THINK ‘GO’ TO MARKET IN CHINA

Neil Selby, Director of Executive Education for CKGSB (Europe), discusses how tapping into traditional Chinese game strategy can give market insights.

Perhaps the most famous scene in the Indiana Jones series of films is where the hero faces a man brandishing a sabre in an Egyptian bazaar. He responds to the extravagant display of swordsmanship by firing his pistol.

The situation is memorable because it highlights an extraordinary level of cultural incongruity. The swordsman has been schooled in prescribed standards of combat behaviour, while Indiana Jones adapts his behaviour to solve the problem quickly and decisively.

When entering the Chinese market, Europeans schooled in Western leadership principles may find themselves equally vulnerable to similar incongruities. Westerners should be aware of the most fundamental differences they may encounter. Much like the differences between ancient strategy games Go and Chess, achieving the proper East-West mindset is crucial to success.

CKGSB’s most recent research proves that Western senior executives would do well to know the fundamental difference of approach that may affect their business success with Chinese counterparts. And much, apparently, boils down to thinking ‘Go’ not ‘Chess’.

Originating in China 2,500 years ago, Go (圍棋) literally means ‘Encircling Game’. Leveraging a combination of vision and tactics, players use identical stones to encircle their opponent through intuitive pattern recognition and hard-won experience. Mentioned in Confucius’ Analects, it was even considered one of the key skills of the scholar gentleman alongside calligraphy, painting and music because of required patience and tenacity.

Chess, meanwhile, prioritises strategic and analytical thought, bold moves and the ability to plan far in advance. It places relative values on rank and capability and has a definite conclusive goal of checkmate. Originating 1,500 years ago in India, it is said to have caught on in the West because it corresponded to class structure and a sense of knightly morality, even adapting itself over time to correspond to Western circumstances by changing the nature of certain pieces.

So while chess is essentially a war game that has adapted itself over time to the Western context – in which opponents command equally matched armies with clear rules and standards of behaviour – Go is a closed territory game that has remained unchanged over the last 2,500 years, prioritising order, patient discipline and encirclement.

This need to understand fundamental Chinese thinking is why CKGSB has developed its China Strategy Challenge Programme in collaboration with top-ranked business school IMD. Learning objectives include understanding the way Chinese executives think and discovering the critical success factors in building relationships alongside Chinese CEOs.

In the first half of the three-day programme, running this year in Lausanne from 2 to 5 September, participants familiarise themselves with the global implications of China’s rise, the resultant opportunities and competitive and collaborative strategies for success. In the second half, Western participants have the unique opportunity to network alongside a select group of fifty successful Chinese CEOs to reach a better cross-cultural understanding and enhance chances for success.

CKGSB’s European ‘China Strategy Challenge’ Open Programme has been prepared with IMD, a top-ranked business school with a global perspective, and is scheduled from 2 to 5 September, 2013 in Lausanne, Switzerland. For further information, visit www.imd.org.