



Relational Leadership in China

By Paul von Wittgenstein (Da Xiong), P.Ent.
General Manager
CanadAsia Management Development Ltd. – (CAMD)

Introduction

It is only a handful of us who can actually achieve our goals entirely by ourselves. We are naturally interdependent. We need to build solid relationships with other people. As relationships are built, we collect the rewards that come with being part of something that is bigger than we are, where we can achieve more than we can individually. As leaders, we must constantly work on building these good relationships.



As managers, I hope we have come to understand that the most important asset of an organization is its people. What we need to recognize is that one of the reasons people are so important, is because of their capacity to learn. A key factor of organizational learning is the development of its people. The role of the leader includes ensuring that learning is a core element in maintaining the organization's success.

The objectives of learning involve gaining and sharing knowledge, analyzing and solving problems, and creating innovative plans for the future. Much of the organizational learning companies experience is gathered through a process of sharing collective intelligence and creating chances for people to broaden their perspectives and perceptions. This is the quest for new thinking.



Organizational learning is linked to the pursuit of quality and excellence. The goal of quality is to improve both efficiency and effectiveness through teamwork and learning. This situation has changed the way people are organized in companies (less management, leaner staffing, more outsourcing, multi-functional job roles and responsibilities, more flattened organizational structures etc.) and the way employees are expected to work together (in teams for learning and change). Many promising new practices and technologies are hatched through the organizational learning process.

One such promising practice is called relational leadership. Relational leadership involves being aware of and staying in touch with the complex system of inter- and intra-relationships that influence an organization. There are six areas of competency generally associated with relational leadership that include the following:

- 1. leading employees,**
- 2. interpersonal savvy,**
- 3. work team orientation,**
- 4. conflict management,**
- 5. managing change in others, and**
- 6. effectively confronting problem employees.**





Interpersonal savvy is closely related to social intelligence and maturity. A leader with interpersonal savvy "demonstrates skill in building and mending relationships, evidences compassion and sensitivity, is able to put people at ease, and understands and respects cultural, religious, gender, socioeconomic and racial differences".

"Leadership is always dependent on context, but the context is established by the relationships we value" – Wheatley

The following is a summary of some distinctive qualities of Relational Leaders:

- Relational Leaders create commitment through participation in work and problem-solving processes. This contrasts with the Transactional Leader who gains only compliance.
- Teams and teamwork play a key role for the Relational Leader. Belonging to a team is powerful motivation for most people. In addition, teams are better at solving difficult, unclear and non-technical problems.
- Relational Leaders manage politics within his/her own team and also with the outside world. This further promotes team effectiveness.
- Relational Leaders generally work within the existing organization structure and culture. They adopt existing values, goals and processes. They also respect the importance of local customs, culture, and organizational rites and rituals.
- Relational leaders are usually personable. They welcome participation and consultation and will not only tolerate, but in fact, encourage and invite opposing views.

Relational Leadership is:

- **Inclusive** of people and diverse points of view. Being inclusive is difficult because you must step out of your comfort zone in order to expand your organization or vision. *Inclusive means sharing ideas or beliefs rather than selling or telling.*
- **Empowering** of others who are involved. "Thriving on change demands the empowerment of every person in the organization – no ifs, ands, or buts."
- **Purposeful**, means having commitment to a goal or activity. It is also the individual ability to collaborate and find common ground with others to establish a common purpose or vision for a group. "It is no longer what we do, but how we do it, who we affect, and letting both mind and heart guide the way ... every leader is a follower of a higher purpose."
- **Ethical**. Driven by values and standards and leadership that is 'good' or moral in nature. "Social rules that govern and limit our conduct, especially the ultimate rules concerning right and wrong."
- **Process-Oriented**. How the group goes about being a group, remaining a group, and accomplishing the group's purposes.

Tips on how to build a good relationship with the Chinese team you lead:

- *Guard your tongue.* Say less than you think and mean what you say.
- *Make promises sparingly.* Keep them faithfully, consistently.
- *Never let an opportunity pass* to say a kind word.
- *Be interested in your team,* their pursuits, work, families and outside interests.
- *Be careful.* Don't dwell on small problems and disappointments. Focus on the positive.
- *Keep an open mind.* Discuss, but don't argue. Disagree without being disagreeable.
- *Don't dictate, coach instead.* Lead by example and nurture the behaviour you expect.



- *Discourage and don't participate in gossip.* It's destructive.
- *Be cognizant* of their face and feelings. Use empathy and compassion to guide you.

- *Have a thick skin.* Pay no attention to ill-natured remarks about you. Instead, act in ways so that nobody will believe them.
- *Have a good sense of humour and humility.* Be able to laugh at yourself when you should.
- *Do things with them outside of work.* More than the just the annual staff dinner.

Ultimately the relationship that you want to build with your Chinese team is an authentic one.

Authentic Team Relationships Are Typically Characterized By:

- Honesty and trust,
- Commitment
- Patience
- Transparency
- Compassion
- Open communication, and
- Laughter



To find out how much of a Relational Leader you are, ask yourself these questions:

- When was the last time you went to one of your Chinese colleague's home for dinner?
- Do you know the names of your Chinese team's spouses? Children? Hometowns?
- Do you know the age and birthdays of your Chinese teammates?
- Do you know the favourite hobby or pastime of your Chinese teammates?
- When was the last time you shared a joke or funny story with a Chinese teammate?
- When was the last time you had a good laugh with your Chinese teammates?

If you are not happy with some of your answers, it may be time to re-examine your leadership style. From my own personal experience with leading Chinese teams, especially when working with teams of professionals, I find that Relational Leadership is consistently proving the most effective, enjoyable and rewarding.

So, the next time one of your local team wants to tell you about some cultural aspect of China or a local custom of their hometown - even if you already know it, let them tell you anyway. Ask questions, take interest, share your insights and encourage relationship building at every opportunity. When you have a problem to solve, actively seek their opinions and find out the underlying reasons why they might think differently than you. Broaden your sense of openness and laugh generously in front of your team. Let them see that the leader is also human.

Follow this advice and you will be well on your way to developing one of the most loyal, hardworking, quick-learning and effective teams you could ever work with. This will in turn increase your desire to learn more about your people and spend more time with them. Everyone wins.

By the way, any guess where I had my birthday dinner this year? ... At my Ai Yi (maid's) apartment with her family. Where will you be having Spring Festival dinner this year? Why not take up one of the offers from your teammates to eat at their home. You will never forget it ... and neither will they!



Paul von Wittgenstein, General Manager
CanadAsia Management Development Ltd. (CAMD)
Email: info.sh@camdltd.com
Telephone: 86-21-2898-6658 or 86-21-2898-6659

Fax: 86-21-2898-6670