

COACHING FOR EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

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The increasing number and size of U.S. multinational corporations (MNCs) in China over the last 30 years has spawned a corresponding need to provide “on the ground” support for executive development. Coaching, which until recently had been largely used to support MNC executives in North America and Europe, is increasingly being implemented to effectively address the development needs of their counterparts in China.

China continues to reflect a scope and pace of change unrivalled in the history of the world. These changes, resulting from China’s decision to open itself increasingly to Western economic and cultural forces, are a challenge not only for local Chinese but also for China-based executives of U.S. MNCs.

These executives, General Managers and above, usually come from China, elsewhere in Asia, or the U.S. Many are Chinese “returnees” from abroad. Their geographic responsibilities include parts of China, the entire country, or, increasingly, the Asia/Pacific region. Business responsibilities may include a portion, or entire scope, of the company’s activity.

As in other parts of the world, coaching in China is used to help executives identify and reach more of their potential. Similar too are the key elements of any quality coaching process: rapport building, data gathering, goal setting, coaching, and feedback. The “chemistry” between coach and executive, the executive’s motivation to change, the coach’s experience, and MNC support are also critical to a positive outcome.

In my own experience, executive coaching in China tends, currently, to be focused on individual leadership development (including executive presence and other forms of communication), team alignment, on-boarding and staff retention.

Executives who have been in China awhile often suggest that headquarters doesn't understand what it takes to be successful in "our part of the world". Back at headquarters, seniors and peers can't understand why their high-potential colleague in China can't understand (or worse, won't listen to) their views.

In this situation, coaching has been used to support improvements in the leader's executive presence. Coaching support has led, for example, to action on "active listening" goals. It has also enabled the executive to present his or her China market experience in the form of a conversation with (rather than a lecture to) headquarters' colleagues.

Improving executive presence can be tough, even when the executive has the chance to return to headquarters periodically to interact with colleagues there. Improving other forms of communication can be even tougher. A case in point: interacting effectively on conference calls with peers and senior colleagues from a variety of cultures.

For "returnee" executives in particular, even those who have spent a few years in the U.S., the challenge of communicating effectively with colleagues from non-Confucian cultures can be daunting. How can these execs express a point of view, especially one which challenges the views of colleagues, in a way which allows for effective interaction and a felt need to show and earn respect?

Coaching has been used in this situation to help executives identify ways to strike a balance, ways which have included building relationships with key colleagues in settings other than conference calls. Having built closer relationships, executives then tend to have the confidence to engage in group dialogue more effectively.

Managing the perceptions of Chinese executives about coaching can also be a challenge, as some may not be as comfortable with the approach as their U.S. or Europe-based colleagues. They may perceive it as less a development vehicle than a means of remedying their "faults". Worse, it may be viewed as a harbinger of potential dismissal.

In addition, given the value Confucianism places on hierarchy, Chinese executives may find it difficult to “slot” the coach psychologically.

For example, as a partner in the executive’s development, the coach is clearly not a subordinate. If the coach is seen as a peer, however, he or she may be perceived as insufficiently capable of providing the support the executive feels is needed. If the coach is viewed as a superior, then the executive may expect to be taught, rather than coached.

Given these cultural nuances, successful coaching of Chinese executives may well require a longer rapport-building period than appears to be necessary in the U.S. Coaching relationships can also involve business mentoring as well as coaching.

Even taking cultural differences into account, the ROI from using coaching for executive development in China appears to be strong. Such returns include greater productivity and effectiveness, higher retention potential, and a mitigation of derailment risk.

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