

A QUESTION of LEADERSHIP

ELIZABETH WELDON

Weldon, the H. Smith Richardson Jr. Visiting Fellow at CCL in 2004, is a professor in the School of Business at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. She holds a Ph.D. degree from The Ohio State University.

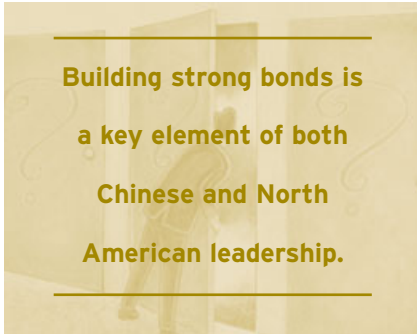
Western companies continue to invest in China, with many companies integrating their Chinese operations into their global strategies. These organizations, along with Chinese companies—whether private or state-owned—all need more-effective leaders.

The manager of a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in China recently approached me hoping to find a competency model designed specifically for China to guide leadership development in his company. A competency model defines the skills, characteristics, and behavior of an effective leader.

Inspired by this and by the debate about the differences between Western and Chinese leadership, I did some preliminary research using a North American model of leadership developed by James Kouzes and Barry Posner, coauthors of the best-selling book *The Leadership Challenge* (now in its third edition; Jossey-Bass, 2002). From their descriptions of exemplary leadership, I generated a list of leadership behaviors and asked 103 midlevel and senior Chinese managers to indicate how important each behavior is to effective leadership in their companies.

The results of this survey allow three preliminary conclusions about

Chinese leadership and how it differs from leadership in North America. First, building strong bonds based on collaboration, teamwork, dignity, and trust is a key element of both Chinese and North American leadership. Second, like North American leaders, leaders in China believe that one of their main roles is to improve the company; North American leaders, however, place more value on experimentation and taking risks. Finally, although Chinese leaders believe it is



Building strong bonds is
a key element of both
Chinese and North
American leadership.

important to help others succeed, they also believe that this is of secondary importance. This finding departs from Kouzes and Posner's model and from the beliefs of many North American business leaders, who say that today's leaders must be coaches, facilitators, and helpmates to enable others to succeed.

In another survey I looked at attitudes toward leadership development in Chinese firms. I pursued this issue with a questionnaire to 172 senior executives and top functional managers working in SOEs, foreign-invested enterprises, and private Chinese firms.

Overall, 51 percent strongly agreed that developing people was one of their company's top three objectives. However, only 15 percent felt strongly that the managers in their company knew how to do this efficiently and effectively.

This illuminates three important points. First, although managers believe that developing the people they lead is important, most of them don't know how to do it. Second, all managers must learn how to develop their people. And third, once managers have the skills needed to develop their people, they should be held accountable for accomplishing this task.

In a third short survey I found that senior Chinese managers would like to participate in the same types of developmental experiences used in the West, such as 360-degree feedback and coaching. These Chinese managers also want to be challenged and believe they can learn from challenge.

This last point was borne out by another survey I did of young, high-potential Chinese managers. Overall, the results showed that managers who are allowed to take on new responsibilities and tackle new tasks in their daily work are more satisfied with their opportunities to develop than are those who are not given such responsibilities and tasks.

It would appear therefore that Western practices such as CCL's approach to development (assessment, challenge, and support) are good models for China. Working with local experts should help us tailor the models to the Chinese context.

Are Western leadership development approaches appropriate in China, or might a Chinese approach be more effective?

MARIA CHOW

Chow is custom solutions director, Asia Pacific, for CCL in Singapore. She holds an M.B.A. degree from Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

Traditionally, Chinese leadership development was an apprenticeship system—the apprentice would follow the master, learning all the aspects of the business. Starting with the most menial tasks, he would gradually build up responsibility. The learning was insightful and practical but it took time. The Chinese value learning by experience over any other learning style, and they appreciate people who have “been there and done that,” so the mentoring system fits well in China.

The Chinese also value self-reflection. A number of ancient Chinese proverbs relate to setting aside time for self-reflection and have a bearing on leadership practices today. For example: “You need to settle domestic affairs before you can rule the country then conquer the world.”

When I first came across the assessment-challenge-support (ACS) model, I was struck by how well the assessment part—with its emphasis on finding out about ourselves, our skills, our strengths, our development needs, and what others think of us—would fit in the Chinese context.

Confucian teaching, though, emphasizes hierarchy, filial piety, and respect, and this can make it difficult for subordinates to give what seems like negative feedback and, likewise, for superiors to receive such feed-

back. However, there are ways to address this issue. One is to prepare the target group. In the program I am currently working on, we brief both participants and human resource managers. The HR managers then help us to explain the purpose of the feedback to the raters, including preparing a standard letter to raters to enclose with their surveys. It is important to emphasize that the feedback is for development rather than performance



and that the results are totally confidential. Participants and raters find it reassuring that the assessment reports are not given to HR or management and that the reports are compiled by a neutral third party.

In my experience there are differences between Chinese and Western countries in how leadership competencies are valued, but they are differences of degree. One aspect of leadership that is very highly regarded in China is *guanxi*, or “good connections.” It’s not just what you know; it’s who you know. Business acumen, intelligence, and knowledge are also valued, as is the willingness to work and to do whatever it takes to get

ahead. There are also noticeable differences in attitudes about which practices constitute effective leadership. Punishment, for example, is regarded in China as an effective motivational tool for leaders, whereas in the West it tends to be frowned upon. This is the kind of thing that CCL hopes to learn more about through research.

Another leadership issue in China is the generation gap. Top local leaders tend to be in their late forties or fifties, with the next layer in their twenties or early thirties. Those in between were growing up during the Cultural Revolution (1966 through 1976) and missed out on ten years of education.

Young leaders tend not to pay as much attention as their elders to traditional values, such as concern for face, at least in the workplace. They judge their leaders on their perceived merits, not on their age or position. They are also impatient. If they don’t get what they want quickly, they move on, and because demand exceeds supply, they can always find another job. Management retention is therefore a big issue for companies. Leadership development may play a part there too, as research shows that managers who feel they are being developed are more satisfied with their jobs. In these respects I feel that Western leadership development processes have a lot to offer Chinese firms. I also think that as processes to fit the Chinese model are researched and adapted, the resulting learnings will contribute to leadership development globally.

Copyright of Leadership in Action is the property of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. / Business and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.