

Accelerating leadership and talent development in China

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As the world becomes more complex, organizations expect and need more from their people than their people are capable of. This gap between expectations and skills is particularly acute in China, where business conditions are changing rapidly and people often work across cultures. Despite extensive investments in their people, companies in China struggle to achieve excellent performance and build a robust leadership pipeline.

Developing leaders in China is a marathon, not a sprint. Most local professionals have had limited exposure to international market economies and therefore have large gaps to fill. Furthermore, cultivating the “something more” that distinguishes leaders from their peers takes time. Unfortunately, recruiting senior talent isn’t a viable solution: demand for internationally capable managers and technical staff far exceeds supply. Poaching is expensive and those poached from others often don’t stay very long.

The good news is that it is possible to accelerate leadership and talent development. By integrating development initiatives into core business processes, organizations can fully engage their people and ensure they grow as they progress in their careers rather than simply lengthen their tenure. By creating learning-rich environments, organizations and communities such as Toyota, the Linux community, and Ideo consistently innovate and outperform their peers.

So how do you accelerate leadership and talent development?

Based on my 20+ years of experience helping Asian and Western individuals and organizations improve their performance, I’ve become convinced that it is not so much tools or techniques that enable groups to attain and sustain excellent performance, but rather how groups think about learning and development. Indeed, groups get different results from the same tools and many people make remarkable progress without sophisticated tools or training.

Groups that excel at cultivating talent integrate capability and leadership development into day-to-day work. They don’t just focus on executives, but invest in the line leaders and internal networkers that make things happen. They nurture their organizational culture as well as invest in training programs and tools.

To accelerate their people’s development with minimal discrete investments, organizations should

- Encourage a culture that promotes continuous growth
- Explicitly address reasons change efforts fail

- Be as thoughtful about their pedagogical approach as they are about content.

ENCOURAGE A CULTURE THAT PROMOTES CONTINUOUS GROWTH

Deep, sustainable development requires strengthening underlying health and well being, and creating a foundation upon which change and growth can stand. For this to happen, organizations and the individuals within them need to work together to create conditions that promote continuous growth.

Cultivate environment that supports learning

Organizations can facilitate individual and organizational growth and development by ensuring their systems and processes support information sharing and learning. In organizations that focus on learning,

1. Managers skillfully structure and staff projects to create learning opportunities. Individuals are challenged while being supported with the resources they need to learn and succeed.
2. People see a clear link between development and success. Assessment, compensation, and advancement systems are designed to encourage responsible risk-taking and to reward growth and development.
3. Communities of practioners and learning networks are recognized, valued, and supported. Knowledge sharing – not knowledge itself – is power. People know who to contact for information and help. They are given time, tools, recognition, and rewards for sharing what they know and helping others learn. Withholding knowledge and support has negative consequences.
4. People actively involve others in their development. Leaders openly discuss their development goals and efforts. Everyone is expected to maintain and share a personal development plan. People have the skills and motivation to give constructive feedback.

Creating a learning culture usually requires only minimal changes to human resource systems and processes. The key challenge is changing people's mindsets because this affects what they do when no one is watching. Organizations could start by helping people understand how their work contributes to their organization's success and how learning and information sharing creates value in their organization. In addition, organizations should recognize people and groups who model desired behaviors. In most cases, people can be rewarded simply by giving them the freedom and resources to do more of they are doing (e.g., time to cultivate learning networks and encouragement to innovate).

[Assess your organization's learning environment](#)

Expect people to take responsibility for their own growth

In today's global economy, leaders need to navigate through fundamental and tumultuous change without a map. Doing this requires core learning skills: assessing the environment, anticipating changes, identifying possibilities, developing plans, and correcting oneself amid action.

People accelerate their growth and development by

1. Recognizing their learning needs and responding to them creatively.
2. Involving others in their learning: drawing upon wide, diverse networks for advice and support, finding coaches and mentors, sharing their development goals with those around them, and actively seeking feedback.
3. Becoming better learners: understanding their learning styles, actively developing new learning tactics and strategies, and improving their ability to listen to and observe themselves.

Because Asian education traditions focus on helping students to absorb large amounts of prescribed knowledge, even the best graduates are often not skilled in planning their development or managing their learning. Investing in enhancing their learning skills often yields large dividends.

[Assess your personal learning and development strategy](#)

EXPLICITLY ADDRESS REASONS CHANGE EFFORTS FAIL

Changing is hard. New Year's resolutions rarely last. Diets fail. People regain weight. Big bang change initiatives peter out.

So how do you make change stick?

Regardless of whether you are working with individuals or groups, to make changes last you need to address both interior elements (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, aspirations, values) and exterior elements (e.g., behaviors, systems, skills, technology, relationships). Focusing only on external elements produces short-term improvements, but if these changes are not internalized – i.e., if attitudes, perceptions, and aspirations aren't changed – new behaviors often fade away. On the other hand, focusing solely on internal elements may help a person to feel good or a group to bond, but if people don't develop necessary competencies or have systems that support them, little will actually change.

[Integrated approach to change](#)

Incorporating two approaches into change initiatives will increase the likelihood of success:

- Don't just solve the problem. Build the capabilities necessary to address underlying issues.
- Identify and address the taken-as-truth assumptions and perceptions that fortify an individual or group's immunity to change.

Focus on building capabilities not merely solving problems

Solutions alone do not resolve issues. People who fear they lack the understanding or skills required to succeed often resist change. Rather than seek quick fixes, organizations should *slowly* solve problems, focusing on building the skills necessary to address underlying issues. A capability enhancing approach to issue resolution enables people and groups to learn, grow, and be changed by the problem-solving process itself. Furthermore, groups that *grow together* while solving problems develop conversation and problem-solving skills that increase their ability to solve the next problem.

How might a company actually do this?

One approach involves using skill building to communicate a change initiative. This usually involves helping a group to define what the change means for them, the skills required to implement the change, and the best way to develop the skills. Equipping people strengthens their confidence and constructively involves them in the change process, which builds their commitment to the change.

Identify and address immunity to change

Resistance to change – even when it comes from high performers – is usually viewed negatively. In many cases, however, resistance to change is not opposition, incompetence, or inertia. Rather, it is a logical response to being forced to give up something that was the basis of past success.

Deep, lasting change doesn't happen without changed mindsets. Transformational change – moving beyond enhanced knowledge and skills to changing how one operates – requires exploring and embracing the perspectives that shape a person or group's world and keep them from changing. It is only when people understand the assumptions, commitments, and fears that influence their behavior are they able to test these assumptions, experiment with new approaches and behaviors, and evaluate the results.

So how do you help people overcome their immunity to change?

The key is to help people surface and keep their assumptions and inner contradictions in front of them as they try something new. Often taken-as-truth assumptions have rarely been tested or were true once but are no longer valid. Combining skill building with assumption testing enables people to short-circuit destructive cycles and rewrite recurring scripts.

Helping a person articulate the specific underlying assumptions that make them resist change (e.g., “If I don't do this myself, it won't be done properly. When others see this, they will think I'm incompetent.”) enables them to test them. The best tests extend beyond, “Is this really true?” to include “What could I change to break this pattern?” For example, “If I give her adequate support, she can do a great job and I'll be freed up to do higher-value work.”

Untested assumptions and skill gaps work together to limit an individual or group’s performance. For example, mistakes escalate when people withhold important but unpleasant information (e.g., feedback, a problem) and innovation is stifled when fear of being stigmatized by failure prevents people from taking prudent risks. Equipping people to test their assumptions helps create break throughs. For example, helping people build skills in having difficult conversations would enable them to test whether or not bearers of unpleasant news are actually punished. Teaching people to structure projects for success (e.g., creatively access resources) and to ask insightful questions about failure would free them to embrace risk.

There are several techniques to facilitate this type of discovery and learning. It is important to keep in mind that embarking on this level of learning and change (e.g. challenging deeply rooted assumptions) can be emotional and stressful, and is only effective if done in a supportive learning environment.

BE AS THOUGHTFUL ABOUT PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH AS CONTENT

Organizations usually know what they want from their people – even if they haven’t articulated it – but aren’t always sure how to help people change and grow. They recognize that developing a person’s leadership capacity requires more than just increasing skills, knowledge, and experience.

To that end, organizations should use rigorous, pedagogically sound approaches. These approaches should be based on proven models of how adults learn and grow and be structured around clear outcomes. In addition, approaches should increase people’s learning skills so they can correct themselves when they get off track and navigate from learning curve to learning curve.

Being aware of one’s development stage, developmental priorities, and desired outcomes accelerates growth. Generally speaking, high-performing professionals transition through four role stages. To perform well at each stage, a person must have specific

Role stage	Developmental priority	Learning approach
Self-sufficient professional	Technical capabilities	Build skills, knowledge, and experience
New decision maker	Strategic problem solving	Introduce problem-solving methodologies, strengthen critical thinking skills, enhance judgment
Emerging leader	Execution	Cultivate integrated development and build organizational, business, and social acumen
Senior leader	Authentic presence	Facilitate transformational development

competencies and an appropriate way of acting (e.g., relating to self and others). We’ve all seen the damage done by a leader who is intelligent and skilled but not developed enough to manage complex relationships or handle delicate

situations.

The following section outlines learning approaches that will accelerate growth at each stage.

Improve learning skills while developing technical capabilities

Most self-sufficient professionals easily master the skills and knowledge necessary to perform their role competently. Encouraging them to adopt new learning approaches will help them quickly scale learning curves.

While enhancing their technical capabilities, learners should focus on

- Learning to ask questions – particularly questions that help them articulate their perspective and assumptions. Asking questions helps them embrace the complexity of a skill, topic, or situation and also increases their self awareness.
- Becoming self-correcting. This involves learning what excellence looks like and how to improve quality.
- Gathering robust feedback. This gives learners the data necessary to self-correct. It also builds their network of support by involving others in their learning.

These learning skills are particularly important for people who have been educated in China. China's education system rewards people who know the "one right answer" and can recall copious amounts of information. Helping young Chinese professions to think critically about what they are learning and how they are performing will accelerate their learning and help them apply what they are learning to the real world.

Strengthen problem solving skills by focusing on methodology, critical thinking, and judgment

Given China's tumultuous operating environment, leaders must be able to solve complex problems. This requires quickly identifying the essence of a problem, determining the best tools and approaches for tackling specific issues, making sense of ambiguous data, developing a systems perspective, and crafting pragmatic recommendations.

Although few people begin their careers with strong problem solving skills, with proper training and coaching, most intelligent people can become solid problem solvers. Focusing on the following three areas accelerates this process:

- **Problem solving methodology.** Introduce a formal approach to problem solving that includes problem definition, problem structuring, tools and frameworks (e.g., Porter's Five Forces). Provide practice (e.g., problems, projects, case studies) to enable learners to become fluent with different methodologies. As they build their skills, help them to select the best tools for any situation.

- **Critical thinking skills.** Teaching thinking draws upon methodologies traditionally used to teach mathematics and writing. Start by developing dexterity in logic, drawing comparisons, and relationship mapping. Transition to systems thinking and constructing multiple perspectives. Throughout the process, encourage learners to synthesize rather than merely summarize and to push from conclusions to implications.
- **Judgment.** Training people to systematically direct their attention to specific aspects of a problem or situation broadens their perspective (e.g., illuminates implications) and enriches their experience. In addition, problem solvers should be encouraged to build broad, diverse networks to tap into organizational memory and the wisdom of their peers.

Cultivate integrated development

Execution is a key development need for most emerging leaders. Execution is not just a matter of doing things oneself, but getting entire groups to make things happen. To do this, leaders need to act strategically while also attending to people.

People rarely choose to follow someone simply because of their abilities and knowledge. They seek leaders who are competent, inspiring, genuine, courageous, honorable, and committed. Emerging leaders need to be aware how their decisions and actions affect others, quickly notice when things are not working, and modify their actions real-time.

Many professionals have the technical skills to manage, but miss the “something else” that makes them a leader. For most people, developing this requires honing hard and soft skills and making cognitive and behavioral changes. Furthermore, to teach emerging leaders to deal with complexity, learning and development should be integrated into day-to-day challenges, which are far more complex than any case or course material.

So how do you help someone make changes that will increase their leadership effectiveness?

Who we are determines and defines how we lead. Developing the personal qualities necessary to be an effective leader involves enhancing awareness of self and others. It requires a willingness to reflect on and learn from our experience.

At this stage of development, it is essential to use an approach that recognizes how complex people are. Leadership competencies therefore comprise a range of dimensions including cognitive and emotional intelligence, relational skills and self-awareness, as well as the ability to connect to a larger vision and integrate multiple competencies.

These multiple competencies provide a foundation that supports leaders as they navigate through complex challenges.

As Chinese and western managers help their companies expanded overseas, they are discovering the importance of multiple competencies. Understanding the market and developing a sound strategy requires cognitive intelligence. Executing the strategy – attracting staff, developing clients or customers, delivering excellent service – requires much more. Leaders need to make personal connections and build relationships with people with different

backgrounds, mindsets, and habits. This requires not just emotional and relational competencies, but also physical awareness and resilience to manage stress and project presence. Leading any group, especially a multicultural group, in creating and fulfilling an inspiring vision requires spiritual depth. Given these and other demands, the ability to integrate multiple competencies is crucial to sustainability.

At this stage of development, learning involves articulating desired outcomes, becoming aware of gaps between desired and actual performance, and developing and executing strategies to close these gaps. Integrated development involves enhancing awareness and helping a person learn to correct him or herself by building underlying competencies that influence performance.

Area of competence	Definition	Why it matters
Cognitive	Ability to prioritize, interpret and manipulate information	Enables people to anticipate and solve problems
Emotional	Being aware of and able to adjust to own and others emotions, moods, and reactions	Enables people to judge situations and act appropriately
Relational	Having the skill and desire to initiate and sustain healthy relationships	Enables people to facilitate collaboration and build networks
Physical	Being able to interpret and respond to clues from the body (e.g., tension, energy). Having stamina. Maintaining overall well being	Provides foundation for projecting vitality; fortifies intuition; increases ability to recognize and manage stress
Spiritual	The capacity for vision and value. Being able to place actions in a wider, meaning-giving context and contribute beyond the task and people at hand	Enables leaders to make connections between diverse things, expand boundaries, inspire people, and shape a group's values
Integrating	Being able to pull pieces of self and life together into a coherent whole	Creates a stable, balanced presence. Enables people to be genuine and to live in a way that reflects their values

Facilitate transformational development

Shifting from managing to leading and from leading in a routine situation to leading a group through adaptive change requires fundamentally changing our *modus operandi* – how we act or show up in the world.

In today's rapidly changing world, leaders need to help organizations become what they need to be, not merely sustain what they are. Resolving China's toughest challenges, such as increasing the living standard in China's western provinces, will require leaders who are able to help groups see themselves and their situations from a new perspective. This enables them to shape their future by making courageous and productive choices. For example, as China's agricultural industry develops, fewer farmers will be needed. Farming communities will need to adjust their economies (e.g., create new jobs) and equip younger generations to thrive in an urban environment. Leading communities through this adaptive challenge will require mature leaders who are continuously learning and transforming themselves.

How do you help someone transform their leadership style?

Because our actions and reactions are guided by how we interpret the world around us and our view of ourselves, acquiring new skills, knowledge, or experience is not enough. Making this transition requires changing our self image and how we relate to ourselves and others.

Most professional development efforts focus on enhancing our ability to perform, but to perform within the world as we see it using variations of a known approach. Transformational development involves moving beyond our current view of the world, exploring our hidden assumptions and inner contradictions, and developing the capacity to act differently.

How can an organization support leaders in this sort of development?

Transformational development can be stimulated by new roles, structured interventions, and experiences that nurture awareness and cause people to re-examine their assumptions. Many organizations have found sending someone on an overseas assignment or asking them to solve a tough problem with a new group of people (e.g., PMM or turnaround) helps them transform.

Because transformational development involves changing how we view ourselves, a supportive community is essential to nurturing this type of growth. People need to share experiences with and bounce ideas off of others who are also engaged in inquiry.

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Organizations in China seeking to accelerate leadership and talent development would do well to focus on the “how” of the approach as well as the “what.” They can effectively and efficiently develop leaders by integrating development into day-to-day work. This involves encouraging a culture that

promotes continuous growth, explicitly addressing the reasons change efforts fail, and being as thoughtful about pedagogical approach as content.

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APPENDIX ONE: ASSESSING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

How opportunities and roles are determined

- To what extent are projects structured and staffed to create learning opportunities?
- How easy is it for people to switch roles within your organization?
- How readily available is support for people trying something new?
- How is risk-taking encouraged in your organization? How is failure handled?

Assessment, learning, and compensation systems

- How clear is the link between growth and career progression?
- To what extent are assessment, compensation, and advancement systems designed to encourage responsible risk-taking and reward growth and development?

Communities of practioners and learning network

- How important is knowledge sharing (not knowledge itself) to someone's reputation within your organization?
- How easy is it for people to find the right contact for information and help?
- Are people given time, tools, recognition, and rewards for sharing what they know and helping others learn?
- Do people actively involve others in their development?
- Do leaders openly discuss their development goals and efforts?
- Do people maintain and share personal development plans?
- Do people have the skills and motivation to give constructive feedback?

APPENDIX TWO: INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Enhancing your learning and development planning skills is one of the easiest ways to accelerate your development. You should aim to excel in three areas:

Shaping your own learning

- Where and when are you most effective? What enables you to be effective? What gets in your way?
- What new capabilities would significantly raise the level of your game?
- How does learning and development contribute to your personal and professional success?
- What is the question on your learning edge? What question, if pondered deeply, would spur your learning and growth?
- In what areas are you taking risks? How are you supporting yourself through these risks?
- What resources and opportunities are available to support your learning? To what extent do you take advantage of them? What resources could be made available if you sought them out?

Involving others in your learning

- When and with whom do you discuss your learning goals, aspirations, and performance?
- Who are the core members of your professional network? How do you expand your network? How do people in your core network contribute to each other's growth?
- Who could create opportunities that would stretch you? Which specific opportunities?

Becoming a better learner

- What do you do to ensure you learn the most from the situations you are in?
- How flexible are you in dealing with circumstances and opportunities as they exist?
- In what ways do you engage in reflective self-assessment?
- How willing are you to risk being wrong?
- What changes will you make to your learning strategy because of these questions?