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Leadership
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from Carlsberg's Sunny Wong

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Probably the Best Leadership in the World

Sunny Wong, regional CEO for Carlsberg Brewery, gives a refreshing take on leadership and cross-cultural challenges in Greater China.

CARLSBERG HAS ENJOYED A LONG-STANDING reputation as one of the world's finest beer-makers, brewing the amber fluid since 1847. The Danish-founded company boasts one of the globe's most-sold lagers, Carlsberg, and has an international workforce of around 35,000. The multinational is a success by any measure and continues to build a powerful brand.

Early in 2008, the company announced a cash offer for Scottish & Newcastle, which President of Carlsberg Jørgen Buhl Rasmussen described as "a truly transformational transaction... creating the world's fastest growing global brewer." Plans to take over more breweries are afoot. But what does this "transformation" mean for Asia and the new markets like China? HR magazine caught up with Sunny Wong, CEO (Greater China) for Carlsberg Brewery HK in his Hong Kong office to find out more on the company's expansion. Additional comments were provided by Søren Ravn, working for Carlsberg Brewery HK on a two-year assignment from Denmark as regional VP for Supply Chain, HR & Business Development.

HR: How has Carlsberg met the challenges of handling cross-cultural differences as a European company doing business in Asia?

SW: You can learn from all these so-called conflicts. The fundamental thing is that the experience I have gained from Carlsberg in the last 20 years – and in particular in the last 10 years – has helped us to understand cross-cultural differences before the conflict happens. You can imagine across our 19 breweries in China where we have different ownership and different types of people, including [ethnic] minorities, some of which are in the management team. So we are already a mixed-culture company, which is must better able to handle cultural differences than a company newly arrived from Europe.

HR: How have you overcome some of the major friction points with different cultures?

SW: The big thing is that the mindsets are different. The local employees are looking for job safety, a stable working environment. One of the things that is often lacking in international companies is how can they achieve a change in the [working] practices of the local people. For example if you go to frontline workers with a kind of PowerPoint management it can't work. However, if you go along and sit with them in the canteen and win over the foreman and have some influence with the foreman then you can make progress. You have to appreciate the local value, the local thinking. We adjust our own behaviour to achieve a win-win situation.

HR: Søren, how have you made the transition to the different working culture in Greater China?

SR: I came from this position as a strategy director and I thought if I used the skills I had picked up back in the head office in Denmark then I could achieve my results 100%. I went from a job where I was very much in my comfort zone. My strategy was that I could use the things I knew to achieve results in China. Of course, what I found out over the first three to six months was this was not the case. If I used everything I had already learned, I could deliver only

50% of the results I wanted to achieve out here. The incentive to pick up new skills became immediate. So it was not an option for me to continue using the same kind of skills I already knew.

A Good Head For Leadership

HR: Can you give an example where the organisation has used leadership to help bring out the talent of workers?

SW: I'll give you one good example. I was travelling in Xinjiang. For many people, life is very dull. You finish work and go home because of the cold weather. But one thing that the minorities like very much is singing and dancing. Then the organisation decided to arrange a big performing team. We gave all the girls who worked on the production line the opportunity to perform. It was very motivating for them. Everyone took their own time to practise and they put on a Broadway type of performance. You could see that they had found additional value in their lives through this type of gathering. The most important element we learned about working together was they were able to understand their desire to be known by the people through their own talents.

HR: What do you have in mind when you're running leadership and coaching sessions?

SW: For my coaching [to upper management] it is very important to have clear communication at all times. We are a role model for our management team, so in front of outsiders we perform with one mission. You need to be strong leader – working very hard to open yourself.

Søren Ravn



And then there is continuous learning. The biggest element I have to meet is the learning demand of all the people working with me. To me coaching means sharing and trying to find a better solution in making some sort of decision.

HR: How did you develop your leadership skills for Greater China?

SR: Sunny wanted me to be much more operational than I had been at headquarters in Denmark. At headquarters, I touched levels one, two and three in the organisation but here, to have any kind of impact on a joint venture in Xinjiang, I had to go down to levels four, five, six and seven in the organisation. Sunny's challenge to me was extremely annoying in the beginning. He didn't want to just go out [to the breweries] and drink a few beers. He actually wanted me to coach the functional heads and report to the functional heads in HR, supply chain and business development.

This gave me real functional responsibility and expanded my scope. To cut it short, I was in very deep water. It made me realise that I needed Sunny and my colleagues to make this transition. I ended up learning some things that were not only relevant for me in China but also developed me as a leader.

Helicopter View and Deep Dives

HR: How have you combined what you know from Europe and what you have learned in China?

SR: I get my daily coaching from Sunny, and I convert that into my style, and then we have a platform I can use in my daily work. I have managed to keep my ability to go up in a helicopter and get an overview and measure a lot of different things. Then I make deep dives into different parts of the organisation and then I use Sunny's techniques too. And also, we sometimes have the opportunity to go up in the helicopter together for an overall view of the organisation.

When we encounter a management problem, I know what works in Europe, Sunny knows what works in China and the truth will be somewhere in between.

HR: What practical tips can you give for HR managers to help lead the organisation?

SW: Try to think outside the box and be partners with all the people who work with you. A leader needs to jump out of his or her own framework and try to face criticism and develop themselves. **HR**

