

Cultural Information

Getting Things Done in China

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Learning how to get things accomplished in China is no easy task for a foreigner. The workings of the Chinese system often seem patently irrational to Westerners, though they do possess an internal logic of their own. An appreciation of how things work and why they happen as they do is the key to manipulating the system to serve your ends.

The areas controlled by the bureaucracy are vast, and the numbers of people involved phenomenal. It would be hard to imagine a more conservative, change-resistant system. Decisions are most often made by consensus, and they are generally top-down affairs. Since authority is not explicitly delegated to those at lower levels in China, subordinates tend to be insecure about deciding much of anything.

Average government functionaries stick their necks out only with great caution, for there is generally little reward for doing so. There is no great "face" to be had in being innovative or permissive unless one is sure of success, and while there can sometimes be financial gain (in the form of illegal gratuities or favors), there can also be danger if this is discovered. The tried-and-true conservative tack is to avoid accepting responsibility, lest one's decision is construed as the wrong one and one is made to suffer for it later. So an official is likely to be very discouraging when approached with an out-of-the-ordinary request, especially when this request comes from a foreigner.

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Nothing is easy in China, but little is impossible. Many tasks that appear undoable can in fact be achieved if you take the proper approach. Just about anything can be negotiated in the P.R.C., and there are a great many things that have worked for others:

- Find a "win-win" solution. A favorite Chinese way to overcome resistance is to identify or create a solution in which either everyone wins, or at least everyone saves face. A good example is a foreign company that ran afoul of one of the government organizations that regulated its activities in China- in this case, an organization responsible for testing the quality of its products. The testing organization regularly found fault with the company's product quality, and was often citing the foreign corporation for violations and fining it accordingly. The foreign company did not agree with the assessment and felt it was being victimized by an activist regulator that saw it simply as a "deep pocket." After several run-ins with the testing infrastructure, the company got smart. To "improve the accuracy of testing," it underwrote a donation of modern testing equipment - far more up-to-date than what the government had been using. And the problem went away. This company devised a "win-win" situation that solved not only its own problem, but also that of its adversary.
- Catch flies with honey, not vinegar. This doesn't necessarily mean being compliant and docile. If you are convinced what you are asking for is feasible and ought not to pose major problems, you probably should try pressing your point quietly, calmly and relentlessly. But not acrimoniously. There is seldom a need for unpleasantness, and it generally backfires. Remember that the Chinese themselves try to avoid expressing genitive emotions as much as they can. To lose your cool is to lose face, and there is little as unforgivable as this.

- Try the indirect approach. Not only does speaking in soft tones generally get you a great deal further with the Chinese than shrill complaining; it's often a good idea to speak less directly than you might otherwise prefer, and to imply things rather than state them outright. The Chinese themselves frequently give only subtle signals as to their desires. This lack of directness can sometimes be infuriating, but learning to hear in between their words is a skill worth developing.
- Offer a way out. When you go head-to-head with a Chinese bureaucrat, one of the most important things to keep in mind is always to offer the person a way out. If you maneuver a person into a corner, you can absolutely count on strong resistance. If, for example, someone tells you something you know to be untrue and you confront the person with evidence that he or she has lied to you, don't expect the reaction to be embarrassment and subsequent cooperation. You may invoke the former, but in putting the person's honor—that is, his or her face—at stake, you'll get anything but the latter.

One way of offering a "way out" is to use an intermediary, especially when you are in the position of having to deliver bad news to a Chinese associate. Relaying the message in this way spares the face of the injured party, who may be shocked, furious, hurt or otherwise distressed. It's important to realize that using a go-between is not considered a coward's way out in China; among the Chinese there is no premium on confrontation.

- Don't lose patience. In the majority of cases when you go up against the Chinese bureaucracy, time is not, or appears not to be, on your side. Urgency can be your worst enemy in trying to get something accomplished, because it can make you willing to pay more and settle for less. Be prepared to wait and to go over familiar ground several times. Never lose your cool.

- Go through the back door. Knowing people in high-or simply strategic-places, and motivating them to help you out are important tools. Chinese frequently cultivate such people against the future possibility that a favor will be needed.

Using guanxi (relationships) to obtain personal favors, services or goods for which you might otherwise not qualify has a special name in China; zoo houmen, or "going through the back door." When someone uses the powers of his or her office, or even those of a network of friends, to deliver personal favors, this constitutes a use of the back door. This phenomenon is ubiquitous in the P.R.C., precisely because many things can not be accomplished in any other way.

Naturally, access to the back door is not without its costs. People can be motivated in many ways: There are always reciprocal obligations, and there may also be gratuities involved. Someone might be delighted to pull a string to help you get an apartment in a new high-rise building, for example, if you can scare up a Japanese-made refrigerator in rerun. Or the price might be a hongbao, literally a red envelope, which is expected to contain a certain amount of cash. In China's back door economy, money, power and access can all fetch a great deal in return.

One way that many things get accomplished in China is through bribery. Like it or not, there are officials who accept gratuities for providing hard-to-get and often improper or illegal services. This kind of graft is not really in the same category as the relatively innocent gift that someone may give you before asking you to do a favor. In that case you receive the gift before you agree to do anything, and, strictly speaking, the present is not contingent on your willingness to help out.

You will still run into principled Chinese government officials, but corruption is definitely increasing. If a Chinese bureaucrat is interested in some sort of payoff, he or she will undoubtedly find a way to let you know - a subtle signal or a message through an intermediary. You need feel no compunction about turning down such a request, however. Explain that such acts are illegal in your country and that to engage in them would subject you to severe punishment.



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