

THOUGHTPIECE 5

寓教于乐
Learning Happily!

The Chinese Challenge

Major Global businesses are exploiting the opportunities for manufacturing and sourcing in China. As they rapidly expand their operations, they need local staff, fluent in English and conversant with an international business culture. There is huge competition for talent in the Asian marketplace and rapid growth creates a need to develop the leadership pipeline and to retain quality managers. **Andy Neal** outlines the realities of working within this environment of phenomenal economic growth. He examines the cultural divide involved in the implementation of international leadership and management skills training, indicating how to overcome barriers such as the Chinese resistance to consultative approaches to development.



Andy Neal as captured by a street artist in Wuhan

Learning Style

There is a big thirst for knowledge and an ambition to move upwards quickly but, "in western terms", they are not ready. What are the drivers for this? The one-child policy has created a generation that are known as "little emperors", they were spoiled by their parents and they expect this treatment to continue at work. Expectations exceed ability and there are few realistic benchmarks for them. There is great pressure for companies to elevate local people as soon as possible so that their organisations are more balanced at the senior level. Couple this with a traditional view that status and position are important and you find a population eager to advance up the hierarchy.

Tradition also drives expectations of the style of a learning experience. We followed in the wake of a Cambridge university professor who had been employed to teach Leadership, by delivering 3 days of lectures. This fitted perfectly with the expectation that the best learning comes from an "authority figure" and that knowledge is valued. We challenged this by suggesting that the most important thing to measure was people's ability to take new ideas and change their own behaviour at work leading to increased performance and better results. This was agreed at an intellectual level but it has taken the best part of a year to get real buy in. We have had to start from scratch with many of the things we take for granted.

Traditional Chinese education involves a didactic style; the teacher is the fount of all knowledge. I admitted to one group that I didn't know the answer to one of their questions about a complicated business process. I offered to go and fetch my colleague who was the subject matter expert. He arrived and answered their query. Imagine my surprise 36 hours later when the end of course evaluation said that the "teacher was no good and should be removed because he did not know the subject"!

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It's not good to ask questions, because to admit that you do not know something in front of your peers means "loss of face". In our early programmes we would ask for open feedback to be met with a resounding silence. Later little huddles would convene and then discussions in Chinese would take place with the results fed back to us via an intermediary.

Our aim was to develop a truly experiential style, that involves skills building not information giving, and which relies on the sharing of and discussion about real-life experiences in the work-place, but how could we do this in a learning environment that seemed to discourage debate, exploration and challenge? Our style involves close contact with our participants, facilitating and coaching on a personal level. As a result we often work in small groups at a 1:6 ratio. Our Chinese clients have often questioned this because their frame of reference involves one expert standing up in front of a large group and imparting knowledge. It is really difficult to explain the benefits of this kind of contact until they have experienced them and they are unlikely to experience them if you can't convince them of the added value. Chinese Catch-22. We have probably spent more time in discussion and exchanging communications on this topic than on the details of the content of our programmes.

The rapid company growth and the consequent need for experience and talented managers drives a need to "fast forward" the talent development process, trying to do it with an old style approach doesn't address the ingrained behaviours and attitudes that exist or allow people to learn to think for themselves, to question the status quo and to make their own decisions. What has always been in our favour is that we are working with clients who want to embrace the western way of doing things; if we can prove that it happens this side of the world and show where it has been successful then we get the green light.

However once we started to work in small groups, the rules seemed to change. People would ask questions, discussion opened up, the quieter ones became bolder, people actually enjoyed feedback and revelled in the concept of feedforward which is about making suggestions for the future. The secret seems to be in building relationships of trust. We have recently started working with the second intake for one programme and we have been involved from the start of the process this time. This has been so much easier because we have been able set the scene and build the expectations. The result? Highest post-event evaluation scores of the whole project so far. So if you plan to use controversial or challenging methodology make sure that you have the time and commitment to be involved right from the start. In this case we were involved in all design discussions and in the development of pre-course reading and context setting materials.

Working Traditions and Culture

I remember reading an article more than 20 years ago that was heralding what it called the New Imperialism, I was sceptical at the time that organisations could have the influence to change national cultures, but I find myself in the 21st Century experiencing it first hand. It is therefore, really important to understand the Company Culture as well as the local Chinese culture and to understand the interaction between the two. This starts to make sense of things you see happening in the business and enables understanding of how decisions are made.

In China people seem to work very long hours and often *working long* is seen to mean *working hard*. "Put the hours in and you are doing a good job! I must be in before my manager and leave after he/she leaves!" I was confused when I heard

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people talking about having to do overtime (OT). They didn't seem enthusiastic. Back home people would be keen to earn some extra money at time and a half or whatever. It transpired that managers expect OT from their staff, but there is no payment for this.

We walked into the Shanghai office one day, just after our lunch. As we tip-toed through the offices it seemed that all heads were down on folded arms. Had a nasty epidemic of sleeping sickness taken hold? No; it's just the custom to take a short sleep to re-energise for the afternoon. Once aware of this we saw it more and more; in shops; food malls and other offices.

The mobile phone! If you find travelling in a railway carriage in the UK a severe challenge to your patience, don't do business in China! The decision to focus on mobile technology rather than the terrestrial infrastructure means that everyone seems to have one and they seem to take precedence over anything else that is going on. Does it annoy you, at home, when you are checking in to a hotel, or at a shop counter and suddenly the ringing phone becomes more important than you, the real live customer standing in front of them? If you don't want to take second place to technology when running a program in China make sure you set the ground rules early and find a firm but non-draconian way of enforcing them.

I'll talk about food later but we have noticed a significant difference in the drink culture. In Europe we will find ourselves drinking alcohol with meals and then retiring to the bar to consume more, late into the night. In China we may have a beer with our food but after an early dinner people will either retire for some privacy or gather to socialise by going together for a massage, or to play table-tennis or badminton or another very popular pastime is Karaoke.

When did you last run an event in a hotel and could never find the person responsible to help you with the simple things like more flip-chart paper? In China be prepared for an army of crimson-coated staff, in and out of your room, replacing bottled waters, clearing up or just standing in a neat line waiting to do anything for you.

What's in a Name?

One of our big successes, in gaining acceptance and engagement, has been to show a real interest in people by the seemingly simple mechanism of learning their names and using them at every opportunity; but this hasn't been without its interesting moments. Apart from getting familiar with different speech patterns and cadences and a variety of Chinese accents we also soon recognised that the Chinese language does not differentiate between him and her. Sometimes this was easy to unravel:

*"My father lives in Xian, but **she** is coming to Beijing next week"*

Sometimes we were kept guessing on who we would meet:

*"My manager will be in the office later, **he** would like to meet you"*

Sometimes it needed great patience to agree who we were talking about: On a recent programme we had a *Winnie* and a *Vinny*, one was male and one was female!

Most of the people we have been meeting have chosen an English name to use at work, but, when they change companies people will often decide to try a new name. Because they choose the names themselves there can be interesting outcomes. The husband of one of our Chinese colleague's wanted to call himself *Hercules*, but settled for the more prosaic *Humphrey*. (I wonder if he had seen Yes-Minister?) She also recounted the tale of the confusion that was caused when

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someone at work was named *Boss*. I had a team member recently called *Ulysses*, difficult enough for the English to pronounce. We were doing a practical problem solving exercise and the team were getting really frustrated with him. In desperation one of the team yelled at him: "Hurry up **Useless** we are running out of time". The name stuck for the rest of the week!

Our client also shared the story of a young man they knew who had adopted the English name *Honey Bee*. When asked why, he said it was because his girlfriend was called *Flower*. There's devotion for you.

Humour

Everywhere we have worked around the world people seem to like to have fun when learning, and China is no exception once it becomes clear that it's OK to enjoy yourself in the learning environment. Clapping and acknowledgment of individuals seems commonplace and I have found this a great tool to use to create energy and to refocus a large group when things are flagging.

We recently asked some groups to explain some of the human aspects and emotions of experiencing change. We wanted them to prove they had understood the concepts by performing short sketches for the rest of the group. As we watched, I began to think how a European group would have reacted, and realised that I was witnessing a beautifully naïve approach. In the UK they would have been edgy and full of innuendo to make the point, here in China there was embarrassed giggling as relationships were hinted at. It was refreshing as we turned our gaze outwards to recognise that the level of overt sexual reference in advertising on TV and in the streets is minimal.

Food

A normal day will involve an early lunch, be prepared for a big drop in energy levels and focus of attention just before lunch, especially if you run late! And it is quite normal for teams to gather and discuss the day over dinner which is served very soon after the close of the formal day. There are also many differences in consumption from what we are used to in Europe. Expect people who eat lots and never seem to show the signs of over indulgence, during the working day they will graze on fresh fruit, juices and green tea rather than "carb-laden" pastries and snacks and high octane coffee.

The sheer size and scale of the restaurants is hard to accept. Streets are lined with eateries ranging from a hand-made noodle stall to the 3 floor eating palace catering for 400 people on each level. Be wary of our western habit of clearing the plate, the Chinese are indulgent hosts and will always offer to refill it. Although the HSBC advert is based in truth we have never been embarrassed by an ever increasing volume of food as we clear our dishes, but we are often offered the first choice or the tastiest morsels, which in their eyes will be the fattiest piece, or some obscure part of the anatomy valued for medicinal purposes. Chicken's feet and heads, turtle, duck's neck, duck web, fish heads, sea-slug, frogs, snake, Szechuan peppers that anaesthetise your mouth, and smelly tofu that few of our Chinese hosts will eat. It's been a culinary expedition on the wild-side.....

Driving

There is one key piece of advice. Don't. Insurance is non-existent and discipline is haphazard. Imagine ahead of you a 2 lane road with hard shoulders. As you move to overtake the truck in front you realise that another car is coming past you and a bus is going up the hard shoulder and "undertaking" the truck, meanwhile with

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lights on main beam, 2 buses are racing side by side towards you overtaking a motor-cycle who in turn has veered out to avoid a cyclist, at this point your taxi driver decides that the hard shoulder on the "wrong-side" of the road is the clearest path!! I have rarely seen drivers get angry with each other. The horn is used abundantly and the lights are on full beam all the time, but "road rage" seems to be a western phenomenon. It all seems to glide along most of the time.

Overcoming the Cultural Barriers

We thought we entered China with open-eyes but we would have done things differently if we had known how far apart our basic concepts were. Here is a list of quick tips for training in China, getting good results and enjoying it!

- Make personal contact with people and make learning fun.
- Harness their creativity and natural love of story-telling.
- Prove that knowledge isn't skill and what matters is how to do things differently back at work.
- For skill development use large group sessions of maximum 20 minutes, and lots of small group work. (Remember they are using a second language and tire easily).
- Deliver information in small chunks and practice it. Review the process and repeat the practice.
- Pull lots of examples from their business; work with real live company issues where you can.
- Capitalise on their energy and enthusiasm to learn, by interspersing your material with energetic linked activity.
- Ban mobile phones and laptops in the classroom.
- Be patient
- Eat socially and try everything that is put in front of you; it's a culinary expedition on the wild-side.....

And enjoy the cultural experience; things are changing so quickly it won't be like this for long. 20 years ago I visited a fishing village near Hong Kong called Shenzhen, today it is a burgeoning high-rise city of over 6 million people.

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BY

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