



Review

Can core values enhance talent? Lessons learnt from a Singapore non-profit organisation

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Abstract

Talent or human capital is the primary driver of any successful organization, better talents will definitely differentiate higher performance organization from the rest; and talent management is critical when it comes to business excellence and success. Even though talented people are crucial to society (organization), even more important is the person who knows how to find talented people for business development, continuity and sustainability. It is a common practice for leader to spot leader; and (s)he also breeds leaders. Therefore, it takes talent to spot talent! In this paper, the practitioner-researchers talk about talent selection and talent management which involves the process of injecting new talents and human resource development in a continuous natural way. The authors also highlight the importance of Confucian values in order to make it works.

Keywords: Talent management, filial piety, Confucius, Confucianism, leadership, the talent portfolio, people-oriented management, influence, being persuasive.

INTRODUCTION

In Singapore, Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng was a cemetery that was established in 1870 by immigrants largely from the three prefectures of Kwong Chow Fu (Guangzhou House), Wai Chow Fu (Huizhou House) and Siew Heng Fu (Zhaoqing House) in Guangdong Province, China. It was originally solely for the Cantonese community, but within a century, Peck San Theng (PST) became one of the biggest Chinese cemeteries in Singapore, holding more than 100,000 graves over 384 acres (1.55 km²) of land.

In 1979, the Singapore government decided to acquire all its land to create the present Bishan Housing and Development Board (HDB) New Town. Many graves were exhumed and remains cremated during the 1980s. To enable Peck San Theng to continue with its tradition, the government leased 8 acres (32,000 m²) of land to Peck San Theng for accommodating an office block, a Memorial, two temples and a columbarium. The colum-

barium houses some 100,000 niches which are available to the public irrespective of race, language and religion since 1980. It was and will continue to be a place for ancestral worship in Singapore. Peck San Theng is currently managed by a federation of sixteen clans of the Cantonese community in Singapore.

Singapore Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng is situated in a compound comprising an office block, canteen and recreational facilities. Peck San Theng, which now holds 45,000 urns of deceased ashes for ancestor worship, is able to accommodate twice of that amount (Loo, 2004). The columbarium cum niche area was designed with modern, clean lines. In front of it is a beautifully landscaped garden, lush with flowers and greenery, a pond, and an exquisite resting pavilion in the centre, located at Bishan, (Bishan Pavilion, the hanyu pinyin 'Peck San Theng' in Cantonese), the central region of Singapore.

Singapore Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng is a 140-year old organisation, and its core business is basically to facilitate ancestor worship or veneration. Although it has an interesting history and heritage, the authors felt that it is important to find out the key reasons why the organisation survives for so long, more than a century

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and even to date, it is still going strong.

Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng Organisation

This organisation is in fact driven more by its core values, the Chinese values that it holds. A value is a core belief and what the individual strongly believes in (Low, 2002; 2009). Values themselves can be very motivating (Low, 2005). Knowing values is critical, as it helps one to understand how an individual ticks (Low, 2006). Core values are set of values that guide an individual's or organization's internal conduct as well as one's relationship with the external world. In an organization, core values are usually summarized in the mission statement or in a statement of core values. One of these core values of Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng organisation is that of ancestral veneration. Ancestral veneration, in Chinese culture, has its roots in filial piety (孝, xiào) put forth by Confucius. It is the practice of living family members who try to provide a deceased family member with continuous happiness and well-being in the after-life. As a continuing way of showing respect to the dead, the ancestral worship reinforces family unity and lineage. It encourages children and relatives of many generations to come together to know, help and support each other; they are to strengthen the heritage bond, to celebrate on each other's successes; and to help each other when member(s) of heritage is(are) in difficulty (Low and Ang, 2012; 2012b). Showing respect to one's ancestors is an ideology deeply rooted in Chinese society. By seeking to know one's ancestors, an individual would return to one's root. Confucius summed up this teaching as Reverence for his ancestors: hanyu pinyin: shèn zhōng zhuī yuǎn meaning "having a proper funeral and not forgetting to pay respect for years to come".

Organisation Structure

Singapore's Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng has a total of 102 management committee members serving various sub-committees with 15 employees and 79 engaged or volunteered committee members. The number of managerial employees includes 4 on its payroll and 10 volunteered members working in the committee.

The Aim and Purpose of the Organisation

"Interestingly, we are always in need. The business here is always in demand. There are often people wanting to buy niches in our columbarium and temple. These niches are purchased for placing urns containing ashes of their dead parents or loved ones. Also, the Chinese would buy these niches to place tablets, representing their family names and background for prayers in the association's

altars," as explained by Dr. Sam Kong San, the President of the Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng Association.

The purpose of the association is to serve the needs of the community. Indeed, Low (2011, 2009; 2005; 2002) has classified this kind of association as the organization driven by social objectives (*co-operative* culture). It is a customary tradition or in fact, a value held by the Chinese for at least 4000 years. This tradition or practice is in line with the Confucian teaching, "慎终追远," meaning "To earnestly handle a proper funeral for your deceased parents and not forget to pay continuous respects to them years after." The descendants have one whole month during the *Ching Ming* Festival period from early April to early May each year to do their filial duties. The general guidelines for doing such duties are "事死如事生, 事亡如事存, 孝之至也", meaning "Utmost filial piety means do whatever the descendants would like to do for their ancestors as if they are still alive". In other words, if a person thinks that he would like to bring some household necessities and give money to his deceased mother, he should by all means get them in paper form and burn them in offering after paying his respect. If a person feels like sharing some of his favourite food with the deceased, then he should bring it along, and eat the food together with others, after paying his respect, almost as if the deceased is sharing the meal with them.

On the other hand, ancestor worship is also practiced by the descendants to remind one to be grateful and to be proud of their ancestor's heritage; sometimes ancestors' death anniversaries are celebrated with big banquet amongst families, relatives and friends to remember and upholding their ancestors' good image in contributing to the family and to the society when they were alive. The descendants also use the opportunity to unite and foster good relationships (networking) amongst themselves who live far apart. In this respect, the authors use the Chinese characters, 脸 hanyu pinyin liǎn or 面 hanyu pinyin miàn (face) whereby the descendants respect and praise their ancestors in a nice way. In Confucian culture, face is a powerful social force in governing interpersonal relations (Chun, 2005).

All these rituals are good education for the young and will pass on the traditions. Ancestor worship has become a living heritage in Singapore through Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng. Usually, over 100,000 people will visit Peck Shan Theng during the Ching Ming period every year to pay respects, in their own way, to their ancestors.

'Hidden' Talent Management System

"Seemingly, there appears to be no system in managing talent here, but we should stress that there is indeed a system," expressed Mr. Chou Yik Lin, an entrepreneur and a Committee Member of the Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng Association. Here, Dr. Sam San Kong added that, "there is a 'hidden' talent management system that

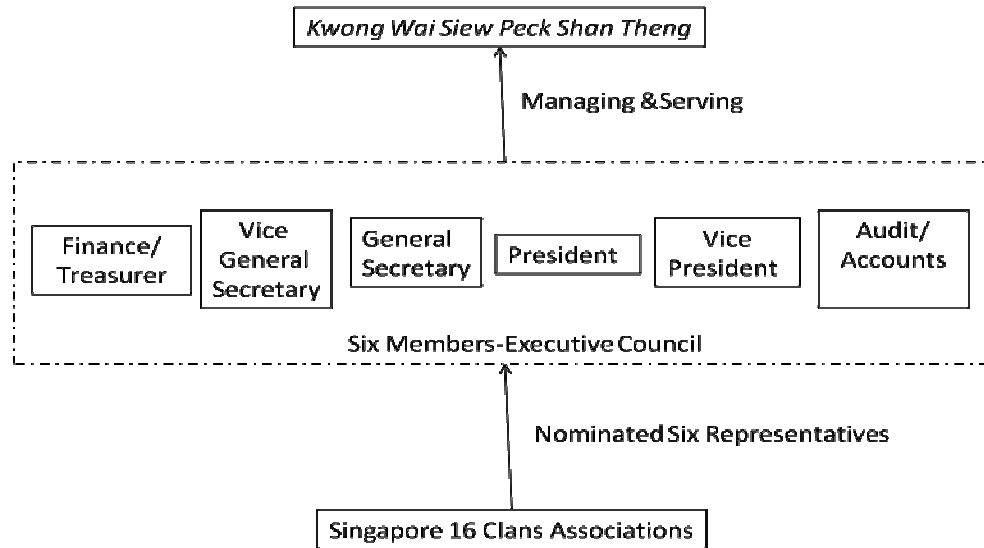


Figure 1. Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng Executive Council.

is in place that accounts for the long standing, survival and continuity of the association.” When further asked on what is meant by ‘hidden’, Dr. Sam explained that talent management “is all this while based on the committee or team and it’s not explicitly discussed or highlighted, we just practise or take it for granted, it’s there, we use and tap the team.”

Talent Management

Talent or human capital is the primary driver of any successful company, better talents will definitely differentiate higher performance companies from the rest; and talent management is critical when it comes to business excellence and success. Even though talented people are crucial to society (organization), even more important is the person who knows how to find talented people (Low, 2010). In this respect, talent management here should be seen or taken as the ability of the people (in the case of the association, the members) getting together to work towards achieving particular result(s) as well as realising mutual benefits for all involved (Low, et al, 2012). Dr Sam pointed out that, “The Chinese are, more or less, a practical people. The great teacher Confucius, who lived about 2,500 years ago, spent his entire life talking about humanism, particularly human relationships.”

Dr. Sam San Kong expressed that the talent here in the association is managed by the team and this has its advantages. It started some 90 years ago that the Cantonese community decided to form a proper management committee to manage the Cantonese/Chinese burial ground. The organisation is structured in such a way that the key management or committee team

(6 members) is able to introduce and implement innovative ideas to bring about changes and its progress.

Selecting Talent

In the Confucian context, a person, more so, a leader should uphold the value of *Junzi* (acting and behaving as gentleman (lady)). People are grown to be gentlemen (ladies), and they become better leaders. According to Han Yu, a Tang Dynasty scholar although talented people are important to society, even more important is the person who knows how to find talented people. And in this aspect, Confucius stressed that the selector of talents should understand the person (the talented individual) throughout. For Confucius, he was not concerned about others not knowing him; his great concern is his not knowing men. Leaders spot leaders; and they breed leaders. It takes talent to spot talent! (Low, 2010).

Presently, the decision-making of Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng are made by the Executive Council of the Management Committee, consisting of 6 members. Talent is selected and managed by the way of a team, the 16 clan associations under the umbrella body, Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng, send their representatives to manage Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng and decisions are made in a collective fashion. By default, the 6-member core, the Executive Council of the Management Committee, is involved in all aspects of Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng’s operations. Figure 1 illustrates the organization structure of executive council. The current Executive Council (2009 - 2011), consists of: (Table 1)

The line managers involved in talent management are

Table 1. The current Executive Council (2009 - 2011).

Name	Position	Association
Dr. Sam Kong San	President	Shun Tak Community Guild
Mr. See Yee Hoi	Vice President	Hok San Association
Mr. Lee Tat Cheng	General Secretary	Ning Yeung Wui Kuan
Mr. Sum Onn Wah	Vice General Secretary	Yen Peng Wui Kuan
Mr. Chou Yik Lin	Finance/Treasurer	Kong Chow Wui Koon
Mr. Hoong Kong Fatt	Audit/Accounts	Tung On Wui Kun

provided through the ad-hoc sub-committee meetings and monthly management committee meetings. Generally, talent management through the team way with expertise or professionals coming from the feeder clan associations is taken as given and readily accepted by all, including the ordinary members.

The Process of Continuity in Injecting New Talents

Mr. Sum Onn Wah, an interior designer and a committee member of the Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng highlighted that, "Unlike the sole proprietor whose business will end on the demise of the sole proprietor, the clan association business and activities will continue through the structure of the committees or teams structure. The conduits to talents are representatives sent by the clan associations. And they come from all walks of lives, and in fact they have varied pool of experiences and professional careers." These were also agreed by Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng's Vice President, Mr. See Yee Hoi. An entrepreneur and representing the Hok San Association, Mr. See holds a Bachelor of Arts (Economics) degree.

Teamwork and Team Spirit

Confucius said, "When it comes to formulating a document of law or decree in the State of Zheng, usually it is Pi Chen that would work out the draft; Shi Shu that would put forward specific suggestions; Zi Yu that would revise it; and finally, it is Zi Chan that would polish it. The document worked out through the common efforts of the four wise senior officials seldom suffers flaws." (Analects of Confucius, XIII: 8). Confucius explained clearly how each person's potential and capability in team work can contribute to the spirit of a team leading to the success of a team. Therefore, team dynamic and harmonious relationships are important. If a team consists of players who are too opinionated in their views and can never reach an agreement in any decision-making, one has to spend a lot of energy in convincing each other and sometimes to no avail. In this respect, teamwork and harmonious relationship are both important factors in

team success. With regard to Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng, Dr. Sam, an information-technology specialist by training and an academician, insisted that, "I cannot choose my colleagues; like it or not, I have to work with them. I've to get along with them. Any conflicts arose have to be resolved and amicably settled. Here we in fact stress very much on the relationship factor, getting along with each other and working well together. This reflects the Chinese value of relationships and the importance of relationships. This organisation functions based on relationships, and decisions are made based on collective decisions." Dr. Sam stressed, "Your colleagues are given; no choice... members must just learn how to work with each other."

Dr. Sam also added that, "When it comes to getting financial approval, team work is necessary. Individual committee members are given the authority to spend or do things, but this is quite limited... Authority is given to each committee member to approve up to \$3,000 only. However, there is a need to get agreement of others... the committee as a whole needs to approve. ...perhaps, progress is slow but steady and in a way, lobbying and building good relationships are needed... ..but overall, we work well."

"In fact, one key success factor of Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng can be said that there's no power struggle; the jobs are there, and there's job rotation of the Executive Council or management committee members," highlighted Dr. Sam. Each of the 6 committee members undergoes a job rotation holding different positions every two years, designed to give him a breadth of exposure of the Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng's operations. At this senior management level, job rotation or more appropriately, management rotation, is tightly linked with succession-planning. This develops a pool of people capable of stepping into an existing job. The two-year term also enables each committee member to become expert in the task, function(s) and role and at the same time they are available to the other members if the other members want their advice or help.

Of critical interest here, the main goal is to provide learning experiences which make easy changes in thinking and perspective equivalent to the horizon of the level of the succession-planning.

All these years, the committee members met regularly,

and the proceedings were recorded. Knowledge and skills, over the years, are built up through the records, and institutional memory created. Interestingly, at present and as in the past, scholars, both local and overseas, from People's Republic of China, Taiwan and other countries have come to Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng to study the association's core values and activities. Academic books and studies have been made, crystallising the knowledge while providing the necessary permanent records for Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng.

It can also be taken that in essence the constitution of Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng clearly spells out the organisation structure and the roles of the different positions of the committee/ team members. Dr. Sam pointed out that "on the whole, the organisation should work within the constraints or positively speaking, what's spelt out in the constitution. That's the plus point! We're made to focus on perpetuating and facilitating the practice of ancestral worship." He then added that however, like a double-edge sword, there is also "no chance to venture into certain or other businesses whatever its nature and profitability... ..we're tied by the constitution."

Human Resource Development

In terms of training and human resources development, Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng's organisation structure provides a framework for informal coaching or sitting next to Nelly's style, and mentoring (the past President automatically become advisor), and hence, competence is progressively developed and enhanced. Indeed, although no formal training practically exists, each of the committee members brings in wealth of different experiences and expertise and they just think how to contribute and give.

"I guess the key motivational source for the volunteered members is to value the culture, the values and the practices embodied in ancestral worship. We are motivated to preserve... worth to preserve what we've inherited. After all, we owe it much to our future generations; they must also know the past and the traditions." (One Peck Shan Theng interviewee's input).

The Challenges Ahead

The challenges ahead are more of how to get the young people within the island-Republic firstly, to become members and secondly, to participate in the activities of Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng. Thirdly, the challenge for the Association is how to promote Chinese values of ancestral worship, filial piety and the associated familial values among the young in the island-Republic's multiracial and multicultural society which also faces

incoming foreign talents and new citizens coming from countries such as India and the Western world.

The Way Forward

The organisation also needs to change with the times.

In the past, it has shown to be so. A case in point is that in 1997, a \$4 million renovation and restoration project was completed on the Peck Shan Theng temple within the compound, which was originally built in 1890. That renovation added features like porcelain wall carvings based on legendary figures such as Yue Fei, the legendary Chinese general and famous scenes from the novel, Romance of the Three Kingdoms. And in June 2004, another round of renovations at Peck Shan Theng costing \$2 million was made, and this time, it involves the refurbishment of Peck Shan Theng's gates and boundary wall, rooftops and another smaller temple in the compound. (Loo, 2004).

Additionally, more youthful energy was then infused in the area in 2001, when Raffles Junior College moved into its spanking new premises which was built at another site next to Peck San Theng. And the hope of creating ties with the young – at least, among Rafflesian youth – is being realised.

Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng's newsletters were published in Mandarin but in the past two years or so, the association's newsletters also carry English articles so as to attract and heighten the awareness and interests of the English educated Singaporeans to the Association's interests and activities.

Interestingly, Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng had set up its Youth Group back in 2004 to attract the interest of younger Singaporeans. Here, it is seen as "a way for us to show the young that it is not about being superstitious. We want to show that this is how the Chinese traditionally honour the memory of their ancestors. Our hope is that by doing this, we can help them retain the traditional value of always remembering their roots." (Sam, 2004 cited in Loo, 2004).

Additionally, Chinese website (www.kwspecksanheng.com) was also set up back in 2004 to help attract the young, and more critically, the association is now looking for English-language Web programmers to help extend the site's reach (Loo, 2004).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In olden days, ancestors were worshipped with elaborated rites. For example, children would mourn their deceased parents for three years, abstaining or barring all celebratory events during the mourning period. Children would also need to fulfil most of the general daily needs of the afterlife. They would visit their deceased parents' resting places at least twice a year,

during the spring and autumn festivals. They would bring with them food and all manner of household items (usually made of paper), that their parents would likely need in their afterlives, and present these items formally in front of the gravestones before burning the joss sticks and lighting candles. After paying respects with the appropriate rituals, the descendants would burn joss sticks and joss paper items to symbolise sending off their offerings.

Nowadays, these rituals have been made simplified and the modern significance is instead stressed, and besides, the respects, as in Singapore, can be done at Peck Shan Theng. Indeed here, talents are also managed in a voluntary fashion and besides, it is done in an effective team way. We should also note that talents can, at times, come in nearby sources, from the members themselves rather than search from afar. The key learning lesson from this kind of organisation is the continuous selection of good talent candidates through several layers of screening/nominations amongst the sixteen clans/associations before putting forward the six candidates to the main organisation. It also illustrates the importance and benefits of Confucian values such as filial piety, team work and team spirit in supporting talent management. The role of Kwong Wai Siew Peck Shan Theng is to facilitate ancestor worship. More importantly, for the younger generation, they learn the values of family and a sense of togetherness and unity when they understand that each (is recognised and) has a place in the chain of descendants, and are responsible to those who come before and after them. And finally, as long as these are realised, these ancestral veneration services are much in demand... ..even in the future.

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