

## Good Leadership & Getting On Top Of Office Politics

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### Abstract:

In this Organization Behavior paper, office politics is examined and discussed through the good leadership/Confucian visor. The practitioner-author examines how a good leader (Confucian) copes with and manages office politics and on-goings at the workplace. Among other things, the strategies and pointers, seen from the good leadership (Confucian) perspective, include being bold and standing by one's values, taking actions – making things happen as well as continuously learning, learning and applying.

**Key words:** disciplined leadership; Confucius, supportive leadership, learning, competence.

### Introduction

*“A clever person turns great troubles into little ones and little ones into none at all.”* (Chinese proverb)

Office or organizational politics involves actions by individuals, teams, or leaders to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources in order to obtain preferred outcomes (Hellriegel and Slocum, 2011: 293; Nye, 2004; Cross, Parker and Cross, 2004).

From the outset, it is vital to note that all office politicking or office politicians need to create and build their influence over other people. They, in fact, rely upon a simple concept: the biggest help and in fact the biggest obstacle to reaching their goals is other people, their fellow colleagues.

From another angle, we can look at it that people tend to label things, and really, “there is nothing right or wrong in office politics”. Perhaps it is the thinking that makes it so. To this author, “what matters most is that we stay competent, grow our skills, *cooperate*, make friends and build relationships” (Low, 2008: 44-45, *italics mine*). And this would contribute

to creating a peaceful environment – with fewer conflicts or friction – for doing business and allowing the company to excel in the ‘marketplace’ (Kogan Page, 1993: 9).

Confucius’ teachings, set down 2,500 years ago in a poetic style, may, at first, appear distant, seemingly arcane or even disjointed, difficult to apply to our lives today. But, with some reflection, we seek to unlock the timeless and profound nature of his work. And what this author did was to think about how Confucius’ words might have meaning for him in terms of coping with office politics in a modern corporate setting.

While some of us say they do not want to get ‘caught up’ in politics at work, most Human Resource (HR) experts argue that playing the game is crucial to your career success (The Times of India, 2010). Politics is a reality one cannot keep away from; species such as devilish superiors, backbiting colleagues and irritating colleagues will always be omnipresent. The way is the Confucian way of getting on top of office politics; the Confucian leader simply gets the job done. “The wise are free from perplexities; the virtuous from anxiety; and the bold from fear,” (Confucius, cited in Wang, 1982: 43). The aim and objectives of this paper are to highlight the various strategies, ways and key actions in which a Confucian leader, based on Confucius’ teachings, copes with and manages office politics.

## **1. Stand by the Values Held**

There is a need to be bold and stand above politics. And in this respect, the Confucian leader is a die-hard where values and integrity is concerned. Each of us can then be what Confucius called gentle-man (lady) (*junzi*). This is what the Chinese commonly say, that is, person of principles have courage. Each of us stands, lives; or dies by their core values or key beliefs and convictions; this is also known as inner leadership by which the leader stands (Low, 2011). Ethics, in the sense of discerning right and wrong, and embodying underlying values are basic or essential to leadership.

When the values of the leader are aligned with that of the company, there is no anomaly or variance; it certainly becomes much better and easier for the leader to act. When a situation happens and decision has to be made, (s)he would normally ask, “Where do we (I) stand?” This would seem to tell us that a leader has responsibility for at least enabling the group that they lead to create its ethical sense, and thus to set up an ethical community of practice. (S)he would make decisions based on what core values the company holds but more so, (s)he would

have peace of mind or be satisfied if the decisions made while agreeing with the company's values are also aligned and matched with his (her) values.

Interestingly, Low (2010: 42) has also argued that the leader gets soft power when (s)he stands for his or her values, has moral courage and represents what a leader stands for. The gentleperson (*junzi*) stands tall, and understands what is right and ethical. (*The Analects*, IV verse 16). In another verse, *The Analects*, XII: 4 (Lau, 1979: 113):

Ssu-ma Niu asked about the gentleman (*junzi*).

The Master said, 'The gentleman is free from worries and fears.'

'In that case, can a man be said to be a gentleman simply because he is free from worries and fears?'

The Master said, 'If, on examining himself, a man finds nothing to reproach himself for, what worries and fears can he have?'"

That is to say, a leader who is above politics should be courageous because (s)he has a clear conscience when making a decision. (S)he stands by his or her integrity. This, it should be noted, as not only as characteristic of a Confucian leader but also, as the hallmark of true leadership, really standing for one's values, moral courage and what one stands for. Here it matches with what Low and Theyagu (2003: 14) have highlighted, that is, "by the leader's values, moral courage and what he stands for, (the) people know if he is committed". One should not be caught in a situation where one is seen less than honest and candid. If one is caught in a compromising situation, one misplaces the people's or the followers' trust. Basically, it boils down to who one is and what one stands for.

And people usually admire who one is and what one stands for. And in the Confucian sense, one needs to be a gentleperson (*junzi*), and be kind and benevolent to one's people. When the people trust the leader's values, they are likely to follow the leader. And to quote Bacon (2012: ix), he eloquently puts it: "authentic leadership — is never an act of control, coercion, or dominance. Leadership arises from the core of who a leader is. It's an act of influence. Authentic leaders do not seek to compel; they seek to inspire. They do not impose their will on others; rather, they live according to core beliefs and principles that attract others; they initiate change because they envision a better way, and others follow that path because they believe it is a better way."

## **2. Speak Correctly and Be Trustworthy**

To Confucius, fine words and an insinuating appearance are seldom associated with true virtue. For him, it is critical to be sincere. When people are not sincere, selfish or mean – with sweet-melon lips but bitter-melon heart, there can be little trust among them. And the effects of office politics are subtle and menacing, which makes it more damaging. What more, it fosters an environment of mistrust, disagreements, conflicts and suspicion, and as such, all the more there is a need to promote the trust of others of ourselves. A harmonious workplace should be created and one where one is happy to work with others and vice-versa. In short, it is a matter of building trust and making the trust spirals upwards.

Office life is actually a matter of working effectively with other people, and as highlighted by Oade (2009: 97), one needs to work in tandem with other people as well as to gain support for plans and proposals that one wants to initiate. According to Confucius, one needs to be “sparing of speech but trustworthy in what (one)...says” (*The Analects*, I verse 6) (Lau, 1979: 59).

Indeed we should not just talk; talk is cheap. Just to talk is being patsy; instead there is a need to “make it... (one’s) guiding principle to do (one’s) best for others and to be trustworthy in what (one) say.” (*The Analects*, IX, verse 25) (Lau, 1979: 99). The crux here is for others to see us as such – doing our best and can, in fact, be trusted. And if everybody does this, then it can create and foster an environment of mutual understanding, trust and harmony. Performance and productivity thus increases; and this is certainly good as it is associated with long-term thinking and applying foresight (Low, 2009: 53).

## **3. Be Daring Enough to Listen and Promote Teamwork/spirit**

Good Confucian leaders listen well; their ears should be on the ground. They are close to or in touch with the grassroots. And they establish good rapport and relationships with their people. They apply the power of creating good relationships and promote teamwork (Low, 2001; 2003), building their own support network.

Getting the job done and producing results, good leaders and successful managers listen to the grassroots and/or staff and ask for their feedback; and in this way gain their support. *The Analects* speaks of:

“Tzu-kung asked, ‘Why was K’ung Wen Tzu called “wen”!’

The Master said, 'He was quick and eager to learn: he was not ashamed to seek the advice of those who were beneath him in station. That is why he was called "wen"' (*The Analects*, Chapter V verse 15) (Lau, 1979: 78).

It is worthy to note that at most times, most of us dare not ask questions for fear that we cannot handle the answers. Good grassroots leaders, having the common people touch, are bold enough to ask questions and to listen to their answers. Questions elicit answers, and leaders who are savvy listen to get feedback so that they can indeed learn and cater to the needs of the people. They then make effort, if need be, to change their communicating or even leading ways and (re)connect to the people. Here, Pye (1985) spoke of Asian leaders are expected to be sensitive or responsive to the feelings of their employees, for everyone should be understanding of the needs of others. Basically, we would be promoting good team spirit and good team performance culture (Hill and McShane, 2008: 255-256; Low, 2003); there is information-sharing with good support, collaboration and camaraderie among the team members.

When one listens, one shows one cares (Low, 2001). Listening too can be therapeutic, the brave leader simply listens, allowing the employee to express, voicing out his or her feelings or dissatisfaction, serving as a catharsis.

#### **4. Make Things Happen**

Confucian leaders also get on top of office politics by making things happen.

Not involved and moving away from petty cliques, the Confucian leader makes things happen. This is a good move because... Firstly, (s)he is a silent achiever, (s)he does not brag, bragging or boasting attracts enemies. Secondly, it is better to do before talking about it or giving publicity about what is to be done. "The Master said, 'The gentleman desires to be halting in speech but quick in action.'" (*The Analects*, IV verse 24) (Lau, 1979: 75). Moreover, a Confucian needs to be humble.

Thirdly, instead of being passive or inaction, it is better to take action, facing the issue squarely. Some people, managers and even leaders choose the easy way out by avoiding the

issue, sweeping it under the carpet. This is like passing the buck and it could come back to haunt the person one day.

All of us should act, resolving problems and achieving the bottom-line. If we are to act, then we act; and determinedly pursue it and get it done – pure and simple; we are then promoting a performance culture.

## **5. Be Decisive or Have No Double Standards**

One indeed needs to be decisive about one's ethical position or morality, and no double standards (such as pretending to be nice but all the while plan someone's demise, DuBrin, 2007: 274) should be practiced. (S)he knows for sure what is right and what is wrong. And this is certainly appealing to others and it does invoke or brings about soft power on the part of the practitioner. Confucius highlighted that, "The man of wisdom is never in two minds about right and wrong; the man of benevolence never worries about the future; the man of courage is never afraid." (*The Analects*, IX verse 29) (Lau, 1979: 100).

By this, we can also say that another angle of looking at it is by applying de Bono's (1993, 80 - 85) white thinking hats. We show causes or reasons for a particular course of actions. We are rational about the whole thing. And that would make us decisive.

Besides, we can add what Sir Robert Kuok, Malaysia's "Sugar King", once highlighted, "Sincerity and focus. Don't be uncertain about what you are doing" ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMd6AB\\_JubU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMd6AB_JubU)) and if we are sincere and focused, we will know what is right and what is wrong, and there is no double standards.

## **6. Be Brave Enough to Be Big-hearted**

In combating against office politics, good leaders also dare to be noble and generous – they are magnanimous, showing much love, kindness and compassion to their fellow peers, followers and to the people around them (Low, 2008; 2008a).

In the organizational work world, goal-directed or task-orientated, it is ordinarily bureaucratic and impersonal, if not cold. True, there is a need to take care of the work, but there is a need to inject feminine feelings of being soft, nice and empathetic, be daring enough to practice and extend out that feminine feeling; basically, it is about being human or at least having that

personal or human touch. For Confucius “no man is a machine. He should not behave heartlessly like one, or as if others were machines” (Chew, 2000: 5). “A gentleman is (*also*) conscious only in the knowledge of others’ comfort; the mean is conscious only of his own comfort” (Chew, 2000: 2, *italics mine*) (Low, 2008: 34).

A slight variant of this has been put forth by Low (2008b: 46), that is, the “be charitable technique”. Share credits for win-win outcomes and make others look good too. One will gain respect from the people around while tactfully promoting one’s own accomplishments. This is good when one stresses on the ‘we’ aspect of things; and that is how one can talk or show about it. Spread the news through email, a company newsletter, or by talking to them personally especially to one’s co-workers whom one most want to impress.

Perhaps here a little caution is required. Do not overdo it lest one will look like a suck-up. When one’s team fails, one takes the heat oneself. Spreading discredit or blame is trivia; besides, it is lose-lose situation. But such a strategy works best for team projects, more so, those that needed extra work or involved conflict.

## **7 Be a Good Planner**

Essentially, one just gets things done by dealing with the bottom-line – without being duly concerned or too attached as to who gets the credits.

Planning is in the hands of man (Heaven’s in charge when it comes to executing the plan), and good leaders get things done, they have vision, and they plan. Planning is developing a goal and choosing and doing a method to achieve it. Plans encourage or support managers and employees to direct their persistent efforts *toward* activities that help accomplish their goals and *away* from activities that do not (Williams, 2009: 157). It not only persuades people to work hard for extended periods and to engage in behaviors directly related to goal attainment; it also encourages them to improvise or think of better ways to do their jobs.

For Confucius, “A man who does not think and plan long ahead will find trouble right by his door.” (Lin, 1994: 181). A good leader is also a good planner, (s)he leaves nothing to chances. To boldly plan is to cut down uncertainties, and this helps to lead well in business.

Confucian leaders should attempt to minimize or reduce uncertainties; they plan. Unlike externals who see themselves as mere pawns in the game of life, leaders, being internals with high locus of control, would normally want to be in control of things and their environment.

## **8. Learn and Apply**

Learning, self-cultivation and self-improvement is important at the workplace and in doing business (Kuok 2011, cited in [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMd6AB\\_JubU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMd6AB_JubU)).

Learning and applying has impact in the workplace, and the leaders' (including followers' or employees') willingness to involve themselves in learning behaviors that lead to advancement is locus of control. Some people believe that they are the determiners of their own fate (Burns, 2000: 214). "The Master said, 'Learn as though the time were short, like one that fears to lose.'" (Lyall, 2010: 109). The Confucian leader simply increases his or her core competences, upgrade and improve his or her skills and abilities.

Even in the old time, Confucius said, "In making a mound, the job is not finished until the last basketful of earth is in place; in filling in a hole, even if you've only poured in one basketful of earth, the job can surely be finished so long as you persist." Here, Confucius smartly used this metaphor to encourage his disciples to be determined, resilient, consistent; persistent and to strive to improve themselves constantly and not to give up mid-way. (*Analects of Confucius*, IX, verse 19).

"Always eager to learn" (*The Analects*, I verse 14) (Lau, 1979: 61), the gentleperson learns and continuously learns. Each of us should learn from the mistakes made by others and ourselves.

For Confucius, when he walks along with two others, they may serve me as his teachers. Like Confucius, we should select their good qualities and follow them, and as for their bad qualities, we should avoid them.

## **9. Do One's Best**

Working hard, one should move forward, forge ahead, do one's best and achieve. Again, one is promoting a performance culture as well as setting a positive example. One should "not allow... (one's) efforts to slacken." (Lau, 1979: 118). Confucius urged his disciples to do their



best and be trustworthy in what they say. (*The Analects*, VII verse 15) (Lau, 1979: 89). They must be ethically correct at all times.

And again interestingly, in *The Analects*, V11 verse 4, we learn that even “during his leisure moments, the Master remained correct though relaxed” (Lau, 1979: 86).

In avoiding office politics, one does one’s best, and besides, one can...

### **10. Forge On, Be Hardy and Resilient**

Self-motivated and standing tall, a Confucian is a fighter and one persists. One continues to work hard. And in fact, one works hard without complaining and solves problems and at the same time, one keeps one’s broken arm inside one’s sleeve.

In fighting against office politics, a Confucian cooperate, collaborate, resolve conflicts, build teamwork and promote trust among their team members (Low, 2003). Employees look to the leader to provide stability. Being able to count on that person being on an even keel increases their level of trust. Competent, they are consistent in their actions, and this promotes reliability and trust (Shearouse, 2011: 125-6). These would then raise the leader’s influence at the workplace.

For Confucian leaders, there is no shame or embarrassment in getting knocked down or making mistakes [citing a common Chinese saying, one Chinese manager this researcher spoke to aptly said that, “everyone has a black pig in his house”]; they would get up, move on and think about what to do next. They would accept such is the life in the organization. This indeed requires being hardy, an ability to face and deal with adversity as well as keep on trying and persist when the going gets tough.

Being determined, such a leader, in the Confucian sense, is patient (*The Analects*, I verse 6) (Lau, 1979: 59); bold and hardy. The leader also learns from mistakes and corrects him(her)self. If one falls seven times, one stands up eight.

Seeing difficulties and problems more as challenges, leaders overcome or get through them. And this is akin to what Low and Theyagu (2003: 57 - 58) has highlighted, “leaders are moulded their ability to take charge of the situation and turning them around. When the going

gets tough, the leaders get going. They show that they can take on challenges and attain the ultimate goal. As a leader, you can achieve this if you have a clear vision of what you seek and the purpose for it.”

The event or hardship should be seen in the right context. After the rain and storm comes a beautiful rainbow. After the event or a misfortune, one nurtures and develops one’s restored energy to make it even greater, more indestructible and incorruptible. One’s strength is boosted after a problem, crisis or a hardship.

### **11. Be Careful and Prudent**

Being prudent in some ways is often good, being careful in terms of money and procedures; the leaders would not be extravagant or reckless. In the Confucian sense, this is being bold. Leaders, the Confucian way, are prudent (Low, 2008; 2008a) and ensure that the company’s resources are intact or well preserved. The late Matsushita Konosuke Japanese corporate leader practiced what he called “dam management”. What is meant here is that: By damming a river, one can store enough water to have an unbroken supply regardless of the vicissitudes of the seasons or the weather. Similarly in business, one ought to upkeep a fitting surplus of resources in all areas – equipment, capital, personnel, inventory, even technology, planning, and product development-based on a prudent review of one’s future needs in each. (PHP Institute, Inc., 1994: 53).

In *Confucian Heritage* Singapore, the personality profile of the Singapore leader suggests a tendency to be more prudent than his or her global counterparts. And this implies that the leaders “tend to be organized, dependable, and thorough; or they are leaders who follow rules well” (Busine, Till and Dy-Liacco, 2011: 25). On the one hand, one can say that the Singapore leaders are bold in that they maintain the integrity of the system, ensuring good governance and smooth management of the organizations. On the other hand, it, in some ways, only shows that Singapore leaders, compared to their global counterparts, are more compliant or rule-bound. Being compliant has its advantages, it ensures good governance as well as good administration; and the work gets done.

### **12. Know When to Retreat, Relax or Retire (When to Advance)**

In performing well, one certainly needs to influence others. One should rightly sense when the utensil is of no use or relevance, and to aptly discard it. There are always seasons. Rain comes

and it goes away; trees and plants grow, mature and die. Time and timing is of essence, and it is all part of nature, life and living. One thus ought to be flexible and bold enough to cleverly know when to advance and more so, when to retreat, and when to apply pressure and indeed when to relax or even not to be around.

In 497 BC, at the age of fifty-four years old, Confucius was at the height of his political career. However, when he realized that his advice to the government was not being listened to, and that all his hard work was not being appreciated, he “resigned from office and took to the road with no prospects and with very little cash” (Chin, 2008). The issue here is that as leaders, if we need to retire, then we do so; time and timing is crucial. Take the case of President Ferdinand Marcos who refused to resign and was in fact toppled when people power, led by Mrs. Corazon Aquino, swept or overwhelmed the Philippines in 1986 (Burton, 1999: 96). There is indeed a need to intuit or know when and what to hold and/or timely release or relinquish our position – this is, it is felt, a typical Confucian trait that is seldom pointed out, but very much practiced by ancient Chinese military strategists and the Japanese, taken naturally as part and parcel of their culture.

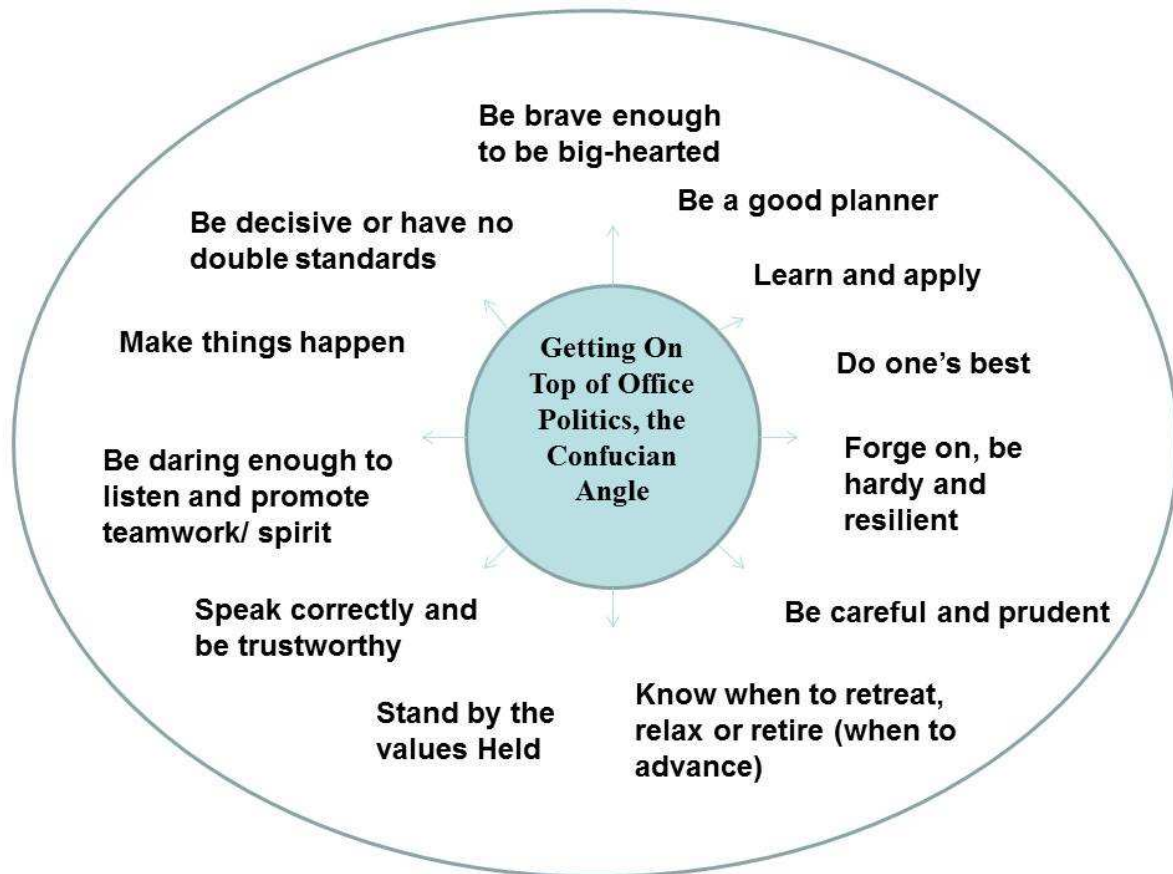


Figure 1 shows the various strategies and ways in which the Confucian leader gets on top of office politics.

### Conclusion

When we stand by our core values, being sincere and holding high integrity, soft power attracts and people are persuaded by us. They will certainly trust us; and we will stand tall.

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