

Analysis of Staff Performance Appraisal Strategies in Invisible People-oriented Chinese Management ——Viewpoints Held by Zeng Shiqiang

Yue Zhang and Shiyu He*

Guangzhou College of Commerce, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. This paper is to discuss and analyze Prof. Zeng Shiqiang's viewpoints on the staff performance appraisal. Invisible and overall supervision is regarded as one of the most important characteristics in the people-oriented Chinese management. Based upon this characteristic, this paper is to analyze in detail about the management strategies of encouraging staff's self-introspection to make them become self-disciplined employees, and focusing on the private performance assessment in order to save face and achieve the satisfying results of the staff performance appraisal.

Introduction

The performance appraisal ought to be conducted in an overall assessment manner, which appears reasonable for the employees to make relevant self-criticism to see if their work has successfully met the planned requirements, and what places need to be corrected and made better, so that they are clear about their direction or goal of advancement. However, the performance appraisal, if not conducted properly, tends to provoke aversion from the employees, hurting their face and bringing large pressure to their work. The feasible solution, to Prof. Zeng Shiqiang, is to understand Chinese-style management focuses its attention on people due to their belief that human effort is the most important factor in handling affairs. Only when the people involved devote themselves to the work can things be managed and carried out effectively to guarantee the expected outcome. Therefore, the social purpose of the performance appraisal is not to "kill" people, but to help the staff not only know their relative merits and disadvantages but to encourage them to strive for the best and make continuous progress. Chinese culture makes Chinese people take their "face", namely their pride as the top consideration. Based upon the context of Chinese style management, Prof. Zeng makes some suggestions such as encouraging self-introspection in order to save the face, paying equal attention to the private performance assessment.

This paper is to explain one of the most important characteristics in the people-oriented Chinese management: invisible and overall supervision, and analyze in detail about the management strategies of encouraging staff's self-introspection to make them become self-disciplined employees, and focusing on the private performance assessment in order to save face and achieve the satisfying results of the staff performance appraisal.

People-oriented Chinese Management: Conducting Invisible and Overall Supervision

Prof. Zeng believes that there is great difference between western-style management and Chinese-style management. Western-style management tends to be achievement-oriented, and consequently puts emphasis both on the successful implementation of plan and on the desirable results. Hence, much emphasis is put on making the supervision visible when practicing it over "things". Evaluation standards are to be set up, rules and regulations be enforced, the actual situation be carefully analyzed and revisions be made if necessary to keep things go on smoothly.

Chinese-style management, however, boasts its focus on people, which is due to their firm belief that human effort is the decisive factor in handling affairs. Only when the people involved are supervised properly can things be managed effectively to guarantee the expected outcome.

The supervision on people is focused on its invisibility and flexibility. Things that are visible have to be managed under some given standards. If one wants to change it as he pleases, he has to play tricks and resort to some dishonest means. Compared with visible things, invisible things are not limited by any clearly defined standards, thus much subjected to change, making it practically unnecessary for people to do any deception. If they want to make some adjustments, they may do it.

Prof. Zeng believes that the supervision on “people” should be conducted by perceiving their individual variations.^{[1][2]} If both the internal and external circumstances remain stable, it is workable at this time to be more concerned with “things” which show little variation and are easier to be supervised, and ignore the factor of “people” who do not affect much of the final outcome.

However, if the internal and external circumstances make changes, people’s change tends to be faster and more complicated than the changes in things, and often results in changes in things. In a time when everything changes rapidly, supervising people can yield higher efficiency, which is an important phenomenon but often overlooked by people practicing management in the contemporary context, as most of them unduly believe in the decisive power of circumstances rather than people. It is true that circumstances have significant influence on the final outcome, but human beings’ power can be stronger and even all-conquering. As situation changes, the managers should be able to judge accordingly to tell which plays a more decisive role in handling affairs: the circumstances or the people? Chinese people believe that “man proposes Heaven disposes.”^[3] People all have a destiny which nothing can change, and everything just happens and goes as a part of a plan of Heaven. So opportunity is not to be manipulated by human beings, since it is arranged by Heaven. However, opportunities can also be grasped by smart people, and can be made best use of by them. From this perspective, human factor is especially important in many conditions, and human power is the core element in deciding the success of everything, including the big or small affairs of a company. Thus people-oriented management should encourage managers to capitalize on the strengths of the employees and their ability to contribute to the accomplishment of work goals.

But how to bring into full play the initiative, wisdom and power of the employees? Prof. Zeng answers: in order to be successful in the invisible supervision management, the managers at all levels are supposed to make self-introspection and the manager should pay equal attention to both public performance assessment and the private performance assessment in the staff-performance appraisal in order achieving satisfying management effect.^{[1][4]} Now we are to deal them in detail.

Encouraging Introspection to Become Self-disciplined People

Prof. Zeng believes that it is undisputed and widely held that self-examination is a good way to help people make progress.^{[1][5]} However, inspecting the work performance is inevitably concerned with people’s face.

It is quite natural for people to be sensitive about their reputation and face, which has nothing to be ashamed of. A man who had no sense of shame and never feel guilty will be labeled as “an impudent person”. When in assessment and review meeting, Chinese people tend to associate it with the face matter, such as “he is the one who did it so he should feel ashamed” or “this criticism is directed against me to make me lose my face”. Face saving has been rooted inside Chinese people. The ancient sages had a good understanding of the nature of Chinese people and have been constantly reminding people that the only effective way to make review is to “practice self-reflection and try to find fault in oneself in order to correct them.

Zengzi^[6] has made enlightening remarks, “Daily, I examine myself from three perspectives. Have I done my best when doing things for others? Have I been trustworthy in dealing with friends? Have I revised the lessons I have been taught?”^[7]

Confucius advocates that “a gentlemen is not a tool to be used at anyone’s will”^[7], and the subordinates who are blindly obedient to the order from his superior, will be looked down upon and

be called “the willing slaves” or “the yes-man”. Also, Confucius once remarked that “if you serve your master with too much courtesy, you will be called a brown-noser”. Apparently, the Chinese do disapprove of such kind of behavior, even looking upon currying favor, flattering or soft-soaping as immoral. For the Chinese, the healthy attitude is “as the leader he should be kind to his men, as the subordinate, he should be loyal to the leader.” Being loyal has to take self-discipline as the foundation. Imagine, if a person fails to practice self-discipline, how can he be reasonably loyal to the leader, and to the company as well?

Prof. Zeng argues that the self-disciplined people are expected to achieve what Confucius says in *The Analects*, “When you see a wise person better than you, try to equal them; when you see an unwise person not as well as people expect, reflect upon yourself to see if you have any flaws in your character or any inadequacy in your work in order to improve or correct them.”^[7]

To most Chinese people, admitting their own mistakes can be a threat to his face which is what they are most concerned about. Hence, they will make all kinds of excuses to shirk their responsibility, only to leave them labeled “unreasonable stubborn men” or “shameless men”. This kind of people are what the Chinese dislike most.

How to achieve a balancing point: to save face and meanwhile avoid going so far as to become “the shameless man”? As Confucius said, “A man who has committed a mistake and doesn't correct it, is committing another mistake”.^[7] To err is human. Therefore, as long as you dare to make practical self-criticism and try to avoid repeating the mistakes, you will save face but not lose face. Therefore, Prof. Zeng suggests that whenever a mistake occurs, be the first to stand out and admit it, which will relieve others of their nervousness about the face matter, and make them more willing to admit their own mistakes later. Through a group discussion and introspection, the mistake can be identified more easily and corrected more effectively.

If all employees are able to be brave enough to acknowledge their shortcomings and mistakes in the staff performance appraisal, it would become easier for them to know well what kind of mistakes they have made, what kind of responsibility they should take, and what kind of work they should do to correct them. In this way, other comrades in the group can draw lessons from it so as to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future. Contrarily, if people hold a defensive attitude and put the blame on each other, then nobody would realize what really goes wrong, and they would most probably commit the same mistakes again. So, Prof. Zeng suggests never casting the first stone and shift the blame onto others, which can do nothing but force the others to defend themselves by evading the responsibility or even turn against you and reprimand you.

Chinese people have a stubborn belief that “it takes two to make a quarrel”, which can be attributed to the fact that they prefer “two-in-one” approach more than “either-or” approach when handling things. The Chinese believe in the power of the collective, success cannot be achieved by only one person, in the same way, work failure cannot, most probably, be brought about by one individual either, but by a group of people except with different degrees. Now that the responsibility should be taken by all, so if there is the first one stepping out to admit the mistake, others will be encouraged to follow him.

Mencius' teachings may help to shed some light on this problem, as he proposed the principle that “the superior should take the initiative in doing things, hence setting a model for his subordinates to follow”^[8]. Similarly, being the first to admit mistakes is an encouragement that propels his subordinates to follow, and confess their faults as well. As for Confucius, what worries him most is that “a man has committed a mistake but does not correct it”^[7]. In modern management, only when people have their face saved in admitting mistakes will they make a determined effort to do it. Interestingly, supposing the superiors take the initiative in admitting mistakes, the subordinates and other employees would view following the superiors to shoulder responsibility as an honorable deed or a “saving face action”, thus eager to do introspection to fix timely the mistakes they have made.

Even Confucius wishes that he could avoid “making grave mistakes”^[8], since it's quite natural for people to make trivial slips. In China, however, making even the slight mistakes seems to be unpardonable nowadays, as we often scold people saying “how muddle-headed you are as to constantly make the small mistakes?” On the subordinate's part, he may interpret these words in a

totally different way and come to the conclusion that “the more I do, the more mistakes I’ll make, and the more angry my boss will get, then I might as well do nothing and make no mistakes”. Therefore, Prof. Zeng suggests that a good superior should allow his subordinates to make mistakes.^[9] For those small mistakes, as long as not deliberately done, it is best not to reprimand or punish them. Only by taking a tolerant attitude to subordinates can the subordinates admit their mistakes without hesitancy.

Laying Equal Stress on Public and private Performance Assessment

In the western management, staff performance appraisal mainly focuses on rewarding based upon the contributions the staff has made, and the more contributions he has made, the more rewards he will get, which, however, would inevitably leave some employees in low spirits thinking they have to face the “threat” of dismissal if their work performance is evaluated as “far from satisfactory”. Such a worry, however, seems to be justifiable. After all, even such a high-ranking executive like Lee Iacocca who is thought of as “a man who saved Chrysler”, got fired by Ford Motor Company, let alone those average employees.

Prof. Zeng thinks that Chinese employees are very modest, and not willing to boast of their credit in public, as they know that credit should be attributed to leadership rather than their own. Supposing they really have made some contributions in the work, they will still think that contributions have to be acknowledged by the team leader. The employees should at first politely refuse to take the credit even if their meritorious service has been recognized, which may leave an impression to the manager that you are very modest, and then make the manager feel comfortable and insist on rewarding him. Otherwise, if the employees kept boasting about their contributions, the manager might be uncomfortable, and even see such a behavior as a possible threat to his authority by trying to write off his contributions if he feels it necessary. Therefore, Chinese staff generally focus more on working hard rather than striving for credit.

In view of the situation where one craves for credit yet dares not to do so after taking into account a lot of concerns, on the other hand, everybody wants to ask for the manager’s recognition for their hard work of 365 days yearly, but feels much unsatisfied because such an ordinary effort most often goes unrewarded. Accordingly, to Prof. Zeng, staff performance appraisal in Chinese style management should be conducted in both public and private ways simultaneously.^[1]

In a public setting, the performance assessment mainly focuses its attention on the annual work people have done, and everyone is put on the same pay scale, with the performance bonus given to people based on the seniority, which seems quite just, and no one would lose face in this kind of performance assessment system. The public performance assessment, though seeming just, might be unfair in essence, since those with less satisfactory work performance may get the same reward with those with satisfactory work performance. Besides, such an evaluation approach may promote the thinking that the longer one stays in the office, the higher bonus he is likely to get. So he may slack at work and count days to see how his bonus grows with his seniority.

The private performance assessment, however, is conducted according to the employee’s real contributions he has made, so the bonus pay often reflects big differentiation. However, this seemingly unequal approach fosters a sense of true fairness, and can be regarded as a healthy complementary mechanism for the public performance assessment. Since it is conducted privately rather than openly, if one employee gets more than others, it would not make others lose face because of the “dark” operation. Supposing even if there are some employees who have learned that others get more, they would only make some complaints to his family, accusing his supervisor of being unjust and “apparently showing favoritism toward others”, and then everything is all right.

Zeng believes that only one of these two approaches alone cannot help to arrive at a perfect performance assessment condition, while integrating both of them can get a better result in addressing the assessment problems. In the public assessment mechanism, the same standard bonus is issued according to the employee’s seniority. In this way, when an employee takes his bonus home, he wouldn’t lose face, since his bonus is not less than others, which shows to his family that he goes to work every day, does his job very well just like others. If the family heard something about other

people who have got a big bonus in private, the employee can save his face by saying, “Don’t believe it, no such thing.” But in his heart, he will make up his mind to get a bigger private bonus next year. When he succeeds in getting a bigger bonus because of working hard, he can boast, “last year I saw Li needs money, so I gave credit to him. This year with a little effort, you see, the big bonus is immediately available to me.” How proud he is. The example above shows the advantage of the public assessment mechanism. In the private assessment mechanism, however, differentiating the individual bonus pay according to the individual’s respective contribution to the work will help incentivize those excellent employees to work harder with higher bonus, and stimulate those less devoted and lazy ones to put in extra time and energy to work in order to catch up with the advanced employees. The combination of the two assessment mechanisms can constitute a perfect evaluation system in the Chinese style management soil.

Prof. Zeng emphasizes that one of the most important things Chinese people care most is “face problem”.^{[1][10]} Let the employees have the “face”, everything is OK, even they get a small bonus and criticized privately, they will readily accept it. Otherwise, even if they are treated fairly, the employees still feel they have been wronged, and it is unjust. How to avoid such unhealthy emotional responses and complaints from the employees?

When the manager is planning the performance assessment for his employees at the end of the year, he can’t merely do it with a “settle-account” manner, to praise those who make achievements or reprimand those who are less devoted. A smart manager has to know how to motivate the employees to devote themselves to work at the beginning of the year, so they don’t have to wait until the end of the year in a “clean house” manner to pick the employees up for their underperformance, which is of no good for the work of the company. In fact, December is the time for the superior to have an individual talk with the employees about their past year’s work and their future work expectations of the coming year. In the private talk, the manager can frankly point out where the employees have done well and where they have not done very well based upon the fact. Even if the criticism is very harsh, the employees will readily accept, because no “face” problem is involved. No matter whether the employees have finished the tasks well or not according to the original plan set at the beginning of the year, the superior should then focus his attention on telling his subordinates the expectations clearly, and provide measurable assessment criteria for them to follow. Besides, he should make it clear that if the employees succeed in finishing the work according to the standard of the work expectations, they will be rewarded accordingly. To Prof. Zeng, setting expectations through a clear and specific communication and promising proper incentives are the effective ways to motivate the employees to perform at a higher level next year.

Apparently, the social purpose of the performance appraisal mechanism is to “save people” rather than to “kill people”. Recognizing the employee’s accomplishment can motivate them forward. However, don’t hurry to “kill” (either by replacing him or firing him) the employees because of their bad performance at the performance appraisal. Rather, “save” them by setting concrete expectations for them and giving them chances to do better next year. Replacing or firing an employee can cause losses to the business, whereas taking necessary steps to help them do better is more likely to yield satisfactory results.

Prof. Zeng thinks that the American favor individual appraisal and the Japanese prefer team performance appraisal. What about the Chinese? The Chinese place their emphasis on both individual appraisal and team performance appraisal with team performance appraisal being the priority. Concretely speaking, they usually start from team performance appraisal before they move on to the performance evaluation of every individual, which proves to be quite effective in reducing the employees’ resistance to the appraisal.

Conclusion

This paper has explained and discussed Prof. Zeng Shiqiang’s viewpoints on the staff performance appraisal. The social purpose of the performance appraisal aims at helping the employees make relevant self-criticism to see if their work has successfully met the planned requirements, and what

places need to be corrected and made better, so that they are clear about their direction or goal of advancement to strive for the best by making continuous progress. Chinese culture makes Chinese people care most about their “face”, namely their pride. Based upon the context of Chinese style management, Prof. Zeng puts forward some suggestions such as encouraging self-introspection and paying equal attention to the private performance assessment.

Invisible and overall supervision is regarded as one of the most important characteristics in the people oriented Chinese management. Prof. Zeng believes that one of the advantages of the people-oriented management lies in that people’s change tends to be faster and more complicated than the changes in things if the internal and external circumstances make changes, which often results in changes in things. Then supervising people can yield higher efficiency. From this perspective, human factor is especially important and can be regarded as the decisive power in many conditions in deciding the success of business management.

Chinese people are sensitive about their reputation and face. However, inspecting the work performance is inevitably concerned with people’s face. Thus in the staff performance appraisal, people-oriented management should pay great attention to the staff’s face. The best way to achieve the satisfactory result of the staff performance appraisal is to encourage employees to make self-introspection to become self-disciplined employees, and develop a habit of examining themselves constantly just as Confucius advocates by acknowledging mistakes bravely and try to correct them and avoid repeating them, which would bring about a harmonious atmosphere between the superior and subordinates and make them do their work better.

Besides, staff performance appraisal in Chinese style management should be conducted in both public and private ways simultaneously. The reason is that public staff performance appraisal mainly focuses its attention on the annual work people have done, and the same standard bonus is issued according to the employee’s seniority. In the private assessment mechanism, however, differentiating the individual bonus pay according to the individual’s respective contribution to the work will help incentivize those excellent employees to work harder. Since it is conducted privately rather than openly, if one employee gets more than others, it would not make others lose face. What’s more, if the superior frankly points out where the employees haven’t done well based upon the fact, the employees would readily accept it because no “face” problem is involved. Therefore, the combination of the two assessment mechanism constitutes a perfect evaluation system in the Chinese style management soil.

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