

# Quality Conversations:

The pandemic's impact on leadership discussions in APJ



# Leaders turn to data amid pandemic changes



Today's leaders are ever more reliant on data to make decisions and bind their organizations together to this new era of work.

**JY Pook, Senior Vice President and General Manager, Asia Pacific & Japan, Tableau**



JY Pook, Senior Vice President and General Manager, Asia Pacific & Japan, Tableau

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses and those that lead them have changed dramatically.

They've not just had to help their organizations survive, but they've had to carefully examine their own role in increasingly fragmented work environments.

Quality Conversations looks at an important slice of those role changes – critical conversations. Conversation and its ability to lead to effective business outcomes is often the litmus test for an effective leader. The ability to motivate, inspire and cajole others is as a skill critical as strategic planning or financial nous.

This report considers how the COVID-19 pandemic has driven workplace change and its embrace by business across the region; including the impact on collaboration and decision making; the democratization of the data; and the growing clout of digital executives, amongst others.

Amid all of these disparate changes, one thing is clear: today's leaders are ever more reliant on greater data literacy across their business to make decisions and bind their organizations together to this new era of work.

Thank you to the thousands of senior executives who provided the insights that informed this report and this critical, quality conversation.





**Professor Donnel Briley**  
**PhD BS Stan. MBA Calif.**  
**The University of Sydney Business School**

# Foreword

Much has been written about how the pandemic has changed workplaces – particularly in the rise of remote working.

What has been arguably less explored is its impact on leadership, particularly on meetings and business conversations – which are the lifelines between leaders, employees and partners.

How leaders across the region have communicated this change can be as important as the decisions themselves.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly disrupted the leader's ability to connect. New circumstances, new channels and new audiences have effectively redefined the leadership template.

What is perhaps more interesting, is how those leaders have responded. Within this research we see diversity in adaptability – particularly across the three surveyed markets Australia, Japan and Singapore.

Australia's egalitarian business approach saw business leaders better weather change such as 'opening up' discussions to more staff members, whilst more hierarchical business cultures struggled.

Singaporean leaders seemed to meet the workplace changes with real zeal.

(continues on following page)





**Professor Donnel Briley**  
PhD BS Stan. MBA Calif.  
The University of Sydney Business School

## Foreword (cont)

Japan was a two-speed adaptation. Older business leaders felt more disconnected from their employees, whilst younger executives were more likely to extol the benefit of remote working.

The Quality Conversations research suggests that changes to workplaces had many business leaders re-evaluating not just conversations, but the beginning of new business cultures.

History is dotted with points in time when business culture has been reshaped in the APJ region – the rise of industrialized Japan, opening of markets in China, Singapore's transformation into a regional business hub. In decades to come we may view the changes associated with COVID-19 pandemic as just as profound.

Perhaps understandably in such a period of flux, leaders may look for places of certainty to anchor their discussions with employees. It's not surprising that many in this report have underscored the importance of data in their discussions.

Data is concrete. Data can be shared and used by many. Data is almost its own universal language.

The findings from this report provide an opportunity for leaders to examine their own leadership style and how they can use discussions, and data, to lead their organizations into the future.

# Work shift shapes business conversations

What has been most surprising is not just that business conversations have changed – this is true for most facets of work – but that these changes have been largely embraced by business leaders across the region.

More than 36% respondents across APJ said the COVID-19 pandemic working conditions had actually improved the quality of business conversations, compared to just 25% that had experienced negative impact.

These benefits were most keenly felt in the areas of prioritizing meetings of high value, including more participants and generally making them more efficient.



The COVID-19 pandemic is revealing the true value of discussions. It's forcing us to be more precise and to the point ... if it's not adding value then it's not important to spend time on it.

Manufacturing executive

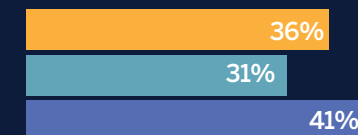


## Top three biggest barriers to effective conversations in APJ

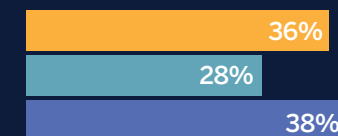
### 1. Meetings don't lead to an outcome or solution



### 2. No agenda or meeting structure



### 3. Lack of data about the topic



■ Australia ■ Japan ■ Singapore

# Lack of face time impedes leaders

Of all the challenges presented by COVID-19 pandemic workplace changes, one of the most keenly felt was the lack of face time and informal workplace discussion.

More than half of APJ respondents said a lack of 'watercooler' conversations (59%) and non-verbal communication (58%) had negatively impacted business conversations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

# 58%

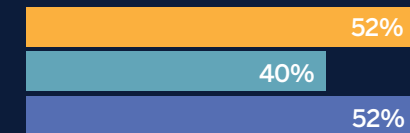
of business leaders said a lack of non-verbal communication made it harder to read others during discussion

## Biggest conversation barriers caused by pandemic

### 1. Less informal discussions



### 3. Unsuitable infrastructure



### 2. Less non-verbal communication



### 4. Information gaps



■ Australia ■ Japan ■ Singapore

# Leaders want open minds and ears in conversation

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many business leaders to reconsider what they and their employees need to 'bring to the table' when making crucial decisions.

There was a real consistency in their responses.

Across the region the three most important skills called out by business leaders were 'ability to see the big picture', 'open mindedness' and 'ability to listen'.

This need for shared understanding and discovery was a recurring theme during the research – particularly in the areas of data democratization and participant preparation.

# 64%

In Japan, the importance of employees being able to see the big picture was key. Almost two-thirds (64%) of Japanese executives said this was the most important conversation skill for employees.

"Data when brought together with context and conversation, translates into powerful insights that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. It paves the way for teams to iterate on each others' ideas."

Christian Hauville, Regional eCommerce Director, Levi Strauss & Co

## What are the most important skills in driving quality conversations?

### 1. Open-mindedness



### 2. Ability to see the big picture



### 3. Knowledge of the sector



### 4. Ability to listen



### 5. Ability to understand insights from data



■ Australia ■ Japan ■ Singapore

# Boardroom, not bored room

As executives have adjusted their own approach to discussion, their expectations for employees have also risen.

There is a need for everyone around the virtual table to bring greater focus, preparation and understanding.

As Gerard Lopez, Chief Financial Officer, Brand Influence told researchers “we are much more deliberate in our discussions today than we were in the past. We need to walk away from every conversation feeling confident in what was discussed and decided. And data helps us do just that.”

# 36%

More than a third of executives said a lack of discussion structure (36%) had plagued discussions in the past, whilst 35% also said lack of information about the topic had waylaid conversations.

# 41%

This need was strongest in Singapore, where 41% said a lack of structure was impeding decision making and discourse – compared to a global average of just 32%.

**“Data gives me a reason to connect with my customers. I am able to identify challenges across my customer’s business and switch our focus to problem-solving mode. Data helps us reveal the ‘why’ behind a scenario and enables customers to lead with action.”**

**Joel Rappolt, CEO, RocketBoots**





# Creating purpose in leadership discussions

One of the most persistent responses from executives in APJ was the need for creating more purpose from their leadership discussions.

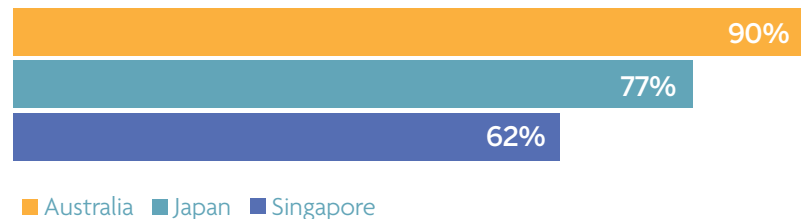
They consistently cited how data can provide the structure, information and accessibility that is critical for this new way of working.

Many executives stated the importance of injecting insight into their company's core beliefs and behaviors.

**"In the field of healthcare, there is simply no room for error. Data ties business decisions to analytics insights. And this means greater transparency and accountability in my field of work."**

Steve Xie, Director, Singapore Medical Group.

How important is it that everyone involved in a conversation has access to the same data? (very important or moderately important)



Data is front and center in many of our conversations. Instilling a digital mindset in all our employees allows us to dig deeper to understand cause and effect, and peel back the layers on the true winners and losers – even though the overall business might look stable on the surface.

Tjen Chew Lee, CFO, Phoon Huat



# Crossing the data divide

One of the advantages of remote and hybrid working models has been the ability to bring more – and more disparate views around the table.

Respondents throughout APJ highlighted the advantages of bringing more people into discussions but also stressed that participants needed access to insight and tools to make for a more productive meeting.

# 77%

of APJ business leaders said it was important that all parties had access to the same data.



This was particularly pronounced in countries such as Australia, where almost two thirds of all leaders (64%) said equitable access to data was critical to decision-making, compared to a global average of just 46%.

# “

The ability to curate, explore and share data with my teams across the region creates a forum for effective discussion. Having said that, drawing insights from contextual data is as important as having access to data.

**Chua Zi Yong, Chief Operating Officer, Carro**

# ”

“

Data provided a complete paradigm shift from where we were with hard-copy financial reports going out towards the end of the month, which people had no time to read. It's really that old adage of 'I didn't know the questions I was going to ask until I got here' to 'I know I want to ask these questions'.

**Greg Lambert, Business Intelligence Manager, Origin Energy**

”

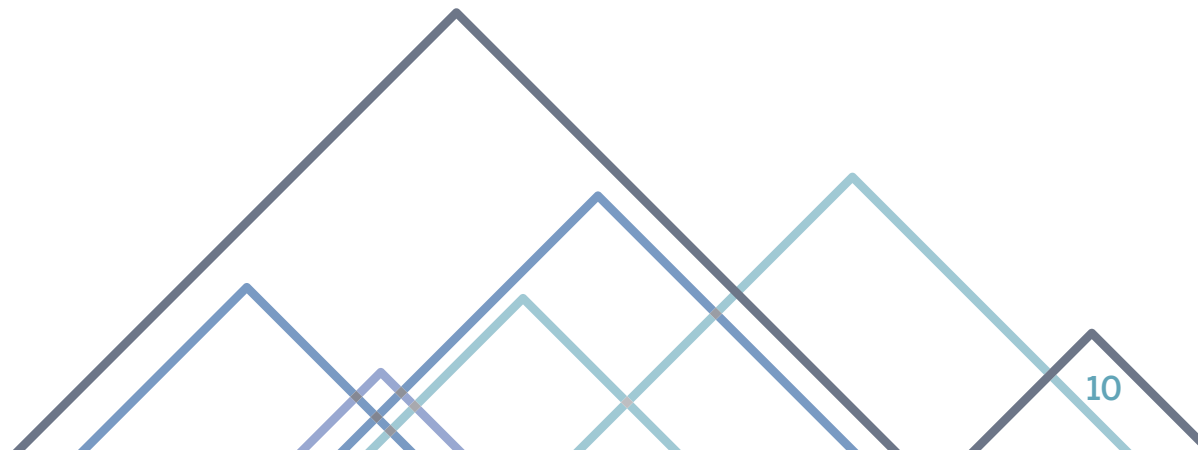
## Driving decision making

Many business leaders identified the relationship between access to data, people empowerment, and better decision making.

Across APJ, 93% of leaders said it was important their business had access to information and tools to drive decision making. Only 4% considering it unimportant, with 3% undecided. However, 52% of leaders cited a lack of data literacy as the biggest barrier to a data-led conversation.

Jonathan Hassett, Executive Director in the Work Dynamics unit of global property consultancy company JLL, told researchers “Data-driven insights are the keys to unlocking new efficiencies and improving outcomes. These are the building blocks of a quality conversation. I have given my team the challenge of completely exiting static reporting. If we can't present our work through automated dashboards, we are not delivering on our commitment to ensure our accounts are highly digitally-enabled.”

Countries such as Singapore placed considerable emphasis on using data to make decisions. In this market 98% of business leaders said their departments needed data to make effective decisions.



# Lead from the top with data culture agenda

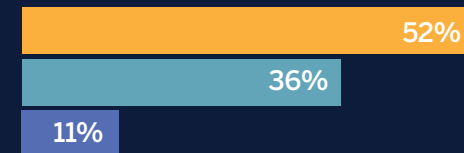
There was a strong correlation between leadership use of data and deployment amongst businesses.

Markets and audiences where leaders themselves weren't relying on insight tended to see poor data adoption across the business. While leaders understand the importance of data, the frequency and scale of data use remains a challenge.

Only 16% of APJ leaders use data analytics platforms across the business daily, and alarmingly, only 19% of leaders have everybody in their organization using data to inform decision making.

## Analytics use in discussion and decision making across APJ

### 1. Leader use of analytics



### 2. Business use of analytics



■ Australia ■ Japan ■ Singapore

# Creating a data culture

**When looking to create a data culture, business leaders need to consider three important areas.**

**Commitment:** is about purposeful improvement to conversations – not just hoping they evolve into something better. You see the importance of this from those businesses that have deliberately upped their use of data since the pandemic, and have seen an improvement of conversations.

**Mindset:** Employees take their cues from their leaders. If they see you taking a more structured approach to decision making, using tools to inform decisions, then they'll likely follow suit. There was a huge correlation between a leader's use of analytics tools to support decision making and likelihood of their businesses doing the same.

**Skills:** are really important. A lot of employees were thrown in the deep end when Covid-19 changes happened. Businesses might expect them to be more open-minded or better informed, but what programs does your business have in place to support that?



The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore more conversations around risk and issue resolution than ever before. The increase in online conversations has underscored the importance of using data to inform conversations – a scenario that was less likely to happen in a physical meeting room.

**Paul Bayley, Associate Director, Demand Intelligence at Optus**





# A blueprint for navigating future discussion

The weight of having to steer their businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic was considerable for many respondents.

Whilst undeniably proud of what their businesses had been able to achieve, there was now a need for a more structured approach to building a data culture.

The research has shown that realizing the full value of your data means empowering

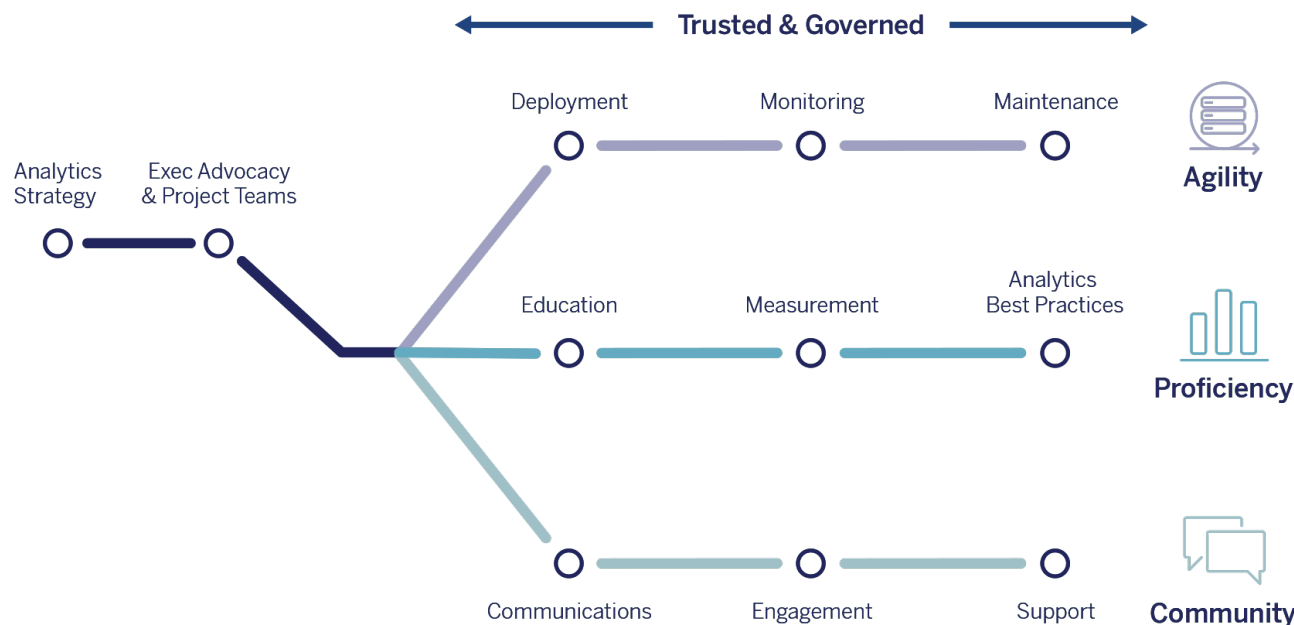
everyone to make better decisions with it, and this cannot be done simply by choosing the right technology.

Tableau works with business leaders across the APJ region to develop a step-by-step approach to modernizing their approach to insight and data culture.

The Tableau Blueprint has been crafted to deliver better organizational agility, efficiency

and proficiency to organizations. Critically for business leaders, the Tableau Blueprint is able to link broader strategic initiatives and outcomes to analytics – including how they can motivate organizations and drive change.

For more information about the Tableau Blueprint visit [here](#)



# Post-pandemic: what's next for quality conversations

The road ahead remains a challenging one for many business leaders in the APJ region. Their businesses will continue to be tested, as will their own leadership abilities.

More than anything, Quality Conversations shows that every leader's approach will be different. There is an almost infinite variety of changing public health situations, business challenges and employee needs to deal with, each scenario often very different to the last.

At least now this is not altogether new ground. Every leader and every business had to forge their own path over the COVID-19 pandemic, and the way they have approached conversations has been very much part of that journey.

However, the need for better informed, structured discussion and rigorous analysis is near universal.

In such uncertain times it's impossible to predict how an organization, let alone an entire country or planet, might need to adapt in the coming year. What will remain true is that data and quality conversation will continue to be the bedrock upon which successful leadership is built.

## Research methodology

From 6-17 August 2021, YouGov surveyed 1,977 C-suite business leaders throughout Asia including Australia (222 respondents), Japan (209) and Singapore (224), as well as countries such as Brazil (224), France (232), Germany (220), Spain (214), Sweden (215) and the United Kingdom (217).

