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Managing Civil Servants in China: a Practitioner's Perspective and Reflection

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Abstract:

Based on the personal experiences and observations of the second and third authors, this paper discusses pressing issues in civil servant's management in China, using a small town in Anhui province as a case study. Furthermore, it recommends contextually meaningful practices and strategies to improve employee motivation and satisfaction for government staff. In particular, this paper provides practical and contextual insights on the Chinese public management, especially the working lives in government units in small towns in less developed areas in China.

Keywords: China, public management, employment reform, case study, human resource management

1. Introduction

While its socialism with Chinese characteristics has attracted increasing scholarly attention (Vickers, 2009; Lim, 2014; Choi, 2011), China has seen remarkable progress on the economic and social aspects. With the recent and ongoing employment reforms (Ma, 2018; Ma, Yong and Feng, 2019), employment and management issues in China have gained momentum (Ma, Blenkinsopp and Armstrong, 2020; Newman et al., 2019; Cooper et al., 2019). With the taken-for-granted assumption underpinning the mainstream management research neglecting the indigenous employment features in China, the Chinese civil servants and related management issues have received less attention due to several reasons (Ma, 2018; Ma, Yong and Feng, 2019). Notwithstanding, the management of civil servants has become an increasingly pertinent problem in China needing urgent research and reform (Ma, 2018), which has been recently suggested to represent a new paradigm in itself presenting difficult questions that remain unanswered (Mingus and Jing, 2017; Christensen and Fan, 2018; Liou, 2017). In line with these developments, we argue that Chinese civil servants require more scholarly attention. This is especially so when compared with the existing knowledge on their counterparts in more developed countries (e.g., Hou and Ting, 2017; Fleischmann, Xue and Head, 2020; Fisher et al., 2016; Cable et al., 2016), in light of the little existing research on their well-being with the limited evidence suggesting several factors for their depression (Huang et al., 2018). In this paper, we explore and discuss issues around civil servant management in China from a practitioner's viewpoint based on the personal experiences of the second and third authors that are Chinese civil servants, supplemented with their workplace observations and informal discussions with co-workers. We conclude this paper by offer some reflections and recommendations for future research and practice.

For purpose of anonymity, and given the preliminary nature of the discussion from the practitioner's perspective presented in this paper, we organize the following sections directly in light of the issues observed and discussed. We use ST town to refer to the context where the discussion below is embedded, which is a small town in Anhui province in China. ST town is located in the northeast of Anhui Province, with a population of more than 30,000 residents. The total area of the town is 78 square kilometers, while under its jurisdiction there are 10 administrative villages with a reasonable size of cultivated lands. The local government of ST town employs a range of different types of workers such as permanent and contract workers, alongside civil servants, while some of them are members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). To explore issues regarding these workers' mental state and perceptions about their job, work and life, the second and third authors have observed a considerable number of these employees and civil servants in order to better understand their employment contexts and perceptions. Below in this paper, we summarize two interesting issues we discovered as (some of us are) practitioners.

2. The Reality-Expectation Gap: Low Salaries and High Expectations

The first factor which affected civil servants working in the government of ST town is an obvious gap between the reality and their preemployment expectations regarding salaries. The lowest educational background of the observed ST town civil servants was a bachelor degree, suggesting a high level of education of the formal workforce. Because the Chinese civil servants must pass an entrance examination, known as the bar examination, as part of the recruitment process and the competition is very high (Stern, 2016), the civil servants usually have high expectations regarding the Chinese public employment before applying and joining. Consequently, when the civil servants in the ST town applied for the government jobs, they thought they had finally gotten very decent jobs, working hard all the way through. However, it was not difficult or before long that they found out that the average salaries paid for the same workload or the same qualifications or talents were a lot higher than themselves, whose salaries were oftentimes even lower than some manual work performed by undereducated workers in the private sector. Wages in the government units were generally low and there was no overtime allowance with fewer momentary subsidies to supplement the incomes. In some cases, some staff were not paid monthly but sometimes once every three months. Before 2018, some of them, especially the contracted staff, were even not covered by life insurance, while those who had it usually had a short-term insurance covering a narrower range of incidents.

At the same time, the civil servants were paid according to their official ranks and seniority, who received same levels of salary and benefits working in different positions and workload. This had caused some certain dissatisfaction among the staff, especially those worked more hours or took more complicated tasks. Many employees would ask: 'Why do I do so much work? I feel like I am dying at work to complete the task every day, but my salary is the same as those who do less or nothing at all. How is it fair?'. From a motivation point of view, this dissatisfaction can be explained by the concept of social comparison which affects the perception of fairness (Folger and Kass, 2000; Ambrose, Harland and Kulik, 1991), which albeit is complex in nature but especially important in reward evaluations (Messé and Watts, 1983). In practice, the supervisory staff working in the government units compared their own salaries with others. For example, in the case where both supervisors were responsible for the public administration of villages, the flow of villagers serviced by one may be twice as high as the other; but they would receive the same level of salary since they had the same official rank/title and seniority. This phenomenon of incongruence between work and pay was perceived to be very unreasonable. Although in China there is an old saying that 'more work for the able', in reality, there appeared to be no fair return for hard work in the government units in ST town. Therefore, many government staff there tended to ask themselves the question 'why should I work more?' and accordingly were not motivated to take more work.

3. Unclear Work Functions and Incentive Policies

Although the township as a comprehensive government department involved all aspects of complex public service and work, there was a lack of systematic distribution of work. Each person held more than one specific job, undertaking more work than specified to a single position or the positions the staff were recruited and appointed for. But it created a very difficult situation for the staff, resulting in common procrastination at work. Similarly, it also led to low work motivation and poor productivity. The staff felt it was difficult to concentrate with too much work a time, and they resented the long working hours which usually could not produce satisfactory results. With no clear definition of position/job functions, there was no efficiency.

Furthermore, the government units paid little attention to incentive policies in the ST town. The staff reckoned that this had to do the structure of government units which made it difficult to implement incentive policies, given the centralized nature of government in China. The budgets of the township were controlled by the financial department which usually gave limited to incentives for its taskforce. Because of the lack of autonomy of lower levels of government, it was believed that there was little the local township or units could do to improve the incentive policies. In addition, it was observed that the age structure of leaders in the government units was not ideal, while the management thoughts were usually too old and lacking innovative thinking. There seemed to be a common dissatisfaction about the incentive system, which made especially the young people unwilling to work hard for better rewards.

4. Some reflection

China has entered a new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Lv, 2018), and its economy and society are constantly developing. Government units should keep up with the economic and employment reforms and developments. The existing difficulties in ST town can be reflected from two aspects. From the internal motivation perspective, the civil servants were not able to manage their own expectations. As the old saying goes, the greater the expectation, the greater the disappointment. Many of these staff had been recommended to work in the government by their families and friends, who thought the government jobs were easy, comfortable and well-paid. However, as these staff entered the workplace in the government, they quickly realized that it was not the case but it was already too late considering their invested time into entering the civil servant career in China (Stern, 2016). They understandably felt demotivated and at the same time often failed to adjust their expectations according to reality. Some of the even lost organizational faith with little affective commitment to work (Blenkinsopp, 2007). A second internal reason might be due to the fact that some of the employees are not capable enough to carry out their duties at government units. Government jobs usually involve high loads of paper work which require accurate checking of documents to ensure that they are error free. This can be taxing both physically and psychologically. Sometimes employees want to work better but feel like they lack the appropriate abilities to carry out their work especially in specialized units which are usually organized to implement special projects by specialized personnel. This can lead to a higher turnover rate among specialized personnel and professionals, which then may force

the management to reduce the requirements of personnel selection of such specialized personnel. This further leads back to the lacking ability to carry out the required duties in specialized projects, and the vicious cycle goes.

Secondly, the job took hard work and considerable long hours to complete, while sometimes the staff especially those from specialized projects would have to work weekends without additional compensation or rewards. An example of such specialized projects involved the township and village poverty alleviation taskforce, who needed to work with many departments at the higher levels in the government handling a variety of data, information and materials. The workload for the project was a lot higher than those who stayed in the office, while the higher levels of management would usually want fast results. Some of them could have a notice in the morning for a difficult task which must be submitted before the day ended, while they would not be given the chance to give feedback on the difficulties with already piled-up work at desk. Worse still, there was no specific office to oversee or support the work of specialized taskforces, which made work lives of the staff especially difficult.

5. Recommendations

First, there should be effective measures to ensure that different tasks and talents receive different financial and non-financial benefits. ST town should be able to use various means to motivate their staff. In many cases, not only money can motivate the staff to work hard, but also other factors which can bring certain satisfaction to them (Ryan and Deci, 2000). For ST town, we think in particular additional motivators may include recognition, praises and personal attention. If possible, there could be a system for voting out the hard working or outstanding staff, which would give them a sense of identity and pride and in turn work as a good incentive to promote their work motivation and productivity. These motivating incentives should be explored, studied, developed, and implemented in the future (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Differential treatments could be made to staff who contribute differently in order for them to better understand their values at workplace.

Second, we think the government units should better determine responsibilities of specific jobs and clarify duties, who may try to establish a position- or job-based responsibility system. This system could be built according to the nature of work and characteristics of different positions in the office, while also should clearly stipulates its according responsibilities and authorities. Furthermore, this system should also carry out assessment for rewards and punishments in accordance with the stipulated working standards. The implementation of such a responsibility system at work will help to make office work more scientific and institutionalized. In order to establish and improve the work management system, it is necessary to make clear boundaries for tasks and staffing at a policy level, which would allow staff to be able to carry out the responsibilities according to their positions in order to achieve the expected goals and standards.

Furthermore, there should be further and fair incentive mechanisms. The incentive policies in the government play an important role in improving work enthusiasm and efficiency of the staff. At present, the incentive mechanism in ST town is almost nonexistent. Establishing an incentive system is of great significance for promoting the orderly development of all kinds of work in ST town. An example of such as incentive policies could be a fair and incremental salary system. It is reasonable for the government staff to expect a certain level of standard and quality of life. Establishing a fair salary system would be the most effective and direct way to change the working atmosphere of traditional government units, especially in ST town.

In addition, a work rotation system may be implemented in ST town. In its government units, many of the staff had worked for a long time who would get lazy at work. To improve this situation, scientific and reasonable job rotations should be carried out to improve the staff's working enthusiasm and efficiency according to their abilities and personalities. A final recommendation is to better the channels for promotion. In government units, promotion is particularly important because the current pay system goes according to the official rank. A fair and accessible channel of promotion would encourage competition which would break the normative conformity.

6. Conclusion

Based on personal observations of the second and third authors, this paper has identified several issues currently present in the civil servant's management in ST town in China. The primary issue was a huge gap caused by lower salaries and higher expectations for a decent job. There are also other issues such as poor incentive systems and unclear boundaries of work. Several practical recommendations have been made accordingly. The issues discussed in this paper are particularly insightful for those who are not familiar with Chinese public management systems, especially government units and jobs in small towns in less developed areas in China. More importantly, we call for future attention to the psychological aspects and affective well-being of Chinese civil servants, who have been neglected in the existing literature. Civil servants in China deserve more attention. With this paper, we hope the work lives of Chinese civil servants will improve in future with more scientific research.

7. References

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