



Developing international leaders at Sinopec

Sinopec, China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation, is one of the major petroleum companies in the world, and with annual revenues of around \$207bn is China's top revenue-earning company. Its business spans oil and gas exploration and refinement, research and development of petrochemicals and the import/export of these products. In 2009, it was ranked 9th by Fortune Global 500, becoming the first Chinese corporation to make the top ten.

the challenge

Sinopec realised that under World Trade Organisation regulations, China had to open its markets, and so it has been expanding its international business, embarking on a globalisation strategy. Therefore it needed the culture and approach of the whole organisation, some 700,000 employees, to change radically. Sinopec wanted to work with a development partner that could help it to develop its senior leadership to lead in a global environment by being skilled in and having an understanding of a wide range of business disciplines and international ways of working. After visiting a number of business schools in Europe and North America, Sinopec recognised that our ability to customise programmes and our picturesque location were a combination that would create an unforgettable experience for the Presidents and Vice-Presidents of their strategic business units.

The challenge was how to make 'Western' business and management concepts understandable and approachable to executives who were deeply steeped in Chinese culture and politics – and the majority of whom did not speak any English. In addition, Sinopec is a state owned enterprise with its own particular perspective on world affairs and business enterprises, so presenting free market principles, as practised in Western countries, posed a number of issues.

the design

A special project team was put together to create a Western-style development programme in an environment that took into account Chinese culture and preferences. The eight-week programme focuses on the management principles of leading an international oil company, at the same time acquainting participants with systematic knowledge in disciplines such as strategy, human resources, finance, operations, business innovation and marketing.

How to influence the participants was a major design and delivery issue. In the Chinese educational system, the predominant method of learning is didactic – the polar opposite of the experiential approach embraced by us. A range of blended learning techniques were therefore incorporated in to the programme to enhance the participants' curiosity to learn and stimulate debate. Special requirements were needed in the teaching rooms. Computers were equipped with Chinese characters and all teaching materials were translated into Chinese. Booths were installed and headsets provided to enable simultaneous translation of all the learning and development sessions. Anxious to provide the best possible blend of Western and Asian hospitality, we also despatched our Head Chef to Hong Kong to learn authentic Chinese cuisine, and Chinese satellite television was provided in the bedrooms.

“Sinopec's experience proves that there is more to learn than tools and techniques: with the right learning partner such as Ashridge, companies can develop a combination of local and Western knowledge and behaviours that will give them a unique competitive advantage in global markets.”

Barbara Wang, Ashridge's representative in China

the delivery

To enhance their understanding of leadership and management concepts, great emphasis was placed on the use of psychometric instruments to stimulate the participants' interest as well as to challenge their leadership styles and encourage thinking. The participants would have been most comfortable with a familiar 'chalk and talk' experience, such as many of them had experienced on MBA programmes already. They simply weren't used to contributing openly during teaching sessions, in syndicates and in plenary sessions. However, we were able to help them learn to think and behave in new ways: not just here, but most importantly, back in the workplace. As well as customising Ashridge's teaching materials to the oil and gas industry, with both a Chinese and international context, we used industry speakers with global and specialist knowledge. A live case study was organised over five days at the London headquarters of British Petroleum (BP). This enabled learning around current business

issues and was combined with a session on the oil industry from experts at Goldman Sachs. Initially the idea of spending time at BP was met with some resistance, as working openly and sharing information with other organisations, especially with competitors, is not usual Chinese practice. However, later feedback showed that in terms of practical learning, this live case study was the highpoint of the programme for many. The continuous eight-week programme was something which had never been tried before at Ashridge and presented additional motivational challenges for Ashridge tutors and participants. In addition to novel learning experiences, participants who were accustomed to working a 14–16 hour day in the office were given the time to reflect while strolling through the Ashridge gardens or during their programme of cultural activities, which included sailing and visits to Edinburgh, Cambridge, Stonehenge and Stratford.

2009 cohort participants say...

“I found the programme was extremely practical and not academic, and this was very suitable for our needs.”

“My experience at Ashridge can only be described as excellent. When compared to other training programmes I have attended, Ashridge was first-class in its service, logistics, teaching and understanding our major needs.”

the difference

Since the first cohort in 2005, over 250 senior leaders from Sinopec have been through the programme. For the majority of participants, it was their first time using diagnostic tools in executive development and they found that the Ashridge approach enlightened their awareness of themselves as leaders. The programme improved the collective understanding of the many business and leadership problems of operating globally. As leaders in China, the Sinopec Presidents and Vice Presidents are rarely challenged, but we challenged them vigorously – not only did they find this stimulating but they learned a great deal about some of the 'softer' skills needed to become a great leader. The Ashridge programme is now perceived within Sinopec as a rite of passage for senior managers.