

Be water, my friend –
Leadership in a high control environment



Management Research Group analyzed the data from their 360° LEA Feedback tool and concluded that in China 'Leaders (...) tend to emphasize a leadership approach that includes the use of effective persuasion to build commitment to their ideas and initiative (Persuasive), a hands-on short range practical approach to tasks (Tactical), and a focus on tracking to assure that assigned tasks are accomplished (Control) completely and on time.'

Working as a leader in China, you need to exert a lot more control than in a western work environment, because hierarchy is very important, decisions are made top down and the power distance is even higher than you anticipate. You have to supervise a lot more than what you are probably used to and give very concise, and straightforward instructions. You need to set clear expectations and check in with your team a lot.

Western leaders starting to work with China often underestimate control: They are surprised how much time and effort goes into checking and double-checking what work is actually being done by their teams. A very commonly lamented issue is a lack of maturity and pro-activeness of their reports. So even if you think you direct and instruct very clearly what you want your reports to do they might just not do it and not come back to you to ask, escalate or clarify. In the Chinese culture reports might just not complete the task, because they are not used to making the decision at hand or asking further questions. This might be linked to losing face, because asking would show that they don't know or understand.

In addition to language problems you'll find that indirect communication is another factor why your team does not ask for clarification. It's probably also based on the fact that it's the boss' job to be unambiguous and clear with his instructions and verify that they are understood. You have to adjust to an environment that requires a lot more control, very clear expectation setting and constant feedback.

At the same time you want to make sure you enable your team to be more mature and act more independently and pro-actively. And for that you need to let go of some control.

So the most important question is: What can you let go? In what areas can you accept results that are not 100%? Of course you are a perfectionist, so the initial answer is probably: none. Difficult, above all for your direct reports, as it is quite clear that we humans only learn when we are allowed to make mistakes. We only build resilience, when we fall and get up. So in order to 'up' your team, you need to create some space for failure and develop some trust. Give up some of your own certainty and also some of theirs.

In order to fulfill this contradiction of letting go and controlling at the same time, you can apply Bruce Lees saying: "Be water, my friend." Go with the flow, follow it and be persistent: water shapes the hardest rock, if it just keeps flowing. Water adjusts to circumstances: "Don't get set into one form, adapt it and build your own, and let it grow, be like water."

One of my coachees took that to be his motto in his leadership approach, and it's beautiful: Leaders should constantly adapt and look actively for change. Be persistent in that and be true to your values - that will make you succeed.

Working with Chinese teams you need to

- Go with the flow and adjust to your environment
- Be prepared to give clear instructions and verify understanding
- Be persistent: Check, double check
- Find new ways of setting control points with your team
- Give regular, clear feedback to develop
- Define where you can let go of control
- Be prepared to work a lot more hands on
- Develop trust with your team, spend time on building relationships
- Negotiate control points with your team
- Allow your team to make mistakes and learn from them
- Be patient and persistent, it will bring results
- Define areas where you can accept less than 100%

Bruce Lees saying is based on Taoism and Lao Tzu, which say the attribute of water is being weak but strong, by constantly flowing it will smoothen the hardest rock: Leaders in multicultural environment need to be persistent: there is a lot of rocks lying around in a different culture. Instead of rushing into the new culture - well, not new in itself, but new to you - with your own set of rules and references, try being persistent in learning new ways and staying open.

These are some reflections on control derived from coaching western leaders in China. I'm sure there is many other things you can do to be a better leader in a Chinese cultural setting. Feel free to share, I'm curious to learn what you do to overcome your cultural barriers.

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