

Leading a New Era Podcast Episode 5: Melissa Tang

David: Welcome back to Leading a New Era, the podcast from IHG that takes you behind the doors of the world's most prestigious hotels where we uncover stories of leadership, belonging and personal growth. I'm your host David Littlewood from the Talent Acquisition team here at IHG.

Eunice: And I'm your co-host, Eunice Clements-Tweedie, VP Global Talent Acquisition and Strategic Business Partnering.

David: In every episode, we sit down with a different general manager from IHG's luxury and lifestyle portfolio to explore what it really takes to lead in this fast-paced world of hospitality. From career-defining twists to cultural moments that shape a leader's journey, our guests share their stories that are as inspiring as they are insightful. Today we're heading to China, where serenity meets sustainability at Six Senses Qing Cheng Mountain. Our guest is Melissa Tang, General Manager at this incredible hotel, where wellness and purpose are woven into every guest touchpoint. Melissa's career spans continents and cultures, and her journey into leadership is deeply rooted in courage, authenticity and emotional intelligence. From navigating a steep curve into people leadership and championing sustainability through creative community-driven initiatives, Melissa leads with intention, and it shows. Let's dive in.

Eunice: Great.

David: Evening, Melissa, to you. It's five o'clock in the evening out there, isn't it? How are you today? How's your day been?

Melissa: I'm good.

David: So you've got some beautiful shadows and sunlight in your backdrop. It looks stunning there. So, the Six Senses, it has such a unique vibe, luxury meets mindfulness. I bet it makes for some unforgettable guests and colleagues' stories. Before we delve into your career journey, let's start with something fun. It's time for an Early CheckIn, which is a rapid-fire round of this or that questions, Melissa. We ready?

Eunice: Lovely, let's go.

David: Are you ready, Melissa?

Melissa: Yes, I'm ready.

David: Fantastic. So, mountains or beaches?

Melissa: Mountains.

David: Morning yoga or evening meditation?

Melissa: Morning yoga.

Eunice: City buzz or nature's calm?

Melissa: Nature's calm.

Eunice: Oh, lovely. Hot springs or an ice bath? That sounds brutal.

Melissa: Hot spring.

David: I'm with you there. Local street food or fine dining tasting menu?

Melissa: Local street food.

Eunice: Pandas or tigers?

Melissa: Tigers.

Eunice: (Chuckles)

Melissa: (Chuckles) Because I'm a tiger.

David: (Laughs) Love that. Sleep in or rise with the sun?

Melissa: Rise early with the sun.

Eunice: Window seat or aisle seat?

Melissa: Window seat.

David: And front of house or back of house?

Melissa: Back of house.

David: Fantastic. Love those answers, Melissa. Thank you. Mountains. Did you feel like you had to say that based on where you are or?

Melissa: I think now, I still prefer mountains.

Eunice: Lovely. You told us a lot about yourself then. It was really insightful.

David: So, Melissa, let's take it back a little bit. You've had a fantastic and fascinating career. When was the moment that you first fell in love with hospitality?

Melissa: It was about, I think, 27, 28 years ago. I just start with the river cruises. It's a fun river cruises, a floating hotel, and then into land hotel. Then goes to city hotels about 38 storeys, and then moving up to 103 storeys city hotel. Then moving down to a resort. It's totally different, you know, from the horizontal to vertically, that's

changing from the city hotel to a resort. And then, on the other side, it's like a rollercoaster, it's from opt-in and opt-out, from operational into non-operational zone, and then afterwards turn into the operations leader as well.

David: I mean, so you mentioned it there, you said that your biggest learning curve was stepping out from operations into leadership. What made that transition so big for you?

Melissa: Yeah, I think that the most significant learning curve in my career, that transition into leadership, is stepping beyond operational excellence to leading the people. And I quickly, quickly realised that being an effective leader goes far beyond technique knowledge. It requires emotional intelligence, clear and empathetic communications, and ability to inspire and guide others through uncertainty and change. In the early stage, I rest with a little bit self-doubt and question whether I was truly ready to take the next step. But girls often begin with comfortable roles. Over time, and with the support from personal development, like, I joined the development session with a confidence code, women in leadership development sessions, I built a strong sense of self-belief. I learned that leadership isn't about being flawless, being perfect. It's all about authentic, adaptable and leading by example. That journey transferred not only my confidence, but also my leadership style. It taught me to trust in my values, lean into challenges, and build a true culture where others feel empowered to do the same.

Eunice: I love the fact that you mentioned emotional intelligence and authenticity as critical leadership skills. I'd be super curious to find out how do you develop them as a leader? Tell us more about that.

Melissa: Yes, absolutely. That is, I think, the big learning from there. And also, I was so honoured and grateful to be the top talent in the organisations. And also, learning from my mentor, **Mr Sebahi**, also teach us, taught us, guide us, leading us, how we move into from an operational leader and to be a leading by people. I think his leadership, you know, always extends a very strong pillar of supportive and encouragement. What really stands out, I think it was his people-first philosophy. Whenever it comes to everything, he's always leading us to think about how do the people feel? How can we make people feel comfortable? How can we make them feel differently? That's always, you know, in my memory. I still remember quite very clearly there's so many things happen and there's still so many years afterwards. When we have the colleagues get the promotion, get the transfer to the other properties, we are so discreet to look into where and how. And of course, the announcement, everybody's excited. However, we look at how is their own team, how is the receiving hotel, whether we're going to get the message. If we announce the first, how is that his or her team are going to think about? So, we're going to discuss all the details, how the team feel. They're both working to transfer out, we're

going to have a new boss come over, and, you know, everybody was going to discuss about that. But to us, and with his leadership, with his guidance, we know furthermore, whenever we take any decision, we take any actions, we always think about the people.

David: That's a lovely answer. I think people, I mean, I guess that's one of the reasons I got into the role that I'm in now. And I know for yourself, Eunice, around talent and working with people, that's been a big motivation for what you do.

Eunice: I think people are at the heart of everything that we do in the team. And I love the fact that you mentioned how people feel will endure far beyond words. And I've always been a big believer of that, whether it's experiences at hotels or whether it's how you treat your team. People always remember how you made them feel. And they'll also remember if those aren't good feelings. So, we always focus on ensuring that those positive feelings endure over time. Don't you think, David?

David: I certainly do, I do.

Eunice: What I loved, Melissa, is leadership isn't flawless. And I know as a leader, I think it's a continued journey. It's iterative. When you've mastered one skill, there's another skill that iteratively you have to master. So, I definitely resonate with what you were saying about unflawless leadership, for sure. It was a great insight what you mentioned there.

Melissa: Yeah, I can't agree more. Because also, that is also in my development session as well. So early years, when I was a manager, I think, as a manager, as a leader, I have to be perfect. I have to do everything. This must be right. And really doubt, and really scared if I did some mistake, if I fail to do something. But after this kind of development session, I realised that being authentic, being myself, and whenever I think I had feel something – everybody have failure, right? So, I learned more. I grew up with more brave and learning. There's lots of learning experience for us. And also, I really appreciate what I am today. It's because, yes, there's some kind of success stories, and of course, there's lots of learning experience for me to learn, to grow. We're sharing the vulnerability. And then, the people were sharing their empathy. And then, the colleague were thinking, "Hmm, the boss also made a mistake, you see? So, I was not going to doubt myself." Right? So, starting having that, sometimes we also share what we feel, whether we didn't do a good job, to build the confidence for our colleagues, for those new generations, for those new managers to really encourage them, inspire them to take the risks, stepping out of their comfort zone. Doesn't matter if we do, if we fail, but we still, we can afford it to pick up and then we restart again.

David: Back to your story now, Melissa. How do you lead and build an inclusive culture amongst your team?

Melissa: It's really a good question. I love it, actually. I think purpose is nowadays also for individuals and for team. I think for leaders, that's very important to me, I think to our team, how we embrace our team together. So purpose, we started with hiring. When we hire the people, we hire the right people, we could have the sharing purpose together. They love the culture of IHG, Six Senses, of our company culture, our company vision, and we found out we have the alignment, what we could do, what we can work together as a team. So that means, starting from hiring and then when we work as a team, we build in trust, encourage open dialogue, and make sure that every team members, regardless of their background or title, knows they are seen, heard, and valued. We celebrate our differences as well. And with that, innovation, wellness and sustainability, and also more than, you know, everything what we immersed together with our guest experience, which really stands out our differentiation with other brands. So, we invite our colleagues, our hosts to be on the same shared purpose, and also, they feel they belong to the team, to the company as well.

David: That's a lovely answer. I think that piece about inclusivity and learning from different cultures is so important. And obviously, I guess, Eunice, from your side, as a leader of our team...

Eunice: (Chuckles) This wasn't scripted.

David: I imagine that's something that you really pay close attention to. And what do you look for when you're hiring?

Eunice: That is such a great question. I think it's really important, like Melissa, to augment your culture. Not add to it, but to augment by shaping it. I think finding individuals who connect to your purpose. So, for example, the Six Senses purpose is really important, and then I'm looking for drive, energy, and all those really positive behaviours that will help shape the team you have or shape the team you're trying to form. One thing Melissa said, which was really interesting, was around inspiration. And we talked to that at the beginning of our podcast. You and I both enjoy nature, going running. Inspiration as a leader is really important. And I've always sought out mentorship, to be inspired, to be a better version of myself. And mentorship almost creates this scaffolding around you as an individual. I would love to find out how you've been shaped by mentors in the past, and how have you really translated the inspiration into action as a leader.

Melissa: Thank you, Eunice. Thank you for sharing. That's a very good question. Yes, for myself, my development is get lots of valuable advice and a learning curve from my mentor. However, I think for myself, I'm also learning from my job, my daily life, and also the people around us. And I'm also doing that for my team members as well. So also, there's lots that we can see, there's a lot of... I think, what I learned

from my previous general managers as well, to also to share with my team what we did, what we learned. Sometimes we're also facing the same challenges, same feel, and how we overcome ourselves, and how we meet in those challenges. So that's also, we build a culture to share with the team, and also align with our purpose, and also share the goal together.

David: Thanks, Melissa. I guess just to build on that inspiration piece. Obviously, in work, you've got colleagues that look to you as a leader, and then, obviously at home as well, in your personal life. I know you said a really interesting piece when we talked previously around balance, and how about being fully present in both work and home is so important. I wondered if you could expand on that for us, and how you manage that.

Melissa: Thank you. That is very close to my heart. Early years, I think I'm working so hard. I want to be a higher level. I want to be a general manager one day. So afterwards, I realised that something is evolving and changing. And also, I learned from the different leaders. We realise that our self-life, our family life, and also, as a senior leader, sometimes we have to empty ourselves. We also need to encourage ourselves, re-energise ourselves. That's how we're showing up in front of our team members. Working hard is not everything. I think working smart, and also to get more time management, prioritise ourselves, and especially joining IHG Six Senses, I'm also learning wellbeing and also the wellness. That also shaped myself to reflect to myself what I want to be, what I want to be a different general manager, how I can bring that to our host. IHG Six Senses, mission wellness is more than everything. That is only for our colleagues, for our host. So we do everything for our host first, then we deliver the wellness to our guest. So all the new programmes, we're going to have our team members to experience. So, every week, we have different programme, wellness programme for our team. That's also learning and also initiate to our guest as well. Personally, for myself, I also started to go to gym three times, four times a week.

Eunice: Brilliant.

Melissa: So I continuous for several years. When you go to the gym, when you're running a little bit, you get sweat or you get a little bit, you know, empty yourself and also encourage myself. And also, I think, we also need to recharge ourselves.

Eunice: What struck me when I came to Six Senses in Portugal, and I was fortunate to go to Bali, was wellness was at the heart of everything. And it was really interesting as a general manager, you call your team hosts and are able to experience all the benefits and the wellness programmes at the heart of Six Senses as a brand, which I found extraordinary. So, they could live and breathe the essence

of the property's DNA. Melissa, tell me a little bit about how you bake in that wellness factor to the culture you're trying to build and infuse into your teams.

Melissa: So here, in Six Senses Qing Cheng Mountain, each of the Six Senses property, we also, of course, we embrace the local culture. Same here, it's quite very unique. That is a Daoist culture birthplace, in China. So, we combined together with the Daoist wellness, which is a very famous one of our features, and also the very special touching point of the wellness that's Qing Cheng Tai Chi. So you may also learn from our guest reviews from our website. The Qing Cheng Tai Chi is every day, 365 days for our guest and for our host as well. Our host also could join us with the Tai Chi session.

David: Fantastic. Okay, Melissa, I'm excited about this section. We're going to take a quick detour from your career right now and chat a little bit more about the hotel itself, the design, the hidden gems and what makes Six Senses Qing Cheng Mountain truly one of a kind.

Eunice: Fantastic. I can't wait to hear what you're going to share.

David: Our first question is, if you were giving a guest a behind the scenes tour, where would you take them?

Melissa: Well, I think the last place I was going to take them – that's why I always encourage the people who ever want to visit the Six Senses Qing Cheng Mountain minimum four and above nights. Of course, first of all, I think we have the arrival ritual for our guest. There's a big door, then starting going inside with the entrance of the front office, guests can feel the flavour of the resort with the flower in the resort. That's also incorporated with the local culture and also architecture of the Dujiangyan, Chengdu Dujiangyan, which is around this place, and also the water irrigation and the Qing Cheng Mountain. There's lots of elements over there. And of course, the morning ritual in front of our breakfast, which is an F2F restaurant, it's a from the farm to fork. So that we have our 37th generation of the Qing Cheng Tai Chi master. Every morning, she starts with a Tai Chi exercise to lighten up the people. Everybody, they start with the energy to learn and to see, to enjoy how's a beautiful morning, to lighten up the guests. So Tai Chi in the farm, in front of the breakfast, that always make our guests to stop by, take photos, and also, even though they have no idea about Tai Chi, they're also looking to learn that. That's also my favourite part. Every morning, also get inspired. And of course, the spa. I think the guests were not going to avoid the spa at any Six Senses property. So of course, the combination with the wellness programme and also personalise each of the guests, they may have different needs. There's lots of places I couldn't talk more. The farm is also phenomenal. There's more than 10,000 square metres in our resort. We have three different farms. So, majority of the breakfast came from

our farm. So that's also conveyed with Six Senses philosophy as well, and also, the wellness elements to our guests.

Eunice: Oh, thank you, Melissa. That's wonderful.

David: I was going to ask you one final question, Melissa, just in this section. You've walked us through some incredible areas of the hotel. I just want to know which part of the hotel is your favourite? And also, is there a certain area within the hotel that you find yourself frequently visiting throughout your day-to-day?

Melissa: The place I always go is, one, is the view, the sunset and sunrise viewpoint. That area also gives me sometimes encouragement, inspiring, sometimes if I don't want to talk too much, that's the place I want to go over there. That's a view on the top of our Sala Thai restaurant. The place, I can see the sunrise. That's also not only a beautiful place, but also, for myself, is a little bit of peace, and also for myself, a moment of reflection for me. Sometimes I like to think and reflect something I could do differently, something I could do better, something how I can shape myself.

David: That's lovely. That reflection piece is, at such a fast pace day-to-day that we all live, it's so hard to find that time for reflection. It sounds like you have an incredible place to do so. Where do you go to reflect? Do you make time for it?

Eunice: Oh, that's an interesting question. I think you have to be very intentional around creating space to reflect. Otherwise, today's fast paced world and digital access just takes over. I was just thinking as Melissa was talking, and you're an incredible storytelling, Melissa, I could listen to you all day. Your voice is so beautiful, and the stories you share are very evocative. So, we've talked a lot about all sorts of topics. I'd love to dive deeper in around impact and talk about a little bit of how impact is created, both in front of the scene in terms of guest experience, but also behind the property also. And I just wonder if there's any guest experience or any moment that you have created for your guests, which are true luxury experiences, whether it's one singular moment or a collective of moments that you're particularly proud of, that you and your team curate.

Melissa: For us, it's more about, I think, collective efforts together with the team together. We create the composting in the farm. That is also incorporated with Six Senses, and also sustainability initiative. So, we're learning that for our guests to understand not only to do in the composting activity programming, but also, it's for them to understand about the circulation. So we have the chicken and also the duck in the resort. They deliver the eggs. So, guests are going to pick up the eggs in the farm. And also, the kids were going to bring the eggs, hold on with themselves, bring to the chef to cook for them. "This is my egg, don't touch, don't touch. I just pick this up." And also, learning from that during the winter time is also super cold,

similar like in London, I think, but the two kids also just watching in the farm waiting for the eggs delivery for more than one to two hours, and the grandparents can wait. But they say it's too cold. However, they never know about that. The curiosity over there also, for us, we love to know, we like to see our guests, our family to have such kind of curiosity. They have the memories about that. And we encourage them to be a Six Senses farmer. They come to the rice field to plant the rice, and then they come back in September to do the harvest. So, that's really for us, it's amazing memory. And also, that's whenever we learn from our guests and what they put on the social media, what they recognised, and also showing that there are different experience in our property, we feel that that is really what we truly want to be there.

Eunice: Gosh, circular sustainability and teaching our youngsters farm to fork mentality is a real experience you just can't give. You have to feel it. And I guess, for families who live in the city, in greater China or beyond, suddenly being on a farm, understanding where their food comes from, children love that. And I love the fact they're waiting for the eggs to be delivered so they can go and have their eggs cooked. What do you think, David? Just what an experience.

David: Such a unique experience. We've literally just started planting peas in the garden at our home with the boys and...

Eunice: Oh.

David: Yeah, they love that whole learning experience. So, it sounds like an incredible and unique experience that you guys offer over there. Looking ahead, what excites you about where luxury travel is headed in the future, Melissa? What kind of initiatives, whether it be tech, sustainability, are you anticipating that we're going to encounter in the next 5 to 10 years?

Melissa: Yeah, I think the sustainability and wellness actually is a combination. So, all the kids' programmes, kids' activities, at Six Senses Qing Cheng Mountain, there's zero plastic, the concept about from the farm to fork. Yes, lots of property, they do get all the vegetables from the farm, but how far it is, is the question. But for us, this year, we get that, we put our dishes with zero kilometres dishes, which is zero kilometres is really just from our resort. And lots of hotels, city hotels, they don't have a farm. They also have the from the farm to fork concept restaurant, but we're doing differently. So, that's really showing the guests we're so serious about how we promote, and also giving the guests to have the taste of the local food, the seasonal food, the most we think that's the most healthy food for our guests. And also, at the same time, we also help the planet to reduce, you know, this transportation, everything, right? You just eat the most fresh dishes.

David: I love that. Thank you so much, Melissa. I'm conscious of time. So, we're going to move on to the next section, CheckIn, CheckOut. I'll list some classic GM

tasks and if it's your thing, please say "check in." If it's something that you'd perhaps delegate, please say "check out." Are you ready?

Melissa: Ready. Yeah.

Eunice: Let's go.

David: I think I know the answer to this one. Early morning lobby walkthroughs.

Melissa: Check in.

Eunice: (Chuckles) Being CC'd on every email.

Melissa: Check out.

David: Weekly revenue meetings.

Melissa: Check in.

Eunice: The right answer.

David: They're important, yeah.

Eunice: They're important. Team briefings with coffee in hand.

Melissa: Check-in.

David: Public speaking events.

Melissa: Check out.

Eunice: (Chuckles) Team building workshops.

Melissa: Check in.

David: Attending design meetings for renovations.

Melissa: Check in.

David: Curating the hotel scent or music playlist.

Melissa: Check in.

Eunice: (Chuckles) Gorgeous. And last-minute owner visits. Surprise!

Melissa: Check in.

Eunice: Yeah! (Laughs) Is the right answer.

David: Cool. So, Melissa, thank you so much for joining us today. Your final question comes from our last guest on Leading a New Era, Diego Padula, GM at Kimpton Grand Roatan Resort and Spa in Honduras, and it comes from a personal angle of working in Asia one day himself. From your perspective, how important is

prior experience in Asia when it comes to becoming a GM in the region? Do you think it's a must-have, or is it something that can be built over time?

Melissa: Working in Asia, I think majority of—not majority, I think all my career experience is focused in Asia, majority in China. In Asia, I worked in Malaysia for about two years. I also got three-month scholarship in United States. That's also a little bit different experiences, understand different people. I think not because of the language, it's more about learning about people, how they think, their mindset. That also gives me more perspective and learning, and also insight of different region. But in China, I had more experience, of course, working together with different nationality of the ex-comp member, general managers, and also our colleagues. I don't think everything is necessary. I think more important, as a person, how we learn and grow from different people and different location. And, I think, our journey is more about how we are learning, how we keep going, how we keep our growing mindset. I think the curiosity of ourself, we always keep learning, keep growing and just stepped out. Don't need to worry too much. No matter if I work in Asia, I work in China, work in United States or work in London, I think more is about the spirit of the people. More about the mindset, more about how the trends of the leaders we learn from ourself, life, and also the people around us. And our guests as well. Because our guests are not only from China, all over the world, I think that's also giving us a platform opportunity as we can learn from different nationality, different region of them to understanding them. And throughout the observation and learning, we also shift ourself as an individual, and also as an organisation, how we shift our decisions and we shift our strategies towards to align with the global development.

David: Thank you so much, Melissa. I think that's it for us today. It's been incredible speaking to you. Thank you so much for your time and participating in this. We've been so excited to have you on. It's been incredible learning about authenticity, leadership, intention, taking risks. It's been lovely speaking to you.

Eunice: Thank you, Melissa. It's been an absolute privilege. I've really enjoyed hearing about how you build purposeful communities and culture for such an exquisite brand at Six Senses.

Melissa: Really appreciate your questions. Really great questions. It also helped me to look into where and how we can do different and do better.

David: That's it for this episode of Leading a New Era. If you're a hospitality leader looking for purpose and perspective, this series is for you. Make sure you follow, subscribe and catch up on past episodes. Next time, we'll be talking to Nick Yarnell, GM at Six Senses London. You won't want to miss it. See you then.