

000605 Career Counseling

Career Counseling

I am now not only teaching English to my students and to those that I tutor, but I have also begun to do some career counseling. Actually it is quite interesting to hear stories from my friends who work at joint ventures between Chinese and foreign companies. I am learning a lot about the Chinese method of getting things done and how it can conflict with the western method of doing things. For example, one of the people that I know from English Corner explained to me that the joint venture that he works for has posted a loss for the past two years. They are making a good product, but they are having problems with their cash flow. It turns out that their customers are not paying for the shipments that they are receiving. These are not small customers who are not defaulting on their payments, but are big names like Beijing Jeep. The problem is that the western management at my friend's company has taken the normal western course of shipping the product and expecting a payment. However, what my friend has been saying is that they should not ship until payment is received. But, his complaints that his company is not doing it the Chinese way have fallen on deaf ears. The situation amazed me, but it got worse. My friend's company in turn does not pay its suppliers unless its customers pay them. So, basically, until Beijing Jeep pays its bills, several companies down the food chain will not receive money for their shipments. I really wonder what will happen once China enters the WTO and more companies do business here. I suspect that companies from the west will want to do business here for very long if it is not paid for its products.

Another friend is a Chinese manager who works directly under a western VP. My friend is responsible for telling the floor managers of the shop what they are to do. My friend, John is constantly between a rock and a hard place. His boss will tell him to do things the western way, but John knows that if he does things the Chinese way, they will get done quicker. Plus the men on the line grumble that the westerners do not know what they are doing if the men must do things the western way.

An example in the difference in methods is what happens when parts are made that are out of tolerance or are not made correctly. The Western manager makes it clear that the product must be remachined if possible or discarded. Bad quality parts can not be sent to the customer. However, John tells me that the Chinese method is to look at how the customer will use the product. For example, if the product is a bearing and the end use is in a tractor, John and the men on the line will still send a product that has a misshapen inner race or a problem with the machined surfaces. They figure that a tractor does not need a high quality bearing and that they can save money by not scrapping the bad parts or remachining them. The poor quality bearing probably will not be noticed by the farmer bouncing along the field and they will have saved the company money on a product with a small profit margin to begin with.

However, a misshapen bearing will result in more noise, more heat and a shorter life for the bearing. That is why the Western boss does not want a bad product to go out. Maybe they have saved money in the short run, but maybe next time the customer will not buy a bearing

from them because their quality is so terrible. I am saying this because I agree with the Western boss that the bearing should not go out, but John and the men on the line do not see it this way.

Sometimes, John has protested to his boss that the Chinese way will be quicker, better and met with less resistance, but his boss has a tendency to yell at these protests. So, often John will just do things the Chinese way without telling his boss because the result will be the same. So, his boss sees the good work that has been done and naively thinks that all is going well under his authority.

Another difference between the Chinese and Western systems that I have learned is in the communication between employees and their managers. The traditional Chinese system as it has been explained to me is that employees do not ask their managers for tools that they need for their job. For example, if I were working at a company and I really needed a computer or a dictionary for my job, I would not ask my boss for these items. Instead, under the Chinese method it is up to the manager to recognize that the employee needs these items and to then give them to the employee if the manager deems them appropriate. If as the employee, I ask my boss for things that I need for my job, my boss will see me as arrogant. Likewise, if I am working for a company and I am bored and so I want more responsibility, I can not make this request to my boss. Again, the request will be seen as arrogant.

I know that I am looking at this system through Western eyes, but I can not see how it can work well. I just believe that good communication in a company is essential. The Chinese manager is expected to be omniscient in order for the employees to have all of the tools that they need. And I can see a Chinese employee simmering in a boring job because he or she can not tell his boss that he wants more work. However, despite my reservations, the system does seem to work for thousands and thousands of companies in China. But, the system can fall apart in a joint venture.

My friend John has a Western boss who does things the western way and is not familiar with the Chinese methods. John does not tell his boss that he needs a computer or a new reference manual to do his job effectively, lest he appear arrogant. Nor does John tell his boss that he wants more responsibility. However, being a westerner, his boss does not realize that it is up to him to observe that John needs or wants these things. So, there is a huge communication gap where the boss expects John to tell him what he needs and John expects his boss to see what he needs. John asked me what to do about this since I am more familiar with western ways than John is. I explained to him that in my experience that it is considered good to approach your boss for requests for new tools as long as can justify why you need the new tool. Furthermore, requests for more responsibility are considered to be a good sign that you want to work more.

John told me that his boss has told him to do things the western way. I can just see his boss thinking that all is well because John has not made any requests to him. Meanwhile, from what John has told me, all is far from well and he and his people need new tools and they want more work. What a mess can be created when a western company comes in with a new management team who does not understand the Chinese system or who expect their Chinese

workers to immediately abandon their old ways.

I hope that I have explained these problems in the companies well and accurately. As I said, it will be interesting to see what happens to a lot of western companies once the markets here open up under the WTO. Obviously, it will be very important for joint ventures to employ people who understand the Chinese methodologies rather than to place Western managers who do not. I expect the demand for such individuals will be high and I and other WT volunteers have even been approached by consulting companies in regard to what our plans are once we are done teaching. Companies really need Westerners who have been here for a while.

Pick your friends

I don't know if I have mentioned it yet, but public nose picking still enjoys a degree of acceptability here in Yantai. Not that my western-influenced friends would be caught dead doing it, but it is common to see it while walking around town. My favorite is when my waitress/ waiter is spied doing it. Actually, the other foreign teachers and I have all admitted to succumbing to the perverse humor of purposefully calling on a student while he or she has their finger firmly planted up their nose.

Jaozi and Bound Feet

Last Saturday, I was invited to visit Helen's (my tutor) grandmother's house here in Yantai. Her grandmother is 100 years old, has bound feet and likes to tell stories, so I was very excited to go. Her grandmother was a lively, neat woman who was very eager to talk. Unfortunately, I could not understand a lot of what she said because she spoke quickly and with a Yantai accent. Fortunately, Helen would translate every now and then for me. In addition to meeting her grandmother, I was also shown how to make jaozi. Jaozi is a small dumpling stuffed with sea food, vegetables or anything else. The jaozi is cooked by boiling it and it is served with a garlic or vinegar sauce. They are very good.

Classes

My Junior 1 Classes are busy with making maps of a city this week. I ask them to name places in a city as we have been learning new places every week. After they name several places, I have teams of students draw them on a map and tell the class what they are. The exercise has worked well and yielded some interesting drawings. Some classes have really gotten into the drawing and the schools, restaurants and hotels have been very detailed. Some of the most interesting drawings have been those of banks. One bank had a US flag flying over it and many have had a big dollar sign (all-be-it backwards) on the front. It shows an interesting impression of currency.

One of my classes named places in a city such as a bar or a temple. They then proceeded to

populate their city with lots of bars and temples. The whole time I just watched them go, thinking that I was so going to be fired for this one. The next class will involved the class giving a tour of the city by telling me things such as "the bank is next to the school" or "the house is to the right of the factory".

My Junior 3 classes had a mock trial this week. We have been building up to this over the past two classes and the students who were the lawyers and judge got really into it. However, the rest of the class was not and I had a lot of bored students. It is too bad since so many students enjoyed it that I got requests to do it again next week. One case ended when the accused person made a plea that he was only human and even though he was guilty he did not deserve to be shot (their judgment, not mine.) He then wanted to sue the accuser for libel (they looked up the word), resulting in requests for another trial next week. But, I do not think that I will continue the trial since so few were getting much out of the class.

I have also been teaching a class at the Catholic church on Sundays after mass. The class was very difficult at first because I am not used to having just 4 or 5 very attentive students. I was at a loss at first as to what to do with them. I actually tore through three of my lessons from my normal classes on the first day of teaching at the church. But, I am now settling down and enjoying working with such a small, captive audience.

I understand that Mission Impossible 2 opened up in the US recently. The movie was available for purchase here on VCD over a week ago (don't mind the people in the movie as they get up from their seats in the movie theater).

Have a great week!

Take care,

Jeff

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