

# CorpComms

The magazine for the corporate communicator



**Eastern**

**promise**

Feng shui in the workplace





# Eastern promise

Tim Human

examines how feng shui is being used in UK offices to boost morale and productivity

If you ever visit the new City of London offices of international banking group Standard Chartered, at 1 Basinghall Avenue, and are told to meet your host on the fourth floor, know that somebody is playing a practical joke. There is no fourth floor: the buttons in the elevator go straight from three to five.

But the reason for the omission is no joke. Standard Chartered may be headquartered in the UK, but the majority of its business is in Asia. Consequently, Asian cultural traits permeate its new building, and foremost among these are elements of feng shui, the ancient Chinese practice of controlling energy.

Take the lack of a fourth floor, for example. When spoken in Mandarin, the number four sounds like the word

for death. It means positive energy could be prevented from entering the fourth floor of an office building, dampening productivity. 'The idea is to make sure the energy in the building is right,' explains Arijit De, head of media relations at Standard Chartered.

## Positive thinking

The bank has installed many other elements of feng shui in its new office. There is a fish tank, crystal balls in the basement and copper pipes lining the reception area – away from the eyes of any visitors – all of which are said to be good ways to hold positive energy inside and prevent negative energy from entering. Every column has a special dragon coin inside, inviting prosperity. 'While we are a British bank, our business is primarily in Asia so there is a lot of Asian influence in everything we do,' says De. 'If you come into the building you will find feng shui elements along with art and artefacts from the region. The whole interior decor has an Asian – particularly South East Asian – influence.'

Feng shui translates literally as 'wind water' in English. It is an ancient Chinese practice that uses astrology and





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geography to improve well-being by controlling the flow of energy, known as qi, around an area.

Westerners often associate it with arranging furniture, and this is one important element of feng shui, but the practice also covers the positioning of buildings and, more traditionally, graves.

By controlling energy, individuals are said not only to achieve well-being but also to encourage wealth creation, making feng shui an important concern for businesses in the Asian world. Furthermore, keeping employees healthy and happy boosts companies by improving productivity and cutting down on sick leave.

The practice is widespread in Asia, particularly in Hong Kong. Until 1949 there was also a strong feng shui tradition on the Chinese mainland, but when the Chinese communists came to power it was banned as a superstition. Its practitioners were later persecuted during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, when the authorities hoped to wipe out the practice completely.

By contrast, the British rulers of Hong Kong tolerated the practice and it flourished as a result, becoming an important part of the city's business culture. 'In Hong Kong, it would be frowned upon if a feng shui consultant *weren't* brought in,' says Suzanne Harper, founder of consultancy Feng Shui London.

Examples abound. In one case, on the advice of feng shui experts, a tower block at Repulse Bay on Hong Kong Island was built with a big hole in the middle, to allow a dragon that lived in a mountain behind the building to come down to the water to drink. (Nine dragons are said to inhabit Hong Kong and its surroundings.)

### East meets West

Some elements of feng shui have been directly transferred from Hong Kong, and HSBC is a case in point. When the bank relocated its headquarters from Hong Kong to London in 1993, its management decided to build a new skyscraper to house all HSBC's City-based workers in one location. HSBC's old headquarters in Hong Kong had two bronze lions guarding the front entrance. 'Statues of lions are used frequently in feng shui to create a protective and grounding aura around buildings,' explains Jan Cisek, a consultant who co-founded the Feng Shui Society of Great Britain in 1993.

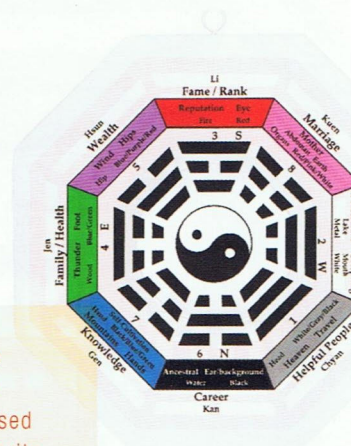
So two exact replicas were placed at the front of HSBC's London headquarters, which opened in 2002. In addition,

### The bagua mirror

The front cover of this month's *CorpComms* features a bagua mirror, an important feng shui device commonly used to create harmony and prosperity by reflecting or transforming negative energy.

They are often placed over the entrances of businesses to create a harmonious environment for those who enter. Bagua mirrors are also aimed at sources of negative energy, like pointy buildings, for protection.

Surrounding the silver surface of the mirror is the bagua pattern, an intricate mix of shapes that symbolizes the workings of yin and yang, the theory of life that underpins feng shui practice.



the building was given the address 8 Canada Square, which adds another element of feng shui to the site. 'The number eight is considered the most auspicious number in feng shui and Chinese culture in general,' Cisek points out.

### Small-scale solutions

The application of feng shui in the UK is not always so grand, however. Harper recalls some less than glamorous work with an Asian singer who toured the West. 'A UK tour operator was looking after her,' she says. 'He thought it was okay to put the singer in a hotel room where the door opened straight onto a toilet, which is completely unacceptable – but he didn't have any way of knowing that.' Harper had the room changed.

For smaller companies with lower budgets, practising feng shui can be



more difficult, as consultants may suggest changes that are either impractical or too expensive. Minor alterations can still be made, however. London Calling, a distributor of art literature based in the capital's East End, is a smaller company that hired a feng shui consultant and made a number of changes to its workplace.

London Calling employees now all face inwards, to encourage energy flow between them. Spiky plants were also removed, as feng shui principles dictate that energy should flow smoothly around a room, like a meandering river, and not encounter sharp objects. In addition, the reception area was brought upstairs into the same room as the staff; previously, it had been located downstairs, away from the rest of the building. This change was made to give the business a sense of openness and quickly connect visitors with the company.

According to Andrew Moir, managing director of London Calling, the changes have made a real difference, with sales showing improvement and staff morale on the up. Moir has not implemented all of the suggestions, however. 'Our consultant suggested that the double entrance doors should open inwards rather than outwards,' he

recalls. 'This is a major construction job, and we don't know if we will ever get round to it.'

### In the press

Media interest in feng shui is much less fervent than it was 10 years ago. Consultants put this down to a surge in the number of practitioners during the 1980s and 1990s; these individuals were often poorly trained, and gave the practice

*'Many charlatan practitioners who started working 10 years ago tarnished the image of feng shui'*

a bad name. Furthermore, the bad publicity has made many companies shy about even revealing that they use feng shui in the workplace.

'I wouldn't say feng shui has a bad reputation, but I think many charlatan practitioners who started working 10 years ago tarnished its image,' says Harper. 'It gained a reputation as a superstitious practice.'

The rise of new age spirituality in the West played a big role, fuelling demand for consultants. 'Many set up with an alarmingly small amount of training and set about selling a plethora of Chinese trinkets and talking about colour therapy and house doctoring,' says Sarah McAllister, director and lead consultant at the Feng Shui Agency, a London-based consultancy. 'This is all relevant, but there is a whole branch of skilled feng shui that is inaccessible to many people because it is so complex.'

Cynical media also come in for blame. 'The press views it as a quick fix,' comments Cisek. 'Sometimes it does work as a quick fix, but not always. In any event, it has been working for 3,000 years so it is not going to go away any time soon.'

Of course, it is not hard to find critics of feng shui. It has been labelled a pseudoscience, and some say it relies on the placebo effect to achieve results. Most consultants point to the results of their work as the best retort.

'I'm sure that one day feng shui will be scientifically proven to work,' states McAllister. 'In the meantime, we need to be guided by the proof of the pudding, so to speak. I get results for people whether they happen to believe in feng shui or not.' ●

**A building at Hong Kong's Repulse Bay was built with a hole to allow the dragon that lives behind the site to pass through**



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