

Outlook

Q&amp;A

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A large, stylized blue chevron graphic pointing to the right, serving as a background for the main headline.

# High performance. Delivered.

Ms. Xu Fang is vice president, human resources director and dean of the Leadership Development Institute at TCL, one of the largest global consumer electronics enterprises and the top brand in televisions in China. In this interview, she discusses the success of TCL's Eagle Project, a leadership development program targeted at all levels of the enterprise. Enterprise learning at TCL has been effectively designed to support the company's strategic goals, enable culture change and encourage innovation.

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## Innovative learning and leadership programs to support business strategy

An interview with Xu Fang, TCL

**Outlook Q&A: At TCL Leadership Development Institute, your training program is called the Eagle Project. Tell us how it got that name.**

**Xu Fang:** In 2006, TCL had begun a globalization strategy through a series of mergers and acquisitions. It was a challenging time for the company. Our chairman, Li Dongsheng, wrote an article called "Rebirth of the Eagle." There is a legend that, at a certain time in its life, an eagle must go through a painful process of shedding its old talons and beak and re-growing them if it is to live to its full lifespan. Although this isn't true from a biological sense, it is an engaging myth. Its symbolism was powerful and the eagle became a kind of emblem for the company.

**Is the training targeted at all levels of the company?**

It is now, but at the beginning, the program targeted middle managers. At that time, Mr. Bo Lianming, who is currently TCL president and CEO of China Star Optoelectronics, was vice president of TCL. He is a visionary leader, and he recognized the importance of supporting

the workforce optimally if the company's globalization strategy was to succeed. He put forth the concept of "winning at the middle level," so that was where we focused.

Over time, we expanded the program to include higher-level leadership and even new recruits. Today we have training for four levels of employees, groups we refer to as "eaglets," "flying eagles," "elite eagles" and "soaring eagles."

**What is the content of the training programs?**

The Eagle Project has conducted eight rounds of training since we began. The first three covered general business and leadership topics, but the subsequent ones have been more specialized, covering such areas as manufacturing, finance, sales and R&D. Each subject was closely linked to the company's strategic direction of the year. For instance, our focus on manufacturing came from Chairman Li Dongsheng's emphasis that TCL needed to go back to its primary strength—its industrial capabilities and product quality. Our training program last year was designed to help frontline sales personnel fully tap their potential.

**"Although our training offerings are based on supporting business strategy, we set great store on the emotional and affective components of training."**

The training theme this year is research and development because our current strategic priority is highly focused on innovation. We think that by matching our training programs with the company's strategic focuses, we can deliver training that really has an impact on our people's ability to support the business strategy.

**How have the training programs evolved over the years in terms of the kinds of learning experiences you provide?**

That is an important question. At the beginning, perhaps not surprisingly, our focus was on promoting the training and scaling it. In terms of content, we were concerned about closing knowledge gaps in certain business topics, so the training was fairly general. Now, however, having established the program, our focus is more on efficiency and effectiveness, and on delivering content that supports more individualized skill sets.

Here is an example of how this works. When TCL sets a new direction, a new business strategy, we translate that strategy into the specific capabilities and skills our people need, and then measure the relevant skills gaps to identify where current personnel have deficits. We then provide them with tailor-made training through a variety of means, including internships, shadowing or coaching, and action learning. In the future, we will continue to develop more customized training and conduct sessions in smaller groups. We want to ensure that we support particular functional areas and personal backgrounds and learning styles, so that we really see performance and behavioral change that helps take our company in the right direction.

**You raised an important distinction between knowledge and behaviors. How do you make a difference in shaping the behaviors of TCL people who need to perform in new ways to work in a more global organization?**

Global thinking and operational capabilities are best cultivated in the workplace through practice. Sitting in a classroom or listening to an online webinar where a trainer is elaborating

on cultural differences is important, but it is just the beginning. As you implied, it doesn't really develop deep understanding, much less change behaviors. So in our training programs focused on globalization, we begin with instructor-based learning but then augment that by sending people to local sites for internship experience. For instance, we dispatched managers to live in Paris for half a month, and then divided them into five to six groups to get in touch with the local culture and values. They came back with valuable practical experience, something they could never have gotten in a classroom.

**It is clear that you are acutely aware of the impact that effective learning experiences can have on the larger culture of a company.**

Yes. Although our training offerings are based on supporting business strategy, we set great store on the emotional and affective components of training. While effective training involves delivery of knowledge and presents opportunities to immerse oneself in how to perform in new ways, in essence it aims to endow people with a sense of belonging to a community. This creates camaraderie so that people then support each other and share experiences about how best to meet their goals. Training to a large extent serves as a vehicle for communication and cooperation across our broader organization. This is relevant especially in the Chinese culture, which is very oriented to community. One might well call the community-building effects of training a "spiritual strength," and it is something not to be underestimated. We will continue to focus on this kind of emotional component in training by making it more touching and soul-stirring.

**What results have you seen in terms of the effect of your learning programs on employee and enterprise performance?**

We pay particular attention to this and do analyses and measurements across four dimensions. The first is about response. Are the trainees satisfied? How did they evaluate the trainer and the content? The second is about learning. What knowledge and skills have the trainees mastered? Do they work in practice? The third is about behavior. What kinds of changes has the training brought out in the day-to-day lives of trainees? To what extent will the changes affect their behaviors as leaders? The fourth is about impact on business performance.

**A goal of most companies today is to encourage breakthrough innovations. How does your current R&D training affect the innovative capabilities of your people?**

For our corporate chairman, embedding innovation in our cultural DNA is essential to TCL's long-term success. But before we could create training programs, we needed to ask a number of business questions: What risks does an emphasis on innovation carry with it? What capabilities does it require? In what kind of environment does it thrive? It was critical that we move quickly to translate the concept of innovation into capabilities and desired performance outcomes.

As with the entire Eagle Project, our training about innovation started with our middle managers, exploring issues such as how to kindle innovativeness and creativity. Many of these managers are now teaching these courses to entry-level employees. Our middle-level people are often those "in the trenches," trying to balance expectations, cost and impact. We think it makes sense to have that balance between mere ideas and the pragmatic application of those ideas in a challenging business context. The Eagle Project will continue to refine this approach. We want innovation to pervade the company, and we believe that happens especially when different levels of employees learn from each other and work together.

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This interview was conducted by Claire Yang, managing director and the lead for Accenture Talent & Organization in Greater China, and Tina Lu, senior specialist in content marketing in Greater China.

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