

USE OF ACTION LEARNING AS A VEHICLE FOR CAPACITY BUILDING IN CHINA

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Abstract

This article describes the use of action learning and action research in the development of management training institutions and management development experts in China. A case study is reported here which was based on a technical cooperation project between Switzerland and China which took place from 1994 to 1996. The aim of this project was to build up the Chinese Government's institutional capacity in support of its policy to modernise its public administration and to strengthen its management of public enterprises.

Conclusions from this case analysis illustrate that it is possible to successfully operationalise action learning and action research methodologies in China and to bring about organisational, managerial, professional and personal development. It also illustrates the needed adaptations of applying these management development strategies in the context of an international transfer of know how. Learning took place at two related domains, i.e., at the domain of Chinese organisers, trainers and managers who participated in the project, and at the domain where the two partner institutions of the project interacted. More work is needed to better understand how to accelerate the development of facilitators and to manage structural and cultural constraints when one applies action learning and action research methodologies to large and complex systems in transitional economies within Asian cultural environment.

ACTION LEARNING AS A VEHICLE FOR CAPACITY BUILDING IN CHINA

The introduction of market mechanisms in China and China's increasing integration into the global economy have exerted great pressure for change on China's public administration. In particular, China's 7 million cadres must re-orient their focus from traditional administration to public management in the shortest time possible. Taking into account China's stated preference for stability rather than radical change, this monumental task of upgrading the skills and knowledge of so many cadres in the shortest possible time could only be accomplished through the modernisation of China's traditional management training system, which was identified in 1993 as a key strategic priority by the Chinese government. Accompanying this strategic priority were the concerted efforts in training and retraining of existing cadres and government officials. Later in 1996, this emphasis on training has been reaffirmed in the 9th Five-year Plan (1996-2000) of the Chinese Government.

The case study reported here describes a Sino-Swiss joint project which was carried out from 1994 to 1996 as part of China's global strategy of strengthening the management capacity of the Chinese government by developing qualified and competent civil servants (CSEND, 1997). The goal of this bilateral cooperation project was to modernise the management training institutions so that they can improve their curricula, training methods and effectiveness. In turn, it was expected that these training institutions would improve their utilisation of training resources and make greater contributions to the modernisation of China's public administration.

A combination of action learning and action research methodology was used in order to accelerate the developmental processes at organisational, managerial, professional and personal levels. The total project consisted of two cycles. The first cycle lasted 15 months, the second 10 months. Feedback from the first cycle was incorporated into the redesign of the 2nd cycle and helped make the project management and administration of the 2nd cycle more efficient and effective.

Description is given here to provide some background information concerning the socio-economic context of the project as well as the current state of in-service training systems in China. This will be followed by a brief outline of the bi-lateral project and lessons learnt.

General Socio-Economic Context

A fundamental transformation has been gradually taken place in China since the beginning of the open door policy (1978) to the current days. The changes brought about by this new policy have not only improved the life of millions of Chinese but also positively affected governance and the codes of conduct in all spheres of life. The impressive performance of China's economy over the past decade has however

exerted great pressure on existing social, political and administrative infrastructures and on the government's ability to maintain a balance between the rapid development of the coastal regions and the improvement of the well being of China's population at large.

In managing this fundamental transition, the Chinese government has relied on its training apparatus to reorient the whole society toward a new vision (to build a socialist market economy) and consequently towards a new set of values (“getting rich is glorious”, “learning from the West”). Similarly, the role of its public administrator has also shifted from that of an administrator to that of a manager and monitor of policies. A general perception emerged within the Chinese government that China's public administration could no longer "order" development but instead should enter into partnerships with other economic and social actors. This fundamental shift of the public administration's role required a different organisation, and different skills and mindset of its public servants.

As a result, in order to support the on-going economic reforms, the Chinese Government decided to undertake a reform of its public sector. The enterprise managers for instance have been given more decision autonomy and responsibility in regard to the management of personnel and production. Fiscal and monetary policies have been strengthened and a system of direct taxation of enterprise profits has been introduced as a replacement of the old system of profit remittance from the enterprises to the government bureau in charge of the respective enterprises.

Government spending also had to be restructured in view of the fact that greater financial resources are now being retained by the enterprises who now increasingly take their own investment decisions. In addition, the government has taken steps to unburden the Chinese enterprises of social responsibilities by “socialising” social costs that is by transferring social responsibilities from the enterprises to the state, e.g. in regard to social security, pension funds and health care. Faced with increasing pressures for delivering public goods and services at decreasing budget levels, the Chinese government decided to further strengthen the management capability and capacities of its public administration.

As part of the on-going public administrative reform, a new civil service code has been put into effect in October 1993 along with other measures which are intended to improve the efficiency and the responsiveness of China's public administration. For instance, the number of central government ministries and state commissions has already been cut down from 86 to 56 and similarly the number of civil servants working for the government apparatus. Further streamlining of the civil service and other public sectors is planned for the near future.

Along with its goal of streamlining its public administration, a public administration reform programme was announced at the First Session of the Eighth National People's Congress on 15 March 1993. The reform resulted in a 25% reduction of the existing cadres (representing more than 2 million staff) who

were outplaced and redeployed while the responsibilities of the remaining 7 million cadres were, in the words of Premier Li Peng, " heavier rather than lighter", hence "their style of work should continue to improve" (see Figure 1: Contrast of General Features of the pre- and post 1993 reform era).

Figure 1: Contrast of General Features of Pre- and Post- 1993 reform Era

	Traditional Cadres	Modern Public Officials
Key Markers	administrative; domestic minded	managerial, facilitation-oriented and internationally minded
Role Definition	Cadres	Public managers
Process Organisation	around authority, command and ideology	around consultation, dialogue and economic pragmatism
Paradigm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marxist-Leninist socialist economy • centralisation • control orientation • deferring and delegation upwards • connections and personal loyalty • gate keeping • rule by man 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics • decentralisation and delegation • service orientation • decision making and leadership • networking • boundary spanning • rule by law
Technology	limited use of technology	increasing use of technology - "learn how to speak, walk and write" ¹
Economy focus	subordinated to political objectives	economic growth and prosperity in support of political objectives
Social consciousness	based on "class" backgrounds, party affiliation and ethnic Identity	less pronounced; more pragmatic "It does not matter whether the cat is black or white as long as it catches the mice"
Leadership	Egalitarianism, party leadership	moving towards competency based leadership

¹ *Speak* foreign languages (English), *walk* (drive your own car), and *write* (on a PC), the emphasis is on the fact that cadres should learn how to do all these and execute these skills by themselves. (No more interpreters, chauffeurs, secretaries!)

Style	model, competition, party leadership
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In order to prevent a potential derailing of the administrative reform process, a critical mass of civil servants and cadres practicing "new thinking and new ways of doing things" needed to be put in place in record time. In other words, the government officials were in need of training and retraining in a relatively short time span. Without the support of an effective training system, this ambitious objective would have been impossible to achieve.

Current State of the Chinese In-Service Training Systems: Economic Cadre Training Schools, Administrative Cadre Training Schools and Party Schools

The objective of changing “minds and hands” has been an overwhelming task for China's existing training system which is still largely characterised by outmoded methods and practices. Prior to the introduction of the economic reform programme in 1978, management training was provided as an integral part of the training programmes of China's economic and administrative cadres. The training programmes which were targeted for the economic cadres tended to focus on economic production quite in line with the requirements of a centrally planned economy while training programmes for the administrative cadres tended to emphasise ideology and administrative procedures and regulations.

With the rapid changes happening in the environment, the existing cadre training institutions have been hard pressed to stay in step with the changing demands from and needs of the increasingly sophisticated civil servants and enterprise managers. Through lengthy training programmes offered by multinational companies and various field visits abroad, these enterprise managers have increasingly been exposed to alternative approaches to managing their daily operational affairs and during their visits abroad they could benchmark their own performance against their colleagues of the Western and of Asian dragons. China’s in-service training managers and management trainers, however, have been mostly deprived of first hand exposure to the market place and to experiences abroad and hence have been forced to limp behind the rapid changing environment while at the same time trying to lead and guide this large scale professional transformation process of China’ public administration.

The current in-service training systems are grouped under two main categories, namely, the training institutions for economic cadres and the training institutions for the administrative cadres and party officials. Both training systems have gone through fundamental shifts. However due to the fact that economic modernisation has moved ahead of the administrative modernisation , and political modernisation has remained at the bottom of the agenda, the reorientation of the training institutions for the administrative cadres have by an large lagged behind.

Training of Economic Cadres

China's three-tier economic training system consists of 18 national level training institutions, 83 provincial training institutions and 2'700 prefectural training schools. In addition, major state owned enterprises have their own in-house training centres. This network of economic training institutions (2'801 in total) serves as a key policy instrument for the Chinese Government in reorienting the Chinese officials from traditional Marxist to a socialist market economy.

It was within the in-service training system for economic cadres that initial steps were taken to transfer Western management know-how to China in 1979 and to help promote modern management techniques in the area of marketing, production processes, and quality control. These efforts have achieved visible success in the short span of 10 years. It has however been less successful in regard to human resource management and organisational theory. The negative results in these areas can partially be attributed to the persistent administrative interference at the operational level of the state owned enterprises in matters pertaining to personnel management and partially to the inadequate management training approaches and the quality of trainers who cover the human resource side of management training.

Although the state enterprises continue to enjoy certain competitive advantages over township cooperatives and over the limited number of private enterprises, the overall performance of the state enterprises has been less than remarkable. As a matter of fact, many of the state enterprises are the root cause of the growing government budget deficit of the recent years. How to better manage the state enterprises has thus become an issue for enterprise managers and public administrators alike and subsequent to this, how to strengthen the functioning of In-service training units, particularly the training units within the major state enterprises, has become a main concern for China's decision makers.

Training of Administrative Cadres

Like the economic cadres, civil servants and other administrative cadres are increasingly confronted with an environment characterised by complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty. Bureaucratic procedures no longer shield civil servants, administrative cadres and enterprise managers from the demands of the environment. Instead, they are compelled to assume leadership and to take decisions contingent on the specific situations of today's changing realities.

Presently, there are more than 2886 in-service training institutions and schools nationwide which cater to this task at all administrative levels. There are 47 training centres at national ministerial level, 10 administrative management training institutions at national level, 129 administrative cadre training schools at provincial levels and 2700 party schools at prefectural level.

Most of these administrative cadre training schools and institutions have failed to respond adequately to this fundamental shift of role of the administrative cadres. Instead of providing the participants of training seminars with necessary problem solving and leadership skills, these training institutions continue to provide them with outmoded ready-made recipe of little value.

The majority of these training institutions and schools are ill prepared to undertake management training and leadership development. Most of these training institutions remain traditional in their understanding of adult learning and management training. Their approach consists mostly of non-interactive lectures and oratories which remain theoretical and difficult to apply at the work place.

Inadvertently, these training institutions have become one of the many bottlenecks of the economic and public administrative reforms. How to reorient these in-service training institutes and schools and how to improve their effectiveness represents one of the main challenges for China's government.

The Sino-Swiss Management Development Project

It was in this context that the Sino-Swiss project was initiated and subsequently implemented. It was mostly financed by the Swiss Government with contributions also made available by the Chinese Government. Project management responsibility was mandated on the Swiss side, to the Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic Development (CSEND) in Geneva and, on the Chinese side, to the China Training Centre for Senior Personnel Management Officials (CTCSPMO), one of the highest ranking training institutions in China.

Goal and Key Tasks of Bilateral Project

The goal of the project was to contribute to the modernisation of the Chinese central administration and of the large state enterprises through the improvement of training management and management training capabilities. The Chinese participants of the project (“trainees”) were to form the vanguard of a new generation of Chinese public management trainers characterised by an ability to have a fundamental command of the concepts and techniques of modern management training and organisation development.

In other words, the *key task* of this project was to develop a core group of management training and organisational consultants who would become the catalysts that could bring about changes in curriculum design, in training delivery and in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of management training. Connected to this, the Chinese and Swiss project partners had to ensure that the newly learned skills and knowledge would be transferred to the trainees’ job site and that participating administrative systems and training institutions would be able to better utilise the trainees’ newly gained competencies and insights.

Major Challenges confronting the project designers at the Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic could be expressed by the metaphorical question: *Can one teach the “fishermen (trainees) to make their own*

“fishing gears so that they could fish in the multiple rivers of China?”. Specifically, the design challenges were the following:

1. How to challenge the management trainers’ assumptions regarding adult learning and the right way to training?
2. How to strengthen the management trainers’ capabilities in integrating theory with practice?
3. How to expand the training institutions’ boundary definitions to include the workplace of their trainees?
4. How to sensitise the training managers as to the value of monitoring and evaluating their own training designs?
5. How to galvanise the training institutions to embark on a self-renewal process in regard to effective and efficient organisation of training, curriculum, training design, training methods and selection of trainers?
6. How to achieve multiplier effects in order to impact as much as possible the large constituencies of training institutions and trainers and hence in how to optimise the investment put forward by the two governments and partner institutions?

The Architecture of the Project Design

It quickly became very clear to the project design team, which consisted 2 Chinese and 2 Swiss, that the best way to meet the challenges confronting the project would be to incorporate the following basic elements into the project design:

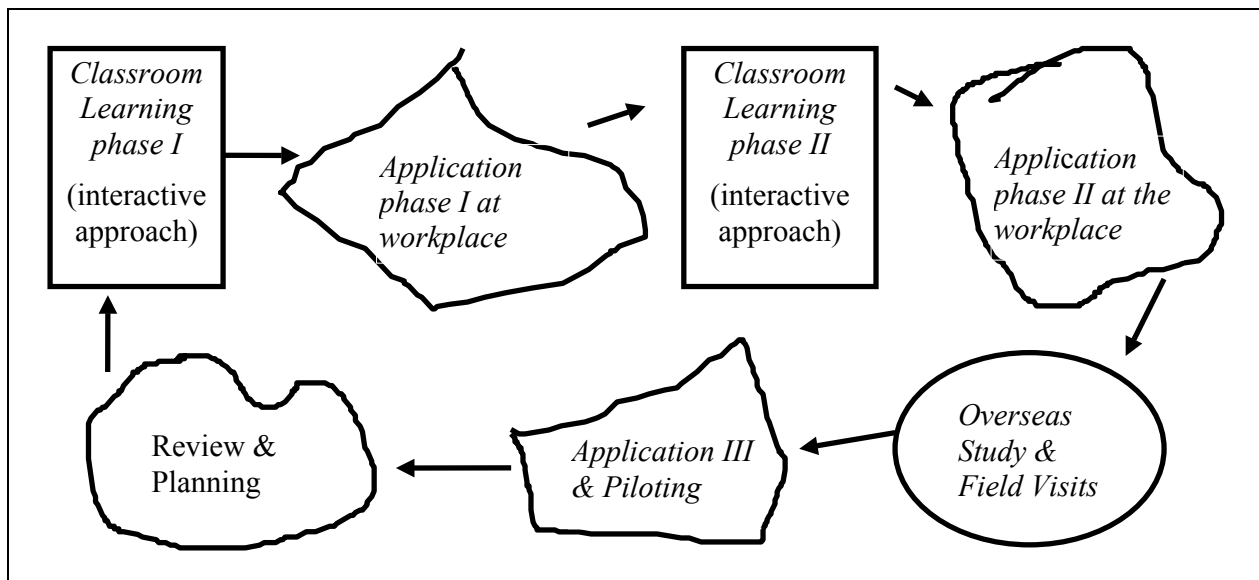
1. A train-of-trainer’s (TOT) programme should be the core of the bilateral development project;
2. The project should consist of two TOT cycles in order to allow for adjustment and adaptation;
3. The basic approach of the project should be action-based and use action learning and action research methodologies;
4. The stakeholders of the project should include the training institutions who were going to select the trainees and also include the supervisory government organisations which directed and monitored these training institutions (boundary definition);
5. Trainees should be selected and grouped into cohorts of trainees who would be from or related institutions, such as training institutions or the training departments within the respective supervisory bodies. The assumption here was that these cohorts could form a critical mass once they return to their job sites and region;
6. The TOT process should follow a sequential arrangement which would combine classroom learning and field application. Each of these components should last three months (see Figure 2);

7. The practical application period should also last three months and should take place at the real work site, such as the administration, training institutions or enterprises. Trainees were expected to solve real and strategic issues related to human resource development and management at their job site;
8. Reviews with Swiss advisers should take place at the end of each application phase;
9. The expected outputs should be concrete such as curriculum design, research reports on real leadership and management issues and problems, and training strategies and materials based on accepted adult learning theories and practices and Chinese case examples.
10. Efforts should be made to sensitise the supervisory bodies and trainees' respective institutions as to the core ideas of the project and the needed support for implementation.

Action learning was proposed by the Swiss advisers and accepted by the Chinese partners as the basic design of the TOT. The reason being that action learning offered great potential for accelerating the learning and transfer, for its “attractive ideology” (Gosling & Ashton, 1994) and an established track record as an effective approach to management development of experienced and practising managers for example as demonstrated by the use of Action Learning by the Hong Kong and Australian Governments. It was hypothesised that action learning process would best assist experienced Chinese management trainers and Chinese training managers in better fulfilling their task which was to train officials in such a way that they could respond successfully to emergent situations in China.

It was also hypothesised that personal development of trainers and managers would yield only limited returns if it were not combined with simultaneous institution development even though Lawrence (1977) pointed out the inherent conflict of these two aims. Yet previous long term experience in China has convinced the authors that a TOT project without a corresponding development of the participating institutions would not lead to a transfer of learning to their job sites because of persistent institutional resistance and constraints. Hence, the basic design as shown in Figure 2 represents this underlying thinking of dual foci. Trainees were scheduled to return to their home organisations and carry out learning projects. In addition, international experts were also asked to give guest lectures at these participating institutions to familiarise local constituencies of the bilateral project's goals, concepts, techniques and procedures.

Figure 2: The Basic Design of the TOT



Programmed learning was structured into 10 basic units covering topics relating to public administration, human resource management, organisational theory & development, adult learning theories & methods and training management. These topics were taught in the classrooms (Learning phase I & II) in Beijing. Trainees were organised into learning groups for the entire duration of the TOT programme.

For the *workplace application*, trainees from the same provincial or municipal administrative structures were given real projects to work on. Selection criteria of these learning projects were:

- ◆ The project had to be relevant to the trainee's current job or career path;
- ◆ It had to deal with a substantial organisational and/or systemic issue or problems requiring resolution by the senior leadership of the trainee's own work organisation;
- ◆ It had to be vital for the survival or effectiveness of trainee's work organisation;
- ◆ It had to be a complex issue covering different aspect of the management task in today's China;
- ◆ It had to be viable;
- ◆ Individual projects of each learning team had to be interrelated; and
- ◆ Individual projects had, preferably, to be endorsed by the Central and Provincial authorities prior to the trainees' start of the TOT programme.

After consultation with CTCSPMO, the learning projects of the trainees that were selected covering the following issues such as:

- redesigning the existing management development programmes for county magistrates, enterprises managers and senior party cadres;

- developing training programmes for training managers working in the prefectural level training institutions;
- developing new training programmes on managing large infrastructural projects for public sector managers;
- conducting research projects on how to improve the human resource management practices within the state own enterprises in order to improve employee motivation.

The trainees were guided to undertake action research within their respective provincial and municipal administrative structures and to formulate solutions to their given projects. Following McTaggart (1992) action research was defined as:

“a process which involves participants in 1) planning action (on the basis of reflection); in 2) implementing these plans in their own action; in 3) observing systematically this process; and in 4) evaluating their actions in the light of evidence as a basis for further planning and action and so on through a self-reflective spiral”. (numbering were added by the authors)

During these two application phases, each learning set, consisting of a cohort of trainees from the provinces or municipalities, was assisted by a tutor from CTCSPMO and was instructed to meet every two weeks. Trainees were also asked to keep a learning journal to record their reflections while carrying out their action learning projects. A learning conference was scheduled at the end of each application phase for reviewing and exchanging of experiences. The Swiss advisers were also attending these learning conferences.

In Action: Actual Project Implementation (1994-1996)

After the completion of the initial preparatory phase during which the trainees could improve their English proficiency, the first TOT cycle was implemented from March 1994 to July 1995. An in-depth review involving all actors and related stakeholders took place in the interim and the second cycle was implemented from March 1996 to December 1996.

1. *Classroom Learning Phases (I & II)*

Trainees were divided into groups of six to seven persons according to their English proficiency and mix of background. The groups' tasks were to support each other in preparing for the lessons, carrying out home assignments and providing each other moral support during the whole cycle of the TOT programme. Decision regarding the groups formation was taken by the Chinese project management team at CTCSPMO.

The learning group approach was critical for the trainees since some of the trainees were definitely deficient in English proficiency. Since this TOT programme was a residential programme, trainees came from different cities and provinces of China and lived in typical students' quarters. Studying hours were long and for some even extremely long. At the end of each day's input by the international expert, a tutorial session commenced which was led by the Chinese tutors. Group work and self-study followed after a short break for dinner. Support of each other's learning group became a critical factor to sustain the members' learning effort. Strong bonding did happen after long months of living and working together.

Key challenges during these classroom learning phases were:

<i>Actors</i>	<i>Learning Challenges</i>	<i>Acquired Learning</i>
Chinese Trainees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to participate actively in the learning process and take responsibility for the relevance of their learning; ◆ to redefine the role of a “good” trainer/teacher; ◆ to question each other and the trainer/teacher’ statements as “facts”, “opinion”, or “truth”; ◆ to challenge the conviction that “the bird who raise its head will be shot first” (equivalent to the Japanese saying of “the nails that sticks out will be hammered in”) ◆ to perceive the social process and group dynamics of learning as being beneficial, not chaotic nor as lacking of discipline. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Knowledge and associated techniques relating to training, human resources and organisations; <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> greater understanding of the behavioural aspects of organisational life; <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> appreciation of the active training methodology in a safe environment; <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> development of team work and confronting the “group think” phenomenon
Chinese Tutors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to act as facilitators, not as “administrators” or “controller”; ◆ to question the perception that “teacher should know everything”; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> on-the-job learning of participatory training approaches; <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> gaining new professional knowledge;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to support an open and trusting learning environment; ◆ to learn how to work as a team with experts from diverse cultural backgrounds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ questioning established ideas
Foreign Experts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to question and to reflect on their own assumptions concerning organisations, human relations and management theories; ◆ to confront their own cultural stress in a foreign environment which had its own logic in getting things done; ◆ to find ways to work as a team with the Chinese tutors who had different ways of relating. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ experience of working in a Chinese cultural milieu; ☑ readjustment of one's own interaction style and role definition; ☑ dealing with ambiguity; ☑ dealing with indirect communication styles; ☑ dealing with consensus decision making without necessarily being involved in the decision making.
Chinese Project Management Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to manage a demanding international project with limited resources and within a tight schedule; ◆ to deal with the boundary issues vis-à-vis the Swiss partner organisation (CSEND), participating institutions in China, and internal division of labour within CTCSPMO; ◆ to be confronted with different expectations concerning information management of the Swiss partner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ observation of different decision making process in two countries; ☑ seeing the world from alternative perspectives; ☑ managing logistics of a residential programme.
Swiss Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to review the various assumptions that the project was based on; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ understanding the subtlety of the Chinese concept of "face";

Management Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to define the boundaries regarding the project, the partnership, and the financing institution of the project; ◆ to solve problems from a distance by phone and fax; ◆ to guard the frame of the project vis-à-vis a temporary faculty group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> dealing with the issue of power and status in the Chinese context; <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> learning how to accept working through others.
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Application Phase I & II

In China, there is an old saying “Sitting down and talking is far inferior than standing up and implementing” (Xun Zi, 400 BC). The more popular practice in China today is “sitting and talking”. Therefore, one of the key changes that needed to happen if the bilateral project was to achieve its objectives was to awaken the trainees’ curiosity in experimenting and in exploring novel solutions. However, in a highly politicised environment such as is the case in China, the scope for experiments is limited. Extra caution had to be taken by the Chinese partners to ensure that no political blunder would happen.

During the Application Phases, trainees returned to their respective home organisations to carry out their action learning projects. For each cohort, a common group project was identified with the approval of the top authority of the respective local administrative system. These learning sets had to define the scope of their projects with the client and agree on deliverables. A initial workshop was organised at CTCSPMO to assist the learning sets in their planning. Afterwards, the learning sets were expected to operate as self-regulated groups with periodical monitoring from the tutors. This arrangement was necessary since the distance between the place where CTCSPMO was located in Beijing and the various provincial localities was too great for the trainees to meet regularly at CTCSPMO and too expansive for the Chinese tutors to visit the sets more than once during the three months. Exceptions were made for the 4 sets based in Beijing. They met on a regular basis with their tutors at CTCSPMO.

Learning Conferences which the CSEND advisers (the authors) also attended were organised to share information concerning the trainees’ findings and to review the learning process itself. In general, the energy was high for the sets which managed their own team’s social process and tasks well and consequently gained substantial support for their projects. Their projects became implementable and obtained financial commitment for implementation. In short, they were able to carry the action research process to its own fruition. Their clients were enthusiastic about their work. Since a large percentage of these learning projects dealt with training related topics, the clients found the findings and recommended

solutions realistic and helpful. They therefore have become supporters of the alternative approach to adult learning and to the need to renew the existing curricula and teaching method at a large scale. Figure 3 summarises the *key challenges* and *learning* during the application phases (I&II).

Figure 3: Key challenges and Learning from the Application Phase I & II

<i>Actors</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Learning & Benefits</i>
Trainees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to confront the pressures from their colleagues at home who wanted them to resume their regular job and tasks; ◆ to seek out additional financial and material resources for their project; ◆ to take responsibility for their own actions; ◆ to manage the client relationships; ◆ to question each other’s assumptions; ◆ to manage the learning project and sustain their learning set; ◆ to bridge the two worlds of conceptualisation, i.e., East and West; ◆ to break the mode of communicating in abstractions and generalities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ gaining better insights of Deng Xiao Ping’s statement regarding China’s reform process which should be based on the spirit of “touching the stones to cross the river” (meaning learning by experimenting); ☑ knowledge of the real world in the workplace and real issues outside of the classroom environment; ☑ testing Western management theories in the Chinese context ☑ perceiving the management issues in a more holistic and integrated manner; ☑ recognition from their superiors and colleagues; ☑ strengthening their networking and selling skills.
Chinese Tutors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to actually facilitate the learning process over distance; ◆ to grasp the real issues in the workplace; ◆ to manage and administrate multiple long distance learning projects with limited resources; ◆ to fully grasp the action learning and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☑ observing “action learning” and “action research” in action; ☑ taking responsibility to solve problems; ☑ personal development regarding leadership skills; ☑ managing constituencies of these learning projects.

	<p>action research methodologies;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to feel comfortable in offering process feedback. 	
Client organisations in the provinces & cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to stay open and receptive regarding the findings and recommendations; ◆ to real support the learning by providing needed resources; ◆ to implement the recommended changes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> getting feedback from their target population regarding training needs and existing programmes; <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> getting solutions in the form of new curricula, training materials and training methods.
Chinese Project Management Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to deal with the cultural and structural differences of the Chinese and Swiss environment; ◆ to deal with the boundary issues vis-à-vis the Swiss partner organisation, participating institutions in China, and internal organisations within CTCSPMO; ◆ to be open to learning opportunities; ◆ to avoid political blunders which would jeopardise the future cooperation with outside world. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> dealing with complex project organisational structure involving international partners, <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> dealing with project partners as equal instead of being superior.
Swiss Project Management Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to challenge assumptions made concerning the Chinese partners and institutions; ◆ to refrain from assuming responsibility for the Chinese partners; ◆ to facilitate rather than dominate; ◆ to sustain the interest and commitment of the CTCSPMO and tutors to the action research and action learning approach; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ learning how to operationalise an action learning design through others ◆ learning how to manage multi-level relationships and power structures; ◆ managing frustration.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ to provide feedback in constructive fashion; ◆ to deal with frustration. 	
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Reactions from the *clients*, which consisted of the Deputy Directors of the provincial organisation department of the CCP², Deputy Commissioner of the State Commission of the Nationalities, Academic Dean of the Central Party School, were in general positive. They found the results of the action research informative and recommended solutions helpful. Rate of implementation of the recommendations was high which was later verified by independent reviewers. A final project evaluation will be conducted in October 1997.

Feedback, Planning and Modification: Cycle II (1995-1996)

After the completion of Cycle I of the TOT programme, an interim review took place which was conducted by an independent review team. The team consisted of 1 Chinese and 1 Swiss. Both were experts in organisational issues and instructional technology. Their assessment of the project outcome was very positive. Learning was achieved on individual and organisational levels. They also noted that conflicts existed between the two project partner organisations. Feedback sessions were held in Beijing to resolve the difficulties. Issues focused mostly on relationships and expectations.

Taking into account the ensuing discussions, changes were made as to the project management structure and division of labour amongst key project personnel on the Chinese side. Communication protocol was redefined accordingly.

Extensive consultation with the trainees and the Chinese tutors of Cycle I took place at regular intervals. Additional components were added to the project design.

1. Workshop on action learning and action research for the tutors and other CTCSPMO training staff.

An international consultant was invited to facilitate the group’s reflection of their own experience regarding action learning and action research methodologies. Participants involved not only the Chinese tutors but also the top management of CTCSPMO. The workshop involved not only exchange of experiences between the Chinese tutors and the international consultant but also training on how to facilitate the action learning process. Participants were asked to apply these methodologies to their own institutions and to reflect upon the process.

² Chinese Communist Party

This input was of critical importance since it helped the Chinese partner organisation to understand some of the requests and feedback from the Swiss partners. It also helped the Chinese project management team to obtain additional resources and political support in organising and facilitating the learning projects of Cycle II.

Outputs of the learning projects of Cycle II demonstrated amply the added value of this particular workshop. It also became clear for the authors that greater resources should be made available to better prepare the Chinese tutors and partner organisation.

2. *A training programme for senior leaders of the participating administrative systems*

A one-month executive programme was organised for the senior leaders in charge of personnel affairs in the provinces. Half of the programme was conducted in Beijing by CTCSPMO and the other half was organised by CSEND in Switzerland. The themes of this executive programme included human resource management, management training and development. Objectives of this programme was to sensitise these leaders regarding current thinking and practices in the respective fields, but also to promote better understanding of the bilateral project and to obtain support and commitment for proper utilisation of the graduates of the TOT programme.

Intensive discussions took place every night during the two week visit in Switzerland. Participants of this executive programme were asked to prepare extensive reports of what they saw and reflected on. As an integral part of these reports, policy recommendations were to be made.

This executive programme for senior Chinese government officials was scheduled to take place concurrently with the trainees' own study visit in Switzerland in order to allow for personal contacts between the trainees and their senior superiors. These personal contacts were perceived in the Chinese context as the best guarantee in making sure that a transfer of know-how to the job site would be supported by the senior leaders.

Other changes concerning the organisation and management of the application phases included:

1. *Concentrating all the trainees in Beijing for better supervision and support.*

The learning sets were enlarged from three members to five to six in Cycle 2. These learning sets stayed together from the beginning of the TOT programme to the end. During the application phase they worked on projects relevant to their own job responsibilities but in other institutional settings.

Regular meetings were held with the support of a Chinese tutor. Ad hoc inputs were provided by Chinese experts on the initiative of CTCSPMO.

Tutors professed more confidence in their role and in the action learning process. Their increased confidence is partially due to the workshop they participated prior to the start of the TOT Cycle II. More importantly, it is due to the *action learning process* that they had gone through as tutors since some of the

tutors for the Cycle II were graduates of the Cycle I. Having the experience of conducting their own action learning projects, keeping the learning journal and reflecting on their experiences helped them to have a better grasp of the needs of the learners and to better organise the learning projects.

2. *Tightening up the methods of inquiry through better project planning and clearer mandate from the clients*

Trainees were better prepared and more competent in the survey methods. Interpretation of the data were more accurate. Teams worked better and members were more open to constructive criticism.

Mandates from the client were mostly training oriented. Trainees were asked to identify the performance gaps and training needs, to develop training strategy and plans, and to pilot test their training modules.

These pilots were completed successfully to demonstrate alternative approaches to adult training. More work has been followed up since the end of the project.

Reflection after the implementation of Cycle II

It remained difficult to reflect on the interpersonal dimension of the learning process. Chinese trainees have demonstrated their sensitivity in this regard. However, to openly discuss their feelings and observations in this regard remained alien to their cultural norms. Feedback of this nature tended to happen privately and informally.

The role of the facilitator remained to be a challenging one. Should the graduates prefer to adopt the action learning approach as their own teaching and training strategy, more personal development would be needed to help them achieve better mastery of the action learning methodology and its related social processes.

Differences and conflicts regarding boundaries remained between the two project partner organisations due to their embedded different institutional contexts. These differences and conflicts could only be overcome by having more frequent and more regular review sessions together. Resource provision needs to be made available to allow for such sessions to be formalised and to take place.

Conclusion

Increasingly, action learning has been recognised as one of the most effective vehicles to management development. Although, work has been reported concerning the application of action learning in an international context, scanty information is available as to the necessary adaptation. The case example reported here attempted to shed some lights in regard to apply action learning methodology in China.

The Sino-Swiss bilateral project was designed to increase the institutional capacity of Chinese public administration in managing change. The strategy used was to train a small group of experienced training managers and trainers with the ability to apply scientific methods of inquiry, to make rational decisions,

to learn new behaviour, and to carry out their role and tasks with greater effectiveness. Lastly, they were expected to act as the catalyst to bring about the institutional development of their respective training institutions.

Activities designed to provide trainees the opportunity to acquire and apply knowledge in practical situations and to learn via participation have by and large achieved its intended impact. Supportive activities such as the Executive programme have provided recognition of the trainees' accomplishment and capabilities. Senior leaders gave greater commitment to the providing of the right environment to allow for better transfer of know-how. The expected mid-term outcome of this bilateral project, i.e., to strengthen the management training capabilities of the selected training institutions seemed to be attainable.

Reflecting on the use of action learning in China, one would say that it is possible and feasible provided individuals are available who could play adequately the role of facilitators. Due to the years of suppression of psychology as a discipline, and due to the Chinese cultural norm which discourages open expression of feelings and confrontation, it is rather difficult to identify individuals with sufficient amount of psychological-mindedness and skills in dealing with the social process of the learning sets.

The nature of the action learning projects moved from the category of "own job projects" during Cycle I to the mix of "technical expertise exchanges" and "own job projects" categories, using Garratt's (1991) classification. The latter approach has allowed the ease of project management but potentially reduced the direct benefits of the home organisations whose participation in this bilateral project was motivated by solving some of its own management problems. However, these training institutions would be able to benefit indirectly from the modularising of the training curricula.

Besides the obvious gains obtained by the trainees, by the participating institutions, and the project implementing partners, it has to be said that, by using the action learning approach, this Sino-Swiss TOT programme has avoid the pitfall that Ravens (1991) so aptly described,

"Much education (*training*), so called, consists in the wrong needs being supplied by inappropriate methods staged by inadequate teachers"

In the context of international know-how transfer of management theories and techniques, it is tempting to assume that they are universally applicable. In China where a teacher will not be challenged nor questioned openly, such an assumption could prove costly and damaging. This bilateral project fulfilled its mandate by structuring learning opportunities for the individuals and institutions alike so that they could develop and become better prepared in responding to emergent situations and by giving the responsibility of examining the validity of Western management theories and practices in the Chinese work environment to the trainees. In a limited scope but an in-depth manner, the trainees of this bilateral action learning project have not only experimented with fishing in unfamiliar waters, but also developed

their own fishing gears for future use. They have been welcome back to their home institutions and with time, it is hoped, that they will be able to facilitate the development of other Chinese managers and management trainers.

In the course of implementing this bilateral project, the project designers at CSEND have also learned to facilitate the growth of the Chinese partner organisation by being critical when justified, by being able to let go when necessary, by being supportive when called upon. Most importantly, it was once again proven that best teaching is by modelling, by walking the talk.

In summary, this use of action learning has facilitated learning at personal, professional, managerial and institutional levels in the context of a Sino-Swiss technical cooperation project. Four major action learning cycles took place with the trainees, the Chinese tutors, the Chinese senior officials and the CSEND designers/advisers. Each of these cycle had its own project, set members, clients and facilitators and jointly achieved the intended project goal of developing China's institutional capabilities in conducting modern management training.

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