

Interview with Hui Chen - China Project Manager

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The obstacle course: a unique experience

Setting up a social responsibility system in a factory in China is a real obstacle course, which required the total immersion of RHSF in a Chinese subcontracting company for two years: a unique and innovative experience. A "first" in this country.

"Like the workers, I slept in the factory".

"I slept like the workers in the factory. In the morning, I shared their breakfast, "à la chinoise", that is to say standing up, in five minutes. Then, before the employees entered the workshops, the supervisors would gather us in the courtyard to give instructions. I would attend. For meals, I was also with the staff". Hui Chen is not thirty years old, she is Chinese, and thus shared the life of the workers of the PolyUnion company at every moment of the day, listening to the managers and workers alike.

Listening to grasp problems from the inside out

Our goal? To understand and redefine the company's Human Resources policy as a whole. For RHSF, it was important to see the problems from the inside in order to find tools and methods to improve working conditions (safety, hygiene, etc.) that could then be shared and adapted for other companies. Immersion was crucial to get to know the realities and problems of the company, and for the workers to realise that the person in charge of the reforms is indeed within the company and not an external consultant.

Cultural barriers

Immersion was essential to overcome the most difficult one: cultural obstacles. The implementation of a Human Resources system as we know it in the Western world encounters obstacles due mainly to the culture of the country. It is necessary to change mentalities, which can only be done from the inside and with time, to be constantly listening and correct the approach if necessary.

Internal migrants

For blue-collar workers, for example, the problem was mainly one of pay. They are internal migrants, coming from agricultural areas, without higher education. They want to earn as much money as possible to support their families and relatives, often without retirement. Their wages are traditionally dependent on the number of pieces produced, or the number of hours worked.

80 hours minimum per week

Therefore, the more the company allows them to work overtime (nights, weekends, more than 80 hours a week) the more money they earn. After analysis, we set up a system to reduce working hours while keeping the same salary.

Surprise, Punishment, Productivity and the Only Child

But to our astonishment, the workers, supported by their supervisors, went on a one-hour work stoppage, which in China is very serious. We then reviewed our change by further integrating the cultural factor. In China, culture dictates that only punishment can improve productivity. In the past, this was not a problem for the company, because with a galloping demography, a company could always find staff. But this is no longer the case with the 'one child only' policy. It was necessary to make supervisors understand that this management system was no longer appropriate. As for management, we showed them, with figures to back it up, that excessive overtime was harmful to the company, particularly in terms of accidents at work and staff turnover.

Meeting expectations

It was therefore a question of finding ways to satisfy the expectations of management (not to increase the wage bill), workers (with decent wages) and middle management by encouraging them to change their management methods. Workers and supervisors had to be pushed to work less and better and without discrimination. Martine in France and Hui in China with Simon, the management controller, helped by volunteer consultants and academics, worked every day to listen, adapt and step back from the demands of management and workers.

A solution that is supported and accepted

The solution was found in the remuneration system. Total immersion in the company, patience and understanding of the importance of the concept of time were essential success factors for RHSF. The project team agreed to take the time to listen, to take one step forward and then sometimes two steps back, and to endure the aggressiveness of the workers and supervisors at the beginning of the project. The Chinese culture was taken into account, as well as the values of the company, so that the results were based on a policy carried by the management, supported by the management, and accepted by the workers. The result of this mission is very positive: the turnover in the company has gone from 100% (usual in China) to 5%, the health and safety policy is being followed because promotions and remuneration integrate it, a health and safety committee has been freely elected, quality and productivity have been improved, making it possible to limit working hours. This pilot project has been rewarded with two awards.

Awards and recognition

The work carried out within the company has been recognised at the international level by the Atlas-AFMI-CCMP Award for the Best International Management Case 2015: the work we have carried out can now be studied and improved in all universities. In addition, a CGT delegation, led by Bernard Thibault, now an administrator of the International Labour Office (ILO), visited Polyunion at

Following this mission. We presented this practical case to HEC, as well as to Chinese entrepreneurs at the French Embassy in Beijing and to the Minister of Labour. In 2016, the project was awarded a bronze medal in Paris, in the innovation category, at the "Purchasing Trophy".

What next?

The work carried out is not intended to be reproduced as it stands: the lessons learned will make it possible to build appropriate training courses, tools and methodologies based on the field experience acquired. RHSF will soon be publishing a practical book based on this rich experience.

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