

## **From the coach's bench: Cultural challenges**

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*Published in South China Morning Post, February 16, 2008*



Peter, an Italian national, was recently transferred to Hong Kong to become the information technology director of his Italy-based company's regional headquarters.

Since 2001, his employer has conducted 360-degree feedback for all middle and senior managers every two years. Peter had received feedback in Italy in 2003 and 2005 and recently, for the first time, in Hong Kong after working here for more than a year.

When I looked at the results of all three reports, I noticed excellent feedback in 2003 and 2005, but rather mediocre results in 2007. His subordinates in Hong Kong, in particular, gave him unusually lower ratings than the excellent marks he received in Italy.

Peter was stunned when he saw these results and wondered what was going wrong. He said he hadn't changed his leadership style and did not understand why the results were so much different than before.

Peter said he found it quite a challenge adapting to the systems, processes and work style in Hong Kong that were very different from those in the Italian office. Looking back, he realised that initially he resisted the established processes and followed them only half-heartedly. That explained why he rated rather low.

But Peter was also rated lower when his Hong Kong colleagues were asked if he was clear in communicating, and whether people thought he acted genuinely and in a proper manner.

While his peers and superior gave him a good rating in these areas, his

subordinates gave him much lower scores.

When he tried to understand this, he realised that his peers and superior were mostly expatriates, and mainly Italian. His subordinates, on the other hand, were locals. Since all his subordinates were proficient in English it seemed this was not so much a language barrier, but a cultural one.

Peter recalled one incident as an example. One of his subordinates, Jim, was in charge of implementing a major upgrade of a customer relationship management system. Peter discussed the schedule with Jim and focused on a few major milestones and the going-live date. When the first two milestones were delayed by more than two weeks each, and he was not warned in advance, Peter was upset.

Peter learned that his predecessor always walked Jim through a detailed planning process, giving Jim little ownership of the project. His former boss would more or less tell him what to do.

Rather than being like his predecessor, Peter realised that it was better to support Jim who could then learn how to perform the detail planning process. This way, Jim would grow as a project manager and soon would not need Peter's close guidance.

Peter also noticed that he was not yet able to build sufficiently close and trusting relationships with his subordinates. For example, Peter was puzzled with their lack of appreciation when he praised their good performance.

I shared with him the feedback from a couple of his subordinates. One of them said: "When Peter gives me positive feedback, I always suspect it is just given to

soften me so that I will more easily accept any of his subsequent complaints." Based on my experience, this challenge can be dealt with in an active or a passive way. The passive approach is to keep giving positive feedback without subsequent criticism. Over time, his subordinates will feel increasingly safe and he will take the assessment more in the way it was meant. The active approach is to say that he simply wants to acknowledge their good work and that he has no other hidden agenda.

To conclude, being transferred into a new cultural environment brings various challenges for both manager and subordinates.

If certain practices that were successful in the country of origin do not seem to work in the new environment, don't be too quick to discard them, but first understand the situation, make careful modifications and take appropriate action.

----- **End of Article as published in SCMP** -----



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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 and CareerTimes.

Charlie is a founding member and President (2007/08) of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community.