



# Build a Winning Team in China

Hera Siu, Managing Director for Greater China at education company Pearson, talks to Dawn Murden about her approach to creating executive teams that produce the right results

**While at the software company SAP, you more than doubled its business in China in less than three years. How did you achieve that growth?**

It's a great company but when I went in there was poor leadership and the staff were divided. Clearly, I had to bring them together, but I also needed someone who fully understood the benefits of using SAP and had deep product knowledge.

I then introduced a more consultative style of selling as we needed to be able to articulate the customer benefits. In the past, the company was not very

customer-centric. I made sure that we talked our customers' language, rather than our own.

I realised I had to change how we communicated, giving people the right tools and confidence to do that.

Much of this was already in the organisation, but it needed to be brought together. Although I did bring in new people, the existing team helped me too, bringing examples of what the company was doing successfully in other markets, such as the US or Australia. I then recreated that in a context that was relevant for China.

**Given that your experience is primarily in telecommunications and IT, what was it like to join Pearson?**

There is a little bit of a learning curve because the cost drivers between the industries are different. People who were already in the business helped me get up-to-speed. I needed to sense what kind of people I had before I invited new players in.

Since then, I have brought in new skills and capabilities to supplement the traditional publishing techniques so that we can focus on education services in China. >



I see more female leaders in education than in my previous industries, and this has been a welcome change. Diversity needs to be all-inclusive – not looking at just gender but people with different backgrounds and from different functions.

I have a country legal counsel turned general manager and a technical R&D person who wants to go into sales. I say: 'Why not? Let's give it a try.'

**At the executive level, what qualities are required to create a high-performing team?**

The hygiene factor is that they can deliver robust results and it has to be a sustainable, not one quarter up, one quarter down. They should be [open to ideas and constantly challenge themselves](#), so they're asking: 'Is there another way to do it?'

If the team is to be effective it will be a living thing and evolve. The loudest member will learn to listen more, while the quiet ones will speak up because trust has been built.

In the beginning, the team may be uneven, but it should become harmonious over time. You want people to be able to debate and agree to disagree certain topics, but once they leave the room [present a unified front to the rest of the organisation].

**COMPANY STATISTICS:  
PEARSON**

Sales:	£746m
Adjusted operating profit:	£35m
Employees in China:	5,000
Employees Globally:	40,000

*“ There is a little bit of a learning curve because the cost drivers between the industries are different ”*

**Is it important for leaders to demonstrate emotional intelligence (EQ)?**

It definitely is. Being a senior executive is not just about technical skills, it's also about EQ. That means how resilient you are in bad times and how modest you become when you're successful.

At my level, I always look for people who already possess EQ. It's difficult to teach older people. With a younger team, it's usually something you can build – I make sure our Training and Development Director works with our first-time line managers on EQ.

**Why do you think Western multinationals struggle when operating in China?**

Often, they think that if something worked in the US or UK, it should work in China. That approach and mindset needs to be binned.

They need to ask themselves: 'Do we know our Chinese customers? How can we delight them?' After that, they

[need] to look at the talent across an organisation. Do they have the right people to execute an agreed strategy?

There is also a disconnect between China and the West. In China, most people build organisations around individuals rather than strategy... There tends to be a lack of respect for structure and systems.

Personally, I think a lot of the privately-owned enterprises in China fail because they don't have structure. The ones that are succeeding – or are on the road to succeeding – respect structure and process. Once that is in place, they are able to scale it. ■

Hera was a speaker at Criticleye's [Asia Leadership Retreat 2015](#) in association with Accenture, Cisco Systems and CEIBS.



**Hera Siu**  
Managing Director  
Greater China  
Pearson

Hera is the MD for Greater China at Pearson, and a Board Director at air transport communication and IT specialist SITA.

She was listed on the Top 25 Most Powerful Businesswomen in China in 2011 and 2012 by Fortune China. She is fluent in English, Mandarin and Cantonese and holds an MBA from the University of Nevada, US.

Contact Hera through: [www.criticleye.com](http://www.criticleye.com)