
WORKING WITH A CHINESE PARTNER: *How it Differs from Working with a Canadian Partner* ♦ ♦ ♦

It's a funny thing; the French call it a couteau, the Germans call it a messer, but we call it a knife, which is after all what it is.

-Richard Jenkyns

China has existed as a distinct cultural entity for a very long time with enduring traditions, customs, and systems. There are pros and cons to Chinese and Canadian methods: skill transfer is inevitably two-way. As a Canadian with years of training and experience, you may arrive in China confident in your abilities and determined to pass them on to your new colleagues. However, if you are sensitive to your new environment, and take the time to observe and learn, you will discover that no expertise, regardless of how well it worked at home, can be transferred unaltered in a new cultural environment.

Skills and knowledge, if they are to be transferred, must be useful and must be adapted to Chinese needs and contexts. Nothing will be gained by technical advisors or business persons adopting the inflexible attitude that their way is the only way a job can be done. In fact, such an attitude will likely cause resentment and hinder trust and cooperation on which strong partnerships are based.

In order to understand how the Chinese might feel about your role in their country, you might simply think of how you would react if the roles were reversed. Chinese methods and systems have been developed in the context of a collectivist, hierarchical society as opposed to that of western countries which are generally pluralistic and individualistic. As a Canadian business person or technical advisor, you will certainly have a contribution to make. Still, you will likely be more successful if you adapt your methods and approach to the Chinese reality rather than trying to accomplish the reverse.

One Canadian advisor tells a story about introducing in-baskets at her office as a way to keep track of documents and increase efficiency. Her partners shared her enthusiasms for the baskets, but did not change the way they worked. After a few months the Canadian was using her in-basket as a storage bin. Rather than embarrass her by saying it would not work, her