

Personality in China vs the West

In Western organizations, performance appraisal is frequently used as a method to monitor the performance of employees. The primary objective of performance appraisal in the Western context is to help organizations achieve their goals, which are generally related to efficiency and productivity. A relatively long standing practice, that has attracted a great deal of research, performance appraisal is seen to be effective if it focuses on performance outcomes and related behaviours, rather than on personality attributes. In the Western context managers would be encouraged to set objectives for employees based on organizational goals, and these objectives would be specifiable in behavioural terms. An example might be sales targets. An employee might be set the objective of achieving, say, £1000 of sales in a week, and the appraisal would focus not only on whether the objective had been met, but whether the employee was engaging in appropriate behaviours, such as following a sales-script, making follow-up phone calls, and making a set amount of calls per week.

Research indicates that in Western cultures, employers and employees make different attributions for poor performance levels. Supervisors, for instance, tend to attribute poor performance to the personal attributes of the subordinate, whereas, subordinates attribute poor performance to their circumstances. In turn, these attributions influence performance feedback. Western managers are encouraged to focus on performance rather than the person, because individuals can be demotivated if they feel they are being blamed for poor performance.

In China, organizational objectives are based on different criteria. For example formerly state-owned enterprises often had to meet goals related to employing satisfactory numbers of people in order to minimise state unemployment. Also, many businesses in China are family owned, so another key business objective for many firms is the retention of family ownership. These objectives influence how Chinese managers judge the performance of their employees. For example, where the firm is committed to minimising state unemployment, sub-optimal performance will not necessarily be seen as a problem. Where the aim is to retain family ownership, employees who support the family will be favoured over those who challenge it.

Also important are the Chinese cultural characteristics of face (*mianzi*), and Confucianism. *Mianzi* is connected to social status, so poor performance appraisals can be difficult for managers to carry out and for employees to accept. Confucianism emphasises morality, with the consequence that effort is prized over ability. Overall, these cultural influences mean that Chinese managers may place more emphasis on personality characteristics (as they pertain to morality and 'face') than they do to performance related competences. Moreover, these cultural characteristics have a strong influence on the performance appraisal process itself. The Confucian concept of *wu lun*, emphasises the importance of hierarchical relationships and of power differences, while the cultural importance placed on harmonious social relationships is equally paramount. Overall, this means that the likelihood of a meaningful dialogue about performance is constrained by this cultural context.

A study comparing Western and Chinese managers' views of performance showed that the latter value dependent obedient subordinates, while the former value independent subordinates. Furthermore, the author argues that the differing cultural contexts would influence how subordinates reacted to performance appraisal feedback. In the West, 'objective' feedback based on actual behaviours does appear to have a motivating effect. In China, however, because employees are likely to believe that their managers judge their personal attributes as more important than their actual performance, it is possible that they would simply not believe 'objective' feedback, likely to see it instead as the managers' way of rationalising their judgements.

Questions

1. Does the evidence that different cultures produce people with different personalities have implications for trait theory? If so, what are these implications and can trait theory accommodate them?
2. What implications does the case raise for the design and management of performance appraisal in China?

Adapted from: Hempel, S. (2001) Differences between Chinese and Western managerial views of performance. *Personnel Review*, 30, 2, 203-226.

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