

MANAGEMENT AND HUMAN RESOURCES

To Team Or Not To Team?

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Understanding the determinants of teamwork in China is integral to understanding a potential PRC strategy.

Are Chinese willing to work in teams? What factors will drive them toward or away from teamwork? The answers to these questions reveal the changes that have occurred in PRC management practices and employee relations in recent years. At the heart of these changes is Chinese employees' acceptance, to varying degrees, of Western management principles and practices.

US companies at home and elsewhere practice teamwork widely, especially in the form of self-directed teams, in which employees themselves are responsible for managing their groups and their work, and for making production-related decisions. By the mid-1990s, around 70 percent of *Fortune* 1,000 companies were relying on teams and planning to expand such usage, according to a study by the American Productivity and Quality Center in Houston, Texas. Companies organized around work teams have reported a number of benefits, including better productivity, higher-quality output, less absenteeism, less employee turnover, leaner plant structures, and substantial improvements in production-cycle time.

Chinese employees: ready for teamwork?

Whether US companies can successfully transfer the concept and practice of teamwork to China is another question. Motorola Inc. is one company that has taken the lead in introducing teamwork in China—80-90 percent of the 10,000 or so employees at its Tianjin plant work on teams, as John Sheridan reported in *Industry Week*. The plant fielded four entries among the 24 teams at the worldwide finals of Motorola's Total Customer Satisfaction competition in 1998.

Beyond the success of one company, however, there is little evidence of how teamwork is generally perceived and received in China's distinct national and business cultures. US-based human resources executives and China-based expatriate managers stand to benefit from knowing whether and to what extent Chinese culture and work attitudes either facilitate or impede teamwork in US-invested enterprises (USIEs). The findings of a recent large-scale survey on the determinants of teamwork in USIEs offer some practical implications and applications for foreign ventures in China.

The study

A 1998 study of the factors that determine the success of a team-based structure in the People's

Republic of China was both timely and enlightening not just for USIE managers, but for the study of cultural influences on teamwork in general. Chinese culture, on one hand, encompasses a collectivist orientation that emphasizes the importance of group structure and values. This orientation may support crucial aspects of teamwork such as a common purpose and cooperative effort. The importance of relationships in a collectivist society may also prompt individuals to place group (e.g., work team) interests ahead of their own. Thus traditional Chinese values may be expected to facilitate teamwork, especially when teams are formed by management and have strong appointed leaders.

On the other hand, the very elements of Chinese culture that create and sustain group attachment and conformity also support a rigid social hierarchy. Top-down control contravenes the principle and practice of true teamwork. During the Maoist era, the Communist system of workplace control reinforced other Confucian cultural and social traditions, such as highly centralized decisionmaking, poor horizontal communication, suppressed individual initiatives, and mistrust of and lack of cooperation among coworkers. To the extent that these Confucian and Communist influences linger today, they could undermine the give and take necessary for successful teamwork.

Yet China is changing in ways that make acceptance of Western management practices likely. With the loosening of state control over people's lives, and the move toward a more market-driven economy, new attitudes are developing. Younger and better-educated employees, who constitute the bulk of the workforce in USIEs, may be more individualistic and less political than older generations and thus more receptive and adaptable to US management styles. Such a departure from traditional collectivist culture may, paradoxically, may be conducive to teamwork. The study's goal, then, was to take a hard look at employee attitudes toward cultural and work-related issues, in an attempt to identify which factors contribute to or undermine Chinese employees' propensity for teamwork.

The analysis

Four USIEs in southern and central China participated in a 1998 survey on the presumed conditions and likely outcomes of teamwork. The first purpose of the study was to investigate the extent to which Chinese employees are team

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oriented. Although none of the USIEs in the study are organized around work teams, employees revealed during interviews that they had been introduced to the general concept of teamwork and identified loosely as a team according to their functional units (e.g., manufacturing, marketing) or their work sections. They tended to view teamwork more as a general principle or spirit than as an effective management practice.

Because Chinese employees in most USIEs, like the study participants, probably have only limited experience with teamwork, the study sought to determine attitudes toward teamwork by analyzing the response patterns to seven questions and statements that reflected the extent of a teamwork orientation (see Table 1).

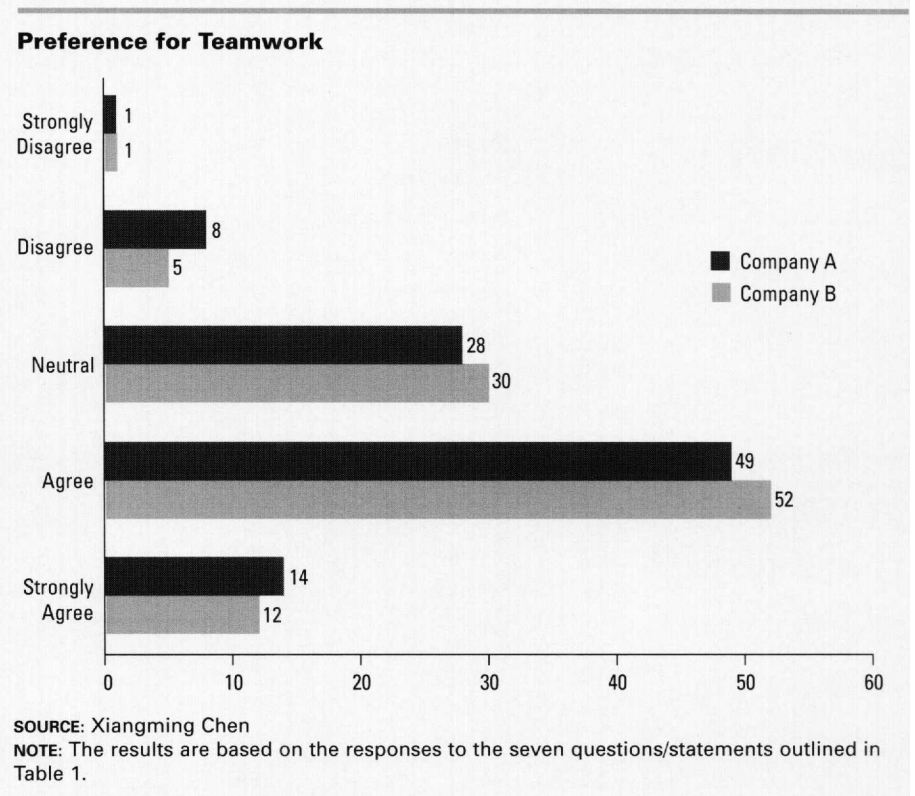
The second purpose of the study was to examine whether a preference for teamwork among Chinese employees could be predicted by China's collectivist culture, or whether other factors were more influential. US-based research has shown that task interdependence, role conflict, cooperation, communication within a group, satisfaction with coworkers, leader-member exchange, and perceived organizational support are, to varying degrees, related to team commitment. Instead of assuming that these relationships would necessarily hold in China, the study sought to reveal the relative influence of four categories of factors on teamwork: demographic and background characteristics, cultural influences, work-related conditions, and organizational support.

The respondents

Though a total of 700 employees in four USIEs (labeled A, B, C, and D) were surveyed, this article focuses only on the results for Company A and Company B—284 and 226 surveyed employees, respectively. Fifteen percent of the respondents in both companies said they had worked in temporary, project-based teams in their companies. The demographic characteristics of the respondents in companies A and B are sufficiently different to warrant a comparative analysis (see Table 2). Nearly two-thirds of Com-

pany B employees were under 25, compared to less than half of Company A.

Most respondents in Company A were born in southern China, which could indicate a slight bias in the results. Because regional variations are so strong in China, Company A's results may more accurately reflect the views of southern Chinese than those of Chinese employees overall. Almost half of Company A employees sur-



veyed were born in Guangzhou (the capital of Guangdong Province), nearly a third were born elsewhere in the province, and the remaining fifth were born in other provinces. All worked in the company's Guangzhou facilities. The bias in Company B results may be less pronounced, as the corresponding distributions were roughly a third each. Company B employees surveyed came not only from the company's Guangzhou-

Table 1
Identifying Preference for Teamwork (percentage of total respondents)

Question/statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am eager to be working with other employees on a team	1.0	16.9	43.8	6.3	31.9
I feel comfortable working with other employees on a team	0.4	5.2	24.5	11.6	58.8
I fully accept doing things with other employees in teams	0.4	3.2	28.0	9.5	58.8
I resist working with other employees on a team	13.7	57.7	19.5	1.2	8.0
I support the use of teams in this company	1.0	2.6	28.4	18.1	50.0
If given a choice, I would prefer to work as part of a team	1.0	4.6	30.8	14.5	49.1
I find that working as a member of a team increases my ability to perform effectively	0.8	6.7	26.8	14.3	51.3

SOURCE: Xiangming Chen

NOTE: Totals may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

Task interdependence is the most powerful predictor of teamwork—its positive effect is both direct and indirect through satisfaction with coworkers and willingness to cooperate.

Table 2
Respondent Characteristics (Percent)

Characteristic	Company A (284 respondents)	Company B (226 respondents)
Average age		
	27.4	25.4
Gender		
Female	27.1	72.3
Male	72.9	27.7
Marital status		
Married	46.2	24.5
Education		
Below primary school	1.5	0
Primary	0.8	0
Junior high	12.8	5.5
Senior high	49.8	35.5
Vocational	18.5	11.9
Two-year college	11.3	22.9
College	4.5	22.0
Graduate school	0.8	2.3
Job type		
Manager	1.9	9.2
Supervisor	3.8	15.6
Engineer	1.9	13.3
Technician	19.8	0
Clerical	13.0	17.0
Operator	50.8	39.0
Other	8.8	6.0

SOURCE: Xiangming Chen

based headquarters but also its Beijing and Shanghai branches. A similar diversity of work histories also made these two companies worthy of comparison.

Employees prefer teamwork—in theory

The response patterns indicate that Chinese employees are generally ready for teamwork, and offer guidance to companies interested in team development. When asked whether they had been exposed to the general concept of teamwork, for example, half of Company A respondents answered in the affirmative, as compared with less than a third of Company B respondents. Interestingly, the majority in both companies said they hoped to have teamwork experience at their current jobs.

The responses to the survey's questions, rated on a five-point scale, reveal other striking similarities between preferences in the two companies (see figure). Half of the respondents in both companies chose "Agree" to the statement that indicated the extent of their teamwork orientation, while only a small percentage of them chose

"Strongly Agree." And though both response distributions suggested an overall preference for teamwork, nearly one-third of the respondents expressed a neutral attitude.

Thus despite some considerable differences between the two companies regarding the respondents' demographic and background characteristics, their employees expressed a remarkably similar and fairly strong preference for teamwork. This suggests that employees will be generally receptive to the implementation of teamwork. However, it is possible that while the idea of teamwork is appealing, actual practice might be less satisfying than employees expect. It would be useful for future studies to focus on the actual effects of team-based systems.

Drivers of teamwork

One of the basic aims of the study was to examine the relationship between a collectivist culture and teamwork, and to find out how China's collectivist tradition fares against today's rapid modernization and rising individualism. Though the responses indicate a preference for teamwork, there are three interesting differences. First, almost 25 percent of the respondents in both companies chose the "Strongly Agree" category in answering eight questions that tap the degree of collectivist orientation, double the same response to the seven teamwork preference questions. Second, 19 percent and 29 percent had a neutral attitude toward collectivism and teamwork, respectively. Third, an average of 15 percent of the respondents expressed a non-collectivist or more individualist orientation, higher than the proportion of those not preferring teamwork.

Given the basically similar response distributions for teamwork and collectivism, it is not surprising that the two variables are positively correlated, with the more collectivist-oriented employees more likely to prefer teamwork. Whether and how collectivism matters to teamwork when other factors are taken into account is the next question.

Three other categories of factors are introduced in a multivariate analysis for predicting their relative effects on teamwork (see Table 3). Although age and education are positively correlated with teamwork, neither have an effect on teamwork in conjunction with other predictors.

Collectivism remains a solid determinant of teamwork. Four work-related factors are correlated with a preference for teamwork. A stronger perception of task interdependence leads to stronger teamwork orientation, confirming US-based research conducted by James Bishop, Dow Scott, and many others. Both the level of communication within a group and willingness to cooperate also contribute to teamwork. Satisfaction with coworkers, which measures perceived competencies of colleagues and willingness to get along with them, also fosters teamwork. This suggests that Chinese employees' willingness to

work in teams depends on both their professional and personal evaluations of coworkers.

Finally, it is worth noting that both supervisory and organizational support, which have been shown to predict team commitment by US-based research, do not predict teamwork in China. This indicates that some predictors of teamwork in China are different from those that predict teamwork in the United States.

Separate analyses for Company A and Company B largely confirm the general pattern, with only one exception—namely, that communication within a group is not a predictor.

The overall evidence suggests that culture is important, but only as one of a series of work-related factors. The relative effect of collectivism on teamwork preference among both companies ranked only third, behind willingness to cooperate and task interdependence (only slightly ahead of satisfaction with coworkers and communication within a group).

The study also revealed how the factors themselves are related to one another in determining teamwork predisposition. Satisfaction with coworkers, willingness to cooperate, and task interdependence were still positively related to preference for teamwork. Task interdependence, however, not only contributes directly to teamwork, but also leads to both satisfaction with coworkers and willingness to cooperate, which in turn lead to teamwork. The direct and indirect effects of task interdependence reveal a pragmatic attitude among Chinese employees toward teamwork, which is based on an integrated assessment of workplace conditions.

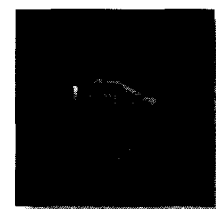
By this analysis, then, Chinese appear to identify collectivism with the more pragmatic factors of task interdependence and cooperation in the

workplace, and not necessarily with teamwork directly. The study shows that, contrary to prevailing views, just being collectivist is not sufficient to predispose Chinese workers to teamwork, as those who label China collectivist might expect. It may be that Chinese employees' belief in and understanding of collectivism might have weakened or changed to such an extent that cultural values seem to take a back seat to several critical work-related attitudes, in fostering teamwork in China.

Practical management implications: more than just culture

To summarize the findings, a majority of Chinese employees prefer teamwork. Although older and better-educated employees are slightly more team oriented, age and education do not make a difference when cultural and work-related factors are taken into account. The determinants of employees' preference for teamwork include both cultural and work-related factors. A more rigorous analysis, however, has shown that collectivism functions primarily as a cultural backdrop. Collectivism can be linked positively with teamwork when combined with willingness to cooperate. Among work-related factors, task interdependence is the most powerful predictor of teamwork—its positive effect on teamwork is both direct and indirect through satisfaction with coworkers and willingness to cooperate.

The findings of this study carry several implications and lessons for USIEs in China, especially for their expatriate general managers and human resources managers. A key lesson is that long-term growth and success in China depends on how companies initiate and manage an important, inevitable shift from a business-based to



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Table 3
Factors Related to Preference for Teamwork

Factor	Company A	Company B	Combined
Individual factors			
Age	no relationship	bivariate*	bivariate*
Education	bivariate*	bivariate*	bivariate*
Cultural factor			
Collectivism	multivariate**	multivariate**	multivariate**
Work-related factors			
Task interdependence	multivariate**	multivariate**	multivariate**
Willingness to cooperate	multivariate**	multivariate**	multivariate**
Satisfaction with coworkers	multivariate**	bivariate*	multivariate**
Communication within a group	bivariate*	bivariate*	multivariate**
Supervisory support	bivariate*	bivariate*	bivariate*
Organizational factor			
Organizational support	bivariate*	bivariate*	bivariate*

SOURCE: Xiangming Chen

* Bivariate analysis (in which no other factors are taken into account) found a relationship between this factor and teamwork preference.

** Multivariate analysis (taking other factors into account) found a relationship between this factor and teamwork preference.



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a people-oriented approach. As many USIEs focus on maximizing financial resources and turning a profit, they may neglect the effective organization and utilization of human resources. Business management tends to take precedence over cultural and personnel management. The team-based structures that have proven successful in many US companies may also be effective mechanisms in China. The following recommendations for fostering teamwork in USIEs are based on the study results:

❖ **Chinese employees are generally team ready.** USIEs should be fully aware of this existing orientation and determine how, not when, to introduce team-based initiatives. They may need to begin with company-wide training on the best practices and benefits of teamwork to convince the entire workforce, not just the two-thirds shown in this study, of the value of working in teams.

❖ **Culture matters, but only in a limited way.** While the collectivist culture is important for teamwork, it does not itself foster teamwork. But because both traditional culture and past political ideology are resilient, collectivism will continue to provide a favorable environment for teamwork among Chinese employees. USIEs can rely on this sustained, team-conducive context.

❖ **Task interdependence is the key.** USIEs should focus on enhancing the understanding among staff of the interdependence of tasks, as it is the critical mechanism for promoting teamwork. Although the degree of task interdependence may vary among companies across or even within industries, management should use regular training to instill an acute understanding among employees that administration, production, and distribution form an interconnected and interdependent process.

❖ **No cooperation, no teamwork.** Promoting a cooperative attitude is integral to implementing teamwork. While cooperation horizontally among employees within groups and units is basic, strengthening cooperation among groups or formal units, which has been generally lacking in

Chinese companies, will go a long way toward eliminating traditional divisive turf battles and promoting acceptance of a team-based approach.

❖ **People prefer to team with colleagues they like.** Finding ways to increase the level of employee satisfaction with colleagues will benefit teamwork structures. Because Chinese employees tend to need to appreciate one another's competencies and become comfortable with their fellow workers before they are willing to work in teams, organizing teams around people who get along well would be a worthwhile experiment. An important step in achieving this begins with matching candidates' personal attributes and cultural values, as well as skills, education, and experience, to the existing workforce when recruiting and hiring.

❖ **Communication within a group facilitates teamwork.** USIEs will find it easier to implement teamwork if they successfully encourage open communication among employees in small groups. Since the traditional lack of interpersonal communication in the workplace bred mistrust and indecision, getting employees to share information and ideas promptly and openly will strengthen mutual trust, which is critical to teamwork.

Since teamwork is more directly influenced by work-related factors than by cultural factors and even less by individual and organizational factors, USIEs have a solid practical ground on which to develop teamwork among Chinese employees. However, with China still in the beginning stages of corporate governance development, it may be too early to transfer American-style, self-directed teamwork with peer-based control and decisionmaking by individual team members to China. Effective strategies should be adopted to create, nurture, and synthesize the team-conducive factors identified by this study. This will ensure that a style of teamwork that fits China will evolve over time and produce benefits for both employees and companies.