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SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE AND LEADERSHIP IN THE CHINA LABORATORY

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Abstract: Research on highly effective expatriate and Chinese leaders in China suggests that the two groups use Spiritual Intelligence to attain extraordinary results at work. Spiritual Intelligence requires the creativity of the values and the inner core of the person. We show that there are culturally specific techniques for reaching that inner core. Western leaders develop Spiritual Intelligence through reflection and use counterintuitive ways to create mindfulness. Chinese leaders identify with group values and draw on images of nature and traditional philosophy to enhance Spiritual Intelligence. This paper gives examples and quotes from interviews with Western and Chinese corporate leaders, and draws initial conclusions on their views of the Common Good while pointing to new developments emerging as executives enhance the spirit through action.

Keywords: spiritual; intelligence, corporate leadership

INTRODUCTION

A spiritually intelligent leader in the China laboratory is usually not spiritual in the traditional sense of the word. Carl Crow was no angel, he certainly exercised a well-developed capitalist instinct, and yet he was also known as a person with strong values and integrity. Likewise, some of the best and most honest executive's we have worked with in our long professional careers in China are not typically spiritual. In fact they cover the range of personalities, from outgoing, even wild types to quiet introverts. What makes them all spiritually intelligent is that they use the same five practices:

- They are hardworking.
- They love what they do and they gain energy from that passion.
- They know and use their values.
- They have a keen awareness of and respect for their cultural roots.
- They do good.

The first two practices create an active and demanding life. The next two help to convert their energy into positive outcomes. The last one ensures that the progress they make cascades out to a larger audience. Our research shows that highly effective executives express Spiritual Intelligence through feeling part of something larger, a feeling that engenders the need to give back to the community (Lynton & Thøgersen, 2006). In this paper we define Spiritual Intelligence most broadly as "the intelligence with which we

access our deepest meanings, values, purposes, and highest motivations” (Zohar & Marshall, 2004, p. 3). This emphasizes a deep connection to a larger whole; and connection is crucial in the development of specific attributes such as humility. The individual seeks to be in alignment with the whole, but that first means living in congruence with ones’ own values and purposes – the definition of integrity. So Spiritual Intelligence also has to do with becoming a whole person – with one set of values that guide our behavior in public and private roles.

The research for this paper is based on interviews with 40 Chinese and Western senior executives, a survey and interviews with 49 Chinese and Western Generation Ys, plus the authors’ more than 35 years of combined coaching and consulting practice working with Chinese and Western executives and managers.

The role of individual leaders in aligned organizations is crucial, as role models, guides, and guardians of cultural and corporate values. Recent scandals such as the financial crisis caused in part by greed and skirting legality by bankers in New York and London, or the addition of melamine to milk powder in China, illustrate what can happen when leaders foster a culture enabling people to feel above the rules. Many researchers concerned with linking corporate social responsibility to better results build on the link between clear principles for action, alignment and positive organizational outcomes sometimes also called “Moral Intelligence” or “Spiritual Capital” (e.g. Bennis, Goleman, O’Toole, 2008; Bouchikhi & Kimberley, 2008; Conger, 1994).

Leaders in both Western and Eastern contexts would do well to heed Confucian philosophy, which states that 'moral example' is central to civilization. A morally educated father will develop an evolved family. A morally upright leader will build an evolved state. And, Wharton research would add, a CEO with integrity will lead a successful organization (Kiel & Lennick, 2004).

This paper examines the role of Spiritual Intelligence in leadership and compares the way Western and Chinese leaders build and use their Spiritual Intelligence to maintain their integrity and guide their organizations.

Purpose is Realized Through Dynamic Action

Spirituality is usually defined as relating to our interior or subjective life, as distinct from our external, material lives. In many traditions, spirituality is seen as something cultivated by men and women who pull back from normal activities and isolate themselves to contemplate life. This division of spiritual and material labor was encouraged by many cultures and ages that have considered thinking more exclusive than action. Now this is changing, with the socially marginal being idle and the privileged working 24 hours a day.

We see a significant new pattern arising as executives generate Spiritual Intelligence through action grounded in their respective culture and history. These changes demand that we find a new understanding of how spirituality is generated. Of course it comes from the inside, but today it emerges equally through action. Or rather, the executives with whom we work seem to develop Spiritual Intelligence through balancing internal and external, contemplation and action. Spirituality as a consequence of action is part of what is now transcending the East-West split.

The Get-Ahead Instinct Rides us Hard

The drive to get ahead is what pushes most business leaders; executives, just exhibit it to a higher degree. In their book *Mean Genes*, Harvard and UCLA professors Burnham & Phelan write: “Lurking inside our

hopes are genes that want us to work hard all the time. They prosper most when we run full tilt. Once we approach the point of promised bliss, the emotional football is moved again. In this manner we are motivated to do our best at every minute” (2001, p. 115). They go on to say that our instincts have short-term goals and do not mind running us into burnout; they ride us like tough jockeys.

This explains why executives without inner balance become slaves to instinct. Many suffer from the low level depression accompanying adrenalin poisoning, and can and do turn into workaholics, alcoholics, or abuse other substances and activities. In order to gather the energy required for all the external action of leadership, the executive should pay attention to building inner strength, to balancing the “doing” with reflection and listening within. This is why the will to build Spiritual Intelligence is essential for responsible leadership.

WESTERN APPROACHES

Work is Good, Passion is Quicker

Many executives have the best of motivations for working so hard – for their families, to build a good future, to develop the company. They see themselves as serving others, and they do. But the executive life is tremendously difficult and many (especially men) throw themselves into work compulsively. Often this becomes too one-sided and leads to broken families and professional burnout.

The pace and complexity of global business makes passion a necessary leadership discipline today. The sociologist G. H. Mead talked about passion as accessing the core energy of the “I”, the place where “change arises and ... our deepest values are located” (1934, p. 204). While core energy in itself is undirected, with passion it becomes strongly focused. Being able to administrate passion is therefore crucial to business success. This view is reflected in the title of a recent edition of the cutting edge German economic journal, 'Brand Eins': “Business needs Passion” (2008). In a state of passion at work, the effective global executive goes beyond action plans and enters into a condition of flow.

Passion is the missing link in understanding what makes up the unusual effectiveness of successful global executives, and it is the main ingredient in the psychological mechanism behind the ability to stay hyper- focused on high priority tasks. “When the feeling is there, you know what you do and you reach your goals sort of painless and elegantly,” said Peter Feldinger, ex-President of Novo China and currently head of Novozymes Korea. Effective executives set strong priorities and stick to them. In passion they forget about themselves, and the focus point rises in their mind to a “higher purpose”. Thus, through passion the priority focus is enhanced into having extraordinary meaning and importance, while other problems become strangely minimized.

Effective leaders are also aware of the ups and downs in energy. One said: “If you are on a high for some days, you will be on a low soon after.” Describing a rewarding situation, Clinton Dines, head of BHP Billiton China said: There is high efficiency; people respond well, and they bring things that sound good. This is a serious psychic reward.... It is a little delicate because if I hit an obstacle I can lose it like air out of a balloon.” Here we feel the energy of the passion, but the wise executive plans for losing it too.

Reflection Gets You Further

Spiritually Intelligent executives learn to plan and administrate passion through disciplined reflection, using practices that help them become aware of themselves in a larger context. They use rituals that

encourage attention to detail and time for reflecting on what is going on around them, how they are impacting their environment, and to think about how they think. "I take time every day," they all say. "To be in contact with your values you have to designate time to think. Sometimes quick judgment is needed, and you must be in close touch with this personal sense of direction that you can only sustain by daily reflection," states Tom Behrens-Sorensen, Executive Vice Chairman & Chief Executive at Maersk China Limited. Even President Obama said: "... actually the most important thing you need to do is to have big chunks of time during the day when all you're doing is thinking. "And if you get too busy and don't think, you start making mistakes, or you lose the big picture" (ABC News, July 26, 2008).

In disciplined reflection executives observe and modify their own thinking and behavior. The process includes self-examination, feeling and defining the gaps between their values and their actions, and deciding on steps to change less-desirable behavior. Executives each have a different strategy for keeping to their daily reflection, but none goes without if they want to keep their edge. Building Spiritual Intelligence demands that you work on it every day. It is like physical exercise or learning a language, as soon as you stop for a week you have lost the "muscle". It is continuous discipline that builds integrity.

CHINESE APPROACHES

Spirituality and Work are Social

Lao Tzu said that those who speak do not know while those who know do not speak. This indicates that spirituality can only be thought about as something you cannot talk about. It is not accessible within the limits of language. In China, spirituality is not a common word. Business is hard and competitive and the Chinese are mostly secular people who do not usually discuss personal matters. On the other hand, they have particular practices that are in essence spiritual, although they are mostly not labeled as such.

The Chinese are fundamentally social beings. They feel themselves and their inner values through such close social interrelationships that they can only define themselves as appreciated by "the other", a technique that every practicing psychologist would not hesitate to call an "ideal" human identification. When this happens in the West we call it love or devotion. Pragmatism is another spiritual strength of the Chinese that is not so easily recognized. Chinese rarely speak in the abstract, and while this causes its own misunderstandings in East-West relationships, in China it is often an advantage when it comes to changing things here and now. The Chinese are constantly building a better society exactly because they accept systems such as capitalism so easily and work with the usable pieces. They do not talk much about an idealistic society; they just want to make progress, one step at a time. In the Chinese holistic mind everything is connected to everything else in such intricate ways that it does not really matter where you start, because good and progress will spill over to what follows, and will grow depending on nature and destiny, the way waters flow and the winds blow.

Culture is the pair of glasses through which we view the world, the system of meaning within which we act and interpret life. In recent years, neurological research has shown that the very paths of our brains are culturally determined, giving a tangible basis for cultural differences (e.g. Hedden, 2008; House et al, 2004; Zhou et al, 2008). The primary vigor of Western business leaders appears to lay in cultivating self-awareness and developing integrity. They emphasize the individual, his feelings, his reflection, and his rights.

Chinese strength, on the other hand, comes primarily from immersing the self in the collective and

using the energy of the group. Chinese begin with a view of life, work and community that is far more integrated than that of Westerners. Their Spiritual Intelligence comes from persevering through hardship, sacrificing for the group, and setting the frame. They develop a heightened ability to intuitively feel the larger situation. The collective culture provides a strong structure within which individual Chinese can be creative leaders feeling and using the existing directional flow. Chinese Spiritual Intelligence therefore seems to be located within the frames of destiny and energy flows, and be expressed through hard work and endurance.

Chinese leaders we have interviewed and worked with talk openly about using their energies. No less committed to long hours than Westerners, many also work all the time. Asked when he turns off from work, Jiang Wei Ming, President of DSM China, laughed and said: “Never, I work 24 hours a day, work all the time.” Many Chinese CEOs work endlessly because they carry the responsibility for decisions that get pushed up the hierarchy, and/or they are entrepreneurs guiding their businesses carefully, making all the decisions.

Asked in seminars to choose adjectives that describe themselves, more than 800 Chinese participants over the last 10 years have virtually always included “endurance” in their descriptions of themselves. No Western participant has chosen that word in the same timeframe. One Chinese observed: “Westerners do not understand about devotion and sacrifice. For them it is all about results and feelings and themselves.” Dr. Lu Jianhong agreed: “The Chinese have a great attitude towards hardship. I can feel that in my Chinese friends as opposed to my Western friends.”

Setting the Frame Gets Results

Chinese leaders also use passion but for them it is less an individual activity, instead it includes the group with whom they work and their relationship networks. The leaders and entrepreneurs interviewed focus on team-building – and even family spirit in their enterprise, and downplay reflection. They emphasize the ongoing joint struggle for success, the need for endurance and mutual support. Among Chinese leaders, the most frequent words used to describe leadership attributes are: the ability to create cohesion, generosity, and the skill to set the right direction. In other words, for them the overarching task is setting the right frame of reference for their followers, to establish norms of behavior and performance that will inspire the group around them to act in concert. They ensure the environment feels right for things to go ahead and happen. Reflection is less necessary in the Chinese context, where the frame drives individual behavior.

Chinese leaders often express their Spiritual Intelligence using images of nature or simple truths. Many report searching both Western literature and Chinese philosophical classics including poetry for ways of organizing their thoughts and emotions.

Our research shows that both Chinese leaders and young Chinese share a deep belief in the power of destiny. This does not mean that they are passive fatalists, but it allows for trying things without feeling personal responsibility for possible failure. “I have no religion but I strongly believe in destiny,” said Henry Zhang, marketing manager. “I do not create my own path; I just follow what is there already.” “Why do these things happen? Feels like – something like fate,” says a Chinese journalist. Belief in destiny, fate, or yuan fen is widespread across generations in China and provides a strong framework for action.

Many of the young leaders we have interviewed seek to anchor their beliefs in Chinese traditional philosophy as well. David Hu, a businessman in Shanghai, explained: “I am a Taoist. I like Lao Tzu; he

was very wise. I like to keep a low profile. Doing nothing is like doing everything.” This is the Taoist concept of wuwei. “It is like in nature. Things work out best on their own energy. When good things happen, don’t disrupt the energy. Like in an organization, if you can create liveliness and spark, new ideas will come. People will know what to do if they have the human quality, like my staff. The traditional Chinese values are mine. Go the middle way, go the natural way.” Many Chinese business leaders set up situations in which they and their staff are motivated to sacrifice themselves for the common goal. This is a Chinese strength and the leaders know how to harness it.

The magnetic pull of Chinese collective culture can both lure and alienate Westerners; from the Chinese perspective, however, it provides a firm context. “I want to lose the ego (Chinese say 'wang qing', literally to 'forget self'). When I lose the ego I feel the flow – I seek that,” said a Chinese editor who has spent two years in Europe. Chinese Spiritual Intelligence is based on shared beliefs and values – in destiny, in natural energy flows, in family and in self-sacrifice. This gives the individual Chinese a frankly superhuman strength – because that strength comes from the group.

OUTLOOK

Our research has shown that successful Chinese and Western executives can and do develop Spiritual Intelligence but in different ways. Leaders from both cultures seek to serve. Western leaders want to give back to the community; at work they use passion and so harness the core energy of their individual “I”. To control it they use reflection. Chinese leaders also give back, “we like to serve, we always think of family,” they say. They discipline themselves through hard work and self-sacrifice, developing their identity as part of the group.

In their daily encounters, we see Chinese and Western leaders seeking to expand their own understanding. The Westerners by intuiting their way into holistic thinking and feeling the group, the Chinese by thinking as individuals in practical matters and experimenting with the emotional ranges they see Westerners experience. “I was so impressed by the Western rituals, upholding their culture through unbroken traditions,” said Dr. Lu. Each side feels the other has something – something they would like to try too, but is uncertain about how.

Somewhere in the overlap of Western and Chinese, of group and individual, on the creative messy borders we see a synergy in emergence, in which leaders are feeling their way towards a Spiritual Intelligence that is based neither on universal principles nor seen as purely relative to the situation. Its universality is a new social universality. Western executives are strongly attracted to Chinese holistic perspectives, and Chinese leaders are looking into the ways Westerners protect their individuality, their tradition and culture, and the values therein. The act of Spiritual Intelligence in the China laboratory seems to be relative to the situation, but is nevertheless objective in that it demands social-rational agreement. We believe this is a developing Pragmatic Ethic and we continue to watch its emergence.

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