

Here at AWS_S1E2_Sandra

Speakers: Constance Souchet, Sandra Teh, & Geetha Annamalai

[Music Playing]

Sandra: So, I always believe that our customers, our partners, the communities that we serve here at AWS are just like our teams. They're equally diverse. They're so multicultural. So, it's just very important for us to be able to keep listening to, as well as understanding our customers, partners, and the communities on ground.

Constance: Hi, I'm Constance. AWS is truly global. My teammates are all over the world. When one of us is getting up, the other is going to bed.

It's a melting pot of cultural identities, ethnicities, and traditions. Maybe we're not always in the office together, but with video chat and via messaging, it feels like we are, and personally I find it has really opened up my world.

So, in our second episode, I want to dive into this global AWS idea a bit more, focusing on how we work together and adapt to each other's sensibilities.

But I also want to focus on how we think about our individual needs in a global company. How do we balance commitment to the company with commitment to ourselves? Welcome to Here at AWS.

Sandra: Sure. I've been working for a long time, since 1997, to be precise.

Constance: This is Sandra.

Sandra: So, I'm currently the Chief Culture Evangelist of AWS in APJC & EMEA region. And I call myself the chief storyteller, in other words because culture building as well as brand building is what I do best here.

And I get very involved in employee engagement that way I will be able to seek out the best stories from within the company and in turn, be able to tell these stories on behalf of all other builders here as well.

Constance: Before we dive further into Sandra's story, let's explore her journey to AWS. I'm always fascinated to hear how my colleagues got to where they are now.

Sandra: I've always been in branding, marketing and communications and advertising fields. However, I've been very lucky and very fortunate to have worked in very different business verticals.

So, I've worked in education and banking and then through to fashion retail, advertising career. And then I was with an IoT systems and services provider.

And finally, and happily here at AWS. So, I'll say right before joining AWS, I was in fact with a customer of AWS. So, this is one of the strategic global accounts of AWS and I was the head of marketing there.

So, when I had the opportunity to work on enterprise consumer IoT solutions, as well as a lot of Smart City's project, which I'm personally very excited about.

So, it became quite natural that I wanted to join the tech company as well as being able to really connect the dots and learn more along the way as well.

Constance: Here's a bit of behind-the-scenes info. Sandra built the team that Geetha and I currently work on. So, you've guessed it. That makes her my manager.

Building this team required an ability to understand and appreciate many people from vastly different backgrounds.

So, what is it like working in a team like this? Can you dive a little bit deeper on how important it is to have a diverse team?

Sandra: So, I'm very happy and very proud to say that I have a truly multi-generational as well as multicultural team. We all work in different locations from London, from Dubai, from Israel, Japan, China, Singapore, and so much more, apart from having very close colleagues in the U.S. collaborating very closely with us as well.

So, what's really amazing is that all of us are able to bring different opinions to the table. And because geographically we're well spread out, and this actually allows us to hear not just thoughts and sentiments in a few locations, but literally everywhere.

So, I always believe that our customers, our partners, the communities that we serve here at AWS are just like our teams. They're equally diverse, they're so multicultural. So, it's just very important for us to be able to keep listening to as well as understanding our customers, partners, and the communities on ground.

This really allows all of us to stay humble and stay close to our local as well as regional colleagues too, and help be that voice to ensure that the stories that we tell are truly diverse. They're authentic, they're relevant to so many people around the world.

Collectively, we speak, write, as well as read more than 10 languages. So, it's very important for me personally as a human, as well as a manager, to be able to know what's exactly happening in Israel right now, what's happening in Middle East this week, what's happening in Japan, what's happening in London and Singapore, et cetera.

And what's really exciting is that I'm very happy to see that what was detailed in my early day plans here at AWS actually all came true.

So, I really feel that we make things possible here at AWS, you have an idea, you detail it with lots of data, customer feedback, anecdotes, and then you focus on making it happen.

Constance: Sandra has this great ability to tap into and connect with the people around her, wherever they are from. So, how did she develop this talent and why is it important to her work?

Sandra: I must say that I feel very blessed to be born and raised in very multicultural Singapore. So, in Singapore, our education system is pretty much similar to that of the UK.

And apart from English being the common language for all of education as well as business, it's totally common for anyone growing up here in Singapore to be growing up in a bilingual or a multilingual environment.

So, growing up I have friends from all races, or religions or beliefs, and I always felt the natural need as well as a desire and interest to want to understand my friends more. I wanted to connect with them in the languages that they most prefer to be spoken to.

So, just like how I am able to toggle easily from UK English to American English, when I write, I can also switch and toggle my brain and my speech patterns to think and also speak in Japanese towards the Japanese audience and the Mandarin language to the Mandarin audience and so on.

So, it helps me, I guess understand as well as appreciate the diversity of Asia and also the beauty of all languages and the cultural nuances that comes along with it as well.

So, apart from Singapore, I've spent good time living as well as working in Japan, in China, in Hong Kong, and also the Netherlands. So, I know the Benelux region pretty well, apart from, of course, my work travels that brought me to many other countries around the world.

So, I always say that I'm a hundred percent Singaporean, but at the same time, I will regard myself as a global citizen and there's no end to my learning journey here. It keeps me very energised as the cultural glue bridging everyone around me as well as at work.

Constance: That sounds so true and so inspiring.

We've spoken a lot about what Sandra gives to AWS, but I also want to know how it allows her to prosper personally. She's incredibly hardworking, coordinating work going on all over the world.

But she's also a mother. So, I want to take a moment to look at how she balances these two lives, how she give in the space to be a mother while working in a senior role.

Sandra: I guess I have a high sense of ownership towards my family as well as towards my own team. So, I try to always make sure that I check my calendars and I plan my time in advance.

I block my time appropriately to ensure that when my teenagers are back home, I can sit down with them and have meals with them properly without any phones nearby, without my laptops being powered on because they're growing up so fast. And when I'm with them, I want to make sure that I'm in a hundred percent mommy's mode.

And same with my team. When I'm with them, I want to make sure that the dishes have been already washed, dinner is already over, or it's right before dinner time so that I could actually be in a hundred percent work and listening mode when I'm with my team members. And that way I feel that I can own each of the different roles as well as the relationships that I manage.

A really interesting episode that happened last year was when my husband was suddenly stung by bees. So, I recall that I had to drop everything in that split second. I was actually in one of the leadership calls, but I had to drop everything in order to drive him to the hospital.

So, that was a fun and scary episode, but at the same time, I was able to cope with it because my managers knew, my teams totally knew as well as they gave me the space that I needed.

And it's not just during times that we have an emergency or sudden urgent state of things that you needed to address, but whenever I need the time, like quiet moments to write a doc that I'm busy working on, because I write a lot of papers, I actually do allow myself to switch on the do not disturb mode and tell my team that when I turn it on, they know that I have a priority task of that moment.

Constance: It's also great to hear that Sandra's love of technology has transferred to her children.

Sandra: Let me first share a fun fact. So, I live in a small apartment here in Singapore, and what happens is that I have my Alexa hooked up to all sorts of smart devices within the home environment.

And so, my kids, my family actually wakes up to smart lights. So, I guess my kids have actually seen how mommy was actually wiring up the house to be a smart home, even though it's a small home. And I guess that they have definitely inherited some of this love for technology.

So, even for AWS specifically and for cloud computing courses that we've offered so far, like AWS Builders Online, AWSome Days, AWS DeepRacer League. They've actually done a lot of this together with me, particularly during the study from home and work from home days during COVID-19. There was a good reason that all of us were in lockdown condition.

However, I think it actually did bring my kids even closer to what mommy is actually doing day-to-day in a technology company.

So, it was really fun when my younger daughter, for example, back then, she was still 9 to 10-years-old and she was actually busy writing new apps and so on, using Amazon Honeycode even though she doesn't know programming.

And she was actively competing in AWS DeepRacer League even though she was actually underage. So, that's really very fun.

And one quotable quote from my younger daughter is that she said that "Behind the AWS console, in fact, no one is judging us by our gender, our hobbies or age or

experience.” So, no one knows that she's a little girl that is actually playing with technology.

Constance: Of course, this enthusiasm for getting people involved in technology extends beyond her own family. Sandra is also part of a program called AWS DeepRacer League, an event helping developers build confidence with machine learning.

Contestants of all skill levels, use reinforcement learning to program a self-driving car. These cars are then pitted against each other on a track. However, historically, AWS DeepRacers participants have predominantly been men. Sandra saw room for change.

Sandra: And I've been quite invested in AWS DeepRacer ever since the program came about back in 2019.

I recall that when I was in Las Vegas, and we were watching the AWS DeepRacer Global Championship live. I had several goosebumps moments because it was a woman from Japan who actually won the championship, and yet somehow, I was disturbed by the fact that she was the only woman on the leaderboard of like the top 30.

So, on the way back, flying from Vegas back to Singapore, I started toying around with how could we make it even more inclusive and even safer for women from all walks of life, from all diverse backgrounds to lean in and compete, as well as learn more about machine learning as well as reinforcement learning through the likes of AWS DeepRacer, because I truly believe in the technology as well as the programmatic approach from behind.

And if my kids could do it and I myself could do it without writing a single line of code, I do believe that more women are able to benefit from it.

So, in 2020, despite the harsh conditions brought about by the pandemic, I was just very happy to work with fellow public sector colleagues from AWS to be able to launch the AWS DeepRacer Women's League. And that was a world's first.

And we managed to finally roll this out across multiple countries, all across Asia Pacific region. And we have seen the program benefiting more than a thousand women altogether.

And what's really important is that through other Skills Guild as well as programs like the AWS re/Start program, AWS She Builds program, we in fact have many different type of community outreach programs here at AWS, that are encouraging lots of young women as well as professionals to pursue their interests in technology. Nevermind what kind of background currently you come from.

So, I guess all of us are the same, we're all equally different, but at the same time, we all have an innate thirst wanting to learn and we are all very curious about technology and that's exactly how I would really want to encourage everyone to embrace technology. And you just never know what you can invent next.

Constance: How important is it to Sandra that we continue to encourage women into the tech industry?

Sandra: I have so many good friends here at AWS and we have different builders, for example women leaders who are managing the space and satellite business here in APJC. And it's just very important for me to continuously being able to pull along other role models here at AWS, other fellow women to be able to share such stories.

Constance: It's clear to me that Sandra is passionate about AWS, what we do and our culture. She's always thinking about our mission, her colleagues, and how we can develop a uniquely creative workplace. And Sandra thinks it's really important that we always come back to culture.

Sandra: I think it's all about walking the talk and not just talking the talk. So, it's really important for all of us to be able to live and breathe the AWS culture and encouraging others to do the same.

So, I am responsible for many culture relevant programs here at AWS, including the AWS Culture Training program. And we have the AWS Alumni program here in Asia Pacific region.

So, I'm very involved and I want to make sure that I'm constantly listening to the feedback of my colleagues past and present, and we are able to do what's possible to make sure that we are creating an inclusive workplace and inclusive programs as well to uplift and invent together with the rest of the community.

Constance: The real key to Sandra's success as an employee is not labelling herself.

Sandra: In life and in work, I always feel that it's actually a two-way door. And by two-way door we refer to that as a mechanism here at AWS allowing ourselves to know that some decisions you can push the door open, walk out of the door, invent, and try and experiment.

And if things fail, you can always come back through the door again and say that plan A didn't work out, I could still roll out plan B or plan C.

So, this applies to not just our work behaviours here at AWS and I think that is very much relevant in life as well. So, that's exactly why I have, I would say been quite an explorer in life and I have actually kept learning throughout my 26 year of my career life. And I always do not want to limit myself.

So, if I were to look at early stages of my career life the word cloud computing, for example, didn't even exist back in 1997. And yet right now I'm pretty much living in the world of cloud computing as well as enabling not just my own colleagues here at AWS, but communities that I work closely with to stay inventive and innovative.

[Music Playing]

Constance: This is really inspiring to me. Whatever you do, there doesn't need to be a hard and fast plan for a career at AWS. What's important is having the desire to innovate.

You've got to be excited by what's next and ready to work with talented people all over the world.

Sandra: Don't limit yourself and at the same time, you just never know what you can contribute to in the future.

Constance: Thanks so much for Sandra for a fascinating discussion and thanks to you for listening. It's always so fun to chat with new people from this AWS family.

Geetha: Exactly. No one here is just an email address. Everyone is building something, and they all have a story to tell.

Constance: That's it for now. So, don't forget to subscribe.

Geetha: And hey, if working up here in the cloud sounds like fun, why not check out our website in the bio? You may just be the person we're looking for.

Constance: We'll see you next time on Here at AWS.