Guanxi

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What is it?

The Chinese term guanxi, often glossed as 'relationship,' roughly translates as a type of social capital developed between people via a process of reciprocal exchange. It depends on connections and shared identification with family, relatives, friends, hometown, region, school, or place of work. The most frequently discussed tactics used to enhance guanxi in Chinese society include presenting a gift or holding a banquet for the other party. Many different forms of guanxi have been studied; whilst some may have a positive bearing on corporate communication and reputation, business performance and competitive advantages, others might potentially damage institutional processes and break the rules of business. It is the participants' responsibility to evaluate the ethical implications and potential impact in a specific cultural context.

Who uses the concept?

As one of the most studied and widely used indigenous concepts in the last few decades, researchers in intercultural communication, international business, management, and sociology have been trying to conceptualize and analyze guanxi. Outside academia, the concept is most often used and discussed by practitioners and cultural trainers in a business and management context.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Guanxi has been widely recognized as the foundation upon which people connect and build relationships in the Chinese cultural context. It has a perfect fit with intercultural dialogue, which is essential to enhancing intercultural understandings and promoting intercultural communication. Although guanxi's linguistic expression originated from Chinese and other Eastern Asian contexts, the concept provides an alternative account in facilitating intercultural dialogue across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

What work remains?

As guanxi is a multilayered construct, studies of how it is related to mientzi (literally “face”) and renqing (literally “favor”) would deepen the conversation. Recent researchers have called for more quantitative studies, e.g., how it can be measured. Although guanxi is deeply embedded in the Chinese cultural context, more insights could be drawn from studies of Chinese-inspired economies, such as Hong Kong or Singapore. Moreover, perceptions of guanxi from a western point of view, e.g., views from Western business partners, could expand this issue in greater depth.

Resources

