

Coaching in Asia – any different?

**By Charlie Lang, Managing Partner of Progress-U Ltd.
Executive Coach & Trainer**

"At first, it's hard to persuade leaders to let go of control. But once they become actively self-reflective, they realize they don't know all the answers.

That sort of humility is very charismatic, because it makes others feel useful and powerful (and trusted)."

- Erika Anderson, President, Proteus Int'l.



Coaching in Asia – any different?

When I underwent my first coach training program, developed in the US and delivered by an American coach trainer based in Singapore, I learned that as a qualified coach you can coach anyone on almost anything. The reason given was that as a coach your job is not to advise but to ask the right questions so that your coachees can reach their own conclusions and insights and subsequently make better choices.

In theory this is correct. There were only two questions to ponder:

- 1) Can you be very effective in coaching anyone at anything?
- 2) Will people believe you can?

Imagine you went to a public speaking course and you learned all the important techniques like effective speech organization, body gestures, vocal variety, eye contact, etc. Let's further assume that you practiced all these skills and are quite proficient at them, would you be able to give effective speeches on pretty much any topic? Could you be very persuasive on topics you had little prior exposure to?

Probably not. The same is true in coaching. You can not possibly be an effective coach on topics you are not familiar with. This is also partly because a masterful coach uses intuition as one of the tools and for intuition to be effective, it requires sufficient prior exposure to the topic. For example a senior manager from a multi-national corporation talks about the organizational challenges she or he faces, a coach who never worked in a larger company is likely to have difficulties relating to what this manager is talking about. While coaching might be still possible, I would not expect it to be very effective.

Therefore, if you ask me if people will believe you can coach anyone on anything, the answer is a clear 'no'. My experience in coaching has been mostly in Asia-Pacific

Coaching in Asia – any different?

but I know from talking to other coaches in Europe and the US that their experience is pretty much the same in this respect.

Where I found a difference though is in the actual expectations of potential coachees here in Asia compared to coachees in Europe or the US. I found that the following factors tend to play a much larger role in Asia than overseas:

- Age of the coach
- Gender of the coach
- Specific background and experience of the coach
- Race of the coach

Particularly the age of the coach seems to be a major consideration for many (not all though!) Asians coachees. They often believe that only a coach who is older and therefore more experienced than them could be a good coach for them. This perception is rooted on the overall higher respect for seniority in Asia but also has to do with a flawed understanding of what coaching actually is. I found that it is frequently confused with mentoring which in fact requires by definition that the mentor is more experienced than the mentee.

For the gender of the coach, I found that particularly more senior Asian managers tend to prefer a male rather than a female coach. I found this to be true for both male and female senior managers. With younger managers I found this to be much less of an issue.

The request for a specific background (e.g. bankers ask to be coached from someone with a banking background) I found to be an important criteria for both local Asian coachees as well as expatriates. However, Asians tend to be less open to compromise on this requirement. I saw similar inflexibility when it comes to

Coaching in Asia – any different?

recruitment of staff or managers. There seems to be a strong belief in Asia that people will not be able to adapt fast and well enough to an industry they are not experienced with.

One way I could help Asian managers overcome this limiting belief is by asking them questions like: "What do you think are the most important characteristics for the person to succeed?" or "If you look back on people who failed in their job, what was the main reason?" Industry background is almost never mentioned.

The race of the coach I found to be a frequent issue for both local managers and expatriates, but even more so for expatriates. They often believe that an Asian coach wouldn't be able to sufficiently relate to their cultural background. I found that only to a lesser extent the case for Asians. Most of them seem to be ready to be coached by a European or American coach as long as there is no language problem.

One question that is important for both professional coaches and managers who use coaching as a leadership style: does coaching need to be done differently in Asia than overseas?

I see certainly a difference in the expectations of the coachees: I know that many coachees in Asia would like the coach (or the manager acting as coach) to give lots of good advice whereas coaching in the way we understand it, actually promotes *not* to give advice, at least mostly not.

In order to avoid disappointment, it is important to manage these expectations and introduce the coaching concept of ownership to the (potential) coachee. Once the coachees understand how ownership – means that the coachee ultimately decides

Coaching in Asia – any different?

what and how to do things – benefits them, they accept that they won't get much advise and start to think for themselves with the support of the coach.

This is particularly important for managers who start coaching. They easily fall into the 'trap' to give their people what they ask for: advice. As a result, they don't really coach them but rather act as consultants. While this may be appropriate in certain situations where the coachee lacks expertise, in most situations, it would be better to leave the ownership with the coachees since they are often closer to these situation and also are more likely to follow through with ideas they develop themselves. Besides, providing them with more ownership help them grow and develop professionally and personally.

Conclusion

There are a number of differences between coaching in Asia and overseas. However, the basic principles of coaching tend to work equally well in Asia as well as overseas. It is only important though that the coach 'prepares' especially local Asians for the concepts of coaching to avoid disappointment and get stronger buy-in.



Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to assist his clients in becoming excellent leaders for the benefit of all stakeholders. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of over 100 articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" (see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm>) which got published in August 2005. Charlie's articles got printed in publications like Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today, SCMP, Effective Executive, A Plus and CareerTimes.

Coaching in Asia – any different?