

Review

Confucius' teachings, good leadership and getting on top of office politics

Kim Cheng Patrick Low and Ali Yusob Mohd. Zain

¹Ph.D. and Chartered Marketer, Certified MBTI Administrator and Certified Behavioral Consultant/ Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Professor of Management and Marketing/Associate, University of South Australia

²Ph.D./Programme Leader, Graduate Studies, Faculty of Business, Economics and Policy Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Abstract

Office or organizational politics is examined and discussed in this article through the good leadership/Confucian visor. The practitioner-authors examine how a good leader, the Confucian practitioner, copes with and manages office politics and on-goings at the workplace. Among other things, the key strategies and pointers, seen from the Confucian leadership angle, include being bold and standing by one's values, making things happen as well as continuously learning, learning and applying. This paper is an adaption of Low's (2012) e-Leader CASA Berlin Conference paper presented on 5 June 2012.

Keywords: Disciplined leadership, Confucius, core values, supportive leadership, learning, competence, office politics.

INTRODUCTION

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 essential 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. In short, one can network to gain more support or help from other people and can thus raise one's net-worth. Interestingly, Robert Kiyosaki, an American investor, businessman, self-help author, motivational speaker and financial literacy activist said that, "The richest people in the world look for and build networks, everyone else looks for work."

From another perspective, it can be said that people have a habit of labeling things, and really, "there is nothing right or wrong in office politics". Perhaps it is the

thinking that makes it so. The authors agree that "what matters most is that we stay competent, grow our skills, *cooperate or collaborate*, make friends and build relationships" (Low, 2008: 44-45, *italics ours*). And this would add to creating a peaceful or positive environment – with fewer conflicts or friction – for doing business and allowing the company to excel in the 'marketplace' (Kogan Page, 1993: 9). Office politics can also be used to create a positive environment; one basically builds one's confidence and competence, and work or network with others. There is really a need to stay away from negative politics, politics that cater to individuals' selfish interests. Negative politics in the office are a waste of people's energy (Holden, 2003).

Interestingly, 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. However, with some reflection, the authors seek to unlock the timeless and profound nature of his work. And what the authors did was to think about how Confucius' words might have meaning for him in terms of coping with office politics in a modern office environment.

While some of us say that they do not want to get 'caught up' in politics at work, most Human Resource

*Corresponding Author E-mail: patrick_low2003@yahoo.com

(HR) experts argue that playing the game is crucial to one's career success (The Times of India, 2010). Politics is a reality one cannot keep away from; toxic species such as devilish superiors, backbiting colleagues and irritating colleagues will always be ever-present or pervasive. 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, techniques, ways and key actions in which a Confucian leader, based on Confucius' teachings, becomes a good leader as well as copes with and manages office politics.

Holding onto the core values held

"Listen to the sound of the river, and you will catch a trout." (Irish proverb)

Standing tall, one must 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, abides, 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 critical to leadership.

When the values of the leader are aligned with that of the corporate, there is no disagreement or variance; it certainly becomes much better and easier for the leader to act. When a situation happens and decision has to be made, he or she 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. A leader would make decisions based on what core values the company holds but more so, he or she would have peace of mind or be satisfied if the decisions made, while agreeing with the company's values, also aligned and matched with his or her values.

More critically, the leader gets soft power when he or she stands for his or her values; the leader has moral courage and represents what a leader stands for (Low 2010: 42). 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?'

In other words, a leader who is above politics should be courageous because the leader has a clear conscience when making a decision. He or she 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.

Genuine leaders stand by their values. And they stand upright; they are a gentleperson (*junzi*). Genuine 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." 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.

Speak correctly and be trustworthy

"It's a good horse that draws its own cart." (Irish proverb)

To Confucius, fine words and an insinuating appearance are rarely 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

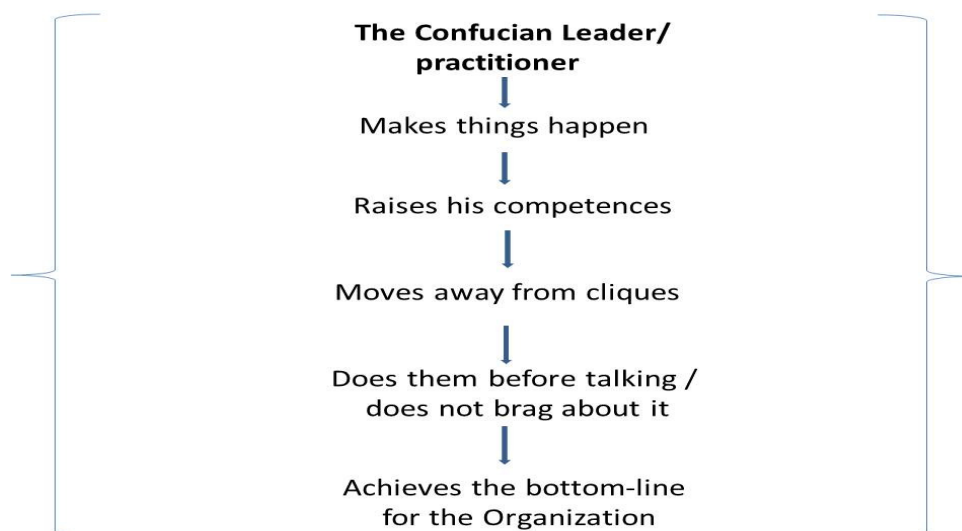


Figure 1. illustrates that the achieving Confucian leader/practitioner, by raising his or her competences, makes things happen and realizes the company's bottom-line. If one is to act, then one acts; and resolutely pursues it and gets it done. Through such actions, he or she also promotes the company's performance culture.

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).

Make things happen

"He who sings frightens away his ills." (Spanish proverb)

Confucian leaders make things happen and get on top of office politics.

Not involved and moving away from petty cliques, the Confucian leader makes things happen. This is a good move because...

One, he or she is competent, silently achieving. He or she does not brag; bragging or boasting attracts the dislikes of others as well as the enemies.

Two, 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.

Three, it is better to act, facing the issue squarely rather than being passive or inaction. 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.

The Confucian leader/practitioner would act, resolving problems and achieving the bottom-line. Overall, if he or she is to act, then he or she acts; and determinedly pursues it and gets it done – pure and simple; the leader is then promoting a performance culture (Figure 1).

Listen enough and promote *Ti* or brother(sister)hood/team spirit plus networking

"A dwarf on a giant's shoulders sees farther of the two." (George Herbert)

It is good to network (Holden, 2003) and in Asia, this is one of the best strategies to apply as Asians emphasizes relationships as well as connections, implying a high sense of unity (Blackman and Butler, 2003). In this connection, brother(sister)hood or teamwork is to be promoted. Low, Mohd. Zain and Ang (2012: 600) reported that managers must galvanize a high sense of unity, and that teamwork is one of the key principles in managing people; they highlighted that, "as a result of the good teamwork and team spirit, the organization becomes effectively service-oriented in line with the total

quality service; and that the internal units working in supplier-customer relationships provide quality services to the external customers". It is good to realize that people and relationships are the basis and context for everything we do and, as organizations restructure and redevelop themselves, the importance of networks and prized professional relationships as the means for oiling the wheels of industry and getting things done is becoming even more significant.

Good Confucian leaders listen well; their ears should be on the ground. Leaders should be close to or in touch with the grassroots. And they establish good rapport and relate well with their people. They boost good relationships and promote teamwork (Low, Mohd. Zain and Ang, 2012; 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"!"

Confucius 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.

Be a good planner

"Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now." (Alan Lakein)

One simply 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.

The Old Master once said, "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; he or she 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.

Be decisive or have no double standards

"He who has two masters has to lie to one." (Portuguese proverb)

One truly 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. He or she 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.

Here, 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) and if we are sincere and focused, we will know what is right and what is wrong, and there is no double standards.

Be brave enough to be big-hearted

"Much wealth will not come if a little does not go." (Chinese proverb)

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 workplace, 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).

Another option 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.

Here a little caution is perhaps necessary. 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.

Learn and apply

“Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous.” (Confucius)

To learn and to apply is to raise one’s skills; one is upgrading oneself. 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).

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.’” (Lyll, 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 midway. (*Analects of Confucius*, IX, verse 19).

“Always eager to learn” (*The Analects*, I verse 14) (Lau, 1979: 61), the gentleperson learns, and in fact, continuously learns from the mistakes made by others and him(her)self.

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.

Achieve the Best

“If you don’t crack the shell, you can’t eat the nut.” (Russian proverb)

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...

Be determined and resilient – forge on!

“That which is bitter to endure may be sweet to remember.” (Latin proverb)

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 combating 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.

Confucian leaders have no shame or embarrassment in getting knocked down or making mistakes. Citing a common Chinese saying, one Chinese manager this

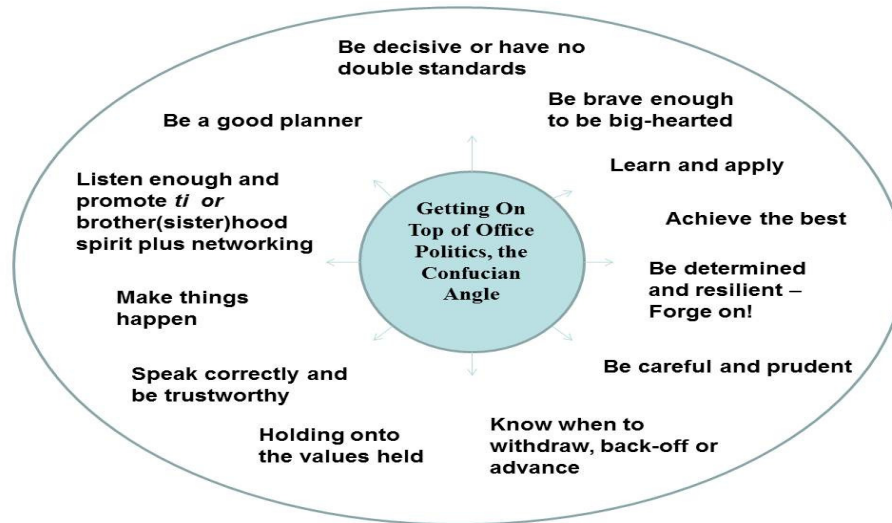


Figure 2. shows the twelve strategies and ways in which the Confucian leader gets on top of office politics.

researcher spoke to aptly said that, “everyone has a black pig in his house” (Low, 2012). 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 hardships and problems more as challenges, leaders overcome and 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 grows one’s strength(s) after a problem, crisis or a difficulty.

Be careful and prudent

“*Little and often fills the purse.*” (German proverb)

Being prudent in most 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* (Low, 2009a), the personality profile of the Singapore leader suggests a tendency and preference 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.

Know when to withdraw, back off or advance

“*Those who know when they have enough are rich.*” (Chinese proverb)

To do well, one definitely 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. But when he realized that his advice to the government was not being listened to, and that all his hard work was not 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 should 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 2).

CONCLUSION

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

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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