

THE FRAMEWORK OF LEADER'S SKILLS IN LEAN MANUFACTURING IN THE CHINESE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY – EMPIRICAL RESULTS

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Abstract

Background. China is one of the most attractive investment destinations for the biggest global automotive players, and Lean Manufacturing (LM) is their most established business improvement methodology enhancing the automotive industry's performance. Despite intensive investments in LM, the automotive industry is still not able to employ Lean philosophy effectively at Chinese locations.

Research aims. Theoretical and empirical questions arise on how to improve the situation in terms of Lean Manufacturing performance at Chinese locations. Thus, in the paper, we pose that if we assume leadership is the crucial enabler in LM implementation, there is an urgent need to address the conditions of Chinese leadership.

Method. Basing on the content analysis of existing job offers we estimated the alignments of demands of the job posed by the unique context of Chinese culture with the profiles of candidates that are mostly wanted.

Key findings. The content analysis revealed that in job offers there is an underestimation of cultural intelligence skills. The aforementioned analysis led us to the proposition of how to improve leadership in China by introducing a model of Chinese leadership center development denoted as a "China Lean Center". The Center can be used by practitioners to develop in-house skillful and culturally aware leaders in order to enable successful implementation of LM at Chinese locations.

Keywords: Lean Manufacturing, Automotive Industry, China, Culture, Leadership

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

China is one of the most attractive investment destinations for the biggest global automotive players, and Lean Manufacturing (LM) is their most prominent business improvement methodology improving the automotive industry's performance (Cua, McKone, & Schroeder, 2001; Shah & Ward, 2003). Despite intensive investments in LM at Chinese locations, the automotive industry is still not able to employ Lean philosophy effectively. A puzzling phenomenon is that despite having the necessary know-how regarding LM and in particular operational instruments (van Dun & Wilderom, 2012), automotive MNCs are still not able to effectively implement Lean philosophy in their Chinese locations (Bolbach, 2012).

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Obviously, something has been overlooked by practitioners that directly impacts the success or failure of the transfer of LM. Thus, the purpose of this article is to explore what is posing big hurdles to implementing Lean techniques in Chinese locations. So the general research question we will address in this paper is the following: how can lean production systems that were adapted and refined by Western companies be rolled out successfully in China?

We will answer this research question by focusing on leadership as the foundation underpinning successful LM implementation (Found & Harvey, 2006; Heymans, 2002). We will try to estimate whether wanted skills from potential leaders at Chinese locations in the automotive industry align with the leadership needs created by Chinese culture. In so doing, we will apply the content analysis of official job offers for a leader's position. Furthermore, we will propose remedies that could address identified discrepancies.

As pointed out by Schein (2010), whether or not a culture is "good" or "bad", "functionally effective", or not, depends not on the culture alone but on the relationship of the culture to the environment in which it exists. This is why Lean culture provides no universal solutions, only a universal ideology that must be translated into the specific cultural context. Lean must be adapted to the environment, in which it should work – namely the national culture. Thus, the answer to the formulated key research question how to roll out lean production successfully in China boils down to: cultural adaptation. Our theoretical positioning is reinforced if we refer to the definition of Lean as an integrated socio-technical system aimed at eliminating all kinds of waste (Shah & Ward, 2003) encountered for instance by automotive manufacturing. In regard to this definition, the conceptual angle of the paper will revolve around social aspects rooted in culture.

In the case of adapting Lean and familiarizing the staff with Lean culture, the crucial role is played by the leader, who is affecting other team members' behavior in order to achieve the goals. As Hexter and Woetzel (2007) stated, companies in China can adopt lean techniques rapidly enough only if strong leaders set the direction, give workers the know-how they need, and establish effective incentives. Thus, the paper relies on the premise that successful LM requires leadership support (Koenigsaecker, 2012).

However, it is common knowledge that in China, there is a need to improve the level of leadership (Gallo, 2011; Bachman, 1992). The reason is the relative short period during which China has been a part of the global market economy. This has not yet allowed China to develop its leaders properly, as Gao Yong, the CEO of Career International explains:

Westerners have had a long time to develop their leaders. In China, we have only been at this for about 10 years. The process is going to take much longer. We need more



time to have enough good leaders to run our companies. But for now, our existing managers will do the best they can by reading, observing, and gaining more education. Coaching can also help and we need to do it more (Gallo, 2011).

The reason why cultural awareness of leaders is pivotal lies in the rudimentary capability of a leader to be able to create trust in their Chinese subordinates-followers (Grudzewski, Hejduk, Sankowska, & Wańtuchowicz, 2008) and to respond to the local unique human resources needs (Leung, 2012).

Unfortunately, the home country bosses are often unwilling to take the time needed for developing company's Chinese leaders. Instead, they hire experienced Western leaders, without taking into account that their experience was gained elsewhere than China. As Yi Min, Director of Global Leadership and Organizational Development in Lenovo, stated:

Until we can develop more Chinese leaders, we will need to continue to depend on foreigners. But for these foreigners to be successful here, they must understand Chinese culture and learn to incorporate the wisdom from this ancient culture into their business practices. Foreign leaders who just try to impose their Western practices here will be seen as arrogant and foolish and they will not succeed (Gallo, 2011).

Apparently, what has been overlooked by international automotive corporations is the decisive role of culture. This calls for new research and approaches to fill this gap.

Chinese people and Western people work primarily guided by very different motives (Kulich & Henry, 2012), with the result that they work completely differently. The main problem lies not in the differences itself, but in the lack of awareness thereof of Western people employed in Chinese factories. Leaders of non-Chinese origin are often not aware of the cultural gap, which hinders mutual understanding or relations. Therefore, in the first place, Western companies must acknowledge the fact that, in order to be successful in China, leaders need to understand the motives of Chinese people so that they are able to guide them. The aim of this paper is to empirically identify the gap between the requirements of leadership qualities or skills essential when working at Chinese locations and the prevailing of leaders' profiles which suit to the available job offers in a recruitment process. This comparison would enable us to determine what kind of leaders for Chinese locations are recently looked for and contrast this picture with the actual requirements of the Chinese cultural context, so to answer a fundamental question, of whether there is an alignment of leadership demands at China locations with wanted profiles of candidates for a given job.

For this reason, the first step of this research was to verify automotive MNCs' degree of awareness of the importance of cultural intelligence in candidates for leadership positions at Chinese locations. The MNCs' job offers at Chinese locations were considered a very reliable source of in-



formation in this context as MNCs are highly experienced in international operations. Based on available written job offers, a set of most wanted skills for a leader was created, which made it possible to assess the mentioned degree of awareness and the degree of the alignment between wanted skills and requirements for leadership jobs in the Chinese cultural context.

METHOD

Berg (2001) aptly described the content analysis as the passport to listening to the words of the text and understanding the perspectives of the producer of these words. By carrying out this type of analysis based on the found job offers it was possible to analyze closely the words of global automotive companies leadership practices and to understand their general idea of a leader working in a Chinese location of theirs. We used the content analysis on the text of job offers. The advantage of this method of analysis is that this is an unobtrusive technique in which the creator of the job offer was not aware of the fact that the message was being analyzed for research needs (Weber, 1990). The text, an official job offer, was taken from the existing recruitment practice in which it had been evolved.

The case study search and data selection process were performed in October 2013. Our unit of data collection is a single job offer, while a unit of analysis is a skill wanted from a candidate for a position. Job offers have been selected on automotive MNCs' career websites based on the five following screening criteria:

1. Job relates to the automotive industry;
2. The employer is a global company;
3. Job is at the company's location in China;
4. Position is holding leadership responsibilities;
5. Employee is working directly with people of Chinese descent.

The selection process was partly limited by the language barrier, in the case of careers websites available only in Chinese, as well as the lack of job offers available on non-Chinese websites (e.g. in the cases of Toyota and Ford, whose careers websites are available only in Chinese, as well as the lack of job offers, as in the case of Daimler, who published only three internship offers in China). Nevertheless, a collection of cases were established. A total of twenty-six cases were collected, of which twenty-four job offers were from car-manufacturing companies (VW, GM, BMW, Volvo, Porsche) and two from consulting firms in the car industry (McKinsey, Staufen).

Firstly, the twenty-six matching job offers were analyzed word by word and codes were assigned to all relevant hard and soft skills identified in the job offer. Secondly, the frequencies of codes were counted, thereby revealing the importance attached to specific skills that were required from a candidate for the position of a leader.

RESULTS

Through the open coding process a set of fifty-six codes came into being, which were grouped into: forty soft skills codes (S) and sixteen hard skills codes (H). They received a tag concerning a level of importance from extremely important to not at all important based on their counted frequency as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Levels of Importance for Interpretation of Calculated Code's Amount

Calculated code's amount	Level of importance
$0 \leq \text{code's frequency} < 5$	Not at all important
$5 \leq \text{code's frequency} < 10$	Slightly important
$10 \leq \text{code's frequency} < 20$	Important
$20 \leq \text{code's frequency} < 30$	Very important
$30 \leq \text{code's frequency} < 40$	Extremely important

Source: own elaboration.

The summary of results of content analysis are in Table 2. From among them five codes were clearly standing out regarding their exceptional frequency of occurrence in the analyzed job offers.

Based on the skills frequency analysis (Weber, 1990) and its underlying assumption that the most frequently appearing codes reflect the greatest area of concern for a job offer creator, it can be concluded that global automotive companies consider the following skills as the most important in a candidate for the leadership position at Chinese locations:

1. Organizational skills (S);
2. Leadership skills (S);
3. Analytical skills (S);
4. University degree (H);
5. Work experience (H).

Although the resulting requirements for such a candidate are all essential when considering a leadership position, they are still insufficient regarding the special work environment present in China. Based on the job offers found, one may assume that these Western companies do not seem to pay much attention to the cultural intelligence of a leader. Therefore, the leaders that tend to be recruited lack a reliable basis for a full understanding of Chinese subordinates' motives. As a result they are unable to lead team members when implementing LM, thus failure is unavoidable as LM is significantly rooted in culture (Rygoska & Sankowska, 2014).



Table 2. The Summary of the Content Analysis for Job Offers

Level of importance	Soft skill code (code's AMT)	Hard skill code (code's AMT)
Extremely important	Organizational skills (38); Leadership skills (34); Analytical skills (31)	
Very important	Accept responsibility (27); Team player (26); Communication skills (25); Independent judgment and initiative (23); Ability to communicate across all levels (22)	University degree (22); Work experience (20)
Important	Self-driven (18); Self-initiative (17); Professional commitment (17); Interpersonal skills (17); "Find and fix it" mentality (17); Creative, innovative (17); Ability to coach/mentor others (17); Work with limited direction from supervisor/ without supervision (15); Future oriented (14); Strategic thinker (13); Persistent (11); Work in a global, multi-cultural environment (11); Work in multi-disciplinary environment (11) Self-confidence (10)	Familiar with (Chinese) Automotive Industry (16); Computer skills (14); Native English speaker (14); Good German language skills (12); Project management knowledge (12); Native Mandarin speaker (11); Lean management/production knowledge (10)
Slightly important	Problem solving skills (9) Learning from experience (9) Bridge communication gap (9) Willing to travel (8) Detail-oriented (7) Customer focus (7) Technical understanding/skills (6) Open attitude (6) Holistic view (6) Care (and respect) to subordinates, develop their skills and competencies (6) Adaptability, change acceptance (6) Honesty, ethics (5) Fairness, objectivity (5) Accepting authority, loyalty (5)	Good English language skills (8) Company insider (7); Good Chinese language skills (5)
Not at all important	Stress-resistant (4) Negotiation skills (4) Business acumen (4) Willing to develop/learn (1)	International education/work experience (4); Cultural insider (3); Native German speaker (3); Driver license (2)

Note: Numbers in parentheses reflect how many times a particular skill appeared in the considered job offers.

Source: own elaboration.

Among the reported codes, there were also skills that reflected respect for cultural differences. However, their reported frequency was too low to



consider them standard requirements for a job. Putting more stress on such skills could help automotive MNCs to recruit culturally intelligent leaders, and by this ensure a mutual understanding between leaders and followers resulting in successful LM implementation. Seeing that, below there is a proposition of list of both soft and hard skills that must be possessed by a leader embedded in Chinese context.

The aforementioned postulated critical skills include the following soft skills and hard skills. The soft skills comprise of:

1. Ability to coach/mentor others (S): Western people see leadership as a form of guidance. Therefore this skill is seen as a very basic feature of a leader and was certainly left out in the offers because of its obviousness. However the Chinese perceive leadership as authority and power. Hence automotive MNCs should highlight this skill in order to make Chinese people rethink their concept of leadership.
2. Ability to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty (S): It is fundamental in the Chinese environment, and something completely unfamiliar in the Western environment. Probably it is not included in the analyzed job offers exactly for these two reasons – the obviousness for Chinese and the unawareness of Westerners. Therefore automotive MNCs should stress this skill in order to make Western people prepare themselves for the unique cultural environment.
3. Accept responsibility (S): Different concepts of leadership entail different attitudes to accepting responsibility. Chinese workers tend to like being directed and not having to take responsibility. But in the case of a leader, a successful candidate simply must be willing to take responsibility.
4. “Find and fix it” mentality (S): According to the idea of Lean there should be a demand for self-directed leaders, who know what needs to be done and act without being told by others. This skill is hindered by the mentioned unwillingness to take responsibility.
5. Ability to communicate across all levels (S): Due to the Chinese cultural custom that superiors are expected to give orders – their subordinates are expected to understand and carry out those orders without questioning them. The leader must be able to overcome these culturally instilled barriers towards superiors to be able to create two-way communication with them. This is the only way to implement LM successfully. Mistakes and problems cannot be left unsaid. The crucial point is to find the appropriate way of communication.



The hard skills encompass:

1. Native English & Mandarin speaker (H): The candidate for a leadership position should be able to communicate fluently in both English and in Chinese. The reasons being the automotive companies' "globality" and the direct work with people of Chinese origin. The leader in question must communicate both with the locals on-site as well as with employees from other locations in the world.
2. Cultural insider (H): Regarding in-depth knowledge of the culture that the candidate should have, it is either not considered important or is an obvious requirement for employers from analyzed cases. It's hard to conclude whether it was left out on purpose as irrelevant or because of its obviousness. But regardless of the job candidate's origin, in the case of working as the leader of Chinese employees – knowledge and an understanding of their culture is essential for being effective.
3. Lean management/production knowledge (H): Most surprising was the relatively low frequency of LM knowledge among the requirements in the analyzed offers. To be more specific, only in ten of the twenty-six job offers for leadership positions was Lean manufacturing knowledge required. It is a very clear indication for the "resistance" to, and problems in, the implementation of Lean to factories of the automotive industry in China. Automotive MNCs must become aware of this skill as it is essential for a leader implementing LM.

To sum up, it may be concluded that the MNCs' degree of awareness of the importance of cultural intelligence in candidates for leadership positions at Chinese locations, and of LM knowledge, is very low and undervalued by recruiters at least when based on official documents such as job offers. We are not able to analyze on-site recruitment practices based on job offer texts as well as the level of misalignment between codified, in the form of job offer requirements, and demands actually appreciated by recruiting staff. However, it is likely that job offers express their greatest concerns. Additionally, for future research a longitudinal study can be planned to check stability of job demands.

A possible solution might be a rethinking of requirements towards candidates for leadership positions. However, in the face of the fact that it is too hard to find suitably qualified leaders of Chinese descent and Westerners who are able to understand the Chinese mentality, recruiting the perfect candidate seems unfeasible. Therefore one might consider training chosen employees instead of searching for new ones. The question is how to do it. In the next section we would like to address this urgent issue.



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As Conner (2004) rightly pointed out

Adopting a new paradigm (new way of looking at things) like Lean Manufacturing is a bit like changing religions. There are many stumbling blocks and reasons to backslide in this new “faith”: lack of knowledge, discouragement from others, old habits and behaviors, along with countless other reasons.

Thence, employees in Chinese locations of global automotive companies should constantly practice Lean. Some experiential, hands-on training programs, the art of practicing, would be the most efficient way of helping to deepen this new “faith” and continuously build “Lean-qualifications” in employees. Boden (2008) stated that

multinational companies such as Motorola, Ericsson, Siemens, and Procter & Gamble have [...] established their own internal universities, business schools or management training centers in China, where courses on standard business topics such as effective supervision, marketing, financial management, business strategy, and human resources management are offered.

This statement and the gap between leadership requirements and job offers provoked the idea of a culturally adapted center, where employees can practice Lean – the “China Lean Center” (CLC).

This mechanism of developing Lean core personnel is illustrated in Figure 1. Firstly, high-potential employees who hold positions at a lower level would be selected. Secondly, the selected promising personnel would undergo in-house training at the CLC, where they can develop their leadership competencies and deepen their LM knowledge in practice. Thirdly and finally, such trained workers would be placed in a pool of successor candidates from which the future leaders should be selected.

The Center would be a huge investment, but it is also a guarantee of the company's development in the direction of Lean over the long term, which is needed in Chinese locations to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage, as the resources for inexpensive production factors are being depleted. It would be a chance for instinctive adaptation of LM to the national culture through every day work on the development of CLC. It is a long-term investment, so the executives of the Chinese location must be patient. The process of developing Lean core personnel will take some time, but the results will be worth the wait – a cadre of managers who not only embody LM but also can teach it to others.

Research has been performed in order to find similar projects which have actually been executed by global automotive companies in their Chinese locations. To the best of our knowledge, there is a complete absence of such centers established directly by automotive companies.



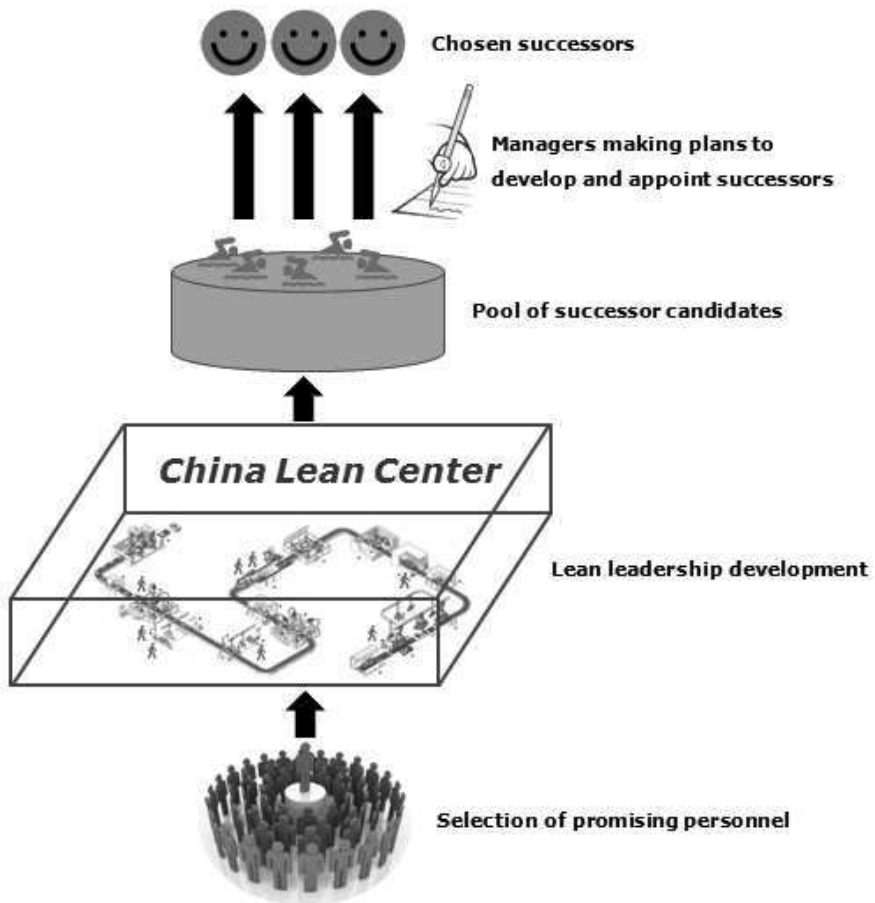


Figure 1. Mechanism to Develop Lean Core Personnel

Source: own elaboration.

Whereas, it has been found that a center of a similar intention was built by the global management consulting firm McKinsey & Company – the “China Center for Operations Excellence” (CCOE). According to the CCOE brochure:

the Center offers a unique experiential learning platform using a systematic, step-by-step capability development program through (...)a state-of-the-art model factory (...) [where] three [inter-connected] small-scale production lines simulate a real production environment(...). The machining line manufactures parts for the air valves produced in the discrete line, which are in turn used to produce iced tea in the process line.

The CCOE offers three tailor-made training programs aimed at producing operations experts, or to supplement existing in-house operations academies or on-going transformation efforts. The main advantages of



these programs are undoubtedly: giving employees the opportunity to test their hypotheses on which changes will produce which consequences by using Lean methods directly on the production lines, and providing coaching – not just answers – by experts leading the programs.

However, out-house training also has a lot of disadvantages that are likely to contribute to the inefficient implementation of Lean to car factories in China. Its main weaknesses are pointed out below:

1. Learning based on a non-automotive production line, multi-sector solutions;
2. Knowledge is assigned to individual employees (who don't take this knowledge with them);
3. Costs per person stand in the way of training many employees;
4. Company-unrelated, lower level of employee engagement;
5. Access to experts with lean knowledge is limited;
6. No permanent guanxi circles between employees participating in the training;
7. Programs are led by out-house experts – lower level of respect.

The proposed idea of CLC refers to training programs that would be done in a way similar to CCOE, but in-house. This would turn all the disadvantages into benefits, which are explained in points below:

1. Learning based on automotive production line, specialized automotive solutions;
2. Knowledge is assigned to company (which constantly educates employees);
3. Costs are an investment into company's intangibles;
4. Part of the company, higher level of employee engagement;
5. Access to experts with lean knowledge is unlimited;
6. Builds permanent guanxi circles between employees participating in the training;
7. Programs are led by in-house experts, higher level of respect.

The China Lean Center would be an ideal way to educate future management teams and appointing candidates from inside the organization – personnel characterized by potential. Such individuals should be educated in the CLC and present managers should prepare plans for their promotion and further education.

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STRUKTURA UMIEJĘTNOŚCI PRZYWÓDCZYCH W LEAN MANUFACTURING W CHIŃSKIM PRZEMYSŁE MOTORYZACYJNYM – WYNIKI BADAŃ

Abstrakt

Tło badań. Chiny to jedno z miejsc o najwyższej atrakcyjności inwestycyjnej dla największych globalnych graczy przemysłu motoryzacyjnego, zaś Lean Manufacturing (LM) to najlepiej sprawdzająca się metoda, która usprawnia ich procesy. Pomimo intensywnych inwestycji w LM, przemysł motoryzacyjny nadal nie jest w stanie skutecznie wdrożyć filozofii Lean w chińskich lokalizacjach.

Cele badań. Pojawiają się pytania natury teoretycznej i empirycznej dotyczące możliwości poprawy sytuacji w zakresie wydajności Lean Manufacturing w chińskich lokalizacjach. Zatem, w artykule wychodząc z założenia, iż przywództwo jest kluczowym czynnikiem umożliwiającym wdrażanie LM, zidentyfikowano pilną potrzebę uwzględnienia kwestii uwarunkowań chińskiego przywództwa.

Metodyka. Opierając się na analizie treści istniejących ofert pracy oszacowane zostało dopasowanie wymogów stawianych kandydatom wynikających z kultury chińskiej do profili kandydatów, którzy są najczęściej poszukiwani.

Kluczowe wnioski. Analiza wykazała, że w ofertach pracy nie doceniano inteligencji kulturowej. Na podstawie powyższej analizy opracowano propozycję ulepszeń w zakresie przywództwa w Chinach poprzez wprowadzenie modelu chińskiego centrum rozwoju przywództwa o nazwie "China Lean Center". Centrum może posłużyć ekspertom do rozwoju wykwalifikowanych i kulturowo świadomych liderów spośród zatrudnionego personelu, w celu umożliwienia skutecznego wdrażania LM w chińskich lokalizacjach.

Słowa kluczowe: Lean Manufacturing, Przemysł Motoryzacyjny, Chiny, Kultura, Lider, Przywództwo, Zdolności Przywódcze, China Lean Center, Oferty Pracy

