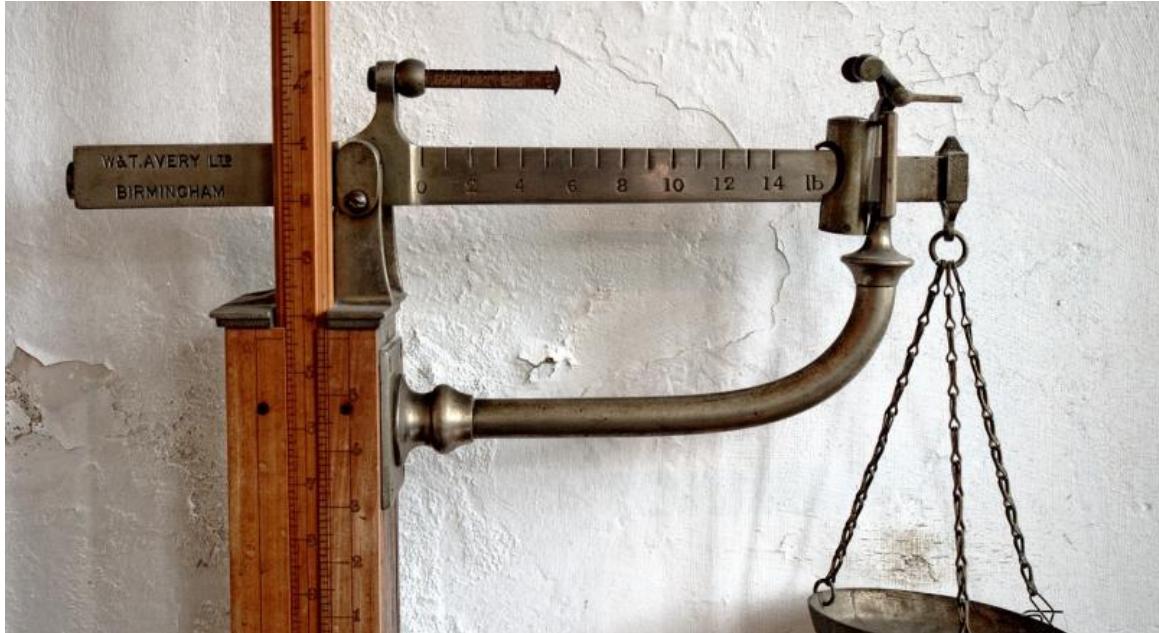


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INSIDE THE MIND OF THE ASIAN CEO

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Why do some people become CEOs and others don't? Why do some Chief Executive Officers thrive while others fail? What separates an outstanding leader from an average one?

For several years, our teams at Russell Reynolds Associates and Hogan Assessments have sought to understand the differences between average and best-in-class leaders at all levels in organisations, up to and including the Chief Executive Officer. In 2016, Russell Reynolds Associates published a report of these findings, [Inside the Mind of the Chief Executive Officer](#). This study leveraged the firm's database of over 7000 psychometric profiles of executives, including more than 900 CEOs, to understand the psychology of these senior leaders, to see how CEOs compare to their fellow members of the C-suite, and to try and understand what separates good CEOs from great CEOs.

Read on for those findings as well as a deeper dive into the Asian CEO profile in Russell Reynolds Associates' and Hogan Assessments' database to explore what sets them apart as leaders.

CEOs Relative to Fellow Executives

Our analysis showed that CEOs differ from their fellow C-suite executives in meaningful ways. For executives looking to take on the top job, the old adage “what got you here won’t get you there” holds true – the traits and preferences that help a leader succeed in finance, or marketing, or sales are indeed different than what is necessary to succeed as a CEO.

The most striking difference is that CEOs are, on average, significantly more courageous and fast-paced than non-CEO executives; they constantly seek out challenges, and are not easily intimidated by the obstacles they face along the way.

In addition to persistence and initiative, the data also showed significant differences in six other areas. Relative to their fellow executives, CEOs are more driven and resilient, more likely to be original thinkers, are better at visualising the future, are more natural team builders, send clearer messages, and are more likely to galvanise others to action.

Average CEOs vs Best-in-Class

It’s clear that there are psychological differences between CEOs and non-CEO executives. But can we discern clear, meaningful differences between average CEOs and those considered best-in-class – the 39 executives in our database who lead organisations that deliver 5% or greater compound annual growth rate (CAGR)?

It turns out we can. When we compared the best-performing CEOs to average ones, striking results emerged. Best-in-class CEOs had a significantly more passionate sense of urgency, a stronger ability to rise far above the details, and lower levels of pretension.

Best-in-class CEOs consistently pursue objectives with energy and perseverance, keep problems in perspective, read situations efficiently and actively, and demonstrate humility.

How Asian CEOs Compare

The analysis to date has been looking at averages from a global pool of executives. But we know that psychological traits which accompany leadership emergence can vary from one geographic region to another as a result of cultural norms and societal influences.

What happens when we separate out Asian CEOs for comparison? We identified 38 Chief Executive Officers in our database who have spent most of their careers in China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Philippines, or Vietnam, and analysed their data.

Relative to their peers around the world, Asian CEOs differ meaningfully in a number of areas:

- Asian CEO tend to be more cautious than their non-Asian CEO peers. They are more thoughtful and vigilant in their interactions, careful in their work, and, as a result, somewhat hesitant. They also tend to take things more personally, and show more passion for what they do.
- They prefer to work more independently. They are focused on their own responsibilities, selective about their priorities including who they involve, and keep their organisations focused on key efforts. They demonstrate strong feelings of accountability.
- Asian CEOs are more inclined to help others. They are sensitive to their associates' needs and attuned to their feelings. Accordingly, they are more likely to anticipate concerns before they arise.
- They are more likely to resist letting power go to their head, as they tend to be more humble. They prefer to drive decisions by achieving of consensus, rather than exercising formal authority.
- Asian CEOs are less likely to chase ideas that bring unnecessary risk. They tend to emphasise pragmatism and feasibility.

What Does This Mean for Asian Leaders?

While it is interesting to understand what an average executive is like, globally or in a specific geographic region, the most critical insights are those related to a CEO's understanding of their own nature and psychology. From there, they can then adjust their style to amplify their influence and build a loyal, broad followership. Their organisation can then build the right team around that individual.

In our recent study of CEOs with long-term perspectives, we showed the impact of having a leadership team focused on long-term goals and objectives, but also the imperativeness for them to be able to provide some short-term returns. Therefore, a CEO who has an overwhelming long-term orientation may benefit from having a member of her or his team with some short-term tendencies so the leadership team as a whole doesn't lose focus on both needs. Similarly, a successful CEO needs to balance the team's innovativeness with caution; humility with self-assuredness; visionary with operational perspective.

Thus, despite variance in leadership emergence factors, successful Asian CEOs ultimately need exactly what every other successful CEOs need: Self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, a team of strong but complementary partners in the C-suite, and the ability to lead a diverse group toward a clearly articulated goals.

Inside the mind of a leader

Tan Tong Hai: I have always valued the old-time leadership values – be a good example, be decisive and serve with sincerity and honesty. An Asian leader will usually have an added element of hard work. I have no doubt these leadership qualities have served us well in the past. However, there has been a shift in mindsets and mode of thinking. This is exemplified in disruptive technologies and new generation leadership. People today value engagement and empathy. As a leader, being able to connect with your team is more important than ever.

Leaders must be humble enough to accept change and adapt their leadership styles accordingly. Politicians now are not just engaging in “common” activities, but posting them on social media to connect with the masses, disrupting the established government model which still relies on the print media. For myself, I have also evolved my communication mode by holding interactive Skype sessions in addition to traditional face-to-face town hall sessions. I have also started posting content on my LinkedIn account to engage and listen to the public. This two-way communication helps me to consider multiple viewpoints and make better decisions.

Asian leaders may not be known to be risk-takers but adapting is a necessary risk. When taking risks, we must be confident to stand by what we believe in and not condemn failures. When the risk is taken, the pay-offs will be reciprocal but more importantly, you earn the respect of your team.

Tan Tong Hai



Chief Executive Officer & Executive Director

Tong Hai was appointed Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of StarHub on 1 March 2013. He joined the company in 2009 as its Chief Operating Officer, overseeing the day-to-day operations of the company.

Tong Hai has over 25 years of experience in the regional information technology (IT), Internet and e-commerce industries and has had broad experience at top management levels. Tong Hai was previously the President and the CEO of Singapore Computer Systems since August 2005, and the President and the CEO of Pacific Internet (PacNet) from March 2001. He was instrumental in turning both companies around when he was at their helms.

In addition, Tong Hai is currently the Chairman of Nanyang Polytechnic Board of Governors and a board member of Singapore Workforce Development Agency. He is also a council member of Singapore Business Federation’s China-Singapore Business Council.

He holds a Bachelor of Electrical Engineering (Honours) from the National University of Singapore.



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