here are some things I advise Next Gen future leaders to think about:

1. You need to take risks.

2. Help your leaders to become better leaders.
3. Navigate misconduct.
4. Develop your most important quality – resilience.

Well what do we mean by resilience? Years ago, I may have experienced covert misconduct. It wasn't recognised or acted on, *until* I sought a leadership role. I was then advised that those who taunted me feared that I would seek retribution if I became the leader. Resilience means learning to be the bigger person, to deal with hubris and importantly, to know when you must bet your career against a slap on the wrist for the counterparty. And then win.

Real change – why we are here

For real change, we need to engage in what I call 'Dangerous Conversations'. These require an understanding of the psychopathic tendencies that may drive harmful covert behaviour. For these conversations, we need to carefully weave in self-explanatory parallels from well understood events, embed clever points of deflection and claim plausible explanation against perceived provocation and retaliation. And somehow secure productive engagement from today's leaders.

We absolutely need to understand sophisticated communication, such as the language of the boardroom. As one mentor advised me, "*If you don't understand the language, you don't deserve to be in the room*". To reference Norse mythology (and the Marvel Cinematic Universe), only the worthy can lift Thor's Hammer (*Mjolnir*)

Summing up

If, for argument's sake, we are fighting fire with water, are we merely tossing ice cubes at a raging bush fire? I wouldn't bet on the fire being contained. Would you?

Today, we have a unique opportunity: to move beyond base camp and begin to move the conversation, by engaging in M rated Dangerous Conversations*.

Because together, we can *move the conversation* and head towards the summit.

Thank you and enjoy today.

(*See my LinkedIn series called 'Dangerous Conversations' for more)