



IN CONVERSATION WITH ...

... SUSAN MEINL



Susan Meinel is an industry veteran, having spearheaded for well over two decades the HR function within one of the original associations set-up to support small boutique hotels across the globe. As global HR leader at Design Hotels (www.designhotels.com), she has witnessed and shaped the organisation's journey from start-up all the way through to its (gradual) acquisition by Starwood Hotels & Resorts / Marriott International. After more than twenty years within the corporate world, Susan has now decided to set up her own practice, honing-in on leadership coaching, and HR facilitation as well as organisational and cultural development work.

Why HR Practitioners Look Forward to Rolling-Up Their Sleeves as 2021 Provides Opportunities To 'Build Back Better'

"I recognise," Susan said, "one has to grasp opportunities when they present themselves." The year 2021 is one such instance – "for HR professionals, it provides the chance to really leave a lasting positive impact on the way hospitality organisations are facing the uphill struggle, but also the opportunities that present themselves after a year of destruction to build back better".

Having, throughout the past decade, maintained a dialogue about market insights, HR trends and the latest about organisational development, Susan and I most recently caught up just after the new year. Despite the still severe travel restrictions, we both commented on how the recent glimmers of hope have started to give the industry more confidence – with many an individual's new year's resolution including the unwavering desire to travel to explore new cultures and cuisines, and to once again be spending time with family, friends, and our communities, we were encouraged that pent-up demand would, in time, ensure a solid rebound for the industry. Yet, there are more reasons to be optimistic about 2021 – wearing our hats as organisational advisors and HR professionals, here are our Top 5 'lessons learned':

Number 1

2020 has proven that, given commitment and willingness, organisations can be quick to adjust. The various, at times fundamental shifts and structural changes which companies have

undergone to ensure the survival and to come out of this crisis not only stronger but better, are a testament to what else firm's and their leadership teams can achieve if they put their mind to it. "A lot of organisations have broken down silos and flattened hierarchy levels, thus speeding up decision





making processes and allowing ‘up and comers’ to have their voices heard,” I commented. Susan added that this would be “an incredibly exciting time from an HR perspective as many a firm has been set free of the ‘chains of bureaucracy’ which, in the past, have slowed down innovation, creativity and empowerment.” Commenting on the importance of learning from the past and maintaining this agile and flexible thinking, we highlighted the growing acceptance of, for example, remote and part-time work solutions, as an opportunity to drive engagement as well as diversity and inclusion. This, in turn, would further help bring in new perspectives and drive innovation. We pointed out, though, that a more mobile and flexible workforce would require a greater degree of trust in, and empowerment of, the employees – thus creating a company culture centred around competencies and skills, but also one where employee engagement would likely be heightened. In short, looking at the bright side, we believe that the necessary organisational structural changes many companies went through in the past 12 months are setting the foundation for a prosperous future.

Number II

With most organisations having just completed their end-of-year strategy planning, many will also have critically assessed, and redefined their mission and vision statements. “After a year of introspection, I anticipate companies having re-connected with their purpose, their core values and belief systems – or critically re-evaluated those with a view to stand on ‘firmer ground’ come 2021,” I said. Susan similarly foresees such ‘organisational re-adjustment’, adding that any firms have been confronted with the harsh reality of what their true company culture really looks like – “and not everyone liked what they saw,” she said. “This has triggered senior leadership teams to commit

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more seriously to aligning business strategies with the firm’s people practices,” I remarked, “and this can only be a good thing”. “Whereas in the past we often complained about the HR function not having its voice heard in the boardrooms, it has proven itself as all but indispensable throughout the past 12 months. It has been a year where senior management teams really appreciated how the people-function truly represents the backbone of any business,” Susan said. Both her and I anticipate organisations showing stronger commitment to strengthening, and further developing, their HR and talent management teams and function. Increased attention to, and engagement with company culture and aspects which related to it will only strengthen commitment, alignment and buy-in – critical success factors when re-building a firm’s operations.

Number III

Having had to shut down operations or put staff on furlough, many organisations – and individual employees for that matter – have wanted to make sure to use their time wisely. Often, this led to some valuable ‘soul-searching’ and the pursuit of training programs, courses and / or personal coaching. “Finding the time, and resources, for professional development, for upskilling or cross-training, always ranks high on the priority lists for both employers and employees – yet, more often than not, the day-to-day realities of tasks at hand, of budgetary cuts, time restrictions or other mitigating factors often mean that such initiatives are being postponed (indefinitely),” I observed. During 2020, however, “we have seen a huge wave of upskilling or proactive career planning,” Susan noted. “The emergence of online learning platforms and their vast and oftentimes free offerings encouraged people to take responsibility for their own development and learning. This will not only prove highly valuable for the individuals, boosting their





confidence and bolstering their future career prospects, but it is also in the best interest of the organisations – they will have a more competitive workforce at their disposal and be able to drive efficiencies, productivity and, most likely, innovation”.

Concurring, I added that “in a fast-paced, digitally enabled workplace, ‘continuous learning’ has become a key aspect of ensuring to stay competitive and ‘at the top of one’s game’ – for both individuals and entire organisations.”

Susan further observed that peer coaching and learning will also be a new way of sharing knowledge and fostering team spirit and collaboration. Going forward, we agreed that the industry must thus ensure that it continues to carve out the time, and resources, to keep diversifying and developing the skills and capabilities required for our new reality. If it does, then organisations will not only be on track to become ‘best in class’, but – as history shows – they will also reap the rewards of a more engaged workforce.

Number IV

There already is a growing emphasis by the industry and investors on social responsibility and sustainability – and not a minute too late as employees have been critical and observant, for some time now, of the best practices, or the lack thereof, of many industry players. “2020 has probably heightened everyone’s awareness for the impact mankind has on the environment, and what the (possible) consequences are of those. At the same time, we have seen that change can happen, that behaviour can change, if there is the need or the will-power to steer this through. In a way, many have thus had their ‘Greta Thunberg’ moment,” I said. Susan agreed that the past 12-months will help set a much higher benchmark for organisations and individuals alike and observed that there is indeed the intent to build back better. “Organisations have redefined their purpose, practices and goals, and

individuals are asking themselves what they can contribute to leave a more positive mark”. In the next few months, we both therefore expect value-driven, purposeful initiatives supporting social responsibility and sustainability to be propelled to the forefront, that there will be a major step-change in organisations looking to do ‘the right thing’ and make an impact.

Number V

In many ways, 2020 has shown a lot of us what we do not want. Yes, the greater flexibility of working from home – and the mere fact that collaboration actually worked rather well despite physical distances – has been welcomed, and individuals have embraced technology to stay connected in more than just one way. In fact, “many industry executives loved the digital conferences which had been set-up all throughout 2020, and I suspect some of the smaller events might switch to a digital (or hybrid) format going forward,” I said. However, many employees and executives have probably concluded that spending hours upon hours on zoom calls staring at a screen is not ideal either.

“In a way,” said Susan, “people have been forced to accept some of the limitations technology provides – and personal interactions have gained in appreciation.” “The challenge,” I pointed out, “but also the huge upside for those successfully manoeuvring it, will be in intelligently applying technology to aid and facilitate communication and better collaborate in a physically distanced world without ‘killing off’ the chance encounters and the informal social interactions which are so vital for individuals to develop, network, bond, engage and form part of a community.”

For the foreseeable future to want more meaningful exchanges whilst embracing tech-enabled communication can only be a good thing for companies and individuals alike.





There remain, of course, plenty of things on the ‘to do list’ of executives and HR professionals alike. For instance, both Susan and I wholeheartedly agreed that no matter the sentiment, mental health and wellbeing would of course continue to be a critical topic in this post-pandemic era. At the same time, some of the referenced structural changes and shifts require further ‘organisational adjustments’ – as it relates to, for example, increased workplace flexibility, the need to alter and overhaul a company’s compensation and benefit program springs to mind. Nor should we kid ourselves – moving increasingly away from a hierarchical structure towards a more meritocratic one, to alter the thinking and place greater emphasis on ‘purpose’, and to give up, to some extent, control in favour of empowerment, and to thus proactively foster or encourage ‘experimentation’, will not be an easy road to travel. By and large, though, it warrants to reflect and acknowledge that there is positive momentum, which in turn will spark confidence and drive welcomed change.

About the Author

Thomas Mielke is Co-Founder and Managing Director of AETHOS Consulting Group – an established human capital advisory and executive search firm focused on hospitality, travel and real estate. He is a fully certified executive search consultant by the AESC, and has grown leadership teams on behalf of operators, private equity investors, institutional funds and family offices across Europe, Middle East and Africa.

Acting as a trusted advisor, Thomas equally supports organisations in identifying and developing values and best practices that define and foster a corporate culture and consults his clients on talent management programs.

He holds a BSc in International Hospitality Management from Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne, has authored a broad variety of articles on leadership, recruitment and talent management, and has participated in and chaired numerous industry panel discussions. Thomas can be contacted on tmielke@aethoscg.com

