

An Ancient Chinese Model of Change for The Modern World

Nancy Post, MAC, PhD

Thirty two years ago, while reading a classical Chinese medical text, I found more practical wisdom about leadership than I have since found in a lifetime of teaching and advising leaders.

During these three decades, management gurus have come and gone, each espousing his own compelling vision of leadership. Like reproducing fish, each idea spawned lucrative management seminars, lectures, books, tapes, CDs, downloadable speeches and instruments to test your leadership and devices to remind you what the aforementioned learning tools may have already told you, but which you have since forgotten because you are too busy to remember.

Yes, my friends, in 21st century America leadership is an industry. In classical China, it was an art.

An art informed by the formidable skill of a doctor named *Chi Po*.

We find the good doctor's words throughout the *Yellow Emperors Classic of Internal Medicine*, the "Neijing" which is actually two books, the *Suwen* and *Lingshu*. Scholars agree that this monumental classic is undoubtedly the most important work representing the crowning achievement of the Chinese, prior to the first unification of the country by Emperor *Qin Shi* in 221 BCE. It's authorship is attributed to *Huang Di*, the Yellow Emperor, who reigned during the third millennium BCE. The Chinese refer to themselves as descendents of *Huang Di*, who is a symbol of the vital spirit of Chinese civilization.*

(Think about it. A 2,000-year-old icon representing leadership is still a potent symbol. And credit is given to his wise advisor, who kept him whole. I can only think of one such enduring symbol in western civilization, but he refused to start or run an organization, and his advisors betrayed him.)

Back to the book, which is actually a series of conversations between the Emperor and his physician.

Page after page shows the wise and seasoned doctor answering questions of health, cosmology and energy posed by the leader of the kingdom. The Emperor is yellow - probably jaundiced, likely to be suffering from over-indulgences common among leaders of all ages and cultures. He is captive in his palace nursing what was probably a faulty liver. Counseled to eat well, exercise appropriately according to the season, maintain emotional equinity and not work too hard, the emperor, while healing, seeks advice to apply to himself and the court. One could say that the Emperor's obsession with this own health led to his desire to understand how energy motivates (or detracts from) the performance of people in his court. Thus, he is compelled to learn how energy works in order to be an effective leader.

Many of the questions apply to this day and age. What energy helps important people do their best work? What conditions bring out their best, or, if not their best, at least their healthiest? Obsessed with longevity, emperors were long-term thinkers. After all, a court needed healthy leaders over

the long haul to keep the country intact.

Contrast this perspective to current leadership fads, which suggest that following their advice will rapidly increase gains, even though they may burn out their people.

History emphasizes sustainability. It's refreshing.

When asked about sustaining life, *Chi Po* teaches about energy, the precious resource that fuels people. What types of energy are used when people are well? When people are ill? When they are under strain? What types need replenishment? Which environmental conditions create strain? Which environmental conditions create harmony? The doctor answers these questions, showing the leader what to do to improve his energy in all different types of circumstances.

The Emperor listens carefully, asks probing questions, and then applies his knowledge to himself and his ministers.

Can you imagine modern leaders following such an example? They would ask: How do I build energy in myself and my team? How will the process make us healthier? How do I maintain equanimity in the face of pressure?

I'd bet, if they were American, they might also ask, "will this approach decrease healthcare costs in my organization? Will healthier employees show greater employee satisfaction results on our organization wide surveys? Will our business perform better financially if people have better energy?"

Think, too, about the role of the advisor to the leader. Can you imagine what might be different if management consultants were paid to improve the health of leaders and ministers of court? Would President Obama still be a smoker? Would America's top negotiator in the Middle East have died of a sudden coronary? Or, on a more mundane level, would so much vacation time be occupied with colds, flu and immune problems that plague leaders when they finally do let down? How many would continue to suffer from sleep deprivation if their performance were measured by the health of their subordinates? Would they set such aggressive targets? Encourage 24/7 availability?

If health in organizations were a true goal, I wonder if prevention would be taken seriously? Much of *Chi Po's* counsel is about how to handle changes - of season, mood, workload, pressure. Might change management consultants think (and be hired) on a more cyclic basis - less reactive to sudden shifts and more to maintain predictable changes in the organizational lifecycle? Might we be given health targets?

Wisdom is wisdom. It often defies cultural definition. Though I'd never dress like a classical Chinese doctor, *Chi Po* makes sense to me today. We work with a similar set of beliefs - that work uses energy, and that energy must be built to sustain work. Thus, healthy workplaces replenish and well as use human capital. If energy is not sustained, there is deficit, then decline, then scarcity. With scarcity comes panic and decisions are short-term and neither for the long-term good, nor for the many. You look out for yourself when you are tired. It's natural.

I have only met a few leaders who get enough rest, or even think rest is important for themselves and others. I have only met a few who think about their organization's capacity before initiating changes. I have only known an even scarcer few who think to build up energy on a regular basis. American leaders are known for their drive, not their equanimity.

The gurus of energy in the workplace, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, wrote one of those business best-sellers I wrote about: "*The Power of Full Engagement*." In it, they liken leaders to professional

athletes who spend scores of hours training for each hour they spend in the competitive arena. The authors argue that peak performance requires a lot of capacity building and encourage their clients to create "positive energy rituals" – highly specific routines for managing energy – in order to have sustained high performance.

When I help leaders understand their energy, I sometimes start by asking them to color code their calendar – red means "drain=stop," green means "generative = sustainable." Then we look at a sample week and notice the proportion of green to red on the calendar. It's a graphic depiction of net gain or loss of energy in any given week.

Here is what I often hear from them:

"Oh goodness, there are entire days each week without any green! No wonder I'm wired and tired."

"I work most nights and get the most done when noone is around. Should I be ashamed that the green is when I am alone? Or that I'm working nights instead of being with my family?"

"I always feel energized at work, I just crash on weekends!"

"I am honestly not sure what energizes and what depletes me. I just WORK!"

The subtlety of Dr. *Chi Po* might be lost on these leaders, who are just learning to observe how energy effects them. I find that many leaders have so much to do that they spend hour after hour constantly engaged in activity, mentally moving from topic to topic, nimbly adjusting themselves to deal with strategy, tactics, policy, and people all day long (and often during evenings, too). They rarely schedule down time or reflective hours and many are even double or triple booked.

Believing it's the right thing to do, they ignore themselves in order to perform. They often expect this from their subordinates. It's well intentioned behavior, but not at all sustainable, and it's culturally correct corporate behavior. The Yellow Emperor would be appalled.

Interestingly, Comcare, the Australian equivalent of OSHA, has clearly defined standards for psychological and physical well being in the workplace as well as conventional management practices that assume health as an organizational goal. They identify the top two variables that create ill health in the workplace to be "heavy workload and fast working pace." They also list — "conflicting or uncertain work expectations, too much responsibility without adequate training or support, or too many 'hats to wear'," as a variable that leads to damage. Do you know anyone who doesn't experience this?

Our culture is a baby at learning lessons of sustainability. But Americans are as superb at innovation as we are infantile at sustainability.

Might we create a cocktail made of classical Chinese wisdom, Australian workplace savvy and American innovation to lead the way to building an international model of organizational sustainability? Let us know if you want to take up this challenge.

References

1. Ni, Maoshing. *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1995. Print.
2. Australia. Comcare. *Preventing and Managing Psychological Injuries in the Workplace: Agency Heads and Senior Managers' Guide*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2006.

