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Cynicism and Ignorance Are the Enemies of Reform

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China is doubling down on fighting corruption. A main message of October's plenum of the Communist Party of China was more discipline. Punishment with tougher penalties and zero tolerance, regardless of position. At an anti-corruption workshop in Yunnan in November, a senior Chinese leader put it this way: "Stricter supervision and criticism should make officials flush and sweat."

Discipline is essential but insufficient. One must also attack cynicism and ignorance, which dissipate the passion for reform. One way to do that is to find success stories within China, document them, celebrate them, and use them to instruct and inspire.

Around the world, people are skeptical about their countries' anti-corruption efforts. They have heard all the fine words before. They have watched laws multiply and regulations flourish. Citizens, officials, and even leaders can become cynical, believing that nothing can be done without everything being done. And many people are ignorant about fighting corruption. They are not aware that corruption can be reduced, has been reduced, even in situations where it is systemic.

Cynicism and ignorance are the enemies of reform. The antidote to cynicism and ignorance is success. Examples of real people and institutions making real progress.

Success stories in reducing corruption include classic examples such as Singapore and more recent ones such as the Republic of Georgia and the Philippines. Many cities and ministries around the world have also been able to reduce, though never eliminate, corruption.

The successes are also within China, including Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption. The successes are not just about discipline, not just about tigers and flies being caught and punished. The CPC should look for examples of Chinese institutions—local, regional, and national—that successfully reduced abuses of power, for example in land, contracting, anti-poverty programs, and food safety. Success stories in promoting the Chinese style of governing emphasized at the October CPC plenum. A style that features innovation, devolution, and openness. A style without formalism, bureaucracy, or extravagance.

Once these success stories are identified (and verified by citizens), they should be studied carefully. Universities can help; the press can help. Study both what was done and how. Then share these stories with CPC members and citizens, with the business community and the press.

The point of sharing success stories is not so much to copy as to inspire. Examples of success can help defeat cynicism and overcome ignorance—and thereby illuminate discipline and rejuvenate the passion for reform.

How can passion be kindled? As good teachers and parents know, discipline alone does not inspire. As we flush and sweat, our passions ebb.

A few years ago, when I departed as Dean of the graduate school at the RAND Corporation, the world's foremost think tank, the students presented me with a globe. On its stand were these words: "Changing the world through passion and discipline."

Right they are: both are needed. Without discipline, passion dissipates. Without passion, discipline can defeat itself.

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