

Work ethic among Chinese employees: water that is too clear has few fish

Water that is too clear has few fish, and one that is too critical has few friends. This is a Chinese idiom from old history. This reflects well an aspect of Chinese culture and philosophy with respect to interpersonal dealing among Chinese people. It preaches the idea that one shall be tolerant with other people's mistakes and errors in order to be able to get along well with people around them.

Recently, I heard from a representative of a foreign corporate client that this idiom was brought about on the table by the manager who was about to be dismissed for his intentional harmful conducts against the company, in a plea for getting understanding from his employer. The representative seemed to be bewildered as to how come this man can speak of such an idea in the workplace.

However, it does not sound that surprising to me. Somehow, this is a philosophy that has been working in many arenas of society but in a negative way whereby people cite this old saying to defend their wrongs, a total distortion of this positive idiom.

In today's China, corruption is so rampant and pervasive that you can find it in every corner of the society from in particular governments to offices. We rely on corrupt (minor or serious, direct or indirect) practice to earn money and profits. Underlying/hidden/unspoken/under table rules, whatever you call it, are brought up every day on Internet, esp, the twitter-like micro-blogging service sites. and the Chinese people seem to be accustomed to the twisted world. It won't be too much to say that the whole social structures are underpinned on corruption, and if all corrupt practices in our society are eliminated suddenly, the whole society can collapse and come to standstill.

So to many, you are an ass if you have the opportunity to earn "extra" money and you don't take advantage of it.

All this social phenomena raise a serious concern or challenge for foreign investors esp those from the developed market economy like USA or Europe as to how they can keep their Chinese employees loyal and aligned with corporate interests. My personal limited

Contact the Author Jason Tian at his email: jasontian78@outlook.com or mobile phone:

+8613816548421 | 1

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experience has already shown that there are a lot of such employment issues with foreign invested companies in China in which Chinese employees were found of guilty of improper activities that very enrich personal pockets of employees.

What is the solution for the problem?

The foreign investors may step up efforts in two fronts to combat the problem. Ideologically, companies should promote and execute a corporate culture that educates and cultivates appropriate work ethics among its employees. In the meantime, companies should strengthen corporate bylaws to regulate employees conducts with particular attention to conducts of corporate management personnel who are able to cause big trouble to the companies if they misconduct themselves. I am once retained by a foreign investor to conduct a due diligence investigation into the corporate transaction documents to understand whether anything wrong has been done to the detriment of the company. It may be not a bad idea to have periodic checkup of this kind to ensure that corporate supervision is well enforced against misconducts.

Companies should keep the water as clear as possible in terms of its human resource management.