

# An Introduction and Analysis of Zeng Shiqiang's Management Thinking: A Balanced View on Promotion

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**Abstract.** Chinese style management is considered to be a kind of a culture which has gained its popularity influenced by Chinese culture and custom with a long period of time. The Chinese style promotion is considered to be one of the important factors in Chinese style management. This paper is to introduce and analyze Professor Zeng Shiqiang's Chinese management thinking on the promotion, and the corresponding strategies both for the managing leader and the subordinate on how to succeed in it.

**Keywords:** Zeng Shiqiang's philosophical management thinking; Chinese promotion system; solution strategies and methods.

## 1. Introduction

It has to be acknowledged that promotion is always the most effective way to encourage employees to move forward. To the Chinese, getting a promotion and making a fortune always come hand in hand, and difficult to be separated from each other. "Congratulations on your promotion" is what we say openly to people when they get promoted. "Now you'll make a fortune", is what we think in our minds but without speaking out. This paper explains and discusses Professor Zeng Shiqiang's viewpoint on the Chinese promotion system and suggestions on how to succeed in the promotion.

## 2. Towards the Chinese promotion system: flexible promotion principle must be carried out

### 2.1 On the Chinese promotion situations

Professor Zeng thinks that Chinese style management attaches great importance to the ability to adjust to various changing circumstances, so this problem is worthy of a lifetime pursuit and practice. As far as the promotion system is concerned, Prof. Zeng argues that the adjusting ability is important and it is reflected in the ideology that the promotion system can neither be completely institutionalized nor at random.

First of all, the paper is to talk something about the Chinese people's king of mindset. What is 'king of mindset'. According to Prof. Zeng, Chinese people often call those who get promoted as "King's men", which means "you are the leader's friends, so you get promoted more quickly". It sounds like a flattery, but in fact, in their heart, they want to say, "Why it should be you to get promoted? Why not me? Nonsense. It's unfair!" Why "nonsense"? Because to their minds no rules have been demonstrated, no reason of the promotion has been explained, which causes complaints. But to Prof. Zeng that is only surface cause, and the real cause behind it is that "I didn't get promoted. So that's unfair. Of course it's nonsense."

However, the problem is that the leaders who are responsible for the promotion, although they do not make clear the specific standards and principles for promotion, they do not feel regretful or guilty at all when being criticized, for they refuse to admit there is such a thing as "King's men", believing they have kept their fairness in deciding who should be promoted, and their decision is

reasonable and rational, because it is based on the solid and sound ground, and for the interest of the public rather than for their own self-interest. So they take the attitude to ignore these non-promoted people, and don't care at all about what they are complaining about.

## **2.2 Towards three suggestions for subordinates on effective ways of getting promotion**

The above description is a true portrayal of the promotion condition in China. Prof. Zeng believes that such mixed feelings may seem unhealthy and outdated, but the fact is that they have existed for thousands of years, and so that's why the Chinese promotion mechanism is worthy to be discussed and analyzed so as to find out the some strong logic power behind it. To this issue, Prof. Zeng makes a detailed analysis about the actual and concrete promotion situations from various perspectives to explain why flexible promotion principles have to be found and employed in the Chinese management system.

First, the Chinese situation is as follows. For Chinese managers, they acknowledge that there must be principles regarding the promotion, however, they don't think that the principles should be clearly articulated. Supposing that the company president has set up an explicit internal promotion principle statement, it would probably immediately cause fierce competition among the staff. The most common situation is that senior staff would join forces to drive their best colleagues out of company due to their concern that with these colleagues around they might never have the chance to get promotion. On the other hand, supposing it's made clear that senior positions are only available to outside talents, the inner staff would probably stand together against the "airborne troops"<sup>1</sup> and turn to support their own colleagues. Because they might think that they'd be at the end of their rope after all if they don't stay together and fight back. Chinese people always have their own measures to be against the policies from the higher authorities. Hence, in some cases, the promotion principle and policy should not be fixedly set up and explicitly declared.

Second, the fixed perfect principle for promotion is not only difficult to find but also hard to apply in the Chinese circumstances, so a flexible promotion principle has to be found and employed, which can be explained from the historical perspective. In dynasties ruled by the Han nationality, the common practice is to pass the power and position to the eldest son.<sup>2</sup> However, if the eldest son isn't wise enough or is dishonest and evil in character, affairs of the state would be thrown into a complete mess. Different from it, in dynasties ruled by the Man nationality, emperors pass their leadership to the most capable son, which, however, have led to fratricidal fighting among brothers, since all of the brothers have the opportunity to ascend the kingdom and become emperor, so they have to resort to the fierce and even cruel competition, such as brother slaughter, to demonstrate their extraordinary ability. Gradually Chinese people are beginning to realize that it's rather difficult or impossible to find one fixed perfect principle, so they tend to take into account of flexible principles to deal with the promotion situation.

As discussed above, the principles should not be fixedly made for promotion in the Chinese circumstances, nevertheless, it does not mean that the principles for promotion are not necessary. But what are the proper promotion principles and what are the reasonable and practical strategies to implement them?

## **3. Towards the suggestions on success in Chinese promotion situations**

### **3.1 Towards the suggestions on taking flexible rules in Chinese promotion situations**

Prof. Zeng thinks that the main suggestion is that promotion can't be handled in dark with no transparency or no rules. Even though the Chinese don't like talking about the rules, or claim there are no such rules, everyone knows clearly that the person in the high position would have rules to follow, since promotion has always attracted great attention of all the staff in a company due to its

<sup>1</sup> Such slang refers to the people who are recruited externally directly take the high position of the company.

<sup>2</sup> The lineal primogeniture system is the system of succession that prevailed in the ancient China, including Han Dynasty. Based on this, the King or Emperor should pass the power and position to his eldest son.

importance in people's lives, the leader has to take a very serious attitude towards the staff's promotion, and does not dare to tackle it in a casual manner or abuse the power by promoting his own fellowmen with no proper reason. Otherwise, it would ruin his career future completely.

Now that the Chinese leader does have rules to follow when deciding who is to be promoted, are the rules the same with western rules? The answer is "no". Different from western rules, Chinese principles and rules are somewhat subjective oriented, thus quite flexible on some occasions. So, there are always such situations that when the conditions for promotion are spelled out, people would say it is customized for a particular person. In some cases, when reading the provisions of the qualifications for promotion, people can't help thinking of a certain person whose name would automatically come into their minds, because the qualifications for promotion seem to be set up completely according to this actual person. Of course the employees wouldn't accept such a kind of promotion condition, "What kind of promotion rule is this? Might as well just appoint someone openly! It's no different than bid rigging."

As for the leader is concerned, he should be courageous and responsible enough to bravely face and meet challenges and criticism from the staff, if what he has chosen is good for the company.

Then how to deal with this embarrassing situation? Prof. Zeng claims that the analysis shows it is those who gain nothing from them think the principles are customized. As for the leader responsible for the promotion work, they believe that they are fair in promotion work, since they have made reasonable decisions in choosing promoted people based upon both the promotion principles and his own careful observation and rational evaluation of this promoted person, though somewhat subjective, but completely for the public rather than out of their own self-interest. Even though the leader only emphasizes good principles for promotion at the beginning without mentioning any of his private thoughts, but what's so great about that! Saying this is one thing, doing is another. So long as his choice is favorable to the development and success of the company, then why not? To Prof. Zeng, it demonstrates that any principles, including promotion principles, no matter how reasonable they may sound, can't be excessively stressed on, or completely and thoroughly followed, if possible adding some subjective colors may work out better

Prof. Zeng believes that in view of this promotion situation, one thing for the leaders or policy-makers to pay attention to is that when making promotion principles or carrying them out, they have to leave room for compromise. This is a better strategy. Fortunately, Chinese language is also open for interpretation, which just meets the requirements of the Chinese management style and the Chinese promotion style as well.

Therefore, in deciding the principles for promotion, leaders should give thorough considerations to the general picture, based on the practical circumstances, aiming at easing conflicts and weighing advantages against disadvantages. These considerations are subtle and pragmatic, difficult to be spelled out.

Prof. Zeng claims that for Chinese people, appropriateness is always considered to be more important than authenticity. Therefore, even though people are clear about the promotion principles, they still put them in their heart on some occasions, because regardless of how authentic they are, maybe on some occasions they are not appropriate to match the actual situations.

Therefore, it is necessary to decide the promotion policy by taking into consideration of many factors, including the practical circumstances. But circumstances are always changing, which adds more subjectivity and arbitrariness to the promotion work. In some cases, a person's capability matters more, while in other cases, his reliability weighs more; one thing can constitute the reason for praise for some people, while to others, it might be for criticism. People's opinions on these things always vary greatly. How is it possible to make such things stated explicitly? The higher the position he is at, the more complex the situation he is in, and the more difficult for him to state the promotion principles he is going to follow explicitly.

Giving thorough considerations to the general picture is one of the challenges enterprise leaders have to meet. Average people only need to see things as they are, while leaders have to take all

things into consideration to get a reasonable decision, especially for those important policy makers, a great many aspects they have to cover.

Prof. Zeng believes that promotion work is not a simple and fixed thing. It demands leaders' all-around and thorough considerations based upon the practical circumstances. Facing subordinates' mixed reactions on who should get promoted, as long as the leaders are all heartened for public interests, and make a fair decision that can stand the majority's test, they would rest assured that the majority would support them. Only in this way can they successfully create a harmonious working environment for all staff in the company. After all, temporary ups and downs will not stop the trend of a bright future. Prof. Zeng offers three suggestions as follows.

### **3.2 Towards three suggestions for subordinates on effective ways of getting promotion**

Prof. Zeng puts forward the following suggestions for the employees to follow in their promotion process.

First, not only do your job well, but also find time to share your superior's responsibilities, such as helping him solve some concerned problems, etc. If a subordinate can only do his job well, but spare no extra time to pay visits to his superior, chatting with him and sharing burdens for him, his superior would probably think of him as someone who has been worn out by his current position and couldn't meet the further challenges of the promotion. In fact, failing to share burdens for his superior is equal to shutting down the door to promotion. In that case, it is not the superior who is to blame, but the subordinate himself.

On the other hand, if a subordinate does not put his heart on the work, but only on how to curry favor with the immediate superior, spending too much time around him, and offering him all kinds of assistance he can think of, then, that subordinate would only arouse his superior's suspicion, "Why are you idling around me instead of going to your work? Your help? No, thanks. You could only make things worse." In fact, neglecting one's own duty and only thinking of pleasing the superior is a typical mean action, which is often despised by worthy people.

The smart subordinates are those who can do their work well and win their superiors' trust and appreciation, and on the other hand, they may try to relieve the superiors of their worries and burdens by offering whatever assistance their superiors need, and at the same time, take opportunities to report the superiors their work and ask for their instructions, all of which suggest that they are not only loyal and trustworthy to their superiors, but have broad enough shoulders to take more responsibilities. Then the superiors would arrange them more work, especially some urgent and thorny work. In this way, the relationship between them will grow closer, and when the opportunity for promotion comes up, the superiors would naturally consider these subordinates first, and give them strong recommendation.

Second, subordinates must be good at understanding the superiors' intentions, and help them reach the right decisions in everything they do. If a subordinate does not know how to play his own subjective initiative to solve the problem, but everything reports the superior for advice and instruction, the subordinate would be thought of as a man with no brains, or putting the responsibilities on the leader because of being afraid of taking them. This type of subordinates has little chance to get promoted.

On the contrary, the subordinate who is too confident and keeps on claiming that he can be responsible for everything, is also what the superior dislikes, since his actions can arouse great worries in his superior. First, this kind of subordinates would be thought of as arrogant and too sure of himself, easy to cause troubles. Second, this kind of subordinates often ignores the superior's authority, and does whatever he likes without asking advice from the superior, whose unauthorized actions show that he has little respect for the superior. "Now that he doesn't respect me, why should I look after him? He says he can be responsible for everything, what a joke! Why doesn't he go have a look at himself in a mirror? He brags he can take the responsibility? Nonsense. I always have to clean it up for him!" This kind of subordinates, even though they are maybe capable, still will lose their superiors' trust.

In fact, the smart subordinates must be good at achieving a kind of balance between demonstrating his ability and showing their respect to the superior's decision. "I will take the responsibility, but I must get permission from my superior beforehand." In China, capable people often lose their leader's trust. It seems that the superior is jealous of their talents, but actually, that's because these subordinates have threatened the superior's authority and face as well, which can do a great disservice to their promotion. So the subordinate should have advanced discussion with the superior in order to get his instruction and advice for the work and to get his permission as well.

Besides, the smart subordinate must understand that when he asks the superior for further opinion and instruction, he must have his own sophisticated and specific ideas or feasible plans in mind. In this way, he can provide the superior with necessary background information for the superior to provide reasonable advice and make rational decisions without spending too much effort. Meanwhile, the subordinate shows proper respect to the superior's authority and the superior's face is saved by getting permission from the superior before taking any action, so the superior would be very satisfied with him, and give him more trust of course. As for the subordinate, getting his superior's permission will make him carry out the work more easily and smoothly. For both sides, a win - win objective is achieved. Naturally, this kind of subordinates stands more chances to get promoted. What is to be avoided for the subordinate is to report to the superior with an empty head, which would only make him look dumb and foolish, and supply a reasonable fact for the superior to question his ability.

Third, give enough opportunities to your men to let them show their ability as well. If not, these men would grow discontent and think of you as an expert in "surface acting", out of pure exhibitionism in front of boss.

However, it's quite natural for some people to think, "I let my subordinates to show their abilities in front of my immediate superior, what if my superior finds them more capable than me? What if my superior decides to replace me with them?"

In fact, these two seemingly contradictory situations can be balanced to a reasonable degree. One thing is certain, that letting the subordinates to show their capability can give them a sense of accomplishment, and encourage them to continue carrying on better performance. The best way is to establish a tacit agreement to let the subordinates to show their abilities in different conditions. That is: when your superior isn't around, feel free to let the subordinates show their abilities, while you play the role as an assistant, assessor and inspirer; when your superior is around, it should be you who shows abilities, while subordinates only cooperate with you by demonstrating their support to you, which can highlight your capability and leadership.

Prof. Zeng believes that the three tips above can demonstrate how to achieve a balance among so many factors, which involve not only the relationship between the superior and subordinate, but the relationship between the colleagues at the same level. The successful balance achievement can help you obtain more chance to get promoted and it is also well deserved.

Prof. Zeng thinks that it has to be acknowledged that flexible Chinese-style management can cause uncertain situations, which is in agreement with Chinese people's changeable character traits. They prefer to deal with things depending on the constantly changing situations, relationship and friendship, thus bringing about many uncertainty elements. It is easy for some people to misunderstand the Chinese as lacking legal awareness. To Prof. Zeng, Chinese people are born with a strong flexible character and they are extremely skillful at adjusting themselves according to changing situations. But the problem is how to deal with the flexibility.

Chinese people prefer taking strategy of playing it by ear much more than that of slick opportunism. However, the trick is that the two are quite similar to each other on the surface. Therefore, Prof. Zeng sincerely hopes that everyone can tell the difference between the two and take active attitude towards the flexible changes, and constantly modify and improve themselves to be suitable for the constantly changing situation. Only so is it possible to have the spirit of Chinese style management really develop and carry forward.

As for the flexible change and modification, Prof. Zeng argues that the most important factor is that the starting point must be the public, which constitutes the most important factor to assess whether the flexibility is reasonable or not. Righteous leaders make flexible modifications to make profits for the whole staff without doing any harm to others, while slick opportunists for their individual interest at the expense of others. So the former is the correct path for the Chinese management to choose. In a word, Chinese-style management starts by stressing on self-improvement and pursuing the overall harmony and happiness, and ends at pacifying the whole staff, which is also reflected in the promotion system of the Chinese management.

#### 4. Conclusion

Getting a promotion is important because it is connected with people career future and financial income. This paper makes a detailed explanation and discussion on Professor Zeng Shiqiang's viewpoint on the Chinese promotion system and suggestions on how to succeed in the promotion.

Professor Zeng thinks that Chinese style management pays great attention to the adjustment to various changing practical circumstances, so the adjusting ability is important and it is also reflected in the ideology of the promotion system which can neither be completely institutionalized nor at random. This paper analyzes Prof. Zeng viewpoint on the Chinese situation about Chinese people's king of mindset, which means that the promotion principles should not be fixedly made in the Chinese circumstances, at the same time, it does not mean that the principles for promotion are not necessary.

For managing leaders, Prof. Zeng believes that they should focus on the practical circumstances with the general picture in mind in order to ease conflicts and weigh advantages against disadvantages, for Chinese people, appropriateness is always considered to be more important than authenticity. Therefore, it is necessary to decide the promotion policy by taking into consideration of many factors, including the practical circumstances.

For subordinates, Prof. Zeng puts forward three suggestions on effective ways of getting promotion. First, not only do your job well, but also find time to share your superior's responsibilities, such as helping him solve some concerned problems. Second, subordinates must be good at understanding the superiors' intentions, and help them reach the right decisions in everything they do. Third, give enough opportunities to their men to let them show their ability as well.

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