



THE HEART OF LEADERSHIP

BRIDGING PROFIT AND PURPOSE WITH RACHEL HO

By Eric Collins

Rachel Ho is Senior Marketing and Communications Manager with Save the Children, Hong Kong. After 25 years of experience steering marketing, communications and brand strategy for global corporations, Rachel made a career change into the NGO sector. City Business Magazine sat down with Rachel to understand why she made the career change and how she sees the future working out.

In an era increasingly defined by the cold efficiency of algorithms and the relentless pursuit of quarterly dividends, the human element of leadership often feels like an endangered species. Yet, sitting across from Rachel Ho, a leader driving

marketing and communications at Save the Children, Hong Kong, one is reminded that the most potent force for change isn't found in a line of code, but in the depths of human empathy.

With a career spanning decades in the high-octane corporate technology before moving to the NGO sector, Rachel Ho embodies a unique synthesis: the evidence-based approach of an MBA graduate combined with the compassionate insight of a family therapist.

This is the story of a journey from the "dollar sign" to the "human sign," a look at the critical work of protecting Hong Kong's most vulnerable, and a manifesto for a new kind of

leadership—one where kindness is not a weakness, but the ultimate competitive advantage.

Rachel Ho's Personal Journey

Rachel Ho's story begins in an ordinary Hong Kong family, grounded in values that prioritised character over credentials. "My parents never placed pressure on us to achieve academically or professionally," she recalls. "They just wanted us to be decent, good human beings—kind to the people around us and, above all, happy". In a city often associated with hyper-competitive social ladders, this upbringing provided a foundation of civic responsibility and emotional groundedness.

After graduating from the Polytechnic University in language and communication, Rachel spent some decades in the private sector, primarily within the technology industry. She was drawn to the sector's innovation and its breakneck speed. Her roles in marketing and communications took her across the globe—from Asia Pacific to Europe and the United States—where she developed a fascination with the diverse cultures and values of the people she met.

However, her analytical training—honed by an MBA from City University of Hong Kong—was soon met with a growing curiosity about the "why" behind human behaviour. While her business training taught her to find root causes and fix problems to maximise market share, a course in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) opened a door to the "intra-psyche" world of emotions and relational dynamics.

"I had never really thought about how a family can influence a person—the beliefs, the dynamics... it actually cultivates how a person looks and behaves," Rachel says. This realisation led her to pursue a master's in social sciences in Marriage and Family Therapy at the University of Hong Kong. She began to see that the psychological principles governing families were equally applicable to teams and organisations.

The true turning point came during a period of social unrest. Despite a successful career at multinational companies—complete with stock options and international prestige—Rachel felt a calling to contribute more directly to her home city. "I was thinking, maybe it's a time to put aside the profit, the dollar sign, and also think about people," she says. This introspection led her to Save the

Children, where she could leverage her global perspective and private-sector know-how to help those in the most desperate circumstances—from conflict zones like Gaza to the vulnerable corners of Hong Kong.

Save the Children Hong Kong & Mission

Working with Save the Children for over five years, Rachel Ho has witnessed the profound challenges facing children both globally and locally. In the context of Hong Kong, the issues are often more hidden but no less urgent. Through rigorous needs analysis, the organisation identified child safety and mental health as the most alarming areas of concern.



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Rachel vividly remembers her first press release for the organisation, which concerned a five-year-old girl who passed away after being physically abused by her biological parents. “I was puzzled and sad,” Rachel reflects. “Why in such a developed cosmopolitan... people are educated, welfare system is very good, and yet there’s a kid who could pass away in this way?” This tragedy fuelled her commitment to advocacy and public education.

Save the Children was instrumental in lobbying for the mandatory reporting of child abuse, which came into force in early 2026. Beyond legislation, the organisation focuses on “positive parenting” and “parenting without violence”. They offer a Child Safeguarding Service that helps child-facing organisations improve their knowledge, skills, and internal systems, to actively protect the children they engage with. They also run parallel groups: one teaching parents better communication, and another teaching children their rights and how to ask for help.

The mental health crisis in Hong Kong, exacerbated by COVID-19 and social unrest, is another primary focus. Rachel views this through a systemic lens. She notes that Hong Kong’s culture of extreme productivity creates an environment where people must deliver in very short turn-around times. This pressure trickles down to toddlers, whose parents—driven by a desire for their children to survive and thrive—crowd their schedules with playgroups.

“Parents try to stop and think,” she says. “Don’t pass anxiety down from generation to generation”. She challenges the prevailing definition of “A” in the Asian context. For many, “A” stands only for Achievement—exam



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results and musical grades. Rachel advocates for “A” to also stand for Affection. She urges parents to see their children as individual human beings rather than tools to finish their own “unfinished business”.

The Intersection of Business & Empathy

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Rachel Ho’s philosophy is her refusal to accept that business success and social impact are mutually exclusive. Drawing on her MBA background, she critiques the traditional “minimise the cost, maximise the profit” mantra often taught in business schools.

She shares the example of Tony’s Choccolony, a brand she discovered while travelling in the UK. While many brands focus solely on the bottom line, Tony’s invests in stopping child labour and the exploitation of cocoa farmers. Despite the increased costs associated with fair wages, the company has seen significant growth.

“Leaders need to stop the short-termism,” Rachel says. “They can mutually achieve. They are not mutually exclusive if leaders can do it wisely”. This human-centric approach to business—the “S” in ESG—is where she believes the future of sustainable enterprise lies.

In her view, a kind leader is not a weak leader. Rather, kindness is a form of charisma that differentiates a human leader from AI. While AI can generate a business proposal, it lacks the “human touch” required to articulate a mission that staff and customers truly align with. This connection creates better retention and resilience, ultimately helping the company grow.

Future Challenges & Next-Gen Advice

As we look toward the future, the rise of Generative AI looms large. Rachel Ho acknowledges that many traditional roles—even in law, accountancy, and health—face disruption. However, she remains adamant that qualities AI cannot replicate—empathy, affection, and kindness—will become the new currency of the workforce.

“The content itself is something that AI can generate... but the thinking process is something that, together with the emotion, the empathy... is something that AI doesn’t have,” she says. She also warns of the “digital divide,” where underprivileged families lack the resources to access these tools.



Don’t pass anxiety down from generation to generation... let ‘A’ stand not just for Achievement, but also for Affection.

Rachel also highlights the dangers of AI when left ungoverned, citing news reports where AI facilitated tragedies rather than preventing them. She calls for leaders and protocols to ensure that technology serves humanity.

For students and young professionals entering this complex landscape, Rachel offers several core pieces of advice:

Volunteer Early: Before entering the workforce, try to be a volunteer or intern in both commercial companies and NGOs to understand different cultures.

See the Society: Engage in volunteer work to understand how different segments of society live beyond academics and music lessons.

Innovate for Impact: Use this understanding to think of business models or products that create social impact while remaining profitable.

Focus on EQ: Develop your emotional intelligence, resilience, and creativity, as these are harder for technology to replace.

The Person in Charge

Rachel Ho’s final thoughts serve as a powerful call to action. “Leaders shouldn’t underestimate the power they have,” she says. “They can make huge changes to society”.

In a world where technology is a revolutionary force, we cannot let the technology lead the reformation of our world alone. We must put the human

aspect back into the centre of the equation. Human beings must remain the “PIC”—the Person in Charge. Without being kind and having empathy, we risk letting the revolution be led by robots rather than people.

As Rachel Ho continues her work with Save the Children, she stands testament to the fact that when we lead with the heart, we don’t just build better businesses—we shape a better world.