

Humility - A superior man is modest in his speech, but exceeds in his actions.

A recurring theme in my coaching sessions with leaders and teams from Greater China is assertiveness. Male and female leaders alike are often asked by their European and American counterparts/ bosses to be more assertive, to sell themselves and their teams better and to speak up more in group settings.

Culture and personality

Of course assertiveness is not only a cultural question, but also a type question. Introverts tend to take more time to think things over before speaking up in groups. They reflect on ideas with few people or alone rather than developing them with a large group. And if you put the cultural lenses in your observing glasses you discover quite quickly that a lot of Chinese Extroverts would be considered as Introverts in the US. This is a major point I try to make when working with the MBTI (Meyers Briggs Type Indicator) tool with leadership teams: it's really more about where you get your energy from, people or reflection, rather than how much or loud you talk or how good you are with people.

Humility as Confucian virtue

Confucius said: 'A superior man is modest in his speech, but exceeds in his actions.' Humility is one of the most embedded Confucian virtues in the Chinese value system and has been for a long time. Working hard and life long learning is showing virtue towards self. Showing respect and (emotional) restraint is showing virtue towards others. This is why outbursts of both anger and happiness are seen as weakness. So putting yourself in the limelight and speaking about how great you are and how much you have achieved really goes against the grain in Greater China.

Earned status versus attributed status

In the West status is earned by good results, achievements and acquired knowledge. In the East status is attributed more based on seniority, title, acquired certificates and education and connections (i.e. GuanXi). Also stricter hierarchical systems are more respected and seen as being effective for running corporations. Flat organizations and democratic leadership styles work well in the West, but are seen as undermining commitment to the company and its mission.

Control of your environment

Eastern cultures believe a lot less in being able to control their environment and nature around them. This might be part of why they are much more comfortable with uncertainty. We try to control our environment in the west and are usually flabbergasted when it doesn't work. Trying to ascertain our rise on the corporate ladder we market ourselves, try to manipulate

stakeholders, control our environment by influencing it. Based on the hierarchical order in the East, the boss says what is to do rather than getting buy-in from stakeholders.

Change and humility

Chinese leaders need to ascertain things get done; less by banking on initiative and self-motivation, more by controlling their reports and making sure their instructions are clear and followed through. In Asia a boss is used to superiors getting involved, demanding change, he's usually comfortable with this as change is to be expected and nothing is ever certain. This is the same for government regulations and constant changes of the latter. On the same token you can't be sure that you will be successful. So in this shifting environment it really makes sense to be humble, no use to market oneself too much. It is much more important to build the right relationships.

In a multinational environment it is necessary to sell your team and show your success to advance up the corporate ladder. So it is important for Chinese leaders to do a certain amount of lobbying, stakeholder management and self-marketing. On the other hand working with Asia Western leaders can learn from their counterparts how to let good work speak for itself and be more humble. Humility goes a long way and makes you more likeable. Recognize success is not only to be attributed to your skills and efforts, but other people involved, your environment. Usually there is also a good portion of luck involved when you are successful, if you acknowledge that, people probably like working for and with you better.

Good leaders should lead by example -and yes also sell their success as well as their teams. But a humble leader who lets results talk rather than boast about all his achievements is admirable and likeable.

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