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Creative PARTNERSHIP

MANDARIN ORIENTAL KUALA LUMPUR'S VISIONARY GENERAL MANAGER FRANK STOCEK SOUGHT OUT TIRIAN INTERNATIONAL CONSULTANCY CEO ANDREW GRANT TO ESTABLISH A UNIQUE PARTNERSHIP THAT MELDS THE WORLDS OF HOSPITALITY AND CORPORATE CREATIVITY FACILITATION. **ANANDHI GOPINATH** FINDS OUT MORE ABOUT THIS EXCLUSIVE COLLABORATION, WHICH WILL MAKE TIRIAN'S INIMITABLE CONTENT AND PRESENTATION STYLE AVAILABLE TO MALAYSIAN COMPANIES AMID THE STUNNING SETTING OF KL'S PREMIER URBAN RESORT.

For the past year, Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur's general manager Frank Stoczek and Tirian International Consultancy CEO Andrew Grant have been in talks to launch an idea so clever, that it is a wonder it has never been done before. Utilising the best of the hotel's award-winning conference spaces and Grant's shape-shifting content in creativity and innovation, this exclusive new collaboration will provide corporate clients with a package deal they could not possibly refuse — the chance to participate in one of Grant's innovation labs in Kuala Lumpur, held on the beautiful grounds of Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur.

Nearly everyone is doing corporate training these days, and for good reason. The world is changing faster than ever before and many companies are struggling to keep up with the pace. In the race to stay afloat, creativity and innovation are often compromised, even though it is these very qualities that will help any company move forward.

This is where Tirian steps in. Grant and his team have developed customised programmes that are creative at their very core and are designed to alter the behaviour and mindset of corporate executives. This is not a team-building retreat at a beach resort that everyone talks about for a week and then forgets about within a month — Grant's objective is to create permanent change.

I meet Stoczek and Grant for a sumptuous lunch at the Mandarin Grill to go over the details of the new partnership — a venue that subtly puts forward a major plus point of the hotel, namely its location next to the country's most recognisable icon, the Petronas Twin Towers. Our meal is exquisite as well — oh, my kingdom for another serving of that burrata — highlighting yet another advantage. Although I did not experience this personally on the day we met, Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur's other strong points include above-class conference facilities, a wide range of accommodation options and a suite of recreational amenities, including an award-winning spa.

Tirian is able to match the hotel's unsurpassed services and facilities with its content as Grant and his wife Gaia, both directors of the company, are internationally recognised experts in creative thinking and innovation. Grant is a TEDx speaker on the topic and Gaia is a researcher in strategy, innovation and entrepreneurship at the University of Sydney. Essentially, being creative is Tirian's business and a collaboration like this is right up its alley.

Creative content

Sydney-born Grant has always been in the field of education and when his child was born, the family moved to Indonesia at Gaia's suggestion. She had been raised in Asia and wanted the family to be exposed to the colour and culture of a region so different from what she considered the more sterile environment of Australia.

It was in the Indonesian capital that Tirian was born 21 years ago. Corporations wanting something different from the traditional format of team-building sessions would approach Grant and his wife for help.

"We would be told that 'we don't want boring seminars in the morning and we don't want childish activities in the afternoon. Can you give us something better?' And these guys had a point. When we looked at your typical conference, it was a lot of boring powerpoint slides in the morning, playing games in the afternoon and, sadly, everyone getting drunk at night. That is not making good use of a corporate executive's time, so we looked at how we could change things, how we could make the mornings more interesting and the afternoons more intelligent.

"And this is how we created a whole suite of programmes based on experiential learning, and they all had the same message — an important business outcome but delivered in a way that was going to be memorable. We felt we had a really good intersection between the two and it just took off globally because people hadn't seen anything like it before," Grant says.

He had already started looking at creativity and innovation in the workplace as a serious consideration about a decade ago, well

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before it had become the catchphrase it is today. Indeed, all manner of businesses have now embraced the idea that creative thinking is a necessary tool to stay relevant, efficient and interesting. But Grant was already talking about this 10 years ago. This insight came from the clients themselves, who were looking for alternative ways to unravel existing issues.

"Clients were trying to solve difficult problems and they were not sure how to do it, and we realised you could use creativity to solve problems if you got people thinking outside the way they normally do things. So, in the true nature of our company, we were not going to create courses on how to be creative, but programmes that were themselves creative. We ask participants to think of other ways to solve problems and not do it the way they have always done," Grant says.

Without personal experience of one of Tirian's sessions, it is hard to describe, but Grant's approach appears to be more all-encompassing and considers the perspectives of the people having to attend these things, often at the expense of family time or hours they could be working.

"The greatest mistake that any presenter makes is to assume everyone in the audience is as passionate about a given topic as they are. That's not always the case," he laughs. "To ask people to give up their time, to ask the finance guy to foot out thousands of bucks for something — think about it. You have all these important and powerful people in the room and you do not want to be wasting their time and money."

"Our focus is to engage people, make it memorable and ensure that there is an outcome. And it should not matter if you



are on a beach in Bali or a meeting room at the Mandarin Oriental — the goal is essentially the same."

At its core, Tirian's sessions encourage participants to create lasting change, beginning with their mindset. It is based on the theory that we are all creative in some way but our life's experiences may have caused us to block that particular part of our brain. His sessions are meant to unearth that buried creativity and anchored in experiential learning processes that are engaging and fun.

"It is the whole experience that people will remember. If you want to create actual change and new behaviours, well, put everyone in a room for three hours

Tirian's facilitated workshops make use of themes that may seem gimmicky, but are in fact carefully thought through to engender permanent shifts in behaviours and mindsets

and all that information is going in one ear and out the other. If you want an expert to talk, you can get that from YouTube for free and you don't even need to leave your bedroom for that," Grant

says dryly. "We are trying to create an experience that inspires change at the core, so we engineer everything from scratch — from presentation slides to the facilitator to the venue, as well as all the experiences outside the actual teaching time itself, which includes the food and the rooms participants stay in. Then we add the theme, which could be a crime scene or an Antarctic theme. That has an impact that people remember for years because it is not a gimmick, there is a reason behind it."

Grant's first book, *Who Killed Creativity?*, tackles this. The reader is asked to crack an unsolved crime. Creative thinking is critical for future fulfilment and survival, and yet it is now declining at an alarming rate. With this original whodunit/CSI-style approach, you have the opportunity to match your knowledge against that of the latest brain researchers, psychologists and sociologists. As you are taken on a humorous and often startling journey

through the murky world of murder and mayhem, interrogating the potential creativity killers and identifying their preferred weapons and haunts, you will discover why creativity is dying an untimely death.

Tirian's 7 Rescue Strategies will then provide you with practical innovative solutions to solve any modern mystery, from personal issues to team challenges and organisational imperatives — even saving our civilisation.

Grant's second book titled *The Innovation Race* was published four years later, recognising how creativity then breeds innovative behaviours.

"If you are going to get technical about it, innovation is the idea that comes out of creative thinking. The innovation is the end result. Our argument is that you need creative thinking to trigger innovative thinking. The book is also about creating a culture of innovation and, therefore, it is a bit more academic — why some companies are more creative than others, for example, and looking at why some companies collapsed when others succeeded."

Venue of choice

Stocek, whose posting at the Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur is the seventh in his 35 years in the hospitality industry, has always liked the idea of working directly with staff to keep them motivated. "Way back, when I went to one of my earliest team-building events, I saw the impact that it could have and I was inspired by how the interest in innovation and creativity can take your team to a new level. I love to throw ideas to my staff and see how they can convert them into action and when they are motivated, my work is also made much easier," he says.

The next step was to pair Stocek's passion for experiential learning with his business at hand — he had the hardware, so to speak, but the content was lacking.

"My idea was to create an innovation hub and have the best creativity training in the country. That was the goal. I found nothing here, so I did a global search. I went on Google and I spoke at length to people I knew. I found some companies and I just wasn't convinced, but when I spoke to Andrew, it all clicked."

Based on their shared passion, the two men became fast friends and in April, Grant held a session with Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur's staff for their annual managers' retreat.

"One of the activities Andrew set the team was to design a toaster, but a Mandarin Oriental toaster. The challenge was how to assign all the values of the hotel to this common kitchen appliance," Stocek says. "What the team came up with was pretty amazing, and the team was changed — they kept talking about it and they remember it so well! They physically made the toaster, which was the fun part, and then they had to pitch it, which was sort of like that television show *Shark Tank*."

"I have to say, the attention Andrew and his team paid to every detail was amazing. Every element of the scripted experience was laid out from the time we got there, and the whole thing flowed flawlessly."

Stocek says that, based on his research, there has not been a partnership quite like this anywhere in the world and he is quite confident of its success.

"I have done a lot of research and I haven't found anything quite like what we are doing with Tirian. There are innovation labs all over the place — tech companies have them, some banks have them — but I have never seen a hotel with one quite like this.

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