



# Making Asia a Great Place to Work

## Transition Leadership in Asia

Steve Morris, Head Coach,  
Steve Morris Associates



A 'crisis' is an event, hitting hard, sometimes without warning and always testing one's preparedness, resolve and resilience. An event of the proportion and impact of the sudden faltering of the Asia economies can certainly be referred to as a 'crisis'. However, the multi-year-long references to the 'Asian Crisis' by media, government and businessmen suggest a far more pressing and immediate concern - the inability of nations and businesses to transition out of crisis and into a new paradigm of business reality. For many, the 'crisis' has become a crutch for poor planning, poor performance and just plain poor leadership.

Symptomatic of this is lack of trust by employees for their leaders. A recent Straits Times article referring to a survey on trust in the workplace applauded a small increase in the percentage of employees who said they trusted their employers. In fact the figures showed that almost half of all workers still do not trust their leaders – that is the

This article was published in the Economic Bulletin, the journal of the Singapore Chamber of Commerce, in May 1999.

reality. Without trust in leadership, how can we expect greater commitment and performance from employees?

Leaders need to face the new economic realities head-on so that their organizations can get back to their core function - creating value for their stakeholders. What makes leaders successful? How can we develop leaders in Asia to meet or exceed the standards for world-class leadership?

### Change or be changed

Wealth creation in Asia hasn't gone the way of the dodo - but it will be different in the next decade, and in many ways harder and less rewarding, than in the waning years of Asia's economic miracle. Economic growth rates in Asia are still expected to be higher than in the OECD. A new breed of successful business leaders in Asia will emerge in time, but for now we have the same faces that navigated (or, at the least, drove) us into the economic crisis in the first place. So what needs to change? If management decision-making was a bit 'hit and miss' in the first place, how can we now



have better decision-making and risk management than in pre-crisis days?

Management in Asia is not accustomed to gathering information, planning and decision-making under adverse conditions. After all, the current cadre of young leaders in Asia has held the helm for nearly 12 consecutive years of expansion and growth. This is not just an issue for Asian leaders; it is one for all leaders in Asia - Asians, Europeans and Americans alike.

Not only have the people who make up management not changed, in most cases management practices haven't changed either. An unfortunate exception is in the growing use of the *'let's wait and see'* approach to previously routine decisions. Such an abdication of management's core responsibility to consider and take decisive action could lead Asia into an additional round of economic slowdown. The *'do not do anything without checking with me first'*, *'let's wait and see'*, and *'let's hope things return to normal'* mindsets are all self-defeating denials of the new realities and in time will prove to be the downfall of many a leader and perhaps the businesses they lead.

That is, of course, unless the stakeholders (represented by the Board of Directors) insist that their organizations' leadership change its mindset, strategies, plans, and management systems or be changed itself. Coasting along at low-risk speeds is not a viable option for survival. More radical change is needed. Starting with the leadership approach at the top. Only if leaders are willing to accept and embrace change can the transition begin. In most cases an external catalyst will be needed for actual change to occur. What are the options for facilitating change?

### **Restructuring for growth**

Restructuring can lead to growth – if it is done in a positive, long term and visionary way. Leaders need to take the lead, to set and define the new vision for their business and to motivate people to change. The economic crisis in fact presents a unique opportunity for leaders to concentrate on what they

can do to achieve even higher levels of future performance. What can they do? Senior business and government leaders addressed this question at the Business Week Presidents Forum, held in Singapore in February 1999.

Attract and keep managerial talent was the most popular answer, in a survey of Forum participants, to the question of how they plan to achieve their financial objectives. In considering how to do this participants agreed that the key lies with the actions of leaders.

Organizations who attract and keep talented managers were found to have three distinct characteristics: trust at all levels of the workforce, corporate and individual pride and high employee collegiality. Leaders are responsible for setting and fostering this environment by developing stronger leadership, better workplaces and more capable and motivated employees. They must provide the vision and group leadership their organizations need. Those who have yet to rise to this challenge must change or be changed or company performance will continue to languish.

It is those companies who have moved on from focusing on the external factors behind the problem, to acceptance of the problem and then to how they can get on with business that have done well. Building trust and commitment, although particularly difficult in these challenging times, is the answer. Success in doing so will certainly distinguish the winners from the losers in tomorrow's workplace. If leaders nurture a high trust environment, employees can achieve peak performance and maximum motivation. Great leadership makes a company a great place to work.

What is a 'great place to work'? Are the characteristics of a great workplace universal? What differences can be expected? The research evidence highlights the quality of leadership and workplace environments as key determinants of employee motivation, performance and satisfaction, worldwide. A great leader (or manager) can dampen the detrimental effects of working for a poor

employer. Similarly, a poor leader will eventually erode employee motivation in even the greatest of companies.

**Building sandcastles at the breaker’s edge**

If a new start-up company were to form a new leadership team under the current business scenario, its financial backers would likely expect the team at the top to be savvy, decisive, strategic, innovative, and competitively aggressive with a balanced approach to risk-taking, using their collective management skills to identify low risk strategic opportunities for growth, expansion, diversification and acquisition. These are indeed promising times for such hand-picked dream teams, provided that they have the capital to back them up.

Of course there are few, if any, of these dream teams in place. Even where there are such teams, the high rate of transfer and resignation means that team composition changes occur almost immediately. Despite a strong initial team, new team members replace old team members in a haphazard way, often without regard to the need to complement the strengths and weaknesses of the rest of the team, nor even replacing the skill sets of the exiting team members. Like building sandcastles on the ocean’s edge, team building in Asia requires an ongoing effort, constant maintenance and complete rebuilding on a regular basis.

When asked to describe leadership, the Presidents Forum participants came up with a mix of positive and negative attributes such as autocratic, energetic, conservative, charismatic, compliant and visionary. In describing management and employees, however, with a few exceptions the terms were universally negative. Their perception is that management is befuddled and employees are demotivated. How can businesses prosper in this self-made low motivation environment?

*Leaders’ current views of other leaders, managers and employees in Asia*

**Leaders see other leaders as:**

Positive	Negative
Popular	Autocratic
Visionary	Corrupt
Charismatic	Traumatized
Out in front	Didactic
Communicator	Compliant
Integrator	Political
Teambuilder	Undeserving
Innovative	Paternalistic
Energetic	Directive

**Leaders see managers as:**

Positive	Negative
Hard working	Befuddled
Expert	Compliant
Team working	Bureaucratic
Helping	Cost-focused
Coaching	Myopic
	Maneuvering
	Moonlighting
	Political
	Mechanical
	Risk-averse
	Maintenance
	Nervous
	Docile
	Creating conflict

**Leaders see employees as:**

Positive	Negative
Hardworking	Stuck
	Hostages
	Submissive
	Confused
	Pragmatic
	Demotivated
	Accepting
	Risk-averse
	Nervous
	Mercenary
	Unskilled
	Docile
	Insecure
	Demoralized

Within this environment it is difficult to attract star performers and to develop and release the star potential that everyone has. What attracts and keeps star performers? Leadership, shared values, opportunity and challenge, recognition and reward are the answers given. What motivates people to perform? Clear goals, instant recognition and their boss. All these are clearly leadership issues. Leadership must take ownership and accountability for cleaning up the motivational balance sheet.

How then do leaders in Asia mobilize a team to produce when so much effort is needed just to maintain one? The sad fact is that most leaders are not investing in either team maintenance or team strength building for enhancing the team’s capacity to perform. This is despite knowing that higher performance, under increasing pressures and change and general uncertainty, is the crucial issue facing them. What then are the new skills that top teams need in order to survive and ultimately to thrive?

Some of the skills that are needed include a shift from:

Market planning	To	Scenario planning
Budget planning	To	Contingency planning
Cost justification	To	Cost/benefit analysis
Employee management	To	Employee motivation
Risk aversion and risk taking	To	Risk management
Critiquing	To	Challenging
Value adding	To	Value creation
Tell and communicate	To	Negotiate and influence
Revision	To	Envision
Managers	To	Leaders
Leaders	To	Pathfinders

The Environmental Changes - What else must they do?

- ◆ Reset timelines
- ◆ Reset returns expected
- ◆ Reassess competitive position
- ◆ Recommit to customers (a leader-driven activity not left to the front-line alone)
- ◆ Practice scenario and contingency planning (simulate

changes to currency exchange rates, economic conditions, government regulations, etc.)

- ◆ Change performance targets and measures
- ◆ Change incentive rewards (what gets paid, gets done)

**Can leaders learn to change?**

How does learning take place among the team at the top? Most leadership teams I see in Asia seem to hold themselves responsible for performance and performance only. They seem to be saying ‘we are achieving our targets, so we must be performing, therefore, there is nothing we need do differently.’

Of course the flaw in this shortsighted argument is that the targets themselves are incomplete and have tended to focus on short-term objectives like budget performance and annual objectives. Some could still argue this case while blaming the entire Asian economic crisis on currency speculation – the message being that we were managing okay before and we still are! I doubt that many investors would be comforted by this head-in-the-sand approach to learning from the Asian crisis. This self-complacency will remain in place – unless action is taken. Action is needed not only to change this now but also to help prevent its inevitable recurrence when times improve.

What action can leaders take? Before thrusting into action, they must form an external detached view of their organization and leadership team. This will generally require outside help – consultants who are coaches, i.e. expert independent observers experienced at seeing and interpreting different teams, play configurations and situations, Their detached view focuses on identifying aspects that work well and can be built upon as well as a weakness that must be strengthened. From this vantage, action plans can be drawn up and put in gear.

**The reign of a thousand days**

More than any other team member the leader needs help in assembling and resourcing the team to perform. Consider the newly designated Chief Executive of a typical organization in Asia. In a

multinational corporation that individual may have an assignment term of only three-five years before he is either rotated out or assigned a new portfolio. Asian multinational companies tend to have even shorter assignment terms for overseas postings. Even the Asian Public Sector is moving to faster rotation periods for their top executives. For example, senior civil servants in Singapore consider three years as a typical assignment duration. Some refer to this as the 'reign of a thousand days.'

This also corresponds to my observations of officer rotation patterns in the US military. For career development reasons and to prevent excessive power consolidation, senior officers are rotated every three-five years.

Therefore, a typical new leader in Asia has 1,000 days to make an organizational impact. Whatever goals are expected of the leader, by himself or others, efforts must be well on their way towards achievement in the first and second year for realization in the third. The speed at which the new leader can force the team into action is crucial to his ultimate success three years hence. There is also the issue of legacy beyond three years - that is that the future successes (and definitely the failures) are attributed to the preceding Chief Executive(s).

Typically, a new leader spends the first 100 to 200 days on familiarization – getting to know the team, the business environment, the issues, etc.; the second 100-200 days on setting/resetting goals. This is the crucial stage for distinguishing success from failure.

#### Reign of a thousand days

*Ideal – What new leaders think will happen upon their arrival or promotion.*

DAY	
0-30	I've arrived ... So what's what?
-100	Who does what and how do things work?
-200	What are we going to do, to achieve?
-300	How must we work differently to achieve our goals?
-400	What must I, the leader, do differently to help the team?
-500	Feedback and reassessment period, clear progress is visible.
-600	Team maintenance and introduction of new players.

-700	Goals virtually achieved, clear likelihood of success.
-800	Review, possible raising of goals.
-900	Achievement secured, legacy in place.
-1000	Ready to move to next goal or role.

*In Practice – What can actually happen!*

DAY	
0-200	I've arrived, don't do anything until I know what's what.
-300	How are we doing? What different things should I introduce?
-400	How are we doing? Are we achieving our goals yet?
-500	Try this now, or how about this.
-600	Everybody is not performing as a team! We need to change!
-700	How are we doing now? Still the same struggles!
-800	We need to work harder!
-900	We are not making it!
-1000	This team is incompetent! I'm out of here!

The critical points for leaders to watch during these phases are:

- ◆ whether they are managing the team rather than the individual;
- ◆ assessing performance and not just results;
- ◆ team resourcing;
- ◆ restructuring roles and risks;
- ◆ goal setting, measurement and tracking;
- ◆ adaptability to shifting resources and situations; and
- ◆ achievement rather than control.

There will always be team members who are completely unwilling to, or incapable of, yielding power, resources and responsibilities. Here, the leader must be firm in his resolve to make the best configuration of roles and assignments against individual strengths and weaknesses - playing to strength and covering weaknesses. The degree of politicking will be high. Again, the leader must reset the reward paradigm in order to achieve reallocation without strong (often subverting) resistance.

The very nature of a competitive business engenders a natural tendency towards internal competitiveness as well. It is the role of the leader to channel this competitiveness externally. As teams are more difficult to manage than are

individuals, weak leaders tend to rely on a hub and spoke approach to maintaining control. 'Come to me with a problem so that I can determine the correct response and I will give you what you need (in line with the other spokes).'

The tendency of performance monitoring is for leaders to rely on what they see, or believe, individuals are doing. This leads to 'grandstanding', 'smoke blowing' and other political maneuvers to make oneself appear to be the real contributor, many times even at a colleague's expense.

While team goals can be tracked easily enough, what often happens when team performance is lacking is that the leader quickly puts accountability back on what individuals must do - zoning out the team from the individual's frame of reference. When this happens, the individual efforts are working directly for the leader and not for the team.

A well-equipped team has a range and balance of complementary skills in advising, innovating, promoting, developing, organizing, producing, inspecting and maintaining.

An experienced leader will recognize the strength of the skill diversity on his team. Weaker leaders will tend to seek out team members with familiar temperaments and, often, similar skills. While recruiting people with similar values is fundamental, recruiting team members with similar skills is like building a one-legged stool - it's easy to put together but wobbles quickly and ultimately fails to perform.

### Business team coaching

A team coach can play a key role in helping top teams to balance themselves to achieve their goals. The coach plays a vital role in objectively guiding the leader - ensuring that he is training the team to team success and not individual success. The coach is, therefore, a mentor or personal coach for the leader, offering development advice and consultation to help the leader grow while the leader learns to grow others.

Why then do so many leaders and top teams in Asia go without coaches? Perhaps they have a view that no outside help is needed. Another explanation could be that there are simply too few people in Asia who can coach at this level. An effective coach must have credibility with Chief Executives, industry and management experience, process facilitation skills, a consultative approach, and of course well-developed coaching skills.

Some organizations are using coaches but only on a limited or ad hoc basis, for example for workshops designed to fill in a missing hole - team building, corporate planning, MBOs, balanced scorecards, Hoshin, corporate values, mission etc., but these one-off interventions tend to be process specialist and not leadership specialist.

Hence, a string of consultants is brought on-board without any one consultant holding check over the team's actual performance and, more importantly, with no one to coach or hold check on the leader to ensure that he is leading the team and not just chairing the team meeting!

Without a business team coach, there is no one to guide and to counsel the leader on his own effective styles and strategies to develop his team. In short, there is no one to ensure the *team's* success!

### A call to action

In early 1999 The Presidents Forum participants issued a call to action for leadership:

- ◆ Leadership can and must choose to have a greater impact on employee motivation (accepting that the Asian economic crisis and El Nino are both beyond their direct control).
- ◆ Leadership can and must acquire and develop new leadership styles and skills, particularly coaching.
- ◆ Leadership can and must set the tone and direction for individual performance and accountability – starting at the top.
- ◆ Leadership can and must ensure that employees are motivated to achieve while accepting more responsibility for their own development.

Great leaders come and go. There are far too few, it seems, especially now in Asia where leadership is being pushed to its limits to perform an encore version of the next Asian miracle.

Some people are naturally great leaders; for most of us, however, greatness doesn't come naturally. For most great leaders, greatness comes with effort and experience. A leadership coach can help speed up the leader's learning curve while also helping to ensure team success and organization performance.

The speed at which top teams transition to the new realities in Asia will determine their likelihood of success and, ultimately, the measure of prosperity for them and their work communities.

---

#### **About the author**

In 1998, Steve Morris founded Steve Morris Associates to assist leaders in Asia to respond to new economic and organizational challenges. Steve coaches and inspires chief executives and their teams within a multitude of cultures and industries to develop themselves and those around them to achieve personal goals, job satisfaction and business performance. He is one of a handful of coaches in Asia that specialize in helping leaders nurture and refine their command of the softer skills of people development and motivation.

#### **About the company**

International leadership consultancy Steve Morris Associates, the first dedicated leadership coaching company in Asia, assists leaders in Asia to respond to new economic and organizational challenges by forging stronger teamwork at the top of the organization and fully developing employee potential. SMA designs and conducts leadership development and feedback programs that are linked to the achievement of business goals by working directly with employees at all levels.

For further information, please contact:  
Steve Morris Associates,  
One Phillip Street #05-00, Singapore 048692  
Tel: +65 538 7228  
Fax: +65 538 1662  
Email: [headcoach@aspire.com.sg](mailto:headcoach@aspire.com.sg)  
Website: [www.aspire.com.sg](http://www.aspire.com.sg)

