

Full Length Research Paper

The Confucian Rectification of Names and People/Human Resource Management

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Abstract

In this article, the practitioner-academician examines the Confucian Rectification of Names and applies it to job titles and human resources management. The paper is analyzed in three parts, that is: i. Should a leader/ manager act or fulfill his or her role and responsibilities? ii. What happens if the title or appointment does not match or fit with the qualities and competencies or skills of the jobholder? and iii. When there is no Rectification of Names, much incompetence can exist and office politics can be rife?

Keywords: Confucius, confucian, rectification of names, competencies, human resource management.

INTRODUCTION

Confucius (551 BC - 479 BC) was an esteemed Chinese thinker and social philosopher. The philosophy of Confucius emphasized personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationship, justice and sincerity. Most of the sayings and teachings of Confucius, China's First or Model Teacher were collected and compiled by his disciples and form the basis and source of *The Analects*, which later became the textbook for future generations of disciples. In this paper, the academician/ researcher examines the theory and application of Confucian rectification of names in South East Asia, more so, in the Singaporean and Bruneian context.

Paper's Aim and Objectives

The objectives of the paper are two-fold. One, to examine the Rectification of Names according to Confucius and two, to apply the Rectification of Names to people or human resources management. The paper also seeks to explore and examine the notion that a leader (manager) should act as a leader (manager) or fulfill his (her) leadership (managerial) role and responsibilities as well as be accountable. At the same time, it also seeks to uncover what would happen if the title or appointment

does not match or fit with the qualities and competences of the jobholder; in other words, his or her qualifications and experiences can be below par.

Literature Review

The Relationship between Competencies (Skills) and the Rectification of Names

A leader (manager) if (s)he is to lead (manage) well must have the necessary competencies or skills. Thus, we need to define skills or competencies. Competency can be defined as "an underlying characteristic of a person that results in effective or superior performance" (Mansfield, 1999). Rankin (2002) describes competencies as "definitions of skills and behaviours that organizations expect their staff to practice in their work". The competencies or skills attached to a job or a profession is thus basic of the job, and the person performing the function(s) or the role(s).

"Let the ruler be the ruler, the minister minister, the father father and the son son" (The Analects, XII: 11; Fung, 1948: 41; please see Figure 1). Remember "What's in a name?" – a famous question made popular by William Shakespeare? Here, in the Confucian Rectification

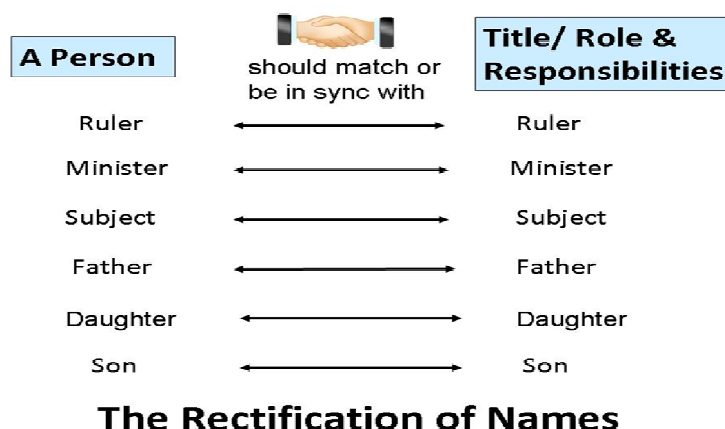


Figure 1. Shows the Rectification of Names

of Names, every name contains certain implications which constitute the essence of that class of things to which this name implies. When everyone acts according to its essence, things will be smooth, and there will be order.

Low (2012) has argued that in the Confucian sense, a leader is a leader, and (s)he should conduct that set of role and responsibilities of a leader, failing which (s)he is not a leader. The author has indicated that, “This may, on the surface, sound like tautology or a circular argument, but a leader should be a leader. This is basically due to the Rectification of Names”. Names, in Confucianism, signify roles and responsibilities (Sun, 2008: 13). One can also add that these lend a professional aura or touch. Besides, when given a set of role and responsibilities, the leader/manager should then be disciplined to fulfill those role(s) and responsibilities undertaken. In this regard, Low (2012a) has expressed the various self-discipline ways and pointers that bolster the various leadership qualities and character of a person, making the person a good leader.

At the higher level, with “what’s in a name”, there is indeed a total commitment to excellence, making professionalism really matters. This author would also agree with Wiersma (2011) that those who profess make an affirmation, by both word and deed, of whatever they do and how they do it. In fact, throughout world history, all of the greatest leaders are professionals in that sense, as are the most talented performers in the creative and performing arts as well as those who have had the greatest impact. They excel. And to that, one can add that they have their names and competences; and their names match their professionalism, roles and codes of conduct.

Confucians take it that social disorder results from failure to perceive, understand, and deal with reality,

which is in turn the result of failing to address matters by their proper names. If leaders commit such sins, they are lesser leaders or technically speaking, non-leaders. A person’s (leader’s) abilities and skills must thus match with the title, role and responsibilities (s)he carries. And a service leader/person, in another example, must really care and serve, having a serving heart (Low, 2002; 2000).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a series of interviews – each time approximately 35 to 45 minutes though some interviews might stretch to an hour plus – conducted with a total of thirty-four Chinese employers and employees from Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Brunei and Singapore, and the period of study was from 18 April 2011 to 16 November 2011. The researcher took advantage of his leave trips back to Singapore to access interviewees to collect data. The study relies on the qualitative research method – the interviewing method.

Referring to many business researchers, sample sizes larger than 30 and smaller than 500 are appropriate for most research. Qualitative studies typically use small sample sizes because of the intensive nature of such studies (Cavana et al., 2001: 279; Sekaran, 2000: 296 – 7 and Roscoe, 1975). The sample size of thirty-four was used because of various aspects including costs, time accessibility and limited personal resources. The critical rationale behind choosing Chinese Singaporeans and Bruneians as the key sample for this research is primarily because many studies have shown that Overseas Chinese including Chinese Singaporeans and Bruneians are motivated and influenced by Confucian values (de Bary et al, 1960; Lien Kraar, 1994: 57; Low, 2009, 2006a, 2002; Low and Ang, 2011; Ang and Low, 2012), and

Table 1: The Interviewees' Responses on "a leader/ manager should act or fulfill his or her role and responsibilities":		
Responses	Number of Interviewees (out of a total number of 34)	Percentage (%) of Interviewees
"To lead (manage) well" "Lead well by gaining trust (of the employees) and giving them direction and support". "Managers should act or fulfill their roles and responsibilities to ensure that tasks are done accordingly."	34	100
"Followers 'follow' the leader because they believe and trust in him and that is why they chose him as their leader."	34	100
"It is commonsense", "(it is a) basic requirement to keep a department running smoothly" (and) "with fewer employee grievances."	33	97.05
"If a manager does not manage, (s)he is not a manager"; "If a leader does not lead, (s)he is not a leader"	33	97.05
"All the followers/employees would look up to him or her as a leader/manager. (S)he must set examples for the people to follow"; "(s)he should be a role model".	31	91.17
"A good leader attracts; and the organization is able to attract talented and able people"	31	91.17
"To better compete in the marketplace" or "to beat the competition"	30	88.23
"When the leader (manager) is a leader (manager), it is good for the company, it can up its image"	30	88.23

hence the respondents' information and insights can be usefully harnessed, confirming and casting interesting light on leadership with rectification of names as well as good ethical practices. It is worthy to note that similar to Low's (2006) studies, being assured of confidentiality and anonymity, the interviewees expressed themselves freely.

Often, small talk or a light conversation on interviewees' personal likes and interests, detected in previous interactions or previous telephone calls, would serve as a springboard for further discussions on the interview content. The interviews were carried out in Chinese mostly in Mandarin for the Chinese educated interviewees and in English for the English educated ones. This interview method is helpful since it enables much qualitative data to be collected from the interviewees. To get more information and data from the various interviewees, open questions were deployed (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2001); they were crafted as follows:

1. What do you think of the Confucius' notion of the Rectification of Names?
2. For what reason(s) do you think a leader should act as a leader or fulfill his (her) leadership role and responsibilities.
3. For what reason(s) do you think a manager should act or fulfill his managerial role.
4. Give reason(s) why the title or appointment matters,

and the qualities (qualifications, skills, experience, etc.) of the person or jobholder must indeed match the job title/appointment, role and responsibilities (s)he holds.

5. What would you anticipate or expect to happen if the qualities (qualifications, skills, experience, etc.) of the person or jobholder do NOT match the job title/appointment, role and responsibilities (s)he holds.

FINDINGS

The remarks and statements made by each respondent were captured and recorded immediately during the interview. After each interview, the author clarified with the interviewees those statements which were not clear and needed further explanation. In this respect, there were many occasions that repetitive interviews were carried out for one interviewee at different day, time and venue (Plate, 2011; 2010). This is the way the author established the verification and the validity of the statements/remarks made by the interviewees.

The findings were categorized into two tables:

- 1) The interviewees' responses on "a leader/ manager should act or fulfill his or her role and responsibilities" (Table 1).
- 2) The interviewees' responses on their anticipations or expectations "if the qualities

Table 2: The Interviewees' Responses on their anticipations or expectations "if the qualities (qualifications, skills, experience, etc.) of the person or jobholder do <u>NOT</u> match the job title/appointment, role and responsibilities (s)he holds":		
Responses	Number of Interviewees (out of a total number of 34)	Percentage (%) of Interviewees
"Mismatch of job and person's abilities (competences) is very unproductive, the organization suffers." "The job(s) will not be done." "This is bad for the organization/company because the organization may not achieve the organizational goals and targets". "Company operations will not be effective"; "Company's productivity and profitability will be affected; and the targets will not be achieved." "Customers complaints will increase, and this may result in bad publicity and lead to a decrease in the company's reputation." "Further training costs would also be incurred to give the necessary training to employees so that they can be effective."	34	100
People "though incompetent are promoted, and they cannot do the job" "These incompetent people simply pretend to work"; "the people are promoted based on their relating well or sucking up to their bosses and so-called achievements; their achievements are no achievements – worse, they get promoted to another level, and all the more, they cannot perform."	30	88.23
"Skills, abilities and talents are not linked to performance." "It does not matter whether one performs", and "the able and the talented are not recognized".	30	88.23
"Morale (and/or motivation) of the employees suffers". "There's no job satisfaction for those who are able"	30	88.23
"The able or the talented may leave the organization". "If the job holder is overqualified for the position that she presently is in, she becomes de-motivated as she feels that the company is "suppressing" (not giving her enough opportunities) to move up the corporate ladders. This will eventually result in her resignation when she finds better job opportunities."	30	88.23
"Office politics can occur", "it can be rife"; "incompetent or conniving people (petty people; "xiao ren") can mask themselves as able people..." "(They) hide or attempt to hide (their) inabilities". "They may do all kinds of tricks or politicking" as well as "image/ impression management". "Anomalies (job mismatches) can give rise to office politicians seizing these gaps as opportunities to upstage themselves and be visible in the organization".	28	82.35
"Disunity may prevail"; "it is crucial for a manager to fulfill his or her managerial role or else there is a risk that the subordinates would not be united and doing things their own ways".	28	82.35
"Service blunders may occur and the company may lose customers"; "customers may switch to competitors, and this may further increase the overall company costs – including marketing costs – to retain or lure customers back to the company."	21	61.76

(qualifications, skills, experience, etc.) of the person or jobholder do NOT match the job title/appointment, role and responsibilities (s)he holds" (Table 2).

The number of interviewees and the percentages of the responses were recorded and tabulated accordingly as shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

A Should a Leader/ manager Act or Fulfill His or Her Role and Responsibilities?

A leader/manager should really act or fulfill his or her role and responsibilities. And be accountable. All the inter-

viewees agreed that leaders/managers should perform their role and “to lead (manage) well”. “Managers should act or fulfill their roles and responsibilities to ensure that tasks are done accordingly.” Thirty-three interviewees out of the total thirty-four interviewees interviewed maintained that “it (Rectification of Names) is commonsense”, “(it is a basic requirement to keep a department running smoothly) (and) “with fewer employee grievances.”

Basically, leaders should “lead well by gaining trust (of the employees) and giving them direction and support” (several interviewees’ input). All interviewees thus unanimously agreed that the “followers ‘follow’ the leader because they believe and trust in him and that is why they chose him as their leader.” These interviewees’ inputs coincide with (Gilley, 2006: vii) comments that: “managers are responsible for performance improvement, quality, productivity, strategy, and execution — through the people who work for and with them.” Leaders and managers “must perform”; they must act, be pro-active and “make it happen” (Brown,, 1996: 13; Low and Theyagu, 2003).

When the leader (managers) leads (manages) well, (s)he would lead the organization well, “better competing in the marketplace” as well as leading “to beat the competition” (several interviewees’ inputs).

Thirty-one interviewees or 91.17 percent of the all the interviewees voted that “all the followers/employees would look up to him or her as a leader/manager. (S)he must set examples for the people to follow”; “(s)he should be a role model”. These coincide with Confucius’ words: “If you set an example by being correct, who would dare to remain incorrect?” (*Confucius - The Analects*, XII verse 17) (Lau, 1979: 115) (Low, 2010).

There should be rectification of names (Sun, 2008). Words or titles should be set right.

One interviewee rightly pointed out that “when people look at your name card, they can immediately know at which level of the organization chart that you are in, what level or amount of responsibilities you carry. There is clarity of duties and responsibilities as well as accountabilities”. Several other interviewees also added that “the job titles and positions also signify that one has the necessary education and/or qualifications to be appointed for the position(s)”.

Rainey (2008: 46) has highlighted that attaching the wrong words or titles to positions and things is “jargon, buzzword, or bafflegab is not merely annoying. It is a lie.” He continues:

When government departments refer to me as a “client” or a “customer”, they are lying about our real relationship. I am not a client or a customer, I am a citizen. If they can convince me that the relationship is a consumer relationship, then they are simply offering a product and I can choose to buy or not. But our real relationship is that I pay taxes that support the government and I can vote to keep or get rid of that

government. That is not the same relationship I have with Wal-Mart.

Telling lies by using the wrong word allows for bigger lies. Phone a “customer support centre” and you will be told, by a recorded message, that “Your call is important to us.” That is clearly not true; if it was, they would answer the phone. Labeling people as “terrorists” who possess weapons of mass destruction leads to war and the death of tens of thousands.

B What Happens If The Title Or Appointment Does Not Match Or Fit The Qualities And Competencies (Skills) Of The Jobholder?

Interestingly, in this study, all or 100 percent of all the interviewees agreed that “mismatch of job and person’s abilities (qualifications, competencies or skills) is very unproductive, the organization suffers.” “The job(s) will not be done” “This is bad for the organization/company because the organization may not achieve the organizational goals and targets”. “Company operations will not be effective”; and “the company’s productivity and profitability will be affected” and “the targets will not be achieved” “Customers complaints will increase, and this may result in bad publicity and lead to a decrease in the company’s reputation.” “Further training costs would also be incurred to give the necessary training to employees so that they can be effective” (interviewees’ input; mentioned 52 times).

Twenty-one interviewees or 61.76 percent of the total number of interviewees also expressed that “service blunders may occur and the company may lose customers”; “customers may switch to competitors, and this may further increase the overall company costs – including marketing costs – to retain or lure customers back to the company.”

It seems axiomatic that a person’s competences must match the job title or appointment (s)he holds yet in terms of localization (such as the *Bumiputra* policy as practiced in Malaysia) and unlike the case of meritocracy, preferences may be given to the locals for whatever reasons, and such preferences can be said to or may, in fact, jeopardize the organization’s (department’s) goals and productivity if the job holder lacks the necessary competences. “Some of these people are installed or occupied such positions as figureheads as in e.g. *Ali Baba* setups”; several interviewees intimated these to this researcher.

Thirty interviewees or 88.23 percent of the total of the interviewees articulated that employees “though incompetent are promoted, and they cannot do the job”. “These incompetent people simply pretend to work” and worse, “the people are promoted based on their relating well or sucking up to their bosses and so-called achievements; their achievements are, in actuality, no

achievements – worse, they get promoted to another level, and all the more, they cannot perform.” These may in fact a way, lead to The Peter Principle (Peter and Hull, 1969) in action. Basically, this is the idea that in business, people are promoted into jobs with duties and tasks that they, sadly though, cannot fulfill. Similar observations on incompetence can be found in the Dilbert cartoon series (such as The Dilbert Principle). Here, the Dilbert Principle appears to be extending the Peter Principle. According to the Peter Principle, the subject has been competent at some job in his past. The Dilbert Principle tries to explain how a person who has never been competent at anything at any point in time can still be promoted into management. [The Dilbert Principle refers to a 1990s tongue-in-cheek observations by *Dilbert* cartoonist Scott Adams stating that companies tend to systematically promote their least-competent employees to management (generally middle management), in order to limit the amount of damage they are capable of doing (Adams, 1996)].

Interestingly, the same number and percentage of interviewees also expressed that “when there is job-person mismatch in terms of the person’s abilities, performance problems can occur.” “(When) skills, abilities and talents are not linked to performance”, “it does not matter whether one performs”, and “the able and the talented are not recognized”. These inputs match with what Mager and Pipe (1997) have highlighted, and the employees would not be performance driven since in organization, performance does not matter and/or what Fournies (1988: 32 - 37) has indicated that “there is no positive consequence to them for doing it”.

And the above also coincides with what Armstrong (2010: 119; *italics author’s words*) has indicated, that is, “it is how we manage people – it’s not a system (*or a policy*)” The so-called system or policy can in fact demotivate the employees or at least cause some dissatisfaction or unhappiness; 30 interviewees or 88.23 percent of the total of the interviewees expressed that “morale (and/or motivation) of the employees suffers”. “There’s no job satisfaction for those who are able”. “If the job holder is overqualified for the position that she presently is in, she becomes de-motivated as she feels that the company is ‘suppressing’ (not giving her enough opportunities) to move up the corporate ladders. This will eventually result in her resignation when she finds better job opportunities.”

C When There Is No Rectification Of Names, Much Incompetence Can Exist And Office Politics Can Be Rife?

“Much incompetence exists.” “(Incompetent people) hide or attempt to hide (their) inabilities”. And the worst case scenario is that each is for their own, and “the people would not be united”; “everyone would be doing their own

things, pursuing their own interests” (several interviewees’ inputs). Twenty-eight interviewees or 82.35 percent of all the interviewees highlighted that when there are mismatches of jobs and the abilities (competencies) of those recruited and promoted, “anomalies can give rise to office politicians, incapable, yet seizing these gaps as opportunities to upstage themselves and be visible in the organization”.

When preferences are given to the individuals for whatever reasons, and these reasons are not related to the jobholder’s (person’s) abilities, “office politics can occur”. “Office politics can be rife”; “incompetent or conniving people (petty people; “*xiao ren*”) can (also) masquerade themselves as able people.” “They may do all kinds of tricks or politicking” as well as “image/ impression management”. [Note what the Master once said, “The gentleman enters into associations but not cliques; the small man enters into cliques but not associations.” (*Confucius –The Analects*, II, verse 14; Lau, 1979, p. 65.)]

One interviewee revealingly pointed out that “if the person’s soft skills, that is, through forming cliques, and having political interactions, connections and know-who, are dominant, then he will be able to find ways and means to cover his tracks... weaknesses, protect his self-interests and enlist support as well as continue to get his work team’s support en masse. Shades of or the full **6Cs**: Connections, Cliques, Cronyism, Conspiracies, Collusions; Corrupt practices may, in fact, prevail”. Negative politics may then prevail, coinciding with what Holden (2003: 227 - 229) has forewarned, that is, the need to avoid the lust for power, control and authority, “never allow the politics of the situation to distract you from the importance of competence and professionalism”; and one’s “raw naked ambition”. Note that Confucius pointed out that, “The gentleman understands what is moral. The small man understands what is profitable (*self-interests*).” (*Confucius –The Analects*, IV, verse 16) (Lau, 1979: 74; *italics author’s*).

Another interviewee added that: “If a leader (manager) is not a leader (manager) but is appointed as a leader (manager), interestingly, he survives or be able to sustain himself, chiefly, by getting cronies and aligning himself with senior managers and currying favor with them; incompetence is, in most ways, camouflaged; he hides or attempts to hide his inabilities”. These interviewee’s inputs correspond with Teng’s (2010) comments, that is, some leaders/ managers “feign competence, resulting in little knowledge gained. ...people are busy covering for themselves instead of doing real work”. It is worthy to note this interviewee’s explanations, that is, “the non-leader or non-manager:

- i. would normally find somebody or others of his kind who is or are loyal and who can work for and with him.
- ii. makes time, be very close offer gifts, sucks up to the person(s) who appointed him and to obey whatever the person(s) command(s) or tell(s).

iii. has to find cliques or clans, even family members, friends and groups of people who can help him. This means he also has to hire the right people who can fulfill whatever he wants.

iv. has to make time and work to have a good relationships with his group (spending time eating together, he would in fact treat them to meals or giving them gifts) so that the group can cooperate and help him in 'attaining' the organisational goals and objectives.

v. would get rid of those who (can be able and capable yet) cannot work and/or help him.

vi. would reward those who can really support him in getting visibility and popularity".

The Confucian Rectification of Names has to be in place and with able or capable, competent people appointed and/or selected for promotion as well as integrity be emphasized. And office politics or behaviors that are associated with personal interests and gains be it power, control or credit, have to be curbed if companies wish to enjoy a more open and trusting environment, greater productivity, and better results, and more so, if they seriously do not want to lose their good or competent employees.

CONCLUSION

The Confucian Rectification of Names is necessary, and in fact, vital to be put into practice since the titles or appointments should match or fit with the qualities, skills and capabilities of the jobholders – the people holding the appointments; and organizations can benefit from this, with goals and targets are being met and leaders – disciplined – and leading well and managers managing well. The organizational world within the Company would then be in order.

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