

What can Leaders Learn from the Ancient Chinese?

Huibert de Man, MSM, man@msm.nl

Leadership is a difficult theme. After a period in which the idea of charismatic, transformational and heroic leaders was promoted as a solution to the problems of business organizations and government bureaucracies, there is serious doubt as to what leaders really do. The opportunism and unethical behaviour of business leaders have been mentioned as the causes of the banking crisis a few years after financial and accounting scandals drew attention in the general and business press. Apparently there is something fundamentally wrong with the ideas of leadership that have become dominant in the last twenty years. Alternative leadership models have been formulated, like 'servant leadership', 'post-heroic leadership' and 'level 5 leadership'. And some management thinkers have warned against too much emphasis on leadership.

In such a situation it is interesting to look for ideas outside the mainstream. I found these in classical Chinese philosophy, in the works of Confucius and Lao Zi, written some 2500 years ago. Their works have been part of the education of leaders in China for many ages and contain the wisdom that has become part of a civilization. The interesting thing is that they teach us a completely different idea of leadership than in current Western leadership.

As I explain in my paper, these current ideas are based on a number of deeply engrained philosophical assumptions with roots in Western philosophy as far back as Plato: individualism, dualism and idealism. Very roughly expressed: Western leaders see themselves as individuals who try to realize their ideals (strategy, mission, vision) in organizations, of which they are not part. As Covey said: you are the creative force of your life and your decisions count, not the circumstances.

By now we know that this ego-centric model of leadership is often ineffective and it leads to moral problems as well. This makes classical Chinese philosophy very relevant. Confucius,

for example, teaches a humble attitude. Leaders are not there to serve themselves but offer their wisdom to the good of the community. Not the inflated ego of the modern leader gets attention, but the sage whose primary aim is to educate people, teach them civilized behaviour. From a somewhat different angle, the Daoists (especially Lao Zi) emphasize that wise persons do not impose their ideas on others, but understand the processes in reality and thus can discover ways to create a meaningful life: 'the Way'.

The Chinese sages do not talk much and what they say is poetic and ambiguous. By forcing words on reality, says the Dao De Jing, you may undermine your understanding and by imposing your action on others, you become ineffective. Often it is better to do nothing or let processes develop in their own way without interfering. We are now rediscovering this as self-organizing processes.

These may still be wise lessons for managers and leaders who make too much noise, interfere with processes in organizations and destroy effectiveness, impose their values and SMART goals on others without being in touch with the lived reality of the organization.

Although it would be foolish to directly apply 2500 year old wisdom from another culture to present-day leadership, the ideas of Confucius and Lao Zi could still inspire us in finding alternatives to the dominant ego-centric, dualist and idealist leadership ideas that are in serious need of revision in the West. They may help us develop conceptions of leadership which acknowledge both the social and the process dimensions of leadership, that is leadership as a process that happens among people, rather than as the action of individuals who mistakenly believe they can make and change organizations alone.

For more information see

De Man, Huibert, *Chinese Philosophy as a Mirror for Western Leaders*, Internal Research Report ETC.