

## AT THE EDGE PODCAST



### SEASON 1, EPISODE 10

#### DICKSON TANG – WHY NOT, NOT CANNOT

Interviewed by Michael Lee

**Dickson Tang** is a keynote speaker, author and influencer who helps people and organizations get creative towards the future of work and business, so that they can unlock ideas and opportunities in new products, services and processes. He is author of the book "*Leadership for Future of Work: 9 Ways to Build Career Edge over Robots with Human Creativity.*" He was featured in media such as *Forbes* and *Irish Tech News* and has trained leaders and executives from companies such as Cartier, CITIC Telecom, JVC Kenwood, Mannheim Business School, Menicon, Montblanc, Novartis and many more. He holds an MBA from ESSEC Graduate School of Management in France and a Bachelor of Social Science from The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He lives in Singapore.

**In this episode,** Dickson talks about the 3Is of innovation, the new mindset demands on today's leaders, the difference between engaging employees in Asia and the West and the use of asynchronous technologies to overcome this, the role of AI in the creative industries, his personalized leadership scorecard, his PPCO method, and making sure to lay out the path to Point B up front.

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**Michael Lee**

*Dixon, welcome to At the Edge. And thank you very much for being here.*

**Dickson Tang**

Wow. Great. Thank you. Well, Michael, thank you for having me. It's great to join you here.

**Michael Lee**

*Tell us a little bit about your background in creativity and innovation, especially in the corporate space.*

**Dickson Tang**

I was a management consultant in the corporate consulting sector. I was working with KPMG Consulting, Gartner Consulting, and a few other consulting firms for over ten years. After those periods in consulting, I realized my true passion is with people or is about connecting with people. So I switched over to leadership development, keynote, speaking, training, facilitation.

**Michael Lee**

*Let's talk about the importance of creativity and leadership.*

**Dickson Tang**

The future of work will require us to be creative and innovative, because most of the standardized tasks will go to AI and automation. But unfortunately, the traditional school system did not prepare us to be creative and innovative. So there's a gap.

I want to close this gap by publishing a book, speaking at conferences, facilitating workshops. That is a huge gap, I cannot generalize to talk about all the education systems around the world, but at least the education systems I went through in Hong Kong and Asia tend to train us to be good in exams. So they drill us to get us prepared for exams.

But if you look at the future of work trends, and if you look at the artificial intelligent trends, if you look at the types of jobs that will be disrupted by AI and automation, those standardized tasks, those structural tasks will be going to AI and automation very soon. But the school system is not changing fast enough to keep up with the pace of technology change. And that's why I always urge business leaders, and also the HR leaders, to make sure that we are doing something to close that gap, to get people to be more creative and innovative.

And how do we do that? It boils down to three things. What are the three things? I call it the 3Is. The first I is Individual mindset. If you want to get people to be creative and innovative, firstly, you need to get them to stop saying "Cannot" and start to say "Why not?" And explore new opportunities and possibilities. So that's the first idea, Individual mindset. Then the second is what I call the Infrastructure, Infrastructure means the way you do things, in

corporations, in organizations. Typically, you follow the proven path of doing certain things. You follow the SOPs - standard operating procedures - but nowadays with things changing at lightning speed, you can't afford to do things the same way. So that's the second I you need to address if you want to get your people to be creative and innovative. Then of course, the third I is what I call Ideas. Well, that is quite obvious, right? If you want to be creative and innovative, you need to know how to work with Ideas, specifically about how to generate Ideas, how to organize Ideas and prioritize Ideas and how to execute Ideas.

**Michael Lee**

*How do we get these kind of 3Is to work throughout a company?*

**Dickson Tang**

Leadership is about influencing people to change. So in our current context, our workforce is moving to this new mode of working, this hybrid mode of working. The organization is moving towards this future of work. That means the workplace is increasingly connected by technology. And also the geographic location doesn't really matter anymore, because we are all connected by networks. So in this context, if you want to be a good leader, you need to inspire and influence others to change. But nowadays, there's another element to you as a leader is you need to know how to inspire and influence others to change virtually, digitally. So that's a new challenge to the leader. And on top of that, a good leader needs to know how to get people to change. Change towards what? Change towards innovation. There's a lot of work for a leader to do nowadays.

**Michael Lee**

*How does it happen? How do they do it?*

**Dickson Tang**

As a leader, you need to embrace a new leadership mindset. A new leadership mindset means you need to start saying "Why not?" to a lot of things. So for example, right, five years earlier, if I asked you, Hey, is it possible to conduct some leadership training, or leadership workshop or is it possible to lead your team virtually, 100% virtually?

So five years ago, if you asked this question to a leader they would probably say no, it's not possible. But nowadays, that's the reality. So one of the key lessons for the leader is you need to be open minded. And you need to say "Why not?" Because you never know what kind of change will happen in the future.

So I think as a leader, if you want to do that, the number one thing is you need to change your mindset. The second one is, as a leader, what you need to do is you need to look at your existing workflow, to see if certain workflow still makes sense nowadays, for example, some of the leaders tend to spend time on leadership reporting or business results reporting, so every month, they compound reports for the upper management to review. But nowadays, with technology, do I still need to do that? So you need to review your workflow, that's the second

thing that a leader can do. The third thing a leader can do is to tap into the team and help the team unlock their creative thinking and get the team to bring out more ideas. Because as a leader, you can't do everything.

The world is changing fast, and new problems are coming up every day, new opportunities coming up every day, one person can't do it. That's why you need to trust your team. You need to activate your team. You need to engage your team. Tap into your team's creative potential so that you can extract the best ideas from the team.

**Michael Lee**

*When you're talking about engaging your team, that's precisely one of the things we talk about a lot on this podcast. What are some techniques a leader can use to engage their team better than they have in the past?*

**Dickson Tang**

I live in Asia. One of the things I can share with you from this cultural perspective is if you want to engage your team better, of course you need to get your team to open up and to share ideas. That is the prerequisite to innovation. But in different cultural settings, things get done differently. So for example, in the Western world, in the US and Europe, people are more individualistic, people are more free to share ideas and opinions.

And so if you're a leader in the Western world, it may be quite normal for you to ask, Hey, what do you think about this issue? Show me some ideas. So if you as a leader ask this question, you will be able to get some ideas from your team.

But if you do it in Asia, because most of the countries in Asia are typically the collective types of culture, so that means the team members don't want to voice out his or her own opinion or ideas. They like to respect the hierarchy. So they don't want even if they have some good idea, they don't dare to say that out loud, they will check if the boss is thinking the same, they will leave this like expression of ideas to the boss. So that's why if you're a leader, if you're managing a team in Asia, if you ask your team member, hey, show me some ideas, give me some ideas, and most of the team members might be very quiet, because they want to observe the hierarchy.

**Michael Lee**

*In Asia, it's even harder to engage your team in an authentic way.*

**Dickson Tang**

Exactly. But having said that there's also something you can do. I would like to call it a synchronous and asynchronous manner. If you want to extract good ideas from your team members, you want to engage your team, you want to get your team to contribute to decision making, what you can do is you need to use both synchronous and asynchronous methods. By saying synchronous method, of course, it looks something like a virtual meeting, Zoom

session, virtual brainstorming, hackathon and so forth. Everybody can interact in real time. So that is one way. But equally important is asynchronous, because as I mentioned, some people are not that expressive in terms of ideas, they don't want to say ideas publicly. Then in this case, you need to set up an asynchronous channel, so that they can submit and contribute ideas in a private way. So I think, as a leader, you need to make sure that you have both.

**Michael Lee**

*What are some experiences you've had working with companies where you found success in shifting the way the company dealt with engagement and an innovation?*

**Dickson Tang**

I can share with you one example. One of the companies that I work with, they are a Japanese technology company. So traditionally, their HR and Operations departments, they tend to do things in a pretty siloed format, that means this task goes to this person, so pretty much siloed. Because what they were thinking is more like a product base, types of operation. But after working with me, what I have done is I a couple keynote, sessions, and also some workshops, to help them shift their focus from the product centric, to more like an employee experience or a customer experience type of thinking.

So after those sessions, they managed to shift their thinking from product or department silos to be more like an overall total solution, total client-facing type of thing. So for me, my biggest takeaway from this project is - Is it difficult to change your mindset? Yes, it is difficult. But is it impossible to do? You can do it. But you need to have proper methodology.

**Michael Lee**

*When you talk about the future of work, the idea that they're in silos and they're not shifting out of the silos, as you say it, it's not impossible to make that shift. But it also seems like it's absolutely necessary to make that shift.*

**Dickson Tang**

If you look at the automobile industry nowadays, even though they are selling a physical product, cars, they are not actually in the business of cars. They are in the business of mobility. So I think nowadays the concept of, What business are we in? That is changing. That is the message I would like to share with business leaders is, Stop thinking about what product are we in. Think about the context. That means, Where are our customers? What do they want? And how can we satisfy them with our offering? Once you can shift your thinking from product-centric to be more context-centric, then you will be able to see more possibility and opportunity. And you will be able to reframe yourself from an automobile company to a mobility company. It is about every department working with one another to offer a total solution to the customer.

**Michael Lee**

*Why now? Why are the silos breaking down now?*

**Dickson Tang**

I think technology is a great enabler to break the team silos. In the past, without the digital technology, each department may be located at different corners of our office building. So especially if you're working in a gigantic office building, so the finance department, marketing department, logistics department, they might be located at different corners, and you might not be able to see one another for the entire year. But nowadays, with the technology, with Zoom, with the virtual technology, nowadays, working from home, working from anywhere becoming the norm, if I want to get to know someone in marketing, someone in finance, or someone in logistics, I just invite them and we can all meet virtually. So technology is actually empowering the breakdown of this team silo. But as a leader, what we need to do is we also need to put in an effort to leverage on all this technology, so that you can get other teams and departments together so that they will work as one team.

**Michael Lee**

*You talk quite a lot in your book about the impetus from robotics and AI pushing us towards the need for creativity.*

**Dickson Tang**

The way I see the future is standardized tasks go to AI and automation, then what is left with human? There's two types of things that will be left to human beings. Number one type of job is those jobs that require a lot of coordination, human interaction. So for example, if you are an event manager running an event, running a conference, or if you're a CEO managing different entities or a type of job that requires a lot of teamwork and coordination. Another type of job that will be quite safe from this threat of automation and robotization will be creative output types of job. That means, as a human being, there's something unique, some new ideas that you can generate out. So that is another type of job that's pretty safe.

**Michael Lee**

*Also, there's ways that AI can actually support that creative output, actually support the collaboration. Can we talk about that a little bit?*

**Dickson Tang**

If you look at some of the advertising companies, they are starting to use an AI creative director or AI copywriter, because once you fit into certain algorithms, certain patterns, you will be able to generate certain things. So, will the creative industries be subject to AI disruption? Yes. But my take is that it will be happening at a later stage. If you're not in the creative industry, make sure that you contribute ideas, topics, three things: new products, new services, new processes. That means stop doing the same old thing. Make sure that you contribute to new products, new services, or new processes.

As a human being, we don't want those boring tasks. If I ask you to keep on doing copy and paste or looking for certain patterns, you've got asked to go through this manual process day in and day out, you won't like it. So to bring it back to the point of employee engagement. I think as a leader, you need to do two things immediately. Number one is to go through the list of tasks and to see something that you can immediately outsource to technology. So that's number one. Number two is, as a leader, you need to get to know each one of your team members well, to see what is that person's strengths and weaknesses and make sure that you put the right tasks to that person. So that they have this intrinsic motivation to do better.

**Michael Lee**

*If we're going to a big organization where there's ten thousand or thirty thousand people, how do people running those organizations manage to give every individual their due?*

**Dickson Tang**

Assume you want to move your organization toward the direction of innovation. So what you need to do is you need to define, number one, what is the number one mindset you would like every one of the employees to embrace? So step number one, what is the one ideal mindset you want everyone in your organization to embrace so that your organization can move towards innovation? And secondly, what is the one skill you want everybody in the organization to develop, so that your organization can move toward innovation? So one mindset and one skill set. So if you can figure this out immediately, and cascade it down to your team, no matter how big is your organization, you're gonna be okay.

**Michael Lee**

*What are some of the mindsets and skills that you would recommend leaders consider? Or even what is the number one mindset, the number one skill?*

**Dickson Tang**

The number one mindset is about Be open to change. It boils down to a few things. Number one is, you need to make sure that you are comfortable with new ideas, and then you know how to generate, nurture, prioritize ideas, together with your team. So that's number one. Number two is you need to embrace a new way of doing things. And then thirdly is you always need to be curious. Be curious, because if you are curious, you will be able to identify new opportunities.

**Michael Lee**

*Surely, every leader is going to say, Yes, I'm open to change. Yes. I'm curious.*

**Dickson Tang**

Personally I have developed a leadership scorecard for leaders to assess how good they are in terms of creative leadership. By saying leadership, creative leadership means the ability to tap into the team, to get the creative ideas from the team members towards future growth. So that is what I call creative leadership. So actually, I have developed a scorecard on that. If some of your audience would like to have a quick tool to assess for themselves, feel free to connect with me and I'm happy to send it over. When it comes to developing your curiosity, how to be curious, it boils down to personal habits. And there are a couple things that they need to do. Number one is they need to always say Why not? Whenever someone says a new idea, they need to say, Why not? Stop saying Cannot.

**Michael Lee**

*What are some of the other factors on your scorecard?*

**Dickson Tang**

Number one is, in terms of idea management as a leader - Do you have certain methodologies or certain systems to capture the best ideas from your team? So that's just one area. The other area is, as a leader, are you able to break the team's silos and engage everyone in your organization to move toward a certain direction? And then the third area is, is there some mindset change that you are going to drive in your organization? And how can you bring this mindset change down to the different levels of the organization?

**Michael Lee**

*What if you're not a leader per se in the organization, you're just an employee, and you want to get your leaders to be more future focused as an ordinary employee?*

**Dickson Tang**

I think a lot of times when they present some new ideas or some new way of doing things to the upper management, they are afraid of being rejected by the senior management. I think that's quite common. If you're an ordinary employee, and if you want to influence upwards so that the organization can move to a new direction, what you need to do is, you need to learn how to present your idea appropriately to the upper management.

Typically there are a couple areas that you can focus on. It is a method I call PPCO. Number one is Plus. The first P is Plus. That means what is so good about your idea? What is the Plus point about your idea? Then secondly is Potential. What is the Potential of the ideas I can bring to the organization? What is the benefit? Then C is the Concern. Are there some Concerns, that the management typically will share with you? Are there some rejections that you can foresee? Then the last one, O means Overcome. You need to think about solutions to Overcome those rejections that are going to be coming out from your boss or from the upper management.



**Michael Lee**

*In your book, you talk about using platforms, both internal or external, to facilitate innovation.*

**Dickson Tang**

There are two ways you can do that. Number one, of course, it is about internal innovation. That means you get your employees together, go through certain processes, be it facilitation, or be it a hackathon, or be it an offside, it doesn't matter. It is to keep the employees engaged, get them to contribute to some new ideas. So you can do the innovation internally. But at the same time, you can also leverage on external innovation or open innovation. You need to start learning from different industries, trying to interact and mingle with people from outside. Ideally, they should be coming from a different industry. Different organizations have different methods to try to drive innovation.

There's no one-size-fits-all answer. But primarily, there are a couple things they can do. Number one is to make sure that the team are aware of the change. Number two is they need to tell the employees where is Point B? Maybe in one year's time, or in two years' time, where is Point B? And number three, some of the activities, so when I say activity, it could be just some kind of casual get-together, or some kind of workshop or hackathon, or some innovation initiative. It doesn't matter. I always believe that you need to start with awareness, then future direction, and then activities.

**Michael Lee**

*What advice would you give to people today as to how to maximize engagement, maximize innovation, and make the two successful?*

**Dickson Tang**

Unlock your employees, ideas and creativity towards the future. That's the essence. I think if you manage to do that, you will be able to lead very effectively in your organization. The future looks uncertain for most of us. But I tend to think positive, so I believe the future is bright. But it's just a matter of how we get ourselves prepared. So start now. Start preparing now. Now or never,

**Michael Lee**

*Dixon, thank you very much for being here At the Edge.*

**Dickson Tang**

You're most welcome. Thank you, Michael, for having me here.