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A Leadership Journey to the East

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Executive Summary

This article introduces the Taoist perspective on leadership to teachers and trainers who want to include nonwestern leadership concepts in their courses and workshops. Taoists advocate a limited role for leaders, encouraging them to lead by example instead of through government, laws, morality or force. In addition, they urge leaders to model their behavior on principles found in nature. Natural images or metaphors suggest that leaders should be simple and humble, exhibit childlike integrity, let events take their own course, exercise strength through weakness, and remain flexible. Information on Taoism and leadership is readily available but instructors must determine how much emphasis to give to the perspective's philosophical origins and how best to present Taoist principles in the classroom. Asking students to draw their own conclusions from statements and examples found in the *Tao Te Ching* (Taoism's primary text) is one way to teach leadership from a Taoist point of view.

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In recent years diversity has become a buzzword for leadership trainers and educators alike. Large companies offer diversity workshops and the typical university leadership course includes material on gender and cultural differences. However, at their core, most leadership training programs and classes are anything but diverse. They are almost entirely based on American theories like situational leadership, contingency theory, functional leadership and Theory X-Theory Y.

Viewing leadership solely from a western cultural perspective not only encourages us to think that our ideas about leadership are superior (a sign of ethnocentrism, the very attitude that diversity training is designed to root out), but also prevents us from learning new and better ways to lead. As teachers, trainers, and consultants we need to include nonwestern leadership concepts in our courses and workshops. Fortunately, interest in nontraditional approaches to leadership is growing. One such approach is based on Taoism, an ancient Chinese philosophy which has attracted a significant following in the United States. The purpose of this article is to introduce the Taoist perspective on leadership. I will briefly describe what Taoism is, identify key Taoist leadership principles, and then suggest ways to present Taoist concepts in the leadership classroom.

Taoism: An Overview

Taoism was one of many schools of philosophy that arose during the collapse of the Chou dynasty between 600-300 B. C. These were traumatic years for China. Peace and prosperity gave way to violence and poverty as the empire divided into warring states (Ching, 1993). Confucians believed that harmony could be restored by emphasizing social obligations like duty, ceremony and respect for authority. Taoists rejected the Confucian preoccupation with rules and relationships, focusing instead on the individual (Hopfe, 1991). They argued that society would again prosper when individuals (particularly leaders) began to live in harmony with the Tao or Way (the creative, sustaining force of the universe) (Watts, 1975).

According to popular belief, Lao-tzu, a royal librarian, authored the movement's most important text: the *Tao te Ching* (*The Classic of the Way and its Power and Virtue*). Most scholars conclude, however, that the *Tao* is a collection of the teachings of several teachers (Schipper, 1993). Whatever its exact origins, this short volume (approximately 5,000 words divided into 81 passages or chapters) has been translated more often than any other book except the Bible (Hopfe, 1991).

Taoism divided into philosophical and religious branches by 200 A. D. The philosophers followed the writings of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, another early Taoist scholar. The religious Taoists, on the other hand, tried to prolong life through diet, exercise and magic elixirs. They developed a religious system complete with gods, temples, priests and rituals and borrowed such ideas as heaven, hells and judgment from the Buddhists. The Buddhists, in turn, drew on Taoism's emphasis on spontaneity, quiet reflection and nature to develop Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism. Most Taoist temples were destroyed under Chinese Communist rule but many have been rebuilt following economic liberalization (Dean, 1993).

Books on Taoist religious practices can be found in the new age and religion sections of American bookstores. However, writers interested in the Taoist approach to leadership generally have a philosophical rather than a religious orientation. They look for leadership insights in the *Tao Te Ching*. For example, *The Tao of Leadership* (Heider, 1985) and *The Tao of Management* (Messing, 1992) are translations of the *The Classic of the Way* which highlight the fact that this text was originally written as a guidebook for leaders (Young, 1993).

Leadership From a Taoist Perspective

Consistent with their emphasis on the individual, the Taoists believe that she/he governs best who governs least. Leading is like cooking a small fish—don't overdo it. The ideal leader is a wise individual (someone in touch with the Tao) who largely leads by example:

When the Master governs, the people
are hardly aware that he [she] exists.
Next best is a leader who is loved.
Next, one who is feared.
The worst is one who is despised.

If you don't trust the people,
you make them untrustworthy.

The Master doesn't talk, he [she] acts.
When his [her] work is done,
the people say, "Amazing:
we did it, all by ourselves!" (17)
(Mitchell, 1988, p. 17)

Minimal leadership is best because followers obey natural laws when they're left alone. As a result, the community as a whole benefits. Government reflects a basic distrust of human nature. Leaders intervening to solve problems often create new ones because they don't understand the connections between events (Watts, 1975). For example, building the interstate highway system made travel easier but, at the same time, created urban sprawl and increased fuel consumption.

Ironically, by imposing rules and morality (what the Confucians advocated) leaders encourage lawbreaking and immorality. Passing laws creates a new class of citizens—lawbreakers. Further, focusing on good reinforces the power of evil: "Wise persons never try to do good, because this requires having a concept of good, which leads to having a concept of evil, which leads to combating evil, which only makes evil stronger." (Biallas, 1991, p. 203).

Lao-tzu and his colleagues were particularly concerned with the leader's use of force. Unlike the feudal lords of their time, they rejected violence except as a last resort.

Weapons are the tools of violence;
all decent men [and women] detest them.

Weapons are the tools of fear;
a decent man [woman] will avoid them
except in the direst necessity
and, if compelled, will use them
only with the utmost restraint. (31)
(Mitchell, 1988, p. 31)

Along with advocating a limited role for leaders, the Taoists were among the first to use nature as a leadership laboratory, encouraging leaders to model their behavior on principles found in nature. In the *Tao Te Ching* these principles are revealed through a series of natural images or metaphors. While there are too many images to describe here, some of the key metaphors include:

1. The Uncarved Block

Though the uncarved wood is small,
It cannot be employed (used as vessel) by anyone.
If kings and barons can keep (this unspoiled nature),
The whole world shall yield them lordship of their
own accord. (32)
(Yutang, 1948, p. 172)

To the Taoists, the uncarved block reflects the nature of the Tao and serves as a model for the ideal leader. An uncarved block of wood or stone is nameless and shapeless, like the Tao itself. Leaders ought to reflect block-like simplicity, rejecting wealth, status, glory, and cleverness. They should accept what comes—success, failure, life or death—and not intrude in the lives of followers. The Taoists also urge leaders and followers to shun education and technology because learning and inventions separate people from nature.

2. The Child

Who is rich in character
Is like a child. (55)
(Yutang, 1948, p. 252)

Children serve as another reminder that wise leaders don't get caught up in the pursuit of power, wealth or knowledge but remain humble. Such leaders demonstrate integrity or character (te) that comes from living in harmony with natural processes as children do. According to Lewis Hopfe: "The early Taoists looked upon the innocence of the child as an idea toward which all human beings should strive. The infant knows no craft and has no ambitions but to live; yet the child is cared for, fed, and clothed." (1991, p. 215). Mahatma Gandhi is an outstanding model of humility and integrity in action. Gandhi dressed simply, owned almost nothing, and did not seek political office. Yet, the power of his childlike character helped make him one of the most influential leaders of this century.

3. The Valley

He who is familiar with honor and glory
But keeps to obscurity
Becomes the valley of the world.

Being the valley of the world,
He [she] has an eternal power which always suffices,
And returns again to the natural integrity of uncarved wood.
(28)

(Yutang, 1948, p. 160)

To the Taoists (and to many other Chinese) the universe is made up of two forces: the yin (negative, dark, cool, female, shadows) and the yang (positive, brightness, warmth, male, sun). When these forces are in balance the universe operates as it should. Our culture highlights the yang or masculine side of leadership. In contrast, the Taoists draw more attention to the yin. They urge leaders to be valleys (which reflect the yin) rather than prominent peaks (which reflect the yang).

4. Nature's Course

A tree as big as a man's embrace grows from a tiny shoot.
A tower of nine stories begins with a heap of earth.
The journey of a thousand li [miles] starts from where one stands.
He [she] who takes action fails.
He [she] who grasps things loses them.
For this reason the sage takes no action and
therefore does not fail.
He [she] grasps nothing and therefore he [she] does not lose anything.
(64)

(Chan, 1963, p. 214)

Central to the Taoist approach to leadership is the notion of wu wei or positive inaction. Nature can't be rushed but takes its own course. The wise leader, then, knows when to intervene and when to step back. The marital art T'ai Chi Ch'uan is based on the principle of wu wei (Hoff, 1982). Practitioners of this art never attack; instead they wear their enemies out yielding, deflecting the force of their opponents' attacks back to them. In the same way, wise leaders seldom take aggressive action to get their way. Instead, they are sensitive to the natural order of things (circumstances, needs and interests of followers, stages of group development) and work with events instead of against them. They use less energy but get more done.

5. Water

There is nothing softer and weaker than water,
And yet there is nothing better for attacking hard and
strong things.
For this reason there is no substitute for it.
All the world knows that the weak overcomes the strong and
the soft overcomes the hard. (78)

(Chan, 1963, p. 236)

The Taoists recognize that there is strength in weakness, which is illustrated by the action of water. Just as water cuts through the hardest rock over time, the weak often overcome the powerful in human society. In recent years, for instance, authoritarian governments in Soviet Russia, Argentina and the Philippines were overthrown, not by military means, but through the efforts of

ordinary citizens. Further, leaders who use "soft" tactics (listening, empowering, collaborating) rather than "hard" ones like threats and force are more likely to overcome resistance to change in the long term.

6. Soft vs. Stiff

When a man is born, he is tender and weak.
At death, he is stiff and hard.
All things, the grass as well as trees, are tender and
supple while alive.
When dead, they are withered and dried.

Therefore the stiff and the hard are companions of death.
The tender and the weak are companions of life.
Therefore if the army is strong, it will not win.
If a tree is stiff, it will break.
The strong and the great are inferior, while the tender
and the weak are superior. (76)
(Chan, 1963, p. 233)

Flexibility is an important attribute of weakness. Weak things, according to the Taoists, are more likely to survive because they can adapt. Pliability is a sign of life; stiffness signals death. Like young grass and saplings, successful leaders bend rather than break, adjusting their strategies to meet changing conditions.

Introducing Taoist Leadership Principles in the Classroom

Anyone interested in Taoism and its leadership principles can draw on a number of excellent resources. Books dealing with Eastern or world religions generally include descriptions of Taoism and Benjamin Hoff provides a basic introduction to key Taoist concepts in *The Tao of Pooh* (1982) and *The Te of Piglet* (1992). There are a great many English translations of the *Tao Te Ching* and several should be consulted when interpreting passages from the text (i. e. Chan, 1963; Bynner, 1944; Yutang, 1948; Heider, 1985; Mitchell, 1988; Messing, 1992; Maier, 1993). Diane Dreher provides an in-depth look at the relationship between Taoism and leadership in *The Tao of Personal Leadership* (1995). She examines Taoist and Zen Buddhist ideas and then applies them to creativity, conflict management, collaboration, community, vision and other leadership concerns.

If you decide to prepare a class session or training workshop after you've learned more about Taoism, you will need to determine how much emphasis to give to the perspective's philosophical and religious origins. One option is to briefly touch on Taoism's underlying beliefs and focus instead on Taoist leadership principles like wu wei, simplicity, and strength in weakness. The other option is to use Taoist thought as a tool to encourage students to think about the relationship between philosophy/religion and leadership. Taoism is an excellent example of how our assumptions about the workings of the universe, the nature of humans, and the role of the environment influence how we lead. Class members can be asked identify leadership principles in other religious or philosophical traditions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism and to note any parallels with Taoism. Holmes Welch (1965) lists fifteen similarities between the New Testament and the *Tao Te Ching*, including Christ's statements that the "the first shall be last" and

"whoever seeks to save his/her life will lose it." Robert Greenleaf (1977), Max DePree (1989, 1992) and others who urge leaders to become servants have much in common with Taoists who want leaders to act like valleys and children.

Careful consideration should also be given to how you will present Taoist principles in the classroom. Taoism offers none of the leadership checklists or one-minute fixes found in American leadership books. It relies heavily on inductive reasoning instead, asking readers to generate principles from statements and examples found in the *Tao*. For this reason, I use an inductive method when presenting Taoism in class, with special emphasis on nature as a leadership lab. First I give a brief lecture on the history of Taoism and its minimalist view of leadership. Then I distribute the uncarved block, child, valley, nature's course, water, and soft vs. stiff passages described earlier and ask groups of students to interpret the images and their messages about leadership. Following the group reports, I offer my observations and distribute a handout with explanations and relevant quotations from Taoist commentaries.

The Taoist perspective forces my students to think in new ways about leadership. At first they are puzzled by this approach that celebrates weakness and inaction. However, they begin to make connections between Taoist concepts and their own experiences in a few minutes. Most appreciate Taoism's emphasis on simplicity and humility and can identify times when leaders should act more like water and valleys than rocks and mountains.

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