

## MAJOR CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH REFORM AND INNOVATION OF LEADERSHIP TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT (LTD), AND SOME PROPOSED SOLUTIONS: REFLECTIONS ON LTD PRACTICES OF CELAP

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**Abstract:** Since the reform and opening up, China's leadership training has experienced three stages of development: the initial stage of leadership training and development in the early period of China's reform and opening up to the world (1978-2002), the rapid growing stage of leadership training and development in the period of fast growing economy and society (2002-2012) and the innovative development stage of leadership training and development guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era(2012-present).The continuous improvement of the capability and quality of the senior leadership team has laid a solid foundation of civil servants for the socialist modernization construction with Chinese characteristics in more than 40 years of reform and opening up.

Based on the research of China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong (CELAP), three major problems were found in current leadership training: firstly, how would a training institute make training more helpful and enlightening to the trainees' practical work; secondly, How would a training institute enhance the sense of substitution and timeliness of loyalty education; thirdly, how would a training institution improve the efficiency of leaders' career development with skills obtained from the practical training programs.

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations were generated from the study of leadership training programs: first of all, we must accurately target the needs of senior leaders and enhance the pertinence of program content; secondly, we need to make an effective connection of the happiness views of contemporary leaders with their job aspiration in leadership training so as to enhance their epochal nature of loyalty; and lastly, we need to focus on problem-oriented solution and reflection so as to further strengthen the systematic design of leadership training programs.

**Keywords:** Chinese Senior Civil Servants, Leadership Training and Development, Loyalty Education, Practical Training, Efficiency of Career Development

In October 2023, CPC Central Committee issued 'Regulations on the Work of Leadership Training and Development' and the 'National Plan for Leadership Training and Development (2023-2027)' (hereinafter referred to as the "Regulations" and "The National Plan"), which provide institutional safeguards for the development of high-quality leaders in the new era. It is an inevitable requirement for the reform and innovation of leadership training and development (hereinafter referred to as the "LTD") to conform to the requirements of the new era and keep pace with the times of public administration (PA) reform and innovation.

### The development of LTD in China since reform and opening up in 1978

Since the reform and opening up, China's LTD has gone through the following three stages of development.<sup>[51]</sup> The quality of the leaders has been continuously improved, laying a solid leadership manpower foundation for the modernization of socialism with Chinese characteristics over the past forty years.

#### The initial stage of leadership training and development in the early period of China's reform and opening up to the world (1978-2002)

During this stage, LTD was promoted to be the national development strategy, committed to accelerating the development of LTD, updating the content and institutional mechanism of LTD, which opened up a new journey for LTD.

#### The rapid growing stage of leadership training and development in the period of fast growing economy and society (2002-2012)

This stage witnesses the rapid development of LTD since the reform and opening up of China. In accordance with the needs of PA reality in China, the focus of LTD has been further adjusted, and a policy of large-scale training of leaders and substantial upgrading of leaders competence has been implemented, laying a solid foundation of LTD for the rapid development of China's socialist modernization at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

#### The innovative development stage of leadership training and development guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (2012-present)

From the 18th National Party Congress in 2012, which is the time that Mr Xi Jinping was elected as the president of China, up to the present time, is the innovative development stage of LTD since the reform and opening up. In this stage, China attaches great importance to the development of the leaders. In the process of comprehensively deepening PA reform,<sup>[52][53]</sup> China has paid great attention to the reform and innovation of LTD, significantly improving the development of LTD to a higher level.

<sup>51</sup> Xi Y.P., Research on the Historical Process and Basic Experience of CPC Party Cadre Education since Reform and Opening Up [D]. Master's thesis, Tianjin University, 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Jing Y.J., Marching through the deep-water zone: Chinese public sector reforms and the way forwards[J]. Public Management Review, 2020, DOI: 10.1080/14719037.2020.1752039.

<sup>53</sup> Xia, Z.Q., Tian, S.Yan, X.Y., Mapping the Knowledge Domain: Research on Service-Oriented Government in China[J]. Journal of Chinese Political Science, 2019:(24):341-360.

In short, the main achievements of LTD in China since the reform and opening up are as follows: the organizations of LTD have become more efficient in practice, the contents of LTD have been greatly enriched, the ways and means of LTD have been innovated to meet the requirements of leaders in the new era. Moreover, as the system and mechanism of LTD have been increasingly improved, a relatively comprehensive and systematic system of LTD was successfully established, pushing forward significant development of various types of LTD institutions at all levels and in all fields in China.

### Key challenges to reform and innovation in LTD

From a profound study of the national LTD history and realities<sup>[54][55]</sup>, as well as training practices at CELAP over last 20 years, three major problems associated with the current LTD reform and innovation in China are found as follows:

#### **A most fundamental problem is how to make leadership training more helpful and enlightening to the trainees' practical work**

According to the survey on the effectiveness of the courses and training programs, we found that the evaluation score of the item of "the program/course has inspired and helped the trainees in their actual work" marks the lowest in all items, which indicates it is essentially most insufficient concerning training effectiveness.

The main reasons associated with the above-mentioned problems are believed to be as follows: (1) the lack of relevance to the actual work of trainees in the teaching content. More precisely, the teaching content is not closely linked to the actual work of trainees, as a result, failed to target difficult problems and hot issues encountered by the trainees in their work. (2) Lack of diversity in training methods. Practical survey has found that the training programs at present mainly consist of theoretical lectures and a few on-site teaching, more effective teaching methods such as the use of case studies, structured seminars, action learning, flipped classrooms and other methods are by large neglected. Although the National LTD Plan requires that LTD institutions should "comprehensively utilize seminar-type, case-type, simulation-type, experiential-type, interview-type and other methods, promote structured seminars, action learning and other research-type learning, and explore methods such as the flipped classroom". Moreover, Leadership development studies generally agree that no single method is most effective.<sup>[56]</sup> In practice, a combination of suitable training methods are proved to be more effective in training. (3) Lack of systematization in program design. Practical investigation found that current program design in LTD institutions are generally insufficient and unable to effectively support teachers' teaching and trainees' learning, resulting in the inability to integrate teaching and learning throughout the training process. In order to effectively

<sup>54</sup> Zhai X.L., Jiang Y.P., Historical Changes and Development Prospects of the Leader Training System with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era - Based on the Analysis of 7 National Leader Training Planning Policy Texts[J]. Journal of China Yan'an Leadership Academy, 2022;15(1):129-136.

<sup>55</sup> Yuan J.T., Historical Development and Experiential Revelation of the Party's Leadership Training and Development[J]. Journal of Hunan Institute of Humanities and Science, 2021;38(4):37-41.

<sup>56</sup> Day, D. V., Fleenor, J. W., Atwater, L. E., Sturm, R. E., & McKee, R. A., Advances in leader and leadership development: A review of 25 years of research and theory[J]. The Leadership Quarterly, 2014;25(1), 63-82.

promote the integration of theory and practice in training, it is necessary not only to provide appropriate content and comprehensive training methods tailored to the needs of the trainees, but also to consider structured program design that supports the teaching of the instructor and the learning of the trainees, so that the entire training process promotes the mutual integration of teaching and learning. Currently, most training institutions only focus on instructor-centered classroom teaching, with less attention paid to learner-centered learning activities.<sup>[57]</sup>

**The second problem is that how to enable a training institute to enhance the timeliness of loyalty education through training programs and training activities.**

With a profound study of a number of LTD institutions and face-to-face investigation of their leaders<sup>[58]</sup>, we found that Chinese LTD institutions largely adopt the traditional way of utilizing historical figures and stories in loyalty education programs. However, little relevance of the stories of earlier leaders with current realities makes loyalty education less effective in practice. In China, loyalty education generally emphasizes values education, which focuses on loyalty to the Party, to the country and to the people. The major content of loyalty education aims to make leaders to serve the people wholeheartedly and to seek happiness for the people through the process of China's modernization.

<sup>[59][60]</sup> Frankly speaking, to effectively enhance loyalty education through training programs is not an easy job, widely recognized by scholars in China and in the world. <sup>[61]</sup> The core of future leadership is believed to be right values of leaders, or more precisely, an altruistic-centered value of leaders. <sup>[62]</sup> <sup>[63]</sup> How to connect the altruistic value of serving the people with the reality of young leaders' pursuit of personal values is a challenge for LTD institutions as well as for PA globally.

**The third problem is how to enable a training institute to effectively improve the efficiency of leaders' career development with skills obtained from the practical training programs.**

There are overwhelming expectation from trainees that they wish skills obtained from training programs would improve their career development in the coming years. However, it is so far believed to be a most difficult task for training institutions. Many factors affect the efficiency of leaders' career development

<sup>57</sup> CPC Central Committee issues National Plan for Cadre Education and Training (2023-2027) [N]. People's Daily, 2023-10-17.

<sup>58</sup> Zhao Y.H., Effectively Carrying Loyalty Education Throughout the Whole Process of Leadership Training and Development [J]., Journal of Chinese Leadership Training and Development Research, 2024(1):30-35.

<sup>59</sup> Cai L.Q., Value Leadership of the Communist Party of China [J]. Research of Party and Government, 2020 (3) : 56-65.

<sup>60</sup> Xi J.R., The People-centered Value Leadership of the Communist Party of China [J]. Shanghai Party History and Party Building, 2021(2) : 3-9.

<sup>61</sup> Zheng J.Z., The approach and system construction of young leaders' experience growth in the new era [J]., Journal of Chinese Leadership Studies, 2023 (3) : 35-40.

<sup>62</sup> Vielmetter R., G., Sell, Y. Leadership 2030: the six Megatrends your Need to Understand to Lead your Company into the Future [M]. New York: Hay Group Holdings, Inc. 2014: 1 - 11.

<sup>63</sup> George, B., Authentic leadership: rediscovering the secrets to creating lasting value [M]. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

with skills obtained from training programs. For example, the learning effect of trainees in training is closely related to whether leaders are seriously committed, or whether they are good at higher-order thinking or not. According to Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, Higher-order thinking abilities include the abilities of analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating and creative thinking. It helps to extract key information from a mass of information for integration and to find creative ideas for solving problems. Research finds that the practical training programs would help those leaders who lack the ability to transfer learning from the understanding of training content to its adaptation and application. As a result, trainers are recommended to make appropriate instructional design that focus on the needs of trainees by effective teaching guidance in the practical training programs.

To improve program design, it is worthy of mentioning the Analects of Confucius that "if a student is not confused and eager to be taught, the teacher should not enlighten him"<sup>[64]</sup>. It reminds us that the best time for teachers to communicate with students and the most effective time for teaching is when students are confused and eager to find answers. It is obvious that the key to good instructional design lies in the precise understanding of the trainees' problems. We should match the appropriate training content with the actual problems of the students in the work situation, and provide various learning tools to combine the students' listening, watching, thinking, speaking and using. Therefore, a systematic instructional design which closely connected leaders' career development with skills obtained from the practical training programs are highly recommended in LTD activities.

### Ideas and initiatives for reform and innovation in LTD under the new situation

Today, there is an urgent need to face up to the various key problems above through deepening the reform and innovation of LTD. Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations were proposed for leadership training programs in LTD institutions.

#### Enhancing the pertinence of program content

Above all, LTD institutions need to accurately target the needs of senior leaders and enhance the pertinence of program content. To enhance the relevance of LTD, three important points need to be noted:

Firstly, more attention should be paid to the learning of trainees, while at the same time encouraging knowledge and skills learned from training into practice. At present, LTD institutions are more concerned about the creation of high-quality courses, from the perspective of the teacher's role. However, the National Plan clearly states that it is necessary to adhere to the principle of "combining learning with practical application in the workplace".<sup>[65]</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Translated and annotated by Chen X.F., Xu R.Z., The Analects of Confucius-University-Medievalism[M]. 2 ed. Beijing: China Bookstore, 2015:77.

<sup>65</sup> CPC Central Committee issues National Plan for Cadre Education and Training (2023-2027) [N]. People's Daily, 2023-10-17.

Secondly, LTD institutions should be shifted from the traditional way of knowledge transfer to an innovative way of solving trainees' practical problems. Today, the generally accepted view is that LTD activities should be more focused on solving problems and clearing up confusions of the trainees' work rather than merely knowledge transfer. The National Plan supports the above-mentioned views, which points out that learning should be "closely related to new problems encountered in practice, deep-rooted problems associated with reform, development and stabilization in China, problems associated with the people's urgent needs and expectations, major problems in international changes, and prominent issues facing the ruling party's building". Therefore, LTD should be a learning process of "unity of knowledge and practice that aims to promote the overall work in China".<sup>[66]</sup>

Thirdly, pre-research before the start of LTD activities should be strengthened in order to accurately identify the learning needs of trainees. Generally speaking, the needs of trainees are various, which include the needs of meeting the requirement of the state, the needs required by the organizations where they come from, and the needs required by their specific posts. In addition to national and organizational needs, it is also necessary to accurately identify the needs of trainees of different categories, levels and positions. Therefore, in the process of program design and course preparation, it is necessary to prepare not only the content of teaching topics, but also collect the common and special problems encountered by the trainees in their work before training. On this basis, ideas and cases of solving relevant problems at work should be included in LTD programs, which would enable trainees to apply ideas and methods learned to their work after they return to their posts. Only by teaching directly to the problems encountered in the actual work of the trainees can we truly achieve precision, usefulness and effectiveness in the process of LTD activities.

### **Connecting the happiness views of contemporary leaders with their job aspiration**

Furthermore, LTD institutions need to make an effective connection of the happiness views of contemporary leaders with their job aspiration in leadership training

Firstly, LTD institutions need to make an effective connection of the happiness views of contemporary leaders with their job aspiration. Since current young leaders live in the post-materialistic era, thus comparing with their parents, they tend to pay more attention to the needs of their material enjoyment and to neglect the pursuit of their spirituality improvement.<sup>[67]</sup> Besides, they also tend to pay more attention to their personal values than social common values. An unavoidable reality is that they live in the Internet age and more easily influenced by all kinds of thoughts and trends online. As a result, the training effect of LTD activities are often weakened in many aspects. Therefore, LTD institutions must find effective ways in their training activities to integrate the personal values of young leaders with social values so that they can establish

<sup>66</sup> CPC Central Committee issues National Plan for Cadre Education and Training (2023-2027) [N]. People's Daily, 2023-10-17.

<sup>67</sup> Zheng Y.F., The Coming of the Post-Materialistic Era [M]. Beijing: CITIC Press, 2016: 14.

and practice people-centered values in their daily life. Studies reveal that young leaders in any era would pursue a happy life, which is certainly a universal issue across generations. A person's view of happiness is important and helpful in the process of forming one's values. Psychology research on happiness has found that profound and lasting happiness is normally based on one's meaningful and worthwhile life goals, which should serve and add value to others.<sup>[68]</sup> In China, the utmost value of civil servants is to serve the people wholeheartedly, which is believed to be precisely the kind of value that adds value to others and brings lasting happiness to a person. Once LTD activities help young leaders in the new era gain a lasting sense of happiness from serving others and society, they will gradually align their life goals with the performance concept of serving the people, and consciously choose people-centered values from the bottom of their hearts. Of course, it is not an overnight work but requires a long process of "practice - perception - internalization - sublimation", which is a complex cycle of moral cultivation in LTD activities, extending to the cycle of one's life. Moreover, it is also believed that through the continuous improvement of one's spirituality, one would eventually become an excellent leader with high morality and charisma. The typical example is the story of Chairman Mao Zedong, who was led by the example of his mother and teachers in his youth time. His mother's noble spirit and practices that full with deep sympathy for the poor laborers and peasants, gradually developed profound people-centered values in Chairman Mao's thoughts and actions.<sup>[69]</sup> Chairman Mao once said, "Human beings are no doubt predominantly trying to benefit oneself, but it is not the only thing in one's nature. There is also the nature of benefiting others, which is also part of human nature. To benefit others is in fact to benefit oneself. The most important point of benefitting oneself is to benefit one's spirit."<sup>[70]</sup> The "spirit of benefitting oneself" in this context actually refers to a lasting sense of promoting spiritual well-being through helping others.

Secondly, LTD institutions need to follow up the whole process design of on-site teaching activities. Studies show that on-site teaching activities often bring great emotional touch to young leaders. However, due to the lack of appropriate reasoning of the on-site teaching materials, or the reasoning in teaching is not deep enough. It is often found that on-site teaching failed to convince people. Sometimes, the teaching effect only stay in the "touched people once for a while" rather than long-lasting effect. Therefore, LTD institutions need to find effective ways of utilizing the emotional touching opportunity in on-site teaching, cultivating the noble spirit of young leaders that would enable them establish the value of serving the people wholeheartedly. It is recommended that LTD institutions need to follow up with persuasive reasoning while triggering emotional changes of trainees in on-site teaching activities, which we believe it's the key to moving from emotional touch to ideological recognition of

<sup>68</sup> Seligman, M. E. P., *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*[M]. New York: Free Press, 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Weng W.Y., *The Formation Process and Contemporary Significance of Young Mao Zedong's "People First" Value Leadership* [J]. *Gansu Social Science*, 2022(1):16-23.

<sup>70</sup> Documentation Research Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Hunan Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Mao Zedong's Early Manuscripts Editorial Group. Mao Zedong's Early Manuscripts: 1912-1920* [M]. Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House, 2013: 146-147.



trainees. Thus, a standard process of on-site teaching of 4-step cycle that concludes “background introduction - on-site visit - interactive exchange - summary” is highly recommended for on-site teaching activities.

Thirdly, LTD institutions need to appropriately design seminars and reflections to help trainees combine learning and application. For example, after some site visits, some related seminars and reflections should be followed up. In this way, trainees would be able to analyze the historical stories of the visited places, combining the actual problems at their workplaces with their learning and gains from on-site teaching and the seminars. The survey of this study find that participants highly approve this kind of project design, which generally would make a deep impression on them and long-lasting effect in their daily life.

### Strengthening the systematic design of leadership training programs

Last, LTD institutions need to focus on problem-oriented solution and reflections so as to further strengthen the systematic design of leadership training programs.

It is well accepted that one of the most important tasks concerning LTD institutions’ training is to help improve higher-order thinking of trainees in their training activities, such as seminars, dialogues and reflections. Systematical design of training content and methods are believed to better support trainees’ problem-oriented thinking and reflections. Research finds that Experience Processing System (including experiential learning, deliberate practice, contextualizing application) and the Self-view System (including self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-identity) are two major tools for leadership development, which is dynamic, non-linear, contextual process.<sup>[71]</sup> Group discussions, structured seminars and action learning are all modern training methods that promote trainees’ higher-order thinking and reflection. It is therefore not surprising that the Regulations also propose the integrated use of “action learning and other methods”,<sup>[72]</sup> and the National Plan even requires all LTD institutions to introduce “action learning and other research-based learning” in training activities.<sup>[73]</sup> It is recommended that action learning, as a training method that focuses on problem solving, should be adopted in program design in LTD institutions.

To further strengthen the systematic design of leadership training programs, it is highly recommended to focus on three key factors such as training content, training methods and training process.

Firstly, in terms of training content, LTD institutions need to focus on the common problems of trainees by designing multiple related knowledge modules and form multiple teaching modules. For example, before training starts, the program designer should conduct a number of pre-training research in advance, summarizing the experience of the last project, and analyzing the cases and problem materials collected from the trainees. Through summarizing some of the problems of the trainees in their actual work, it is recommended

<sup>71</sup> Liu,Z.G., Venkatesh,S., Murphy,S. E., Riggio,R.E.,Leader development across the lifespan: A dynamic experiences-grounded approach[J]. The Leadership Quarterly, 2021:3 (5):art.no.101382.

<sup>72</sup> CPC Central Committee issues Regulations on Cadre Education and Training [N]. People's Daily, 2023-10-16.

<sup>73</sup> CPC Central Committee issues National Plan for Cadre Education and Training (2023-2027) [N]. People's Daily, 2023-10-17.



that three key common problems consistent with three major teaching modules are to be included in the training program.

Secondly, in terms of training methods, it is necessary to use various types of lectures, seminars, workshops and others to form a number of teaching modules, and in this way further enhance a comprehensive learning model of “problem-solving skills training and knowledge learning activities”. Various seminars can be group discussions, structured seminars, experience sharing, work review, flipped classrooms, etc., as mentioned in the National Plan and Regulations. Different seminar methods that carry different learning functions are advised to systematically designed in programs, so as to stimulate the willingness of trainees to communicate with each other. It is also to promote their in-depth thinking, and to create a strong learning atmosphere in the class. For example, an effective process of this kind of training can be designed as follows: at the beginning, one group discussion is used to initiate trainees’ exchange, followed by a group of certain number of trainees conducting experience exchanges related to the topic. Then, a structured seminar would be followed to stress on the key common issues and suggestions provided by the trainees in the previous discussion and experience exchanges. In addition, participants are asked to write down their preliminary solutions to the common problems found from the group discussions. In the end, a debriefing session would be conducted to allow each group to present their solutions, followed by comprehensive feedback provided by the training expert.

Thirdly, from the training process, it should focus on the whole process of solving target problems, which includes the following key steps: first of all, it is to find out common problems, which derives from the key challenges, then followed by activities such as cause analysis, solution design, solution initial Implementation, Initial implementation review, Solution adjustment. After the above-mentioned steps, a Second implementation review should be conducted so as to make Solution readjustment. It is regarded as a systematic training in which problems are solved in the implementation process. Therefore, it is believed that action Learning is not only a training method, but also a learning tool to solve the practical problems at work. More importantly, it is that ability of the trainees to solve practical problems would be significantly improved in the process.

## Conclusion

To summarize, the effectiveness of LTD activities can only be enhanced if the pertinence, topicality and systematicity of LTD programs are continuously strengthened, which would provide strong support for leaders’ career development and PA quality and efficiency in general.