

A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats

Developing management talent in China

David Learmond

The interview was not going well. The candidate was clearly uncomfortable in spite of all my attempts to put her at ease and allow her to tell me why she would be a good fit in our company. My open-ended questions were met with one word answers. I had been long enough in China not to equate English fluency with ability to do the job but this interview was proving particularly difficult. Her English was not much better than my primitive Mandarin and we were conducting the whole thing through an interpreter. We were already 20 minutes into the interview and I did not know this candidate at all.

What I could not understand is how this timid, uncommunicative individual could be a sales director in a major multinational with responsibility for over RMB30m turnover and 40 staff. What's more with barely 18 months experience at this level, she was already on a salary package of over US\$100k plus a fully expensed company car. The psychometric test she had completed before the interview also indicated that her personality was totally unsuited to sales.

"I see you have an MBA from an Australian University – did you like Australia?" I asked, hopeful that this new tack would lead to an expression of some views. "Never been to Australia" came back the answer in the same staccato voice.

Apparently the MBA was conducted entirely by interpreter as well - in Guangzhou.

I decided to try something else. I handed her my blank interview pad and asked her to draw a picture of herself in her current company. She looked at me, nodded slowly and then concentrated on sketching a picture of a woman with her head in her hands. Getting animated now, she pointed out the obvious – “this pretty girl is not smiling”, and the slightly less obvious: “this girl is waiting”. Waiting for what? She explained she was waiting for someone to rescue her from a job she hated and open up a new career direction. However, she also felt trapped because of the status her job gave her amongst family and friends, and the fact that she earned significantly more than her husband – a medical doctor.

It was a graphic reminder that although there are outstanding opportunities for young Chinese professionals here in the fastest growing tiger economy, this does not guarantee job satisfaction or happiness.

Working in a foreign multinational is a sure-fire way of increasing market value and improving job prospects. It is not uncommon to interview candidates who have spent their first 5 years working for 3 different multinational companies. Collecting Fortune 500 scalps seems almost to be the latest fashion beaten only by the frequency that Chinese managers change their mobile phones. In our company, well known for its marketing expertise, there was no shortage of

graduates applying for even the most basic administrative jobs. Typically, they would then resign 12 or 18 months later to become a brand manager elsewhere and double their salary in the process. Just rubbing shoulders with experienced marketers and inhaling the atmosphere seemed to be enough to guarantee the next job further up the ladder.

The best Chinese managers are world class. However, such is the demand for skills that even inexperienced individuals can land jobs with large budgets, impressive job titles and packages that already significantly outpace most other Asian economies. With boom conditions in many industries, many companies feel they do not have the time to provide real professional skills training for local managers. They prefer to headhunt from those companies who do provide training and to pay the inevitable salary premium.

This rising tide is certainly raising all boats in China. Whilst many observers agree that the lights will dim on the Chinese economy because of the looming energy crisis, it is the rising tide of mediocrity that may well prove a more devastating short circuit to the growth engine in the longer term.

David Learmond lived and worked in Shanghai for 5 years as a senior vice-president in a large FMCG multinational. He is an Executive Fellow with the Conference Board in Europe and programme director for HR Councils in Asia Pacific and Europe. He is also a Principal Industrial Fellow with The University of Cambridge and a partner in an Executive Coaching Business – Better Business Coaching LLP.

Not to be reprinted or reproduced without permission