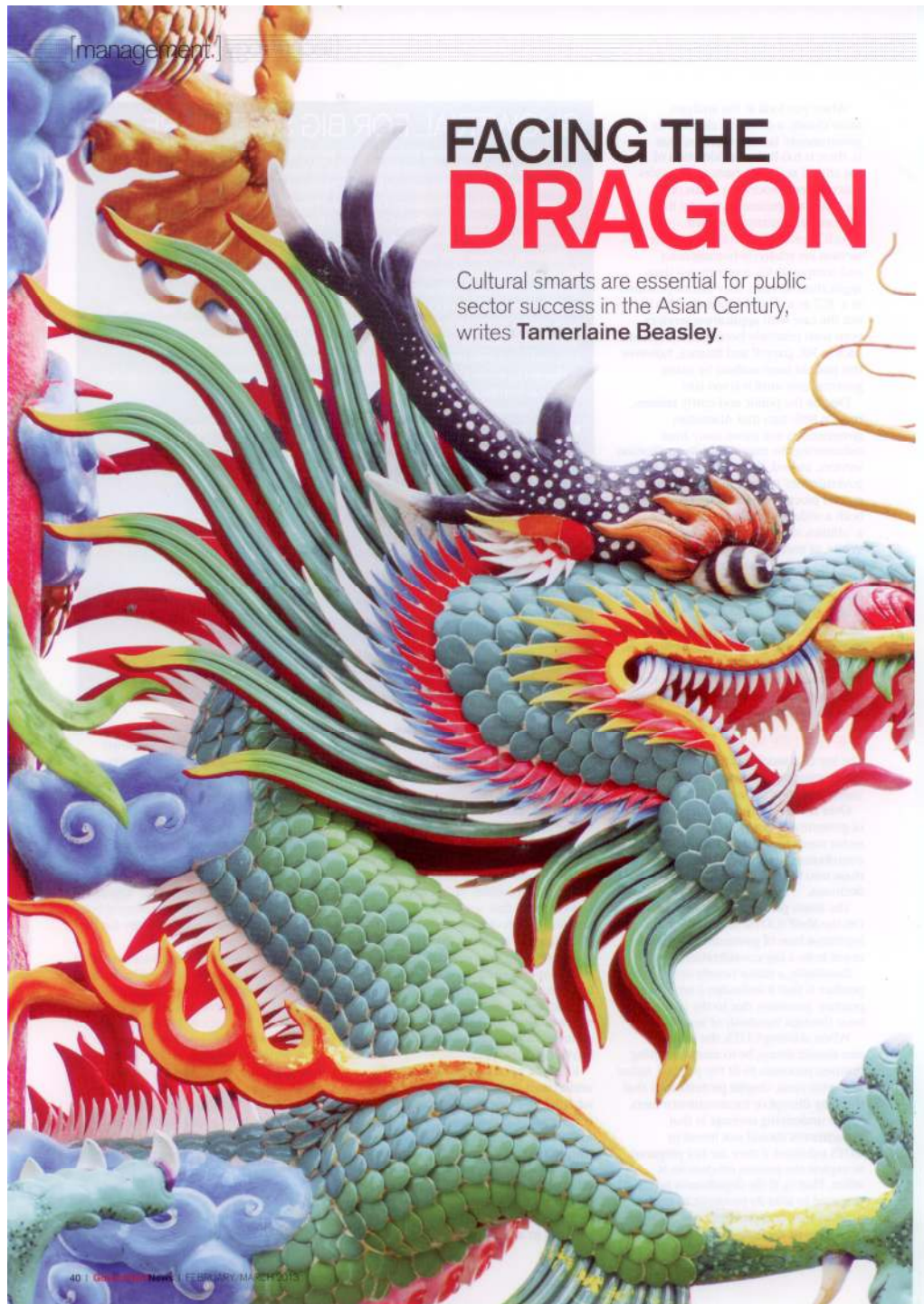


MEDIA COVERAGE

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Australian government employees are increasingly required to collaborate with international and regional stakeholders as well as non-government organisations (NGO) and private sector counterparts, particularly in Asia. The recent release of the government's 'Australia in the Asian Century' whitepaper highlighted the realities of the Asian Century and the need to improve our ability to better engage with the Asian region.

The separation between 'domestic' and 'internationally engaged' government departments is less possible than it has been in the past. Whether focusing on public health, science, climate change and environment or in international trade, Asia-literacy and capability is necessary.

Because of this greater engagement, there is a critical need for our public sector representatives to develop or access intercultural awareness, perspective, knowledge and capability.

These Asia-skills will enable the strategic approach, development of nuanced relationships and adaptability it takes to succeed in the diverse geographic, political and economic landscapes of the region. This isn't just about learning an Asian language but also building knowledge, skills and understanding of Asia.

WHAT IS ASIA CAPABILITY?

Asia capability is about being effective and able to achieve results when working in Asian countries, or with people from Asian cultures. It is also about recognising the distinct nature of the cultures within the Asian region and the huge variances between and among individual countries, and even within them.

Research has shown the higher the proportion of senior officials who have cultural training, speak an Asian language or have lived and worked in Asia for more than three months, the more likely projects or initiatives will exceed expectations.

Many misconceptions regarding what Asia capability is exist because, in many instances, personnel are at the stage of 'unconscious incompetence' – they don't know what they don't know. Without local language capability, or trusting local relationships, it's hard to access the significant differences in world-view which occur in diverse cultures.

As a nation, we are required to negotiate a myriad of complex issues with the countries of our neighbourhood. These issues are significant for our political, economic and environmental future.

In just two recent examples, the challenges posed by negotiations regarding

live cattle export to Indonesia and the significance of close maritime cooperation regarding illegal maritime arrivals, demonstrate how critical these Asia capabilities are.

DEVELOPING DEXTERITY

The elements of developing Asia capability include:

1. Awareness

Understanding what is cultural and what isn't. For example, when negotiating in China the Chinese will sometimes say something is not possible for cultural reasons, implying the other party is being racist. Without a depth of understanding of what's cultural and what's not, this claim can be a real challenge for Australian negotiators who may not be able to discern whether this is merely a negotiation strategy or a reality.

2. Perspective

This involves learning how your (Australian) culture influences your perspective, behaviour and approach to the business process, and how this may be different to the people you are working with. In the highly complex and culturally diverse context of the Asian region, it's hard to know all cultures in detail. What is far easier to do, is understand the key elements of Australian culture which are most foreign in the region. For example, the Australian preference for ignoring hierarchy and being highly informal and using 'banter' to develop rapport, is something often misunderstood in almost all Asian contexts.

3. Knowledge

This involves developing knowledge of Asian cultures to understand the local context, how and why it is the way it is, as well as the unique characteristics in relation to the capability you need. For instance, meeting processes, negotiation styles and governance. Understanding these differences leads to less confusion, greater accuracy in predicting timelines for achieving outcomes and greater focus on the areas of activity which will have the most impact.

4. Capability

Building capability involves developing the skills to adjust, adapt and perform with and in other cultures. When we are capable, we get results. With greater capability in the region, we can better contribute to the regional community, ensure our organisations are more successful and secure a brighter future for our children. Enabling Asia capability can involve a combination of: training; coaching and mentoring; and intensive immersion learning. A blended and tailored approach is necessary as it's not one size fits all. In government departments where intercultural communication is a daily reality, core foundation learning must address cultural awareness and communication skills.

Following this learning, more tailored and focused programs are delivered, for instance, negotiating skills when working with Chinese officials, hosting delegations, or working with local counterparts.

For executive staff in key roles, coaching and mentoring can be more appropriate, particularly when confidentiality and the space to discuss topical challenges is required. Coaching and mentoring should also be carried out as a pre-deployment activity for staff members who are required to relocate or deploy offshore, either on a short or long term assignment.

A very powerful learning opportunity is provided by intensive immersion which includes in-country learning programs and practical skills sessions with the opportunity for applied practice.

However, it is critical for the success of such programs that participants are challenged to engage with the local culture and leave the 'expatriate bubble', that assignments are relevant, and participants have accountability for achieving strategic learning outcomes.

This type of training must be delivered in a highly structured and professionally designed manner by coaches and mentors with real-life on the ground experience and language capability in Asian cultures, economies and countries to ensure departmental results in the quickest and most cost effective way.

Look for specialists that provide quality facilitation and have high-level interpersonal skills as well as relevant qualifications and practical experience.

Effective intercultural coaching and training is not only about 'the other'. Intercultural effectiveness requires exploring values, beliefs and challenging assumptions and the perceived universalism of one's own culture. This requires facilitation by a specialist who is diplomatic, empathetic and has high-level capability.

In research conducted on the quality of cross-cultural training in Australia for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, it was found the best intercultural trainers had more than twenty years of experience. Creating an Asia-capable workforce requires significant design of approach and a nuanced strategy. **GN**

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