

## Understanding Taoism Leadership from the Western Perspective

Givi AMAGHLOBELI\*

Miray CELEPLI\*\*

### Abstract

The aim of the given work is to examine the concept(s) of leadership from the Western and Eastern (mainly – Chinese/Taoist) approaches and try to show the basic differences among these two. In this article we pursuit figuring out new perspectives that can be considered within the context of a Western understanding of leadership as a concept. It is a fact that there has been a growing interest in the West towards the traditional Chinese understanding of leadership/management type that is based on the Taoist philosophical concept and various academic works are being conducted regarding the issue as well. Since the Taoist approach to leadership has become an object of a growing interest in an academic field, we would like to make our contribution to this tendency by examining some of the related works.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Leadership types, Nature of Leaders, Taoism, Western/Taoist perspective.

**JEL:** M12, M19

### Defining Leadership

Leadership has proved itself to be an influential phenomenon throughout the history within all nations requiring different approaches and development of new points of views.

While examining Leadership as a concept, first of all it would be proper to refer to the general definitions of leadership that are prevalent in the Western academic realm: According to Rauch and Behling (1984) Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (İbicioğlu, Özmen & Taş, 2009: 4). In addition to this - leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others (Yukl, 2006: 3). Most definitions of leadership and its effectiveness focus on behaviors used to directly or indirectly influence followers (Yukl, 2006:7). These are most frequently used definitions of leadership in general.

Along with the definitions of leadership it is crucial to determine the ways by which leaders affect others and what are the basic points in this process. In order to increase the efficiency of the workers there is a definite need for a leader who increases their enthusiasm and motivation. This is the reason why leadership has become an object of various scientific researches.

There are number of theoretical approaches to the concept of leadership which can be summed in the following way: behaviorist approach, which focuses on the actual behavioral patterns of leaders. Trait Theoretical approach

– focuses on the characteristics of leaders which is considered to be the ones inherited from an individuals birth. Situational approach – focuses on skills of a leader that he/she presents in different situations that occur in the process. All the above mentioned approaches are based and focused on the features and characteristics of a leader in general.

These are definitions of leadership styles within Western academic realm; Autocratic leadership: Autocratic leaders centralize power and decision making in themselves. The leaders take full authority and assume full responsibility. Democratic Leadership: This style's impact on organizational climate is not as high as you might imagine. By giving workers a voice in decisions, democratic leaders build organizational flexibility and responsibility, and help generate fresh ideas. But sometimes the price is endless meetings and confused employees who feel leaderless. (Francis & Kong, 2012). Laissez-Faire Leadership: This leadership style can be effective if the leader monitors performance and gives feedback to team members regularly. It is most likely to be effective when individual team members are experienced, skilled, self-starters. The charismatic leader; leads by infusing energy and eagerness into their team members. They appear as the role model in terms of employer's behavioral patterns (Edizler, 2010: 139). Servant Leadership: A leadership philosophy in which an individual interacts with others - either in a management or fellow employee capacity - with the aim of achieving authority rather than power. Servant leadership involves the individual demonstrating the characteristics of empathy,

\* Research Assistant at the Faculty of Business Management, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. E-mail: gamaglobeli@ibsu.edu.ge

\*\* Research Assistant at the Faculty of Business Management, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. E-mail: mcelepli@ibsu.edu.ge

listening, stewardship and commitment to personal growth toward others. The other leadership types are Bureaucratic Leadership, Task-Oriented Leadership, People-Oriented/Relations-Oriented Leadership, Transformational Leadership, and Transactional Leadership.

These were definitions of leadership as a concept and characteristics of leaders. As we examine the Taoist approach below, it appears as the opposite of authoritarian leadership styles while stands closer to democratic, Laissez-Faire and Servant Leadership styles. It is possible to see the above examined modern approaches to leadership in an ancient Chinese Taoist thought which is dated back to 6th century B.C. As stated in the abstract, the reason why we decided to examine the Taoist approach of leadership is a growing tendency within the Western scientific realm of considering Eastern philosophical conceptions regarding leadership. As the rapid changes take place throughout the whole world, individuals tend to change their personal world views also refusing the patterns that force them to conform to certain rules of behaviors. This, in turn increases the role of new approaches in leadership styles as a response to the actual challenge. For the important feature of a leader are not his/her compulsive characters but an ability of motivating people to follow certain directions. Accordingly, nowadays leadership approach is not the one based on compulsion, command, inflictions or rewards, it is an approach that focuses on workers and it is a natural way of interaction taking seriously the needs and thoughts of an ordinary individual. Employees feel loyalty, respect and confidence towards leaders who possess the above mentioned characteristics. Taking the above mentioned into a consideration we would like to examine the Taoist approach to leadership and sees how all these notions are being reflected within ancient Chinese thought.

### Concept of Tao and Leadership

Eastern thought has made a significant contribution to the development of concepts like leadership/management long before the scientific interest/approach to these very phenomena ever occurred. These contributions are the focus on human emotions, values, mutual service, considering human values rather than being compulsive. The humanist approach within the ancient Chinese thought of Taoism may open new perspectives in the leadership studies as well (Fındıkçı, 2009: 121).

Having defined the notion of leadership from the Western perspective, we shortly define the concept of Tao and Taoism in general as a philosophical concept. There are two main philosophers associated with the creation of Taoism. The first is Lao Tzu, who is thought to have lived between the sixth and third century BCE. He is regarded as the creator of the Taoist philosophy. Laozi (6th century BC – China) A man of great wisdom, he attracted many

people, who gathered around him and considered him their teacher. But as he observed the moral decay of the city and the kingdom, he felt out of place and resolved to leave. Out of this great work emerged the great philosophical and religious tradition known as Taoism (or Daoism), which have been such a powerful force in Eastern Asia for more than two millennia, and which have exerted their influence in the West for that last two centuries (Pearson, 2010) and Laozi has the legendary author of the Dao De Jing, a collection of prose and verse wisdom literature that is considered the seminal and essential work of Daoism (Barnstone & Ping, n.d.). It is an ancient Chinese thinking based on Laozi's writing named Tao Te Ching (6th century BCE). The term itself - Tao (pronounced "dao") means literally "the path" or "the way. The second philosopher is Chuang Tzu who lived from 369-286 BCE. He wrote a self-titled book that reflects the same teaching of the Tao Te Ching, however it is more mystical and complex in its outlook (Hundoble, n.d.).

Here we give a short list of basic principles of Tao Te Ching in order to understand the core idea easily:

- **Non-action.** The foolish expend a great deal of energy and time trying to do everything and end up achieving nothing. On the other end of the spectrum, the truly wise don't seem to do much at all and yet achieve whatever they want. This magic is possible, indeed unavoidable, when one is in tune with the Tao and acts without attachments.

- **Non-intention.** So often we perform virtuous deeds hoping to receive praise or recognition. That's no virtue at all. True virtue is a state where such actions flow forth naturally, requiring no conscious effort or thought.

- **Simplicity.** The basis for our reality and our existence is elemental and uncomplicated. Human beings create a lot of trouble for themselves by making everything more complex than they need to be. If we learn to simplify our lives, we can experience a profound satisfaction that is infinitely more meaningful than the rewards of the material world.

- **Wisdom.** Logic has its place in human affairs but isn't everything. There is a limit to what we can understand through rationality and reasoning. To transcend that limit, we need to engage our intuition fully. This is the key to insights as opposed to knowledge, and the difference between living the Tao and reading all about it (Lin, n. d.).

What are the basic characteristics of leader according to the Western understanding in general? Generally speaking, the characteristics of a leader in a traditional Western understanding is linked with a strictly defined rule and patterns of behavior that is literary imposed on others which are the followers of a particular goal: "Thus the typically western approach to leadership is to try to establish codified principles that may be written down for transmission to a relatively passive 'learner.' In contrast, some aspects of Eastern thought, notably Taoism and Zen present a view

of leadership, and more specifically the use of power, as a fluid set of interrelations co-ordinated with and within a natural order that is outside our immediate control but of which we are an intimate part. Whereas in the West leadership is about active and shaping control, for Taoists it is about engagement and accommodation with circumstances as they are.”

As shown from the reference in the Western understanding of leaderships there are particular sets of behavioral rules that are preconditioned already regardless what the actual/situational circumstances may be. In contrast to this approach, the Taoist approach is more flexible as it shows natural tendency to grasping the actual circumstance/situations and acting accordingly. Another interesting point that is emphasized is that “Western concepts of leadership are essentially task oriented; Taoist conceptions are process oriented” (Prince, n.d.).

According the Bass (1981), Grint (2000), Kelvin (1970), Stogdill (1974), Western conceptions of leadership are often vague and confusing in terms of a practical application: The conceptual tangles and contradictions in leadership that seem to be an inevitable part of the models derived from the empirical and quasi-empirical methods of the western tradition often cause more confusion than clarity when people try to apply them. In contrast, an approach derived from the theoretical naivete (but conceptual sophistication) of Taoism generates powerful insights that are often difficult to express in words. Part of the key here, perhaps, is to consider leadership not as a set of intellectual principles, but much more as a set of experientially located and responsive relational skills-in-process. From these references we learn that the Western conceptions of leadership form particular sets of formalized general principles, rules and procedures which in practice create piles of unrelated data and observations with no genuine theoretical underpinnings (Davis, 2004). These points can be understood as a criticism of a traditional Western conceptualization of leadership that sheds light to its weaknesses. The point here is that these rules and instructions tend to form an end in themselves while neglecting the immediacy of the here and now.

One of the central features of a leadership according to Taoism is spontaneity – a key feature in dealing and responding to an unexpected circumstances and situations. For, the rule systems that are widespread in the Western conceptual realm “create their own contradictions, and it can take time and a great deal of human ingenuity to untangle them, even when we have created them ourselves. This in turn renders spontaneity impossible, and ultimately subverts that creativity that is a necessary part of lived experience. Sometimes it is better to make judgments without the aid of rules and just respond to the circumstances”.

The basic characteristic of a leader according to the Taoist understanding is a specific state of mind when it is

free of all preconceptions and acts spontaneously. The second very important point is the principle of non-interfering in affairs so that they will take their natural course for “to achieve things it is not always necessary, or even desirable, to try and control events directly”.

Here is the reference from Tao Te Ching where this very principle is being explained:

Tao abides in non-action,  
Yet nothing is left undone.  
If kings and lords observed this,  
The ten thousand things would  
Develop naturally.  
If they still desired to act,  
They would return to the simplicity of  
Formless substance.  
Without form there is no desire.  
Without desire there is tranquility.  
And in this way all things would be at peace.

**Tao Te Ching** (Feng&English,1972:37)

Or the same can be read in the following passage:

The world is ruled by letting things take their course.  
It cannot be ruled by interfering.

**Tao Te Ching** (Feng&English, 1972:48)

Here we can clearly see emphasize on the non-interference principle which is one the central points in Taoist thought in general. From this very passage one can notice the idea of natural development of events (process) which by its side implies the principle of non-interference with the natural flow of the ongoing processes.

Another passage from the above referred work gives a very clear picture regarding who the best leaders are:

The very highest if barely known.  
Then comes that which people know and love.  
Then that, which is feared,  
Then that which is despised.  
Who does not trust enough will not be trusted.  
When actions are performed  
Without unnecessary speech,  
People say, “We did it!”

**Tao Te Ching** (Feng&English, 1972:17)

This very passage shows one of the most important virtues of a leader that is a non-interference principle in managing people and affairs which can be read in the following passage as well:

Creating without claiming,  
 Doing without taking credit,  
 Guiding without interfering,  
 This is Primal Virtue.

#### **Tao Te Ching** (Feng& English, 1972:51)

It must be mentioned that characteristics shown above may confront those of a Western leadership style as in Western understanding a leader should have clearly defined and manifested ambitions in order to achieve a concrete goal.

Let us elaborate more on the characteristics of leaders according to the traditional Western academic and Chinese/Taoist perspectives. From the **Western perspective**: Leaders know what their mission is. They know why the organization exists. A superior leader has a well thought out (often written) mission describing the purpose of the organization. That purpose need not be esoteric or abstract, but rather descriptive, clear and understandable (Javitch, 2009) As opposed to this, from the **Taoist perspective**: A truly good leader gives individuals an opportunity to define the mission themselves but not defining for them. In the Western tradition clearly defined purposes start from being concrete but often turn to abstract/esoteric ones. Within the Taoist context, leaders guide people from the abstract ideas to the concrete ones.

Superior leaders are recognized with their lack of pretense, facade, jealousy, and envy. Leaders high in to are clear, transparent, simple, selfless, and without guile. They do not strategize about human relationships by planning to move others like pieces in a game. Skilled leaders do not manipulate with other people in order to achieve certain goals. One more interesting point from the Tao Te Ching:

In the universe the difficult things are done  
 as if they are easy.  
 In the universe great acts are made up of small deeds.  
 The sage does not attempt anything very big,  
 And thus achieves greatness.

#### **Tao Te Ching** (Feng&English, 1972: 63)

This passage resembles with the idea given above – a truly effective leader does not set goals that are unreachable. Setting goals that are adjusted to the reasonable outcomes is a primary virtue of leadership and thus, big achievements can be obtained with relatively small deeds.

Managing the Ying and Yang opposites is also another crucial point in Taoist style of leadership. According to Taoist thought Yin represents feminine energy – intuition, softness contraction and yielding while the masculine energy of Yang represents rational thought, hardness, expansion and assertiveness. There is a balance between these two forces which can lead to perfection in leading and managing others or/and affairs. Effective

leaders should employ each of the two principles in their performances. One more interesting feature of a leader according to the Western understanding is Ambition: leaders and their followers need to be constantly striving for improvement and success; leaders provoke followers to act towards achieving certain goals. Moreover, ambitions and strive is considered one of the most desirable qualities in the Western (and particular – American culture). As for the Eastern thought of Taoism and its understanding of leadership – leader discards his/her ambitious desires, acts without desires and thus, can achieve great accomplishments. “Let the people always act without strategy or desire; let the clever not venture to act. Act without action and nothing is without order” - this passage from Tao Te Ching may sound somehow strange to the Western individuals but the paradoxical point is that it does “work” within the Taoist/ Chinese context of leadership/management.

#### **Conclusion**

Within the Taoist though and understanding of leadership “I” turns into “us”, the complete philosophy of cooperation is not based on personal ambitions and self-interest like presented in the Western approaches of leadership/working ethics. A truly good leader favors cooperation; support and respect of a concrete individual rather than cultivating and encouraging ambition, endless strive for a personal success at the expense of a mutual benefit.

Taoist understanding of leadership can be quite useful for Westerners from theoretical as well as from the practical points of view. It represents a different approach to the concept of leadership in general that is still to be discovered and applied in the West in academic and practical fields.

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