

Call Me Jack!— Embracing the Growth Mindset

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Angelita Teo has had a fascinating career: from curator and festival programmer to heading Singapore's National Museum and now the Olympic Foundation for Culture and Heritage, where she manages the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, and Olympic culture and education programmes and projects globally. She reflects on her unusual personal journey, and suggests the skills and mindsets cultural workers will need if we want the sector to continue to inspire humanity and reflect our diversity.

Introduction

I grew up in Singapore during the 1980s and 90s with the constant reminder in school that the country had no natural resources, and that our most valuable asset was our people. Then, as it is now, education was held to be of utmost importance.

However, times have changed. Singapore has since transitioned into a developed nation, and the world has evolved significantly.

During my formative years, being labelled as a "Jack-of-all-trades, master of none" was often seen as derogatory. Specialisation in a profession and having a deep understanding of it were highly valued. But, today, having broad contextual knowledge, embracing diversity, and seeking understanding across various domains seem to have become more relevant.

Interestingly, I recently learned that the full quote is "a jack of all trades is a master of none, but oftentimes better than a master of one". Whether this is the complete idiom or not, it certainly reflects the current times, and suggests how we should approach education, training, and work in the culture and heritage sector.

In the dynamic landscape of the cultural industry, characterised by rapid technological advancements, evolving consumer preferences, and shifting market dynamics, embracing a growth mindset has become imperative for individuals and organisations to thrive. Rooted in the pioneering work of psychologist Carol Dweck¹, this concept of a growth mindset emphasises the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through dedication and effort.

Nothing Happens by Accident

My journey into the culture and heritage sector began unexpectedly. At 18, I departed Singapore to pursue studies in Mass Communication, a popular course in the 90s, at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. However, a serendipitous encounter with Archaeology during an elective class prompted a significant shift. I decided to change my major to Anthropology without much consideration for my future career or informing my parents. When my mother eventually discovered my decision, her initial reaction was, "What are you going to do back in Singapore? Dig Sentosa?!"

Upon my return to Singapore in 1995, fortune smiled upon me as I secured a job as an assistant curator at the soon-to-be-opened Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). My timing proved fortuitous; Singapore was making substantial investments in the culture and heritage sector following a 1989 report by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA). This report emphasised the importance of culture and the arts, citing their ability to broaden minds, enhance quality of life, strengthen social bonds, and contribute to the tourism and entertainment sectors.

Although I had been unaware of such plans, I had followed my curiosity, pursuing an avenue I found compelling but believed I couldn't explore in Singapore. This unexpected leap into the unknown ultimately proved the right choice.

Fostering Innovation and Embracing Diversity

In an era marked by continuous disruption and change, fostering agility is paramount, and the cultural industry must prioritise learning and adaptation. A growth mindset at both individual and organisational levels means a culture where failures are viewed as opportunities for growth rather than catastrophes. As Dweck asserts, individuals with a growth mindset are more likely to persist in the face of setbacks, embrace challenges, and actively seek feedback to improve their craft. In the context of the cultural industry, where experimentation and creativity are central, this mindset is indispensable for cultivating innovation and pushing boundaries.

Looking at technology today, it's impossible to overlook the excitement surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) and how companies have pivoted to leverage it, some quicker off the mark than others. An example is Nvidia under the leadership of CEO Jensen Huang. According to an article in *The New Yorker*, "At the beginning of the twenty-tens, A.I. was a neglected discipline... [but] Huang's ten-year crusade to democratize supercomputing had succeeded," leading to an overnight transformation of Nvidia's business. Greg Estes, a vice-president at Nvidia, said of Huang: "He sent out an e-mail on Friday evening saying everything is going to deep learning, and that we were no longer a graphics company, [and] by Monday morning, we were an A.I. company. Literally, it was that fast." This is characteristic of possessing a growth mindset as well as great agility and resilience.

Rooting, Growing, and Innovating

My tenure at the National Heritage Board (NHB) was diverse compared to those of most of my colleagues who focused on specific fields. They were becoming "masters" while I transitioned from curatorial roles to project management, museum operations, and programming festivals, engaging with various communities and agencies. I eventually became the Director of the National Museum of Singapore, but this diverse exposure helped me understand the strength and beauty of diversity, of having a light touch, and allowing things to creatively happen. It was about creating opportunities for things and

people to flourish, and being pleasantly surprised by the outcomes.

This is not to say that all outcomes were good, but there were enough outstanding ones that I was convinced to keep at it. Along the way, I learned how to better manage such an approach. Giving people enough rein to develop was important; things that were well controlled by experienced and knowledgeable managers would often yield good but somehow not exceptional results. That is why I advocate the importance of a growth mindset and Dweck's philosophy that "individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset". She also added that such individuals "tend to achieve more than those with a more fixed mindset (those who believe their talents are innate gifts)... because they worry less about looking smart and put more energy into learning".

Along this journey, I had the chance to further my studies when I was awarded a scholarship. Deciding that I would do something relevant but completely different from my undergraduate degree, I undertook a Masters in Art Curatorship at The University of Melbourne, Australia. There was a lot of emphasis on contemporary art in the course work, something that, at that stage, I did not fully understand. (Well, until now, I still don't understand some contemporary art, but perhaps that is the magic of art.)

Among the many things I learned was that all art, whether valued as good art or not, was contemporary at one point. Taste and appreciation is dynamic as well, so everyone is free to feel and interpret art. However, the understanding of artistic practice, the use of art as an expression, and the facilitating of constructive discussions about art should always be encouraged. I've always said, you have the right to decide not to like something, but don't diss it until

you have tried to understand it. This is an important attitude to possess in our world today because we have to embrace diversity.

The fact is, things change, and fads come and go, and return in seemingly quicker time than before. This accelerated speed of things will not stop, and with the developments in technology like AI, we need to keep ourselves informed and have a broad understanding of things. We need to harness the "Jack-of-all-trades" spirit so that we can discern the connections that link the disparate parts of complex systems, and thus capitalise on the opportunities that present themselves.

Welcoming Change

In 2019, I left a very comfortable and rewarding career in NHB to join the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and relocate to a foreign city, which I had initially had to google to locate in Switzerland. Originally, when contacted, I mistakenly believed that the IOC was headquartered in Lucerne, Switzerland. "What a beautiful city," I thought to myself! However, it turned out to be Lausanne, Switzerland (the Olympic Capital of the world), which, fortunately, is equally stunning. Its beauty helped because there were many days when I wondered what I had done!

The initial learning curve was incredibly steep and intimidating. The role as the Director of the Olympic Foundation for Culture and Heritage (OFCH) includes the management of the Olympic Museum and Olympic Studies Centre in Lausanne, their vast



Figure 1. Ms Angelita Teo at the entrance of the Olympic Museum in Lausanne with the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games’ Mascots. Image courtesy of the International Olympic Committee.

collection and archives, as well as international cultural and education initiatives. The challenge was not the nature of the work but, rather, understanding the complexities and intricacies of the sport ecosystem, involving various sport federations and associations, the Olympic Movement, and its 206 National Olympic Committees (which is more than the 193 countries recognised by the United Nations), with whom we collaborate closely.

I was thrust into an entirely new world, operating on a global stage. In addition, we often work on multiple projects with people from different parts of the world at the same time. The constant challenge of language and cultural differences, negotiating the different working styles and expectations, was nothing short of overwhelming at times. Hence, there were many moments in the first few years when I sought solace in the beautiful view of Lake Geneva.

What was my primary motivation for accepting this new role? I had grown too comfortable in my previous job. I possessed extensive networks and a

deep understanding of the system and processes, but this familiarity also underscored the need for a change—to venture into new realms, challenge myself, widen my worldview, and transition from working at a national level to an international arena. As Marissa Mayer² aptly said, “I always did something I felt a little unready to do”. I identify very much with this sentiment.

Valuing Solidarity and Commonalities

The process of finding ways to blend sport, art, culture and heritage, and making them relevant is exhilarating. The work extends far beyond managing a museum to include international projects involving athletes, scholars, curators, educators, foundations,

and governments. At first look, one may not immediately notice the relevance of culture, art and heritage in sport. However, this is the main differentiator of the Olympic Games, compared to other international sporting competitions; we call it “Olympism”. We define this as “a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles”.

Therefore, whether it's an artistic performance by an Olympian with an audience, an Olympic values educational programme incorporated into school curriculum, or a sporting event with spectators, they converge in the act of public attendance. For me, it underscores how sports and the arts have the capacity to entertain, to inspire, and to push human limits.

It is worth highlighting here that one of the most significant changes at the IOC or in the Olympics in recent years is the revision of our motto from "Faster, Higher, Stronger" to "Faster, Higher, Stronger – Together"³. The addition of the word "together" holds profound significance, emphasising the importance of solidarity, and the belief that progress is achieved only when the world moves forward collectively. In the same way, the cultural and heritage industry must embrace diversity and find ways for more collaboration to do things beyond today's norms. This will not only foster unexpected partnerships, but also positively transform society, promoting unity by recognising our similarities rather than focusing on the differences that divide us.

In essence, we at the OFCH are the custodians of Olympic culture and heritage. We champion the synergy of sport, culture, and Olympism to inspire

curiosity, generosity, and ambition across all generations. This is because culture is the cornerstone of human society, spanning the past, present, and future. In this spirit, we invite everyone to partake in the continuous evolution of the Olympics through our exhibitions, educational and research programmes, artistic commissions, social initiatives, and preservation of collections.

Conclusion

In the cultural industry, collaboration and diversity of perspectives catalyse innovation and artistic excellence. A growth mindset premised on no one individual holding all the answers or solutions promotes a collaborative ethos where diverse viewpoints are valued and there is recognition that talents can be developed over time. This approach not only enhances creativity and innovation, but also fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment among artists and creators.

As the cultural industry continues to evolve, I believe that embracing a growth mindset will become a cornerstone for excellence and achievement. This is because the “growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others”.

I finish writing this on the cusp of the upcoming Olympic Games Paris 2024, while excitement and anticipation of the Games are palpable everywhere. Ahead of the opening ceremony on 26th July 2024, IOC has launched “Sport. And More than Sport”, a new Olympic Brand platform. The long-term campaign “expresses the multi-dimensionality of

the Olympic experience and everything sport and the Olympic Games bring to people both on and off the field of play. It embraces the magic of sport, but also sport’s meaning beyond performance—belonging and human connection, personal empowerment and growth, and opportunities and dreams”.

This wonderfully encapsulates what I firmly believe as well, and provides the motivation for many of us to continue to do the work we do in culture, heritage and the arts. □

About the Author



Angelita Teo has been the Director of the Olympic Foundation for Culture and Heritage at the International Olympic Committee since October 2019. Formerly Senior Director at the National Heritage Board of Singapore, she held dual roles as Director of the National Museum of Singapore and Festival Director for two signature festivals, collectively drawing over two million attendees annually. Teo passionately believes in integrating sports, art, culture, and Olympic Heritage on the world stage while advocating Olympic Values through non-formal educational programmes. Her innovative initiatives resonate globally and, by infusing the Olympic spirit with a delightful blend of athleticism and artistic expression, she hopes to inspire unity and camaraderie across borders—all while placing importance on her family and parenthood journey.

Notes

1. Carol Dweck (born October 17, 1946) is an American psychologist acclaimed for her work on motivation and mindsets. She is currently the Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professorship of Psychology at Stanford University. Dweck’s research has garnered widespread recognition, including prestigious awards like the E. L. Thorndike Award.
2. Marissa Mayer, renowned for her tenure as CEO of Yahoo, made her mark as Google’s 20th employee and its first female engineer. Today, Mayer leads an AI startup named Sunshine, which secured \$20 million in 2020 for its mission to streamline digital address books, and serves on the boards of Walmart, AT&T, and Nextdoor Holdings.
3. “The original Olympic motto comprises three Latin words: Citius — Altius — Fortius, meaning “Faster — Higher — Stronger”. In 2021, the Session of the International Olympic Committee approved a change in the motto to recognise the unifying power of sport and the importance of solidarity. The new Olympic motto now reads “Citius, Altius, Fortius — Communiter” in Latin, or “Faster, Higher, Stronger – Together” in English.

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