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Leadership coaching in China

edited by Marjorie Woo, Tom Payne, James Warner and Jeff Hasenfratz,
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BOOK REVIEW

Leadership coaching in China, edited by Marjorie Woo, Tom Payne, James Warner and Jeff Hasenfratz, Santa Barbara, CA, USA, Fielding Graduate University, 2021, 311 pp., £17.96 (paperback), B08Y62KK5Z

This book is almost unique in being a specialist book on coaching in a Chinese context. Only one other book seems readily available which covers similar ground (Gallo, 2015). Therefore, this must be a useful addition to the growing library of coaching books to have on the shelf if you have any interest in leadership coaching in a Chinese environment.

It is an edited book with an extensive list of contributors, representing a mixture of Chinese nationals and those who have great experience in leadership coaching in this cultural context. The Dedication and Foreword demonstrate that the emergence of this work has been inspired by one individual, William H. 'Bill' Mobley, PhD. Dr Mobley was clearly a pioneer of coaching in Asia and has inspired many others to follow in his footsteps to understand the region and what coaching can bring to support leaders there. His widow, Marjorie is one of the editors of the book.

The preface gives a brief contextual overview of the coaching situation in China and is, on the date of reading, up to date, as it includes the influence of Covid on the coaching landscape. The preface notes that the intention is for this book to be the first in a series, with each carrying forward a particular theme. Each volume is to have consistency of quality and a multi-faceted view of leadership coaching within 'an overlapping Western and non-Western "Resonance Code" of best practice'. This volume, therefore seeks to set the scene of the leadership coaching environment in China and to open up the mysteries of what is different about the culture, the needs of clients and the varying attributes of coaches.

The different chapters of the book cover unique aspects of the subject area in a progressive and logical manner. It is interesting to note the similarities and differences between the chapters. All of them draw on active coaching practice in a contemporary setting and draw on case studies to illustrate the main points being made. Some of these case studies are described as the dialogue between coach and coachee, or between an interlocutor and respondent. These examples are useful in two ways: firstly, to witness the real interactions between coach and coachee and secondly to observe distinct phraseology and conversation style of the participants which can help to illustrate the adjustments that might be made by Western coaches when working with Chinese clients.

One of the really relevant aspects of this book is that it is open to all combinations and situations of coaching. It addresses the opportunities and challenges from the perspective of Chinese resident citizens, Western and Chinese coaches, Western ex pats in China and Chinese workers in global MNCs. This multilateral perspective makes the book feel very grounded, in that it does not take one side or another, but looks at the possibilities of coaching from many different perspectives and offers guidance and much information on how to optimise a situation.

Clearly, the cultural differences between Western coaches and Chinese coachees are explored and this leads to many insights into how coaches should take these into account and adjust their coaching practice accordingly. The repetition of Confucian approaches is noted, so that the coach can become aware of adopting behaviours and questioning styles that will allow their client to respond in a way that is comfortable for them and still achieve a fruitful outcome. This is well illustrated in the situation of coaching a new manager from a

Western MNC who is entering the Chinese business and needs to adapt his leadership approach in order to communicate effectively with his new team. Indeed, the nuances of the learning requirements of a Western manager from a global MNC and those of a newly appointed Chinese manager are very useful.

The book comprehensively addresses many aspects of coaching delivery, training and application. It also covers the issue of how to set up a coaching business in China, having stated that the appetite for coaching is healthy and has moved from the remedial stance to a more progressive and positively focussed stance. Both individual and team coaching are addressed. There is one chapter on 'Immunity to Change' which addresses the issue of resistance to being coachable which can be a factor in Chinese organisations which are entrenched in traditional philosophies of business and reluctant to adopt Western originated change tools.

Overall, I found this book to be a really interesting read. At the simplest end, it is a very good guide to many facets of the market for coaching in China and the various cultural issues that need to be taken into consideration in order for it to be successful. Beyond this, however, it is a really good guide for anyone who has aspirations to coach in the Chinese context, or to coach Chinese people who might be gaining leadership positions in Western organisations. A slight caution would be that there seems to be quite a bit of anecdotal reporting of the different scenarios. However, the breadth of subjects and the clear experience of the authors means that every chapter covers its topic authoritatively, accompanied by highly practical insights and ideas. Quirkily, a couple of the early chapters, whilst drawing on other works in support, do not give their references at the end.

For anyone interested in stepping outside the Western application of coaching and/or is interested in Chinese business leadership development, I recommend this book.

Reference

Gallo, F. (2015). *The enlightened leader: Lessons from China on the art of executive coaching*. Emerald.

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