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# PREFACE

This is a book about some special Chinese people. People I trust. People who created a company where trust trumps fear.

Most commentators and observers describe the story of China's re-emergence on the world's political and economic stage as a 'big' story: a story covering incredible speed and requiring the use of often dazzling numbers. Indeed, for many reasons, China's narrative of the last decades is truly amazing. However, this 'big' story often creates a sense of uneasiness, even threat and fear among audiences outside China.

The story of China's rise over the last 30 years can also be described in terms of hundreds of millions of 'small' stories involving individuals and families who overcame great challenges and forged new opportunities. To create greater understanding and more sympathy for the people of China, I believe we need to share some of these personal stories, meaningful narratives about individuals with normal needs and desires; stories about the superlative achievements of many special-even extraordinary-people.

With this book I intend to share some of these personal stories about the resilient, resourceful, persevering Chinese people whom I have had the privilege of meeting and working with over the last several years. Between 2007 and 2011, I lived and worked in Shanghai, as a corporate leader at TNT Express, a 3000-employee multinational firm occupying 30+ offices spread throughout the country. One of the world's largest logistics companies, TNT's primary business in China is the air export of parcels.

To the company's Chinese nationals, I was their *laowai* (the white face) and also the *laoban* (the boss). Very honestly, at least initially, all our employees seemed like a large group of people who looked somewhat identical to me. They were quiet, obedient, and did not seem very approachable or uniquely valuable.

However, over those four years, both as individuals and as a group, they emerged as a vibrant, living source for my personal development and transformation. As I have experienced their stories, passions, and dreams, I have learned how meaningfully

unique they are. To me — and I would argue to themselves — they have blossomed as outspoken, open-minded, resourceful, pragmatic, and most of all, caring people.

In addition to providing a hopefully fresh perspective on China and Chinese people, I hope this book also demonstrates that the principles of positive leadership can be applied in China as well as anywhere. This surprising insight dawned on me as a result of many unlikely successes that few people even thought possible. Together with a host of other champions inside TNT China, we transformed a mediocre, fear-dominated company into a positive human network exuding energy and enthusiasm, a company now recognized as one of China's best places to work (according to Aon Hewitt and 51Job). This second plot — the transformation of TNT China — surfaces amid the narratives of personal hopes and dreams that comprise the book's primary focus. I have often been humbled and awed by the awakening of 3000+ employees who, because they were valued first as human beings, now believe they work for one of the greatest companies in China.

Each subsequent chapter begins with the story of a person I have been given the privilege of working alongside at TNT China. I share their life stories as they have told them to me. I then link these personal portraits to the organizational transformation aspects of the story. Essentially, we used contemporary management techniques to build a culture of trust within a high performance organization. Some of these approaches were developed in China, so to a certain extent, we served as 'guinea pigs' — testing them for the first time. For other business leaders working in China, our methods may hopefully prove useful. For practitioners elsewhere, at least I hope to illustrate that management innovation can and does happen in China.

Maybe you picked up this book incredulous that anyone would argue the West should trust China. Perhaps the title even upset you. Or maybe you noticed the book because you agree with the need for greater trust. In any case, I hope you keep reading, because this book is intended for anyone who wants to know more about China, for anyone interested in a few positive stories about the Chinese people.

The Chinese I have worked with have inspired me; because of them and what we have experienced together, I am now a different man — a better man, I hope. I have set out to write this book to give them 'the face' they deserve and 'a face' to the world. The Chinese people I know well can truly be trusted. I hope this book can contribute to the better understanding and deeper appreciation of the Chinese people in the rest of the world.

## A FINAL LESSON FROM LEE YAN

During our 2011 Conference ‘Learning to Lead,’ we explored a number of management concepts with TNT’s entire group of 250 leaders, including crucial insights about Generation Y and the centrality of internal customer satisfaction. I had personally insisted to the senior management team that we include the broad, conceptual framework



Lee Yan acting during the annual conference

of ‘becoming better managers’ in the conference. I was (and still am) convinced that although most corporate leaders learn to ‘manage’ their employees through experience, they often have little idea how to run a decent meeting, receive and give feedback, or conduct a good interview. Typically, such practical skills are assumed to make up the standard toolkit of every manager, yet the majority of managers probably received any relevant training (if at all) when at entry levels of the organization, where companies don’t often spend much money or attention teaching leaders how to be their best.

The conference helped launch a campaign for everyone to ‘go back to school’ and refresh their basic leadership skills. As explained in an earlier chapter, we held these events at large venues featuring a prominent, up-front stage overlooking dozens of tables; these tables served to organize conference attendees into spontaneous teams. This year, we used ‘role-play’ to practice critical management skills at each table, and then a few groups acted out their ‘play’ on stage.

Lee Yan, the general manager of our Xian depot (I had always liked his happy nature and easy-going style) took the stage to portray a feedback session during which he basically yelled at the person depicting his subordinate. His portrayal surprised me,

because I would never have expected Lee Yan to actually behave that way, yet he played the role very well. He continuously interrupted his ‘subordinate,’ lecturing for five minutes about something really silly.

Following this performance, the audience laughed uproariously. But then Lee Yan did something I will never forget. He took the microphone and shared with the entire audience that the ‘play’ we had just witnessed was based on reality. A few years prior, he himself had acted just like that manager. He expressed heart-felt sorrow for his blunder, indicating he had learned that arbitrary authority was not the way to be a good manager or coach. He insisted that he wanted to share his story so that others could avoid his errors.

During the years I worked in China, I never saw anyone, unprompted, share so genuinely and openly that he had been wrong, and that he had learned from his mistakes. Lee Yan’s confession was all the more impressive because without it, his boss — who sits in an office two hours away by plane — would never have known anything about his behavior. Yet he bravely shared with 250 people, including all his superiors. He really wanted to contribute what he had learned.

In my closing remarks at the end of the conference, I thanked a lot of people and then called Lee Yan back to the stage. I assured the audience that his short speech had been the highlight of the conference for me, perfect evidence that our theme, ‘Learning to lead’ had been the right choice.

I also realized that in many ways Lee Yan’s example demonstrated that TNT’s turnaround in China was complete. Four years earlier, what Lee Yan showed us on that stage would have been inconceivable. No one, Lee Yan included, would have admitted learning from mistakes to such a large audience of peers and superiors. No audience would have respected someone who did. And we as managers wouldn’t even have considered inviting him on stage to share the story.

Fortunately, in those four years we had all grown, as company colleagues working together, certainly, but also as human beings. We learned a lot about ourselves, about how to connect and interact with other people. Above all, we had learned to trust each other.

My sincere hope is that these stories of the people of China, with whom I have had the joy and privilege of working, have convinced you as they have me that deep, genuine, abiding trust among people can be intentionally sought and found. Indeed, if trust could prevail throughout a transportation company spread across a vast country like China, why not anywhere?