

Book Review

Business Leadership Development in China, Shuang Ren, Robert Wood and Ying Zhu, London and New York: Routledge, 2015, £100/\$168, Pp.xviii+177, 978-0-415-74719-6 (hbk) 978-1-315-79718-2 (ebk).

Contemporary research into leadership has moved its focus from the individual leader to issues of leadership in an organizational and societal context. Current research is concerned not only with the characteristics which define a leader but with how leadership manifests itself in organizations, in part by individual leaders but also through interaction with members of the organization. Leadership may thus be regarded as distributed or shared and not particular to one individual.

A further development, espoused by the authors, has been increasing interest in implicit theories of leadership, that is, ‘the assumptions managers make, albeit not consciously, that shape the way they understand, interpret and react to situations’ (Ren et al., p. 11). Such assumptions are regarded as important because they underlie how managers consider people and the world in general. The assumptions held by managers consequently have a bearing on how they behave and act, and are formed by cultural values and norms. The study of leadership thus depends on an understanding of both the cultural and organizational context in which managers and leaders operate.

In line with much current thinking on management development the authors expose the limitations of development programmes based on external providers and courses. Especially with regard to emerging leaders they identify the benefits of self-development whereby the onus of development is placed on managers themselves. Individual managers determine the structure and content of their own development and integrate it with their present and future career demands and aspirations. Much of the content of this self-development is represented by the actual work managers do, supplemented by observation, reading and self-reflection, and possibly mentoring and explicit feedback.

Business Leadership Development in China is a well researched and insightful investigation into the impact on senior and especially middle managers of the fundamental economic changes China has been

undergoing since the late 1970s. One major consequence of the economic transformation has been the need to make available a sufficient and suitably qualified body of managers. More than that, the book discloses the personal conflicts generated by the tensions between the new economic imperatives and traditional cultural values.

Chapter 1 sets the scene for the book, outlining its main themes, the authors’ analytical perspective and the methodology adopted to collect data from Chinese managers. Conceptually, the main topic is driven by implicit theories of leadership and a focus on self-development by managers themselves. Furthermore the authors aspire to contribute to both theory and practice of self-development.

The next four chapters underpin the main topic of self-development. Chapter 2 reviews the traditional sources of Chinese thinking on leadership, including the contemporary revival of Confucian ideas, and underlines the significance of concepts such as harmony and cohesion in interpersonal relationships. Chapter 3 discusses implicit theories of leadership in the Chinese context, emphasising how leaders have changed over time in terms of both nature and expertise. The tension between rapid economic transformation and lagging societal and individual adaptation has resulted in Chinese managers being subjected to conflicting and paradoxical demands. Chapter 4 supplements the mainstream literature on leadership by including a discussion of the challenges of leadership in China from the perspective of local leaders. One key conclusion from this chapter is that leadership needs to be appropriate for the continuous change affecting the economic and consequently the societal environment.

Chapter 5 reviews the practice and experience of managerial development in China, exposing its quantitative and qualitative limitations. Management development is still in its infancy in China and development organised by companies and other organisations has proved incapable of developing sufficient numbers of managers as required by the economy. In addition, much of the content of such courses is either inadequate or inappropriate and the overall focus is on senior rather than middle managers. On the positive side, continuous learning is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and in today’s China

involves the influence of a range of factors, including a desire for socially recognised personal advancement, the persistence of political morality and the interplay of various cultural factors. In contrast to development self-development is driven by individuals as they seek to equip themselves to cope with contemporary and future challenges.

Chapters 6 and 7 report the findings of the field research into self-development. Self-development is seen by individual managers as a means of regaining some control over their own employment, both in the present and future. The harsh work environment and social obligations create enormous pressures. While the focus is predominantly on present and, to a lesser extent, on future employability, self-development was pursued because of dissatisfaction with existing training systems and in a minority of cases a desire for self-fulfilment. Self-development involves a range of activities such as reading, observation and self-reflection and combines traditional practices and transitional influences in a circle of continuous improvement.

Most self-development activities are driven, as one might expect, by short-term considerations and focus on technical aspects of managers' current work. The development of social skills, especially skill in cultivating social networks, was also regarded as important and of longer-term significance for career progression. Issues of ethical leadership were

mentioned least and then only in the context of company crises. Throughout the discussion of self-development there is a stress on sensitivity to context, as exemplified by the trade-off between 'private heart' and 'public heart'.

The final chapter reflects on the theory underpinning self-development and on research practice in this field. The approach to management development and self-development in China has been largely reactive. Chinese leaders have sought to learn from both Chinese and foreign knowledge and experience and as a consequence the practice of Chinese leadership both diverges from and shares aspects of Western practice. For managers themselves, 'Self-development is their strategy for maintaining control, meaning and legitimacy' (p. 167).

This is a profound and fascinating book which will be of interest to practitioners, researchers and educators in the area of development and self-development in China. The book will also be attractive to readers who are more generally interested in the current transformation in China and how individuals respond to the seismic societal changes taking place there.

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