
Leadership Selection and Development in the Public Sector for the 21st Century: Case Example of China¹

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Synopsis

The goal of this paper is to present the case example of China's effort to develop its future leaders of the public sector. This case example will first describe the leadership model currently in use in China as the basic framework of assessment, selection and development of leaders befitting the tasks requirements of the 21st century. Narrative description will be given regarding the actual practices regarding leadership assessment, selection and development in China.

Reflections will be made regarding the merits of the current practices. It will also highlight some of the assumptions underlying the current practices of leadership assessment and development in China in order to propose ways to enhance its effectiveness. Recognising the interdependencies of other intervening factors that impact on the organisational performance and subsequently the outcome of good leadership, the author argues for a systemic perspective in order to strengthening the strategic linkages between selection, promotion, success planning, organisational performance and innovation.

Background

In the context of on-going economic reform in China, organisations and enterprises have gone through continuous adaptation and re-alignment over the past twenty years. This trend will continue into the twenty-first century. The speed of these organisational adaptations and realignments will gather even greater momentum once China becomes a formal member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and integrates more fully with the world economy.

The onus of change experienced by the Chinese enterprises and public sector organisations are generated not only from these policy decisions, but also from the advancement of technology, especially in the information and communication sector and from the changing expectation of

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the public. "Customers" of the public services and enterprises desire and demand better quality of services and products, greater responsiveness to the needs of the public/customer, tailored solutions at a lower price and more equitable access to services and goods. The organisations that succeed in this increasingly competitive environment and critical market of the 21st century will have to deliver according to these demands which in turn requires continuous adaptation and upgrading. Innovation, therefore, will be one of the key tasks of management in the coming decades. Chinese organisations, public or private alike, will have to be good at adapting themselves to their specific operating environments and at innovation in order to gain competitive advantage in a globalised market.

Continuous adaptation and transformation of the public organisations require not only technological upgrading, development of human resources and redesigning of the organisational structures, but more importantly also the re-orientation of the leadership styles and competencies within these organisations in China.

Leaders of these future organisations will need to ensure that learning takes place within an organisation and that such learning will be transformed into new products, modified operational procedures, more efficient work processes and motivated workforce. Leaders will see to it that learning will take place at an accelerated pace and will be disseminated inside of an organisation across functions, geographic locations and hierarchy. More than ever, leaders of successful organisations of the 21st century will have to be transformational (Burns, 1978) and know how to galvanise the energy and commitment of its people working in their organisation for peak performance and innovation.

China's Need for Effective and Efficient Leadership Selection and Development

China has invested extensive resources in training and upgrading of its managerial talents. Still the growth of the economy continues to outstrip the supply of leadership pools in the coming years. The Chinese economy has grown approximately three folds since the late 70's when the economic reform was first introduced. Today, China's economic prowess measured by purchasing power parity (PPP) is second only to the United States. The need to ensure adequate talent pools of middle and top leaders in the coming decades continues to grow unabated in light of this phenomenal economic expansion and its corresponding social and administrative complexities.

The need to groom future leaders who could master the future operations at various hierarchical levels with the public administration and state owned enterprises is a daunting task. It entails identifying high potentials and nurturing them so that they could live up to the challenges when time comes. This task itself is challenging for all societies. However, it is even more demanding in China since the quality requirement is compounded by quantitative requirements. According to the forecast of the State Commission for Science and Technology, China needs 80'000 MBA graduates per year for the coming 10 years. Presently, there are only 8'000 MBA graduates per year.

The need for better equipped managerial talents and potential leaders is not confined to the economic sector. It is also true within the public administration since one of the key factors of national competitiveness is the quality of public administration which creates the "right" policy environment for the economic and social development of the country. Drastic changes have taken place in China in the past twenty years. Interventions included restructuring of the public administration, decentralisation, reduction of the civil service and massive re-training of the civil servants and approaches to human resource management. Still the need for an effective and efficient public administration remains in a rapidly changing world economic system.

Succession planning has been a vital factor supporting China's four modernisations. Efforts were made not only to establish pools of candidates with the right credentials and high potentials, but also to provide essential training and education for these candidates. In addition, extensive training infrastructure in the past years has been outfitted to deliver modern management training programmes throughout China. The National School of Administration is but one example of a leading training organisations that has been established to support the public administrative reform.

Succession planning, i.e., identification, assessment and selection of potential leaders, in contrast to its early practices, also had to take on technical and scientific dimensions. It had to be rigorously supported by a multitude of rational assessment techniques. This effort to professionalise personnel practices is self-evident from the fact that CNSA has a specific research arm -- Centre of Examination & Assessment for Leaders (CEAL) -- which focuses on the critical issue of developing the appropriate methodology and instruments for leadership assessment.

Coupled with the training and educational programmes, CNSA's objective is to make a potentially great impact in regard to the identification and grooming of the future generations of Chinese leaders in managing China's economy, government and society.

Experiences of China in Leadership Succession Planning

Leadership succession has been one of the key intervention strategies in re-engineering China. It has ensured policy continuity and economic performance and consists of the following components:

Identification, Assessment, and Selection of Potential Leaders

Succession planning and scientific leadership assessment as management tools are relatively novel in China despite a long tradition of imperial examination. However, this tradition was suspended after the 1949 revolution.⁵ Entrance examination seen in the context of succession planning is to ensure the basic pool of qualified human resources for the civil service. Yet, entry examination and training alone would have insufficient bearing to guarantee the leadership succession within the current administrative system. Additional leadership assessment measures and procedures need to be put in place to secure steady supply of competent individuals to implement the national development strategies and objectives.

In 1983 Chinese Government initiated a series of changes in order to facilitate economic reform, to transform the functions of government, and to achieve market-oriented economic growth. Of these changes, one of the major initiatives was to overhaul the existing mechanisms and practices in selection and assessment of civil servant. The goal of this reform was to make the whole civil service system "more politically committed, younger, with higher educational attainment, and more professional". This particular reform is still ongoing and has been continuously strengthened and improved.

There were three drawbacks with the previous system of selection and assessment of civil servants, namely:

1. A leader's term of office tended to be life long. Leaders normally would not face the possibility of dismissal nor of being downgraded to lower level posts.
2. Selection methods were not "scientific", thus making it difficult to identify real talents.

⁵ With the adoption of civil service code in the mid 1990's, it is foreseeable that the entrance examination would be soon reintroduced.

3. Leadership assessment was not always fair and risk of corruption and nepotism have been high in selecting and appointing leaders.

Aiming at curtailing these drawbacks, the "Selection" reform started with establishing five mechanisms, i.e., 1) Setting limits to term-of-office and succession planning, 2) public participation in leadership assessment and selection, 3) open competition for leadership posts, 4) performance evaluation, and 5) dynamic leadership development through job rotation.

1. Setting Limits to Term -of-Office and Succession Planning

Since China began the implementation of reforms and the open-door policy in support of its four modernisation, it needed urgently to replace China's ageing leaders with younger ones and to improve the quality of civil service as a whole. In so doing, the primary challenge China had to face was the lack of talents and qualified human resources.

This situation was most pronounced in the public administration. Civil servants fell short in meeting the needs and demands of the modernisation. According to the statistics of 1981, of 180'000 civil servants working at county⁶ and higher level of government, only 16% had received college education, and 57% had received only junior middle school education or less. While 35% of these civil servants were older than 55 years of age, only 3.8% were younger than 40 years age. As a whole, the civil service was staffed with people who were under-educated, close to retirement and under-informed about modern economy and public administration. Therefore, how to improve the quality of civil servants became one of the most pressing tasks of the reform.

To select people who were "more politically committed, younger, with higher educational attainment, and more professional", the Chinese Central Government established a guideline for selecting civil servants in 1983. Under this guideline, the government set both age and time limits for various levels of leadership posts. Those who had gone beyond the limits had to retire or were removed from their posts. The Chinese government also formulated clear qualifications for selection of various leadership posts. For example, candidates for division chief or prefectures or higher posts were required to have received at least two-year college education, have worked five years at grassroots level government posts. Similarly, clear age requirements were also given to different levels of posts.

Succession planning was also put in place. For each leadership post, two candidates were identified and developed according to the guideline. By the end of 1999, China had selected 450'000 leaders for different level of leadership posts, who are young and have received college level education. By then, most of the leaders who began to work before the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949 and who were in their 50's and 60's had retired from their leadership posts. A pool of future leaders has also been identified who either have already received training or will be trained at Institutes of Public Administration at different levels or their equivalent. By 2000, the succession of leaders in government has been normalised and standardised.

2. Public Participation in Leadership Assessment and Selection

When selecting a large number of new leaders, fairness is a major concern. Selection of leaders from within civil service has also its limitations. Before the reform in 1983, leaders tended to be selected among very few potential candidates by a very small number of

⁶ County is the administrative third level of government in China. However, most counties in China have more than 2-3 million populations.

individuals in charge. The criteria of leadership assessment differed depending on who were in charge of selection. There was also a strong tendency to use seniority as an important or, even, the only criterion for leadership selection. As a result, it is difficult to make fair or unbiased selection and consequently to improve the quality of leaders as a whole.

Thus, Deng Xiaoping introduced the "public recognition" principle. In light of this principle, the Central Government of China and various levels of local government adopted such systems as public nomination, public assessment, public opinion polls, and public announcement before selected leaders formally appointed to their offices. In selection of leaders for government posts, it was required that the posts should be made known to the public. Organisations in charge should organise and encourage relevant public or civil servants at lower grades to nominate candidates, and should select leaders among candidates received most nomination from the work units involved.

As a second step of assessment, candidates should receive a positive approval rating by two third of his/her peers and subordinates before he/she could be selected as leaders. If necessary, public opinion polls are also used. Before an identified leader would be formally appointed to his/her post, the organisation in charge would make an announcement of its choices. Within one week since the announcement was made, anyone could oppose any of these appointments. If the opposition was found justified, then the organisation in charge would withhold its appointment.

The first year after the individual was appointed to the leadership position was defined as "trial" period, during which the public would conduct supervision over the leader's performance and personal behaviour. These systems of public participation have helped significantly in enhancing fairness and effectiveness of leadership selection.

3. Open Competition for Leadership Posts

Chinese central government and some local governments have established and implemented procedures of leadership selection through written examination. These examinations are open to the public. General public is informed of the posts open for competition and encouraged to apply for these posts by registering with the appropriate authority.

The selection process consists of qualification assessment, examinations of skills and knowledge, interviews and performance evaluation. To date, 10'000 officials at levels higher than county magistrate have been selected through this process. Within the civil service, this particular method of leadership selection has prevailed. Through the use of written examination combined with interviews and ability assessment, a better match between the job requirements and the personal qualifications was achieved. Younger staff members are now having the opportunity to obtain posts more suited to their qualifications.

4. Performance Evaluation

One important feature of the leadership selection reform was to attach greater importance to performance. At various levels of the Government, China has introduced a system of performance based contract with specific targets for each term of office. Departments in charge of leadership appointments conduct annual performance evaluation, mid-term and final performance evaluation. Based on performance evaluations, leaders will then be graded into 4 categories, i.e., excellent, satisfactory, fairly satisfactory and failed. These grading will be the basis for awards, reprimand and future promotion.

Another form of evaluation takes place at the Institutes or Schools of Administration when the appointed officials undergo training. Results of such evaluation are used for promotion.

5. Dynamic Leadership Development through Job Rotation

China has adopted a rotation policy for the career development of government officials. Officials are assigned to new posts in another sector or region once their current terms of office coming to an end. It has been stipulated that leaders must have two or more lateral assignments at lower level before they could be promoted to a higher level post. Young officials working in organisations at central or provincial level are to be sent to work at grassroots level organisations. Only those with good performance results at grassroots level and with high potentials could get promoted.

Statistics has shown that the average number of government officials rotated each year is around 50'000. This rotation policy has helped to select the right people as leaders, to make better assessment of leaders and to develop the pool of potential future leaders, but also to make the government more energetic and vitalised.

The leadership selection reform has been continuing for the past 15 years with evident impact and success. However, it would be timely to review the underpinning principles of the current leadership selection mechanisms and practices in order to enhance their effectiveness.

Reflections:

Succession planning in general focuses on defining successors for specific jobs (Byham, 1999). This might work well when jobs are static and people move through them on defined career paths. But in the coming millennium, work will even be more fluid and organisations are steadily reconfigured. Defining specific people as backups for specific jobs would yield limited payoffs, except at the very top of the organisations and government. Therefore, succession planning needs to be integrated into a succession management system with the later "focuses on creating and stocking pools of candidates with high leadership potential" (Byham, 1999). This trend is increasingly evident in China as well as in the West.

Leadership assessment in the Chinese context, it seems, has evolved over the last twenty years from being largely based on normative descriptions to more qualitative and quantitative analyses. Aligning with the succession management approach, the central role and function of leadership assessment becomes even more evident. However, as all branches of behavioural sciences, assessment remains an imperfect science for obvious reasons. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to reflect on some of the working hypotheses of leadership assessment in order to further this field of scientific pursuit and to enhance the predictive power of existing assessment tools.

Working Hypothesis No. 1: Leadership assessment is about assessing quality of an individual leader, not about the dynamic fit between individual leader and his work environment.

How to identify the leadership potentials and how to bring these potentials to the fore are the constant challenges that human resource managers are wrestling with. However, there is unfortunately no sure proof way of doing both. At the best, the real leadership context could be simulated, e.g., through the use of an assessment centres which could help improve the process of identifying potential leaders and in predicting their future performance.

Still, the blossoming of these leadership potentials are as much determined by the individual qualifications as by the environmental conditions surrounding a potential leader. After all, the bottom line of carrying out leadership assessment is individual innovation and organisational performance.

Therefore, leadership assessment needs to pay equal attention to the environmental conditions where these potential leaders will be assigned to work. Prior to the assessment of individual qualifications, effort has to be undertaken in analysing the factors contributing to the sub-standard performance of specific organisations. In other words, leadership assessment is also about organisational diagnosis.

Working Hypothesis No.2: Leadership assessment is about collecting data on how people have performed and whether they are accepted by their social networks (public opinion about the candidate).

Embedded in the concept of assessing individual performance and public appeal are two assumptions. One deals with the validity of past performance as the best predictor of the future. The other equates ability to lead with ability to be liked. Both are questionable assumptions that deserve to be challenged.

Using past performance as predictor for future does not always work. First of all, it does not shade sufficient light on the match between future job requirements and individual competence. Instead performance records should only recommend recognition and eligibility for promotion but they do not confirm it. Secondly, new jobs represent new demands on personal competencies. Therefore, mastery of the current job does not necessarily guarantee mastery of other jobs or higher jobs.

Popularity does not mean respect or competence. Leaders need to make tough decisions that could lead to lay-off, restructuring, disciplinary or other unpopular measures in order to sustain organisational performance and/or to innovate. It would be impossible to perform an excellent leadership function if the need to be liked by subordinates is strong. Of course, personal reputation provides valuable clues to personal integrity, but maybe there are more effective ways to ensure adherence to certain code of conduct.

Working Hypothesis No. 3: Leadership assessment is about quality control, not about personal development.

Using assessment for quality control presents a static view of what the process is about. As a matter of fact, assessment needs to flow naturally into training and other management development activities. In this light, assessment is no longer used as a measure of sanction but as a strategic tool for development.

It is futile at any rate to certify an individual's qualification with yesterday's job requirements since the job content rarely remains constant. In fact, the organisational context is constantly being redefined based on changing organisational performance criteria and consequently delineates individual job contour and its content. Therefore, leadership assessment is less about quality certification, and more about assessment of management development needs.

Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to integrate leadership assessment processes with the management development process. By so doing, an organisation's performance needs could then be better served.

Working Hypothesis No. 4: Assessment is best done by outsiders and should be separated from on-going supervision and mentoring in order to prevent nepotism.

Whenever transparency is inadequate regarding individual performance objectives and performance evaluation, and evaluation of organisational performance remains vague, it is very difficult to avoid subjective judgement. In a system where personal trust is vital for decision making and resource mobilisation, it is difficult to eliminate factionalism and nepotism. The use of a third party in leadership assessment is then justified as a transitory solution.

However, in the longer run, it is necessary to integrate the assessment function with the supervisory and mentoring process for the reasons given in point 3. This could be done by making the performance objectives and selection criteria more explicit and by making the performance appraisal system operational. Making individual assessment a function of the

performance of his group or organisation in order to provide some reality testing could also help achieve this.

In addition enlarging the assessment process from an individual based assessment to incorporate an organisational performance focus would greatly strengthen the strategic function of leadership assessment.

Leadership Assessment: Recommendations

Leadership assessment needs to be an integral part of any performance management system of organisations be they private or publicly owned and managed. It is of course much more difficult to measure performance in the public administration in contrast to the enterprises where performance could be more easily measured through financial terms. Nevertheless, there are sufficient examples from countries implementing public management reform to offer suggestions as to how to tackle performance issue in the government.

To use leadership assessment in a more strategic and dynamic fashion, the authors propose the following recommendations:

1. Leadership assessment should be carried out in combination with organisational performance analysis.

Leadership assessment is not an end in itself. It is meant to serve the organisational objectives, i.e., performance requirements and sustainability. Therefore linking the two would provide a better understanding as to the leadership quality required at what specific time and within what specific type of organisations.

2. Leadership assessment should focus more on the ability in critical reflection, taking risks, handling ambiguity and problem solving skills than on technical skills and knowledge alone. It should also focus on the learning capacity of the candidate for higher office.

The most difficult challenge of leadership is managing the new and the unknown. In a stable environment, it is relatively easy to repeat a tried old formula. In a rapidly changing environment, which is definitely the trademark of today's open global market, it is the innovativeness of the leader that makes the difference. In other words, it is the leader's capacity to learn and ability to facilitate learning that creates the competitive advantage.

President John F. Kennedy once said, "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other" (November 22, 1963).

3. Leadership assessment should be part of the feedback loop on personal and organisational performance.

"Leaders are not born, nor are they made -- they are self-made... Effective self-development must proceed along two parallel streams. One is improvement -- to do better what you already do reasonably well. The second is change -- to do something different. Both are essential" (Drucker, 1974).

For development purposes, the assessment could serve as a vital link between individual performance and his training and development needs. Assessment would therefore provide the corner stone for continued self improvement and self-directed learning.

By anchoring individual performance in the organisational context, it highlights the organisational consequences of the leader's behaviour and choices. It would also provide invaluable feedback of leader's policy decisions and implementation capacities.

4. Leadership assessment should be followed up with individual and organisation development (OD) actions.

Greater effort needs to go into identifying the enablers within different work environments so that individuals can assume leadership in leading continuous improvement and innovation efforts. In other words, an assessment exercise could be employed as a benchmarking activity so that learning could be generated and disseminated.

Other OD activities could also be introduced based on the findings of leadership assessment. So that barriers to organisational performance could be worked through.

Possible Areas of Future Research

In light of the foregoing discussion, the following scientific work could be envisioned which would make a great contribution to the field of leadership assessment and development.

Building a leadership competency model with Chinese Characteristics

Leadership competencies could be defined by focusing on the organisation's critical success factors and values, and the particular challenges it expects to face over the next decade and beyond. For example, state enterprises will need leaders to help them manage international competition and global expansion. Government ministries and agencies will need leaders to formulate effective policies to govern the socio-economic-cultural processes confronted by a technologically advanced society. Political organisations will need leaders who know how to manage the governance infrastructure in an interconnected global society while social organisation will need leaders who can strengthen the functioning of civil society. Within each sector, new organisations will exist side by side with mature ones. The former require leaders who can manage growth, the latter depends on leaders who can manage reinvention and rejuvenation.

The task is to develop multiple sets of leadership competency profiles so that the organisational realities of China could be better differentiated. At the base of such a competency model, a contingency approach (Fiedler 1967) could be expanded to incorporate other factors into the leadership equation. Specifically, Fiedler's three contingency variables, namely, group atmosphere, task structure and leader's position power could be defined according to Chinese specifics. Additionally, other variables could also be incorporated. One possible consideration is the role of moral authority which is central to the Chinese traditional perspective on leadership effectiveness (Rindova & Starbuck, 1997).

Identifying the development paths of the "successful leaders"

Leadership skills could be taught in training workshops. However, there is little proof that leadership training actually leads to better organisational performance, which is after all the goal of leadership training. This lack of transfer is particularly predictable when training programmes are de-linked with the performance needs and/or strategic re-orientation of the organisation (Saner, Strehl & Yiu, 1997).

In contrast, on-the-job learning seems to be formative for effective leadership and managerial success. Therefore, it might be useful to conduct research to chart the development path of successful leaders by mapping their career paths to see whether certain patterns do emerge. Subsequently a rotation policy could be recommended as one of the major pillars for leadership development, in addition to off-site learning/development activities.

An effective approach to off-site learning needs to be action based, for example action learning, in addition to conceptual lecturing or active training (i.e., role playing, case study or simulations). Action learning offers trainees opportunities to learning through dealing with "real" leadership and management issues in the actual work environment (Yiu & Saner, 1998).

Compiling the general profiles of existing leaders

Applying Fiedler's categorisation, it could be useful to compile a general profile of existing leaders. This profile could indicate the strengths and weakness of the existing leadership pool. This information could then be used to devise development strategies and corresponding training programmes to supplement existing competencies. Example of such endeavour could be found from the Public Service Commission of the Canadian Government.

Auditing of current practices of leadership assessment

Measures assessing of cognitive ability, personality tests, structured interviews, simulations and assessment centres can predict leadership success reasonably well in the West (Hogan, Curphy, Hogna, 1994). What are the tools used in China? How strong is the predictive power of the assessment battery used in China? What additional tools could be incorporated so as to strengthen the predictive power, and consequently, the effectiveness of the assessment process?

Reviewing the situational factors which affects leadership and subsequently organisational performance

While reviewing the performance records of existing managers for succession, it is inevitable that data need to be accumulated concerning the contextual factors which impact both individual and organisation performance. It might be useful to review these data and gain better insight into the dynamic interplay between the (potential) leaders and their work environment.

Since the outset of the open door policy, the Chinese government has systematically decentralised decision making power to the state owned enterprises and to the local administrative units. Although the macro operating environment is quite homogeneous, individual organisations' performance vary greatly. Research in this direction might facilitate the transformation of the laggards in the mid-term.

Conclusion

Leadership requirements continue to evolve in accordance to the demographic status of an organisation and its ecological environment. Therefore, to only delineate the core "qualifications" of innovative leadership would make more sense than listing all the specifications for all leadership posts in different categories of organisations of different sectors.

In a stable environment, it is easier to devise an organisation and individual congruence model in order to make predictions about performance. However, with the forces of change already mentioned before, such a model tends to sum up behavioural patterns of the past without necessarily reflecting the potential future scenarios of coping with high ambiguity and uncertainty of tomorrow.

The most important qualifications of the successful leaders for tomorrow, therefore, are NOT the ones with right answers, but the ones who know how to ask the right questions and have the courage to experiment and to take risks. Therefore, leadership is more than doing things right. It is about learning from mistakes and is about helping others to learn from mistakes.

The saying from Mr. Deng Xiao Ping is very fitting in describing what is needed -- "Crossing the river by feeling the stones". Successful leaders are the ones who know how to frame questions and articulate a vision which allows the innovative energy of the organisation and its members to be released. Similarly, leadership assessment as an organisational function needs to learn from its current practices in order to perfect its craft.

Seeing from this perspective, assessment either for performance appraisal or for succession management should be part of the learning process both at the organisation and individual levels. Thus leadership assessment is not a one-time event, instead it is an on-going process and part and parcel of the performance management system of any organisation.

Leadership assessment, as a scientific field, also needs to evolve concerning its philosophy and its instrumentation. Recommendations regarding possible future research were made in order to further develop the theoretic understanding regarding leadership assessments in the Chinese context and to spur innovation regarding assessment tools and approaches.

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