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Training and Development – Insights from China

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China stands as one of the most happening countries across the world, where the multinationals are thronging to invest in various sectors. China, a leader in the manufacturing sector, is yet to sensitize itself with regard to the emerging HR functions to make it a congenial base for the global business houses. Training and development function, not being an exception, leaves a lot to be desired in China. This article gives a brief outline of the training and development practices prevailing in China complemented with a few advocacies.

People's Republic of China is a happening business hub today with more than 3000 Chinese companies having their floodgates opened to the international business houses. China, being a potential Asian country, swiftly jumped on the bandwagon of globalization, with more than \$500 bn of foreign trade in its exchequer. With around 15 companies representing China on the list of Top 500 global companies, the dragon stands as a promising avenue to the domestic as well as the international business houses. However, China is yet to catch up on

the grounds of human resource development, employee training and promoting the practice of learning among the employees. The survey and research findings suggest that the Chinese firms have a lot to be desired on the grounds of employee training. In the light of globalization and liberalization, where China has opened its floodgates to the world for business purposes, it needs to equip its organizations not only with infrastructure and capital but also with the human capital.

Though the domain of human resource development had been gaining momentum of late, with the multinational enterprises showing interest in the Chinese firms, it stands as an imperative on the part of Chinese firms to pay attention to the present state of employee training and catch up with the global pace. There is a pressing urge on the part of the Chinese enterprises to wake up to the call and adopt those emerging and widely adopted, new age training and development practices.

This limitation affecting China is not short or shallow. The employee training and development is a deep-rooted and major shortcoming among the Chinese enterprises, which stands as a serious impediment on the graph of the country's development. The problem is not confined to one organization or a sector. This is a limitation that needs to be addressed from the cultural point of view. It demands a renovation of conventions, traditional practices and cultural perceptions towards learning, training and development.

Training and Education Scenario

Research suggests that the education system of a country and their learning practices have considerable impact on the economic development at the national level and management practices at the organizational level. Until the beginning of 2000, the Chinese education scenario had been lagging behind when compared with the global averages. The inclination towards training as a practice was also not proactively taken up. Though the Deng Xiaoping's celebrated reforms brought in some developments in the educational sector and practices of employee training, they were limited only to a few.

However, towards 2004-05, China's educational industry witnessed a rapid growth since reform and opening-up. The statistics suggest that in higher education sector, in 2005, the number of regular institutions for higher education

and adult higher education institutions reached more than 2200 units in which 1792 units are regular institutions and 481 units are adult higher education institutions. The government has been paying equal importance to education and training of vocational skills, which also witnessed a significant progress. The statistics from Ministry of Education indicate that, in 2005, graduates from non-formal adult education reached 3,733,900; and students of having completed vocational training reached 59,341,900. The statistics further suggest that there were 198,600 institutions offering vocational technology training with more than 5,00,000 teaching staff. However, the sources suggest that the quality and standard of training needs to be further improved.

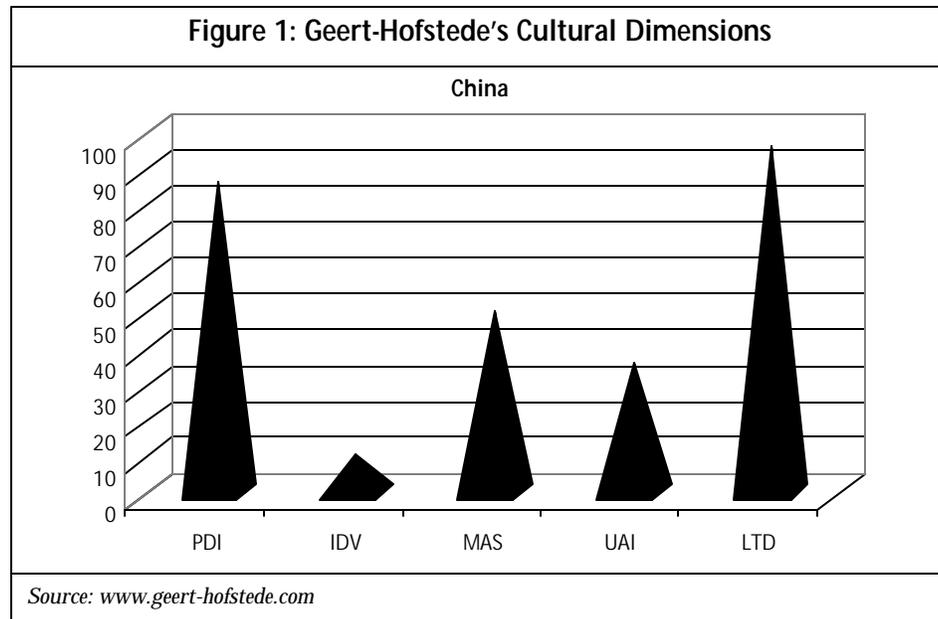
With those windfall developments in the education and the training sector, China is now competent enough to enrich the workforce with effective training and development practices from the education sector's point of view. While that was about government education, private education has been playing an equally vibrant role in China's education and training industry. In 2005, there were more than a lakh private schools (educational institutions) and private training centers, with a near 80-20% contribution.

Despite these rapid developments and constant attention to the sector, China's education and training industry is still constrained by some limitations: firstly, China is yet to improve the standards of education and training as there is a less number of national, authoritative education and training institutions, spread among different levels of training preventing uniformity in the activity. Secondly, teaching standards deserve reform, which require a functional as well as cultural overhaul, with respect to the perception towards training. As per sources, the conventional and redundant operating features and their traditional curricula have limited the benefits to students. This requires an awakening from all corners including the potential and prospective teachers, trainers to improve and enrich the training standards and entrepreneurs and franchisers to encourage the investment in education and training.

The Cultural Implications

Culture, to a large extent, has a significant role to play in the employee perception of training and development. Geert Hofstede's study (Figure 1) about the Chinese

culture says that the Chinese are most prominent in their orientation towards time. Long-term Orientation (LTO) appears as the highest-ranking factor (118). This dimension, as per Hofstede indicates a society's time perspective and an attitude of persevering; that is, overcoming obstacles with time, if not with will and strength.



One more prominent feature in the figure is the Chinese response towards individualism. The abysmal score in individualism suggests that Chinese are more of a collectivistic attitude.

The Chinese managers saw learning as a passive rather than an active process, as it has more to do with individual development. Chinese were rather comfortable with the conventional approaches during training, like taking notes during lectures, despite having been provided with the handouts. They perceived group discussions as a waste of time, and expressed disinterest wherever it required expression of individual opinions, which was by far against their cultural values. Chinese are generally more comfortable with highly structured and spoon-feeding lectures in which they were told how to do things. They have a tendency to focus on the content of the training rather than the process of learning. Thus, surprisingly, a few of the most interactive and experiential teaching methods

generally seem inappropriate to the Chinese managers. Management development in general was never seen as an achievement in one's career development. One more reason, from the culture point of view, behind training being perceived narrowly, is the rock solid and inflexible beliefs and values of the Chinese society, which are highly influenced by the religious preacher Confucius.

In the Chinese culture, the teacher is held in high esteem. Teacher is one of the five elements of high respect built by Confucius and has an important status in society. Confucianism preaches to respect wisdom, knowledge and expertise of teachers, trainers and parents. The knowledge providers are highly respected by the Chinese and they generally avoid challenging those in authority. Thus, the protocol is that the teachers in China are highly respected and are not to be embarrassed or criticized on the grounds of their knowledge and expertise. The teachers/trainers are to be trusted by their students as well as the community at large. These deep-rooted beliefs, values and thus the emerging culture, have an immense effect on the Chinese perception towards training/teaching activity. Because of the high importance given to the trainer, the training sessions mostly remain trainer-centric rather than learner-centric. As a result, whatever the trainer delivers remains final. Hence, training by and large remains a passive, and a one-way communication.

The Chinese perception towards training is also influenced by other values of Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions. We can observe in the figure, that the second highest value is the Power Distance Index (PDI). It means that the various decisions are influenced by the power of the managers. Thus, in the Chinese firms, learning from the experts' opinions and adhering to the advice of previous leaders and managers (who are influential and powerful in the organization) is more important than attempting to develop one's own learning abilities, which, in turn, poses a negative effect on training and development activity. Whereas individual learning is perceived as an opportunity in the western context, it is understood as a risk of failure and individual responsibility for the outcomes, which discourages the executives from volunteering for training activity. This also complements the value of Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) by the Chinese, where they are rated high. These traditional beliefs, cultural values, embedded

into the corporate/workplace practices have resulted in a dismal scenario on the front of training and development supported by various evasive reasons like:

- Training is not thought to be effective.
- Lack of time.
- The temporary nature of most assignments does not warrant budget expenditure for training.
- Lack of knowledge of how to carry out training and what courses should be offered.
- Lack of training experts and expertise.
- No need for training because there is a belief that technical skills are the main success factors on assignments abroad.
- Right people do not need to be trained (Baumgarten, 1995; Tung, 1982; Welch, 1994).

(Source: Training and management development in Chinese multinational enterprises; Jie Shen, Roger Darby).

The Changing Paradigm

The changing paradigm of training and development, as China opens up to the world, is unsettling the Chinese executives as they are hardly exposed to the emerging practices. As the globalization spreads its tentacles, thus resulting in aggrandizing the competition, it is a wake-up call to the Chinese executives and the Chinese enterprises to attune themselves to the needful training and development practices and thus, bring the required changes in the norms and procedures that support the change.

The new economic reforms and the Open Door Policy urge the Chinese enterprises to catch up with the growing competition.

Summing Up

In the pre-reforms era, the Chinese executives were offered very few incentives for improving individual performance. Hence, an employee's efficiency had limited effect on his/her personal rewards. One more limiting factor was the "iron rice

bowl” policy (Warner, 1985), according to which everybody was guaranteed an income. State-owned enterprises had a monopoly in the offering of goods and services in the pre-reforms phase, thereby allowing very limited scope for competition between firms. As it was a monopoly and, more importantly, Government’s activity, quality was never a major issue thus posing no pressure on management or workers to improve the quality of their products or services. These factors at the government, economic and the organizational levels provided every reason to the Chinese enterprises not to treat employee training and development as a priority.

However, as stated above, with the changing times and globalizing world, China also is poised now to change and pay equal attention to the enrichment of human capital.

During mid-1980s, the economic reforms hit the country, which made the firms realize that the training and development of all employees was important and inevitable. The transfer of learning in management knowledge and skills from Western countries was necessary for China’s sustainable, competitive, economic development and growth. As an aftermath of the reforms, the need for management education and training started being felt at all levels of the organization. The Chinese firms were facing an acute dearth of qualified and efficient managers to meet the demands of economic reforms. A study suggests that when the reforms were brought into effect, around two-thirds of the Chinese managers had no professional qualifications beyond high-school level (Courtesy: Michael Warner). There was a dire need for managers who understood the emerging management techniques, which made the Chinese authorities react to the need for the training programme. Thus, the organizations started introducing training programs for the various levels of management of state-owned as well as private enterprises. The training practices in vogue have been influenced and inspired by the Western management education. This resulted in establishment of institutions like National Center for Industrial Science and Technology Management Development. With the realization of the reasons for Chinese lagging behind the western countries in terms of economy and growth, the Chinese have started training as many employees as possible on a warfooting.

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