

Saving Face – Show patience and listen

Saving Face is a much discussed issue in Western companies who have business and dealings in China and very hard to grasp as an outsider. Saving Face includes a sense of honour and belonging, respect, social status and relationships. It ranges from social graces, suave manners and savoir-faire to managing ones own emotions and following protocol with gifts and favors. Saving face can be explained with a combination of Hofstede dimensions. At the heart of the saving face collectivist dimension; Chinese do care more about the group, the family, belonging in the inner circle, less about the individualist component of being different and standing out. This is slowly changing though. Generations X (born between 1960 and 1980) and Y (also the Millennials, born between 1980 and 2000) are highly individualistic and want to work in a different way. They care less about loyalty to their company and belonging to the group and more about self-actualization.

Fitting in and Standing out

Chinas high power distance and collectivist society make people want to fit in and be equal. Like everything else in the Chinese culture this manifests in a contradiction: Despite the fact everyone wants to fit in and be part of the group and save face by matching their peers, people quite often try desperately to set themselves apart from the masses. This can work to your advantage when you think of how to motivate your employees and keep talent in MNCs. Use rewards and internal communication to let your gifted people shine. Coaching and training will help to develop your talent tailored to the individual. Despite tendencies of more individualization, teams often get together not only for lunches but also for after work activities in groups for dinners, i.e. banquets or Karaoke. A lot of team building, networking and building Guan Xi happens outside of normal office hours (Guan Xi means beneficial relationships/ connections and works very much on favors, you scratch my back, I scratch yours).

It pays to spend time on networking with business partners and colleagues after work to build positive credit in your Guan Xi bank account.

Information as Currency

Chinese cherish the exchange of information and most know how to use information as a currency and deal with it: Information is power. MNCs Leadership Teams often report that information is not shared enough and goals aren't set for the entire leadership team, but people work in Silos. Part of the reason that this is a reality in Eastern cultures might be that people consider carefully who to share what information with and what they can get in exchange. Another consideration in group-settings like team meetings is how sharing information makes them look, so it's unlikely anyone will share bad news voluntarily. Part of why people don't share bad news is of course that they don't want to be the messenger who gets shot. Another part is clearly that people don't want to look incompetent, where saving face comes into play. It is similar to Western cultures, we try to look better than we are often times as well, but this is much more ingrained and important in China.

Confucian Values

Being outgoing or outspoken might be an asset in Western cultures, but contradicts the Confucian virtues of being quiet, patient and thoughtful. You will find that people are very reserved in Meetings and group discussions in China. Disagreement is often not voiced and people rather stay quiet. Many Western Leaders in MNCs I worked with in China were surprised that people don't follow up on actions that they thought everyone agreed to in meetings. In order to get more tangible results from meetings it makes sense to give attendees information up-front, prepare them that a decision is needed and follow up with separate one-on-one meetings after if you are not 100% percent sure all stakeholder agree. In order to save face (yours and everyone else's) it's better not to put people on the spot and demand spontaneous decisions or critique. If it is meetings with business partners take them to dinner first and build trust, don't talk shop then, be patient.

Recognition and Advancement

Saving face is also based on what Hofstede called the Masculine dimension, which focuses on earnings, recognition, advancement and challenge. You will find people comparing their salaries whilst making up better packages to gain face. To save face employees would beautify business results and report to their western bosses they can do a task and then not tell them when they can't and just end up not doing it. Western leaders need to be very attuned to reading in between lines and finding out when team members are not up to a set task or achieving set objectives. Rather than dictating Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) it makes sense to negotiate these with Chinese teams and get them to set control points for business objectives themselves.

So what can you do to become better at saving face?

- Negotiate objectives with your team, let them set control points and give effective feedback one on one
- Don't put people on the spot in meetings, let them prepare and if possible send main points ahead if you need feedback or a decision
- Don't point out mistakes or criticize in meetings, discuss improvements in a one-on-one setting
- Use indirect communication more, let trusted colleagues give a hint when you have to bring up difficult topics
- Understand local customs and apply them at dinners and banquets, when gifting, negotiating etc
- Refrain from commenting on local customs you find strange, better than being judgmental be curious and ask open questions
- Stay away from controversial topics as politics or religion unless you are with friends
- Respect and understand existing hierarchy, treat the higher ups with distinction
- Put more emphasis on the relationship than the business deal or facts, invest time and patience in people

Asking my coachees what is the number one tip for saving face in Asia: Show patience and listen. When you listen you are bound to learn how it works and it is the simplest way to show respect.

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