

Leadership

Eastern and  
Western Business  
Cultures

Towards a  
Successful Fusion



Leadership Interview  
with  
Arkadiusz Czopor

By  
Richard Walker



**Amrop**

Leaders For What's Next

# Towards a Successful Fusion

## Leadership Interview with Arkadiusz Czopor



Stepping into a high profile leadership role, especially in an unfamiliar culture, can be a discovery process that is as challenging as it is fascinating. What can European leaders learn from their Asian counterparts, and vice versa? In terms of attitude and practice, and especially given the recent explosion of remote working, how can leaders maximize the chances of success?

We talk with Arkadiusz Czopor, Managing Director, Asia South, T-Systems.

A Polish national, Arkadiusz has over 20 years' regional leadership experience in the Information and Communication Technology Industry. He has a proven track record of managing complex business portfolios, driving digitization and the transformation of multinational corporations, healthcare and public enterprises in cloud and digital computing.

He moved to Malaysia in 2008 as T-Systems Malaysia CIO, and then to Beijing, first as VP Delivery, Greater China, responsible for the delivery and growth of the full IT systems landscape, then Managing Director. Having led the company to its highest financial performance in its eleven-year history, he moved to Singapore as Managing Director, Asia South in 2016 and then took additional responsibility as CEO of Deutsche Telekom Asia. In this role, he is responsible for the continued growth and expansion of the organization's market presence in Asia Pacific.

Arkadiusz has successfully led multicultural teams across Europe and Asia, developing local talent and leading transformation into motivated and result-oriented organizations. He has a passion for customers, managing the continuous growth of the businesses he serves and the pivotal role of ICT services in delivering greater business value.

Arkadiusz holds an MS in Management and Computer Science from the Academy of Economics in Wroclaw, Poland, with dual Executive MBA's from China Tsinghua University and INSEAD, France.

He is a Member of the Boards or Supervisory Boards in several T-Systems legal entities across the region.



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# Towards a Successful Fusion

## Leadership Interview with Arkadiusz Czopor | 3 Takeaways

1

### Remote charisma

Executives who are good at transmitting their charisma in face-to-face interactions must be able to extend at least part of this charisma into remote interactions. Remote communication skills have become increasingly important during the Pandemic, and this importance will remain once the Pandemic has passed.

2

### A win-win mentality

Asian business culture focusses less on competition and more on finding (and expressing) the win-win for all parties, including your own.

3

### The power of silence

Expect silence from Asian colleagues in your team meetings, at least in the short term. Be patient, build trust and respect, and give the opportunity to ask questions anonymously on paper ahead of the meeting. In meetings, learning to talk less and listen more brings greater business wisdom, and valuable insight into the Asian business mind.



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# Towards a Successful Fusion

## Leadership Interview with Arkadiusz Czopor Managing Director, Asia South, T-Systems

### **Arkadiusz, what does the phrase 'Asian business culture' mean to you?**

Here in Asia there are two dominant cultures, China and India. Two very large and strong cultures with thousands of years of heritage. Both are driven by a strong desire to grow and develop and create wealth, both individually and as a country. Not necessarily as we understand it, in an individualistic way, but having the prime objective of looking for a win-win situation for both parties involved in a deal.

### **Does that contrast sharply with Western business culture?**

Western business culture is very much based on competition. We think about sport in terms of winning, and we don't necessarily look around at what else is happening. You could say that in the West an individual perspective is more endorsed, whereas in Asia there is more of a community perspective and always an eye for a symbiotic success.

### **What is the result of the two cultures coming together?**

If you are Western in Asia, you need to adjust yourself because the cultures are so strong here. Even if you enjoy pushing competitively, here you need to look more holistically. Especially with regard to customers, you must understand the potential benefits for them, and explain how you as the provider will benefit, so that the benefits on both sides are clearly understood. This is an important foundation for trust.

### **Is it true to say that business culture, no matter where you are, becomes culture-neutral at higher levels?**

I still believe there is a big gap between Asian and Western business cultures. Both sides are still learning how to deal with each other. But at the senior executive level there is such global experience and wide understanding of the many different cultural contexts in which to do business, that business between these people is quite smooth.



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### **Are there any common mistakes made by Western businesspeople in Asia?**

Yes, funnily enough, there are some quite basic errors that are still often made. For example, when we Westerners are greeted with silence in a meeting or a negotiation with Asian partners, we take this to mean acceptance. But here in Asia silence absolutely does not mean consent. This is a common misconception that people fall into. So being here as a Westerner you must understand how to interpret silence and how to get feedback about the idea you have presented to the other party.

### **How have you dealt with meeting silence?**

I've learnt in Asia to really focus on listening, on watching the details, and to look for signals; to focus on what is happening behind the scenes and on what happens after the meeting. In polite, humble ways you can get real feedback on your position from your counter party, not necessarily in a straightforward or direct way at all. Being invited back is positive; someone immediately requesting a follow-up meeting is good, and the kind of language that is used in wrapping up the meeting will give you indirect but invaluable feedback.

### **Your company T-Systems is headquartered in Germany. How do you bring German corporate values to Asia?**

Germany has a very strong standing in Asia. And T-Systems is a very German company — one third of Deutsche Telekom, to which T-Systems belongs, is owned by the German government. Of course, nowadays we are also very international but still we have a very strong German DNA. And that helps in Asia, because here the impression of Germany is one of long-term development and improvement. Most Asian countries have been on the path of growth in recent years. In Western Europe following World War II, economies were encouraged to grow, while in Asia in the post war period there was still turmoil with the Korean War and the Vietnam War, and in China during the period of Mao Zedong. So, in Asia the period of growth and stability began quite recently. And in Asia the German post war model of continuous development, growth and hard work is highly respected and looked up to as a model. Germany has excellent relationships with the countries of Southeast Asia in developmental ways; those ties are not confrontational or based on zero-sum equations. There's really no country in Asia with which Germany has bad relations.

### **Do you believe executives and senior talent in Asia experience the same types of motivation as their Western counterparts?**

There are some very strong elements which are the same; everybody likes consistency and predictability, for example. Another thing which is true across the board in the West and in Asia is that the motivation for senior executives is consistent — if you are at the senior executive level it's because you desired personal growth; you understand that in the absence of growth you are in fact declining.





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### **If Western executives are more individualistic, is it fair to say that Asian executives feel more deeply connected to their company?**

In Asia, executives are strongly dedicated to their work, to the company — it depends. Many Asian executives are proud to say that they always answer work calls, whether they are on holiday or at the weekend. Western executives on the other hand are much more likely to expect to only answer calls from work in emergency situations. So, the work-life balance in Asia is much more strongly tilted towards work. I've been working with some colleagues in Asia for a very long time, and they're not really looking to change companies or switch jobs. They see themselves growing within the company and they recognize that the company has provided the platform for that growth. I don't of course mean that they stay in the same job for long periods of time, they switch jobs and develop their careers, but they stay in the same company.

### **What challenges are you facing when hiring executives in this unusual year of the pandemic?**

Obviously, we are all experiencing difficulties related to the lack of physical presence. Senior executives influence companies through personal interactions. For me personally when I'm hiring I need to meet the person face-to-face, and I want to invite this person into the office to see the environment, and to give the candidate the chance to see whether they fit the organization or not. It is of course very difficult to gather soft information about a candidate, the kind of thing you learn about somebody through informal talks during informal interactions. Now, of course, it's very important to find executives who are strong in the skill of working remotely. The skills required to be successful in the future will also evolve. There are some executives who are extremely good at transmitting their charisma in face-to-face interactions, but if they are not able to extend at least part of this charisma into remote interactions they will lose a lot, so these remote skills will be more important.

### **What kind of culture shock did you experience working in Asia for the first time?**

When I first worked in China, I was in my early 30s and almost everybody I worked with was older than me, including some people who were junior to me in seniority. This was extremely challenging because in Asia it's widely understood and accepted that seniority comes with age. If you are young and leading a team you will have to work really hard to be respected. In Europe, this issue is much less pronounced, we don't have too much trouble getting behind a young leader.

The second huge challenge was that it is still very hierarchical here in Asia. My first internal town hall meetings were a shock to me because in Western culture it's normal, and even encouraged, to put questions to your team leader. But here in Asia, typically, there is silence. And if your team is diversified, at the end of the meeting the Westerners will ask questions while the Asians in the group remain silent. This is due to notions of hierarchy, age and respect. I learn you need time here to gain respect and acceptance from your team.



### **Did you try to 'westernise' your meetings or adapt to the Asian business codes you found?**

We use Western corporate rules, and it's important to explain to your team why we follow those rules. Ultimately, those rules exist for a purpose based on previous experience, and bring value. As long as we show they are coming from specific learnings and exist to avoid making mistakes, our executives have been good to deal with them. I don't believe in copy-paste, and in my opinion, it doesn't work to just bring Western blueprints and try to replicate in Asia.

### **With your many years of experience in Asia, what happens when you ask for questions at the end of a meeting?**

I collect questions before the meeting, informally. Then at the end we go through the questions and try to answer them and in this way we don't expose individuals to uncomfortable situations.

### **What can European and Asian business leaders learn from each other?**

There is of course much that can be learnt from the other. In Asia there is a lot of room for developing better work-life balance. Asian leaders need to learn how to rest. At the end of the day we're all human, and if you do not rest biologically you will burn out. Here in Asia there is an expectation that one gives up big parts of one's personal life regardless of the personal situation. On the other hand, working in Asia I've become much more patient, I try to be quieter, and to listen more than talk; I used to be much more vocal.

### **What's your top tip for a Western executive arriving in Asia for the first time?**

Coming to Asia, especially to a place like Singapore with diverse races, cultures and religions, it's important not to judge, and important not to have the attitude that you need to 'override' the Asian culture. Don't arrive with the attitude that "my method is better, so let's do it that way". Both value systems and the needs of the community are different here.

### **How do you see the technology sector evolving in Asia over the next 10 years?**

Asia will still be more innovative and faster at adopting new technologies than the West. Currently, the speed of innovation and finding new solutions in Asia is based on a lack of regulation. In the future the gap between Europe and Asia I think will narrow because Asia will have caught up somewhat in regulatory terms. I'm thinking specifically of China and Indonesia's rising technological regulations which are currently less restrictive on business. In those countries, new ideas are easier to test, and they have big populations to test them on. If those tests are successful, it's easy to quickly scale up. Then afterwards regulations start to be implemented.

However, here in Europe there is more efficiency in taking up certain types of regulation like data security and data privacy. In Asia, people who before easily accepted new technologies, who may not have had concerns about their data privacy and so on, are now becoming aware. For example, here in Singapore recently there was a big leak of public health data and people were not happy about that. Now there are growing calls for people's personal health data to be protected. China will continue to be a testing lab for new technologies, making it easier in Europe to adopt those new technologies painlessly. And Asian countries can learn a lot from Europe in terms of how to protect people from the dangers of cyber crime or weak cyber security by bringing in better regulation.

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## About Amrop

With offices in all world regions, Amrop is a trusted advisor in Executive Search, Board and Leadership Services.

Amrop advises the world's most dynamic organizations on finding and positioning Leaders For What's Next: top talent, adept at working across borders in markets around the world.

Amrop's mission: shaping sustainable success through inspiring leaders.

## About T-Systems

T-Systems is a German global IT services and consulting company offering integrated solutions for corporate customers. From secure operation of existing systems and conventional IT and telecommunication services to transformation into the cloud, including international networks. From demand-oriented infrastructure, platforms, and software, down to new business models and IoT innovation projects.

The basis is the global reach of landline and mobile communications, high-security data centers, a comprehensive cloud ecosystem with standardized platforms, worldwide partnerships, and the highest security.

Founded in 2000, T-Systems is a subsidiary of Deutsche Telekom. It has locations in over 20 countries and 37,900 employees.

T-Systems is one of the world-leading cross-manufacturer digital service providers with a European headquarters.

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