

IVAN YU: PUSHING AGAINST THE STATUS QUO

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For many people, the idea of joining a company going through a period of fundamental change or navigating through financial distress would be about as welcome as entering the proverbial lion's den. Ivan Yu says it's his "dream job".

Currently the chief transformation officer at Optus, Ivan started out as a lawyer, before moving into management and strategy consulting roles. But being the one who helps steer companies through periods of massive change has hit the sweet spot for him, though he admits it's not an easy task. "It's still extremely difficult and challenging," he says, "but I feel that I've found that place where I enjoy what I'm doing. I've got the skills necessary to pull it off and people tell me I'm really good at it - which may just reflect that not many people voluntarily jump into these tricky situations."

Many of those skills were honed during his tenure at Herbert Smith Freehills, a firm he was drawn to on graduation by its reputation for being meritocratic and being the first national law firm to have a female partner. He spent most of his time at the firm working with Luke Hastings in Litigation and Philippa Stone in Corporate and took away valuable lessons from both of them that have informed his career ever since. From Luke, he learned the power of bringing out the best in people by building their capabilities early on. "A little bit of upfront investment pays huge dividends," says Ivan.

Philippa taught him the lesson that there is no problem really too complex to solve, "as long as you really think through it, bounce it off some colleagues and work collaboratively with clients to understand what they're really trying to solve".

He also learned the importance of being thorough, and it was while diving deeply into a data room during a transaction that he found his next career move. He came across a document that included an independent review of a company from management consultancy, McKinsey & Company. "The brutal honesty and bold advice, which would have been unpopular with some in the management team, really resonated with me," he recalls. This glimpse into a different industry led him to McKinsey and, six years later, into his chief transformation officer role at Network 10.

It's an area he loves, although he baulks at being described as an expert. "Let's just say I've done it a few more times than the average person," he says. What fascinates him about the field are the very human elements beneath it all. "Working with companies that are undergoing transformation, it ultimately deals with the human condition. There's this enormous pulling power of the status quo and how things are done, and pushing against this is really difficult. But if you get it right, it's a wonderful outcome for everyone involved.

"What intrigues me is changing people's mindsets and behaviours, and I like the challenge of being able to do that at scale," he adds.

All of the tools and skills in his arsenal were certainly challenged by his stint at Network 10 during a momentous period between 2017 and 2018. The company was already under financial pressure when he joined and attempting to develop a transformational plan of revenue improvement and cost reduction initiatives to improve its profile. "Then one day the administrators get called in and the board has to step aside..." he recalls. "The experience was a lesson in leadership and how you get people through those moments where, honestly, we as a management team weren't sure what our futures were and what it would look like on the other side."

That wasn't the only lesson. He also learned the importance of transparency "without causing any panic or alarm". It was vital that while projecting confidence to potential bidders that the team had a robust plan and solution in place, they still had to get on with business as usual at the same time.

"Every single day our teams had to put out quality television and we couldn't lose sight of that... so it was an exercise in juggling a thousand balls at the same time."

In the end it's all about the people, he says. "The number one reason transformations fail is because of people - not resources. Either leaders don't walk the talk, or staff resist and it runs out of steam."

Ivan indicates four essentials to sustaining a real shift in behaviour: start with a compelling rationale to build understanding and conviction, offer a mix of carrots and sticks to incentivise everyone, invest in capability building and training to develop talent and skills, and ensure leaders and staff role model the change.

The last - holding his own peers to account - is one of his toughest jobs, he notes, and he doesn't relish conversations like: "You talk about trust and empowerment. But then you overrule your team and second guess their advice. What kind of message do you think that sends?"

Above all of this, however, is "getting crystal clear on the why". If an organisation is going to embark on a dramatic change "you always need to go back to that higher order reason, and it can't be something purely financial like shareholder value - that doesn't cut through in large organisations where people can just move on," he stresses.

Ivan says that he was attracted to the legal profession originally thanks to his affection for the TV show, Law and Order (coincidentally on Network 10). “Please don’t tell anyone I joined Herbert Smith Freehills because of Law and Order,” he says, half-jokingly. Now, all these years later, it’s the second part of that title that he has made his own. His working life is a series of situations where he goes into chaos and helps bring about order. And it couldn’t suit him better.