

## **Executive Coach in China...**

**In China, one respects a foreigner who has eaten lots of rice!**

*Interview with Denis Lazat, Executive Coach @Progress-U Ltd.  
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Paris' Chamber of Commerce (CCIP) has launched EuroAsiaManagement.com, a website dedicated to HR-related issues affecting French companies established in China. Philippe Gabilliet, Professor at ESCP, interviewed Denis Lazat, a former investment banker turned consultant based in Shanghai, who coaches senior western executives in Asia.

### **What does the coaching market look like in China at the beginning of 2009?**

The coaching market in China is still in its early days, but it is already possible to distinguish between three rather different segments:

- "Personal development", what Anglo-Saxons tend to call "life coaching", which is mostly targeted at expatriates and some wealthy Chinese individuals.
- "Team building" which can include not only exercises to facilitate "team bonding", but also seminar facilitation and work on "alignment".
- "One-on-one coaching for either middle management or senior executives, which is mostly what people refer to when they talk about executive coaching. This market remains limited to large multi-national companies who already use such tools in Europe or in the US.

### **How do large multi-national companies use coaching in a country like China?**

Large corporations use coaching mostly for four types of mission:

- Help senior executives starting in a new position in China: the idea is to give them someone who will help them avoid obvious mistakes and speed up their cultural integration.

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- Help senior executives, whether locals or foreigners, during transition periods: when people are switching from a role of “expert” to a more managerial position, or when people need to change from manager to leader.
- Help during merger and acquisition transactions. For example, before, during, or after a takeover. Everybody knows that individual or HR issues can endanger the success of a transaction; that’s when a cultural clash is more likely to happen.
- Finally, just like in Europe, some of the missions are aimed at specific problem resolution, and designed for a special situation. For example, issues that pop up regularly are: trust, communication, conflict management, etc.

To my knowledge, very few Chinese companies use coaches to help senior managers improve their performance. Very few HR directors in Chinese companies know what coaching is exactly and how it can be used. They have not had the chance to experience it first hand themselves.

Finally, the offer remains limited: very few certified coaches are Chinese or speak Chinese.

**Under what circumstances should a French company in China invest in a coach to help one of its executives?**

A French company will use coaching mainly if the situation falls in one of the four categories above (new position, transition coaching, merger and acquisition, problem solving). It is possible however to be more precise about the French companies’ expectations. They have four types of mission:

- “Multi-Cultural” coaching: the purpose is to help the coachee grasp faster the specificity of doing business in China.
- Coaching to train the manager in a new position to get started with his Chinese team.
- Missions where we analyze and impact the company culture so that it is better suited for the business challenges the company faces.
- Finally, and the most common mission of all: to help a local manager (Chinese national) get a more “global” dimension faster.

**According to your experience, what are the main difficulties met by executives from Europe or the US when they arrive in China?**

Newcomers to China (foreigners) face all sorts of difficulties: among those regularly encountered, I could mention:

- Difficulties with communication: they are usually systematically underestimated.
- Difficulties linked to wrong (over-inflated) expectations from their head-office.
- Solitude and isolation of senior people in China. They have nowhere to turn to for quality listening: very often, when faced with an issue, neither their superior nor their direct reports can help.

**When a western manager is getting groomed for responsibilities in China, what part of the preparation can only be done on site in the country itself?**

One has to really accept that in China, while everything is possible, nothing comes easy. One often meets top executives who admit that even after more than 10 years in China, they still sometimes feel that they need to learn a lot about the country.

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For this reason, expatriates who succeed in China tend to stay in the country longer than in other countries, longer than average.

In China, hands-on experience has to be acquired over a long period of time. A Chinese executive once told me this about his CEO: "He has eaten lot's of rice!", meaning that he has been in China for a long time. He meant that with respect and admiration.

**Do you think a western coach can work efficiently with a Chinese executive?**

One of the best coaching firms in Asia, a Hong Kong-based company I am associated with called Progress-U Ltd ([www.progressu.com.hk](http://www.progressu.com.hk)), normally lets a coachee choose between two coaches: this is for a better chemistry match, so that the coachee feels as comfortable as possible with the coach.

It is interesting to notice that – language considerations apart – a Chinese manager will choose a westerner rather than a Chinese as coach two times out of three.

**How important do you think coaching will be for foreign enterprises' HR development strategy in China?**

Coaching is making its way fast as an essential tool of HR management in China. Things here change faster than in the west. This is for three main reasons:

- First: there is a real need. A real demand from HR professionals. This is because coaching is an ideal tool to tackle the two most important challenges HR directors are facing at the moment: retention and engagement of the staff.

- Second reason: leaders have no choice. They have to answer the question: “How can I be inspirational for my team?” In China, the “carrot and stick” approach is definitely not adequate to make sure that a population of senior executives will remain motivated and engaged. Coaching, because it helps managers to better stick to the company values, is a tool that leaders cannot afford not to use.
- The third reason is that coaching is a tool best adapted to the sharing of values in the era of information and knowledge China is already in. During the Industrial Age, values like uniformity and conformity were the norm. Today, even in China, large groups need to be flexible, adapt, and adopt values like diversity and creativity.

**What is the budget and duration of coaching a senior executive in China?  
Can you describe the process briefly?**

Costs can vary from one consultant to another, depending on his profile and experience. In my case, missions normally last from three to six months. They are normally a series of one-on-one meetings with the executive, sometimes when possible, with his management, some of his peers, or his direct reports.

**How should one choose a coach in China?**

For me, there are three essential criteria that one should not compromise on:

- A good coach should have a successful experience in management over a long period of time. He must have managed teams successfully consistently.

- A good coach must have gone through a specific training, be certified, and preferably be a member of a recognized organization like International Coach Federation (ICF). Coaching is a real job that cannot be improvised. It requires the mastering of tools and techniques that one needs to use.
- Finally, in Asia, I think that it is essential for the coach to have a solid knowledge of the country or the area he is in. Without a sound knowledge of the environment, and without being physically present, it is difficult to do a really good job with depth and continuity.

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Denis works with senior executives to create the conditions for sustained excellent performance, and helps them create and develop a successful corporate culture. He works on issues such as

- Alignment: assisting management teams with the emergence of a vision, then aligning key processes with this vision
- Conflict resolution and leadership development
- Efficient management of global multicultural teams
- Group dynamics: stages in team development
- Individual and team assessment, career coaching

More often than not, his interventions have a strong inter-cultural dimension.

As an executive coach – either in one-on-one situations or when working with teams – Denis banks on a quadruple experience:

- A successful 20-year career in Investment Banking and a multicultural experience across continents including more than 15 years in Asia.
- Business degree from one of the top French business schools (ESCP-1982)
- A specific training as a coach with Vincent Lenhardt (the author of "Coaching for Meaning"), Transformance – Paris 2002

A regular engagement in high level sports (rowing and sailing). Denis sails competitively in major regattas around the world

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