

# The Buck Stops Here

## Why Creating a Culture of Accountability is Difficult in China

By Dr. Laurenz Awater

Key to the success of any business are a workforce that is truly committed to corporate goals and a corporate culture that rewards teamwork, goal-attainment, and accountability. But the latter, as many company executives will attest, is not that easy to establish in Chinese business.

Expatriate managers tend to be full of praise for the Chinese workforce's industriousness, adaptability, and eagerness to learn. In general, Chinese employees readily accept new directives and follow process. So what aspects of working with the local workforce do foreign managers find challenging? There are a few. Too often staff members do not:

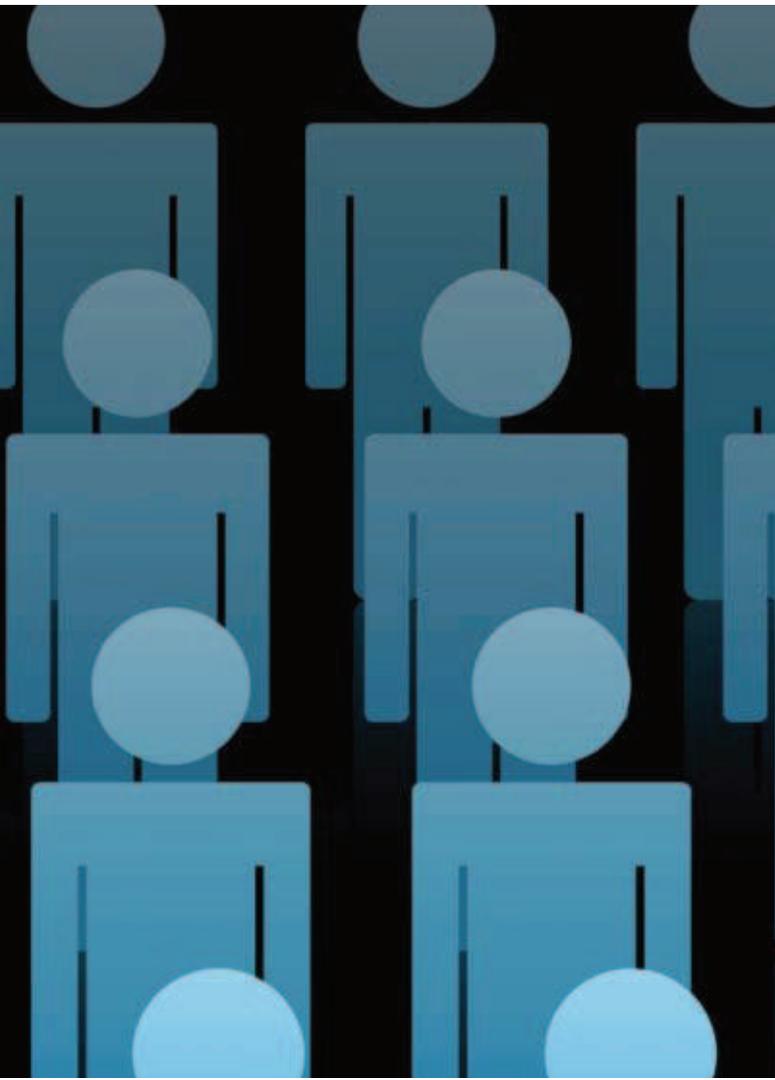
- proactively deal with problems;
- speak their mind openly during meetings;
- take ownership of problems that arise;
- communicate conflicts or report bad news in a timely fashion;
- have trusting relationships with one another;
- initiate process improvements without prompting;
- feel responsible for the results of their subordinates' work;
- manage interfaces actively to ensure that the job gets completed satisfactorily;
- share information freely with other staff members, and
- see the "big picture" when it comes to considering the company's overall interests.

These complaints highlight the fact that many foreign-invested enterprises in China are still struggling to success-

fully cultivate a culture of accountability. Managers and supervisors are held individually responsible for setbacks. This in turn fuels the need for company executives to micro-manage the enterprise and devote much time and effort to interpersonal relationship management and conflict resolution. While Western management could learn a thing or two from Chinese pragmatism and Eastern holistic thinking, there are a couple of reasons why Chinese staff can find adjusting to Western-style management a tough challenge.

### A Tricky Business

Why is it so hard to establish a culture of accountability in China? There are several reasons: China has a dearth of highly qualified and experienced mid-level managers. Like many Asian cultures, the Chinese is reactive. This is to say that acting in response to the demands of others, rather than feeling empowered enough to do something proactively, is the cultural norm. At the same time, ownership of problems is not encouraged but blame is readily apportioned. Therefore to establish peer-to-peer accountability, a strong team culture must first be created. Without that, the pressure to perform can easily lead to fast-escalating conflicts. Chinese culture sees great value in punishment for failure. As a result, employees adopt a safety-first approach as fear and risk-avoidance prevail. The boundaries between those who are "in" and those who aren't are well defined so that there is a low level of trust. This in turn makes a team concept based on open communication difficult to implement.



report to. For an organisation to effectively use teams as its building blocks, accountability must be established at a group, not individual, level. For this to happen, a focus on the task at hand must override interpersonal relationships. Teams have to learn to communicate openly and to deal with conflicts effectively. Team members must hold each other accountable and give constructive feedback.

#### How to Build Trust Systematically

If team members do not trust each other, they will be wary of debate and fear conflict. Without open communication, true commitment to common goals cannot be achieved. If these obstacles make the idea of cultivating a culture of accountability in China seem far-fetched, it isn't. But the first step must be for foreign company executives to acknowledge that a greater level of effort and change to the organisational psyche is required.

Trust is key to efficient management and leadership systems. It is the lubricant that greases the wheels of effective business and brings out the best in teams and whole organisations. It is integral to fostering a sense of belonging, to engendering loyalty, and to maintaining high morale. One basic step to build trust within teams and organisations is through clarification of company values. By laying ground rules for how colleagues should treat each other and by creating an understanding for work values commonly shared within the organisation, a company lays the foundation for a corporate culture based on mutual respect.

Essential to peer-to-peer accountability is the idea that team members are able to give each other constructive feedback. This flies in the face of the culturally embedded concepts of "face", harmony, and politeness that make flattery and conflict avoidance social norms. Relationships tend to be rather complicated in China because obligations and interpersonal dependencies carry much weight. Favours have to be returned and being a member of a network of affiliations comes with its own pressures.

And while Chinese employees expect, and accept, clear directives from their superiors, they tend to be immune to feedback from peers or people they do not directly

A company that acknowledges the importance of trust, not just as a team-building tool but as an accountability-inspiring device, will need to devote psychometrics to the pursuit. Groups as well as individuals within the organisation have varying trust needs; so an analytical approach must be adopted to ensure that trust gaps within teams and the whole organisation can be assessed and more targeted action can be taken. For the Chinese, building trust is less about words and more about the process itself. And the common goal – an economically successful future – holds indisputable allure. So, fostering a spirit of respect, recognition, and confidence in the company's future will lead to greatly enhanced performance at all levels.



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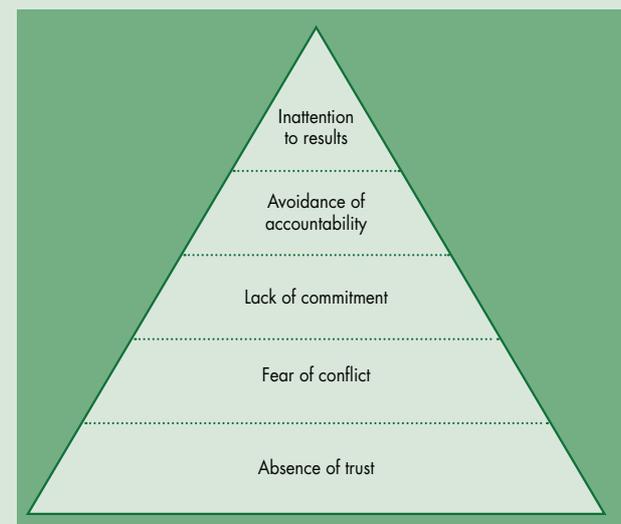
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### The Five Dysfunctions of a Team



Source: INNOVA, adapted from: P. Lencioni: *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*

Western management literature has introduced the concept of vulnerability-based trust: a leader who acknowledges his own imperfections inspires greater self-awareness in his immediate subordinates. This has the effect of focusing all minds on areas for improvement. However, in China, a country where leaders are expected to be particularly strong, if not infallible and where any sign of vulnerability is viewed as weakness, this is a risky strategy to adopt. Authority can easily be diminished and face irretrievably lost.

#### The Team Process

An effective way to nurture a sense of team unity is to analyse the team profile and build awareness of the qualities each member brings to the team, using the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator (MBTI). This builds stronger self-awareness and greater understanding of others. It also engenders a team spirit of mutual recognition and appreciation. As the different mental competencies – represented on the team by members of different personality types – are all of equal value and significance to the team's success, such a team process is inclusive and provides each team member with a defined role. By learning the different ways of perceiving and judging team members, communication gradually improves and conflict is decisively resolved.

Clarity of communication is essential for preventing misunderstandings and unnecessary conflicts. Yet often it is fear of conflict that leads to a lack of clarity of communication in

China – resulting in lack of trust. This happens everywhere but more often in societies which value harmony and shun confrontation. Only if team members realise that conflict does not necessarily lead to emotionally charged relationships but can be productive, can they have the confidence to express their opinions and views freely. For this, teams have to learn about individual and team conflict styles, how to expand their behavioural repertoire, and to respond more appropriately in any given situation.

Once trust is established and open communication firmly in place, it is time to get the buy-in from the whole team. Clarity of goals and acknowledgement of diversity of perspectives are seen in the West as sufficient to get the commitment even from team members who do not share the majority view. Not so in consensus-driven China. If no consensus can be reached, it is the leader who has to take charge. As he does so, he must ensure that the united front is not compromised by differing views within the management team.

#### Achieving Accountability

If team members feel comfortable with each other and are able to engage in open debate, they might also become capable of holding each other accountable for adhering to decisions and standards the team has committed to. Giving constructive feedback, however, must be learnt. Feedback has to be motivational, balanced, and constructive. Foreign managers are sometimes accused of giving only negative feedback, often in blunt terms that can cause offence to the Chinese employee. Chinese managers also don't tend to praise, fearing that subordinates might become overconfident. There is a danger that having grown up in the Chinese system, peer-to-peer reviews may only feature negativity and a back slide to the blame game.

To achieve accountability higher levels of trust must be reached, interpersonal relations have to be improved, and the ability to handle conflicts constructively needs to be developed. Applying the MBTI can help create a deeper understanding of the individual contributions of team members. In openly acknowledging positive contributions, the organisation prompts individual employees to accept their shortcomings and view them as opportunities for personal development. In this way, criticism no longer represents the death knell for one's prospects of advancement, nor does it diminish one's standing within the team. An employee not terrified of humiliation when he makes a mistake won't fear being held to account for his actions, or holding colleagues to account for theirs. ■

#### Profile

Dr. Laurenz Awater is a corporate trainer for leadership, team development, and cross-cultural management. He is licensed to administer the MBTI. His China experience dates back to 1985 and he is fluent in Chinese. He works as general manager of the Shanghai INNOVA Management Institute and can be reached at [laurenz.awater@innova-institute.com.cn](mailto:laurenz.awater@innova-institute.com.cn).



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