

On Zeng Shiqiang's Viewpoints of the Chinese-Style Management from the Perspective of the Interpersonal Relationship

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Abstract:

This paper discusses and analyzes Professor Zeng Shiqiang's viewpoints on the importance of the interpersonal relationship in Chinese management, its characteristics, and how to build up a harmonious interpersonal relationship in order to be successful for the company in fierce competition. The purpose of the paper is to present some philosophical thoughts and viewpoints on the importance and ethical interpersonal relationship in the Chinese style management to the world in order to let the world know China better. The discussion is carried out from the following three aspects: the importance of flexible interpersonal relationship in the Chinese management, how to achieve mutualism ethic relationship in a manner of individuality in collectivity, and the principle of finding the reasonable "middle course" to have the interpersonal harmony achieved.

Keywords:

Zeng Shiqiang, Chinese-Style Management, Flexible and Harmonious Interpersonal Relationship

1. Introduction

The mainstream value of the 21st century should rely on the development of science and technology by taking economic development and culture as the core, integrating global and local cultures, and striking a balance between them. One of the excellent examples is the "One Belt, One Road". The success of the Chinese management possesses its particular feature. Professor Zeng Shiqiang (Prof. Zeng for short) has been the best-known and the most admired expert in management studies in China and has been recognized as the father of Chinese management. In his works, Prof. Zeng carries out a detailed and thorough study and illustration of the Chinese management principles with the help of the corresponding Chinese classical philosophies. Chinese management looks upon the people-oriented concept as its

fundamental principle by putting the interpersonal relationship between the leader and the subordinate, and among employees at the most important position, for only by creating peace and great harmony for others and themselves, can the goal of the company be achieved. This paper is to make a detailed discussion and analysis of Prof. Zeng's viewpoints on Chinese-style Management from the perspective of the interpersonal relationship in Chinese management. The discussion is carried out from the following three aspects: the importance of flexible interpersonal relationship in the Chinese management, how to achieve mutualism ethic relationship in a manner of individuality in collectivity, and the principle of finding the reasonable "middle course" to have the interpersonal harmony achieved.

2. A Discussion of the Importance of Flexible Interpersonal Relationship in the Chinese Management

Prof. Zeng believes that management is nothing but a self-disciplined journey, and it also can create peace and harmony for others. [1] That is why Chinese management looks upon the people-oriented concept as its fundamental principle by putting the relationship among people in the most important position.

Prof. Zeng believes that although the law is lifeless while man is a rational being. So people mustn't stiffly defend the law and its corresponding principles, instead, they should move their minds to look for ideas about how to make use of the lifeless laws for the benefit of the company. Being flexible is one of the Chinese people's characteristics, which is also reflected in the Chinese language and Chinese characters. It is known that in Chinese calligraphy, Chinese characters have five major styles. A Chinese character can be written in five different forms, which reflects the flexibility of Chinese people, constant changes can bring about survival. In other words, the law made by the people, more often than not, can be explained in different ways by different people. However, the last say is always for those who possess a high social status and influential power. That indicates that the law in China is dependent on human interference and decided by people rather than coming into effect of its own accord.

Prof. Zeng claims that there seems to be nothing in the world that cannot show pliability and cannot be dealt with in a flexible way. The problem is people have to find the right person to be responsible for the problem that needs to be dealt with. Under some Chinese circumstances, even the impossible would become possible if the right person is chosen to tackle it, thus people begin to doubt the credibility of the Chinese law. If the impossible would become possible, then what is impossible? Anything can be dealt with flexibly according to circumstances rather than by law.

It is known that the law is made by a small number of persons and amended by the most powerful and influential ones. This phenomenon has existed in Chinese society since ancient times. In ancient China, those lawmakers, though small in number, were very powerful. They often threatened or punished those who were not satisfied with the law, or even killed them in order to warn others. In spite of the public's dissatisfaction, the lawmaker still declared that the law made by them was reasonable and feasible. To prove it, they could even take the idea raised in I Ching as a pretext, that "opinions of a few wise men exceed millions of ignorant thoughts." [2] In fact, the majority of people had no power to make or execute the law, or even their opinions were ignored. This phenomenon can still be seen on some occasions today. In today's management, for instance, in face of emergencies or practical needs, the

leader has the right to revise the provisions of law. He can suspend the implementation of the original schedule through an oral commitment like “With my promise, all of you can rest your hearts.”

All of the things discussed above show the importance of the role people play in business management and also highlight the importance of flexible interpersonal relationships. In Chinese society, there are people, there are factions or cliques, which sometimes make some Chinese people develop the habit of trying to establish small groups or factions. For Prof. Zeng, the complex appellations among Chinese people fully demonstrate the intricacy of interpersonal relationships in Chinese society, which has no equal in the world. [3] Therefore, having a good understanding and implementation of the flexible interpersonal relationship in Chinese management is very important for the survival and success of a business.

3. A Discussion of Achieving Mutualism Ethic Relationship in a Manner of Individuality in Collectivity

Prof. Zeng believes that the success of the Chinese management lies in setting up an ethical relationship, which refers to the interpersonal relationship principled or directed by Chinese ethics, only unique to the Chinese. [4] Different from the interpersonal relationship in western countries which advocates that people are however equal, the Chinese ethic relationship advocates seniority rules which implies the fact that people are social beings and have different social roles.

For the Chinese culture, Chinese ethics advocates that fathers and sons should play different roles and shoulder different duties at different times in a family, and it also requires respect for the seniority. [5] This saying is from “the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues” as specified in the feudal ethical code. It displays the ethical relationship between father and son, ruler and officials, husband and wife, and illustrates that all of them should have their own obligations.

The same goes for the relations between monarchs and ministers, or in modern society, the relations between the leaders and subordinates, or in Chinese modern business, the boss and subordinates, all of whom have their own different positions and assume different responsibilities. So, it is impossible for them to be in an equal position in many aspects, which appears inequitable in some people’s eyes. However, this kind of seemingly inequality is based upon “rational injustice” instead of “irrational justice”, just like in a Chinese family children are required to respect their elders, subordinates are obliged to obey their superiors. A good administrator has to be cautious in weighing it carefully to avoid making mistakes.

For Prof. Zeng, Ethics advocated by westerners is either oriented toward individualism or towards universality, the former developing into individualism, while the latter collectivism. However, for the Chinese, both of them are biased to some degree. Different from westerners, Chinese people are preferring to combine the two extreme thoughts as one and developed a kind of mutualism that emphasizes neither individuality nor collectivity but aims at “achieving individuality in collectivity.” It is a kind of neutralism, similar to the Doctrine of the Mean, pursuing no extremes but the felicitous middle or neutral state. Different from the western world where the democratic concept in Christianity has a great influence on the management, Chinese worship Heaven, and in their mind, Heaven is nature and the universe. Heaven controls universal development. One of the main ethics in the Chinese culture is that “What the Heaven sees and hears is from the common people.” recorded in the

Chinese classic *The Book of History*. In ancient China, the monarch is the representative of Heaven to rule the people. In management, Prof. Zeng compares Heaven to leaders of management work. Prof. Zeng proposes that those engaged in management activities should treat this difference with caution. It is known that Chinese ethics possesses a long history and a much more sophisticated system than that in other countries. Therefore, Chinese people should make their minds integrate their ethics with the well-developed management expertise of the west, establish their own rational and feasible modern Chinese management and then carry it forward. In a word, Chinese human relations are to establish reasonable interpersonal relations from the perspective of ethics. Only in this way can the 21st century differ from the 20th century by taking on a brand-new appearance, and only in this way can people lead a happy and harmonious life.

4. A Discussion of the Importance to Achieve Great Harmony Harmonious Condition and Consensus in Changing and Diversified Management Environment

It is acknowledged that the formation of the global village is surely the only way for human beings to seek their own happiness. Therefore, people must go to great lengths to create Great Harmony, which refers to an ideal or perfect world depicted in the Confucian classic, the *Book of Rites*. [6] It was originally described as follows: when Great Harmony is realized, the world is shared by all people, the wise and talented are valued, honesty and harmony are observed, people take care of each other without any estrangement, and men and women perform their own functions, and no property is secretly concealed, and no self-interests are pursued, and no robbery or pilferage is to occur. However, Great Harmony does not mean that every country has to be totally the same. Nor does Great Harmony require each nation to accept one culture unanimously and all human beings live in the same manner. On the contrary, Great Harmony must contain and tolerate minor and specific differences, and different cultures should be given their proper respect: uniformity incorporates diversity and diversity integrates uniformity.

In the past, it is known that both traffic and information technologies were backward and inconvenient. In order to preserve their own cultures and avoid being influenced by others, most countries had to adopt a close door strategy. They denounced those differences from their own culture as heresy and tried to have them excluded to ensure their own culture's purity and consistency. Nevertheless, the world is composed of different nations, and possesses different cultures. Even for the same nation, the same language, blood lineage, the same lifestyle, custom and ideology help build up the same culture, people have to take a compromising attitude to seek mutual tolerance and understanding.

With more and more convenient transportation and advanced information technology, opportunities for different cultures to contact and crash with each other have been provided, so that a diversified society has come into being. It is a common condition for a great many different patterns and styles to be seen existing in the same region. Those blood lineage, language, character, lifestyle, custom and even ideology which used to possess the cohesion of the local community, suddenly lose their regional glamour, and cannot completely restrain local people's behaviors anymore, not to mention regulating local people's thinking.

During the close-door era, it was unnecessary to emphasize individual corporation culture, since every employee's idea possessed great degree of similarity, regardless of which company he belongs to. A company had to conduct its operations and management in complete accordance with the traditional social ideology. If somebody had any strange words or ridiculous deeds that do not agree with the ideology or tradition of the time, the other employees would stop them as soon as they found it.

Different from the past, now Chinese people are living in a free, open and pluralistic society, which allows its members to express their ideas freely, so people holding different ideas can argue and debate with each other. The same goes for the enterprises where employees like to present facts or reasoning things out in order to convince others to believe they are right. However, since each person has his own opinion, many people would tend to have many different opinions, very hard to agree on the same opinion. To avoid the chaos state caused by it and implement the democratic management without having the Chinese argue ceaselessly, Prof. Zeng argues that the Chinese management should have "democracy" and so-called "undemocracy" combined together to smoothly build up a more rational enterprise culture and get rid of the so-called messy democracy. [7]

In general, to Prof. Zeng, the company with an average life expectancy of seven-year history has the qualification to boast of its corporation culture, those which have survived more than seven years need to carefully construct their own unique corporation culture in order to establish everlasting thriving and sustainable business. Prof. Zeng believes that in the pluralistic cultures of the company, if the company wants to survive, the most important thing is to establish consensus among the employees. In other words, the leaders and the staff have to be of one mind to inspire the employees to make concerted efforts. Prof. Zeng explains that one of the characteristics of people-oriented Chinese management is that like-minded people gather together and become colleagues in an organization. [8] In this modern pluralistic society, the small number of like-minded people who have decided to stay in the company and work together must build consensus to strive hard for one common objective to achieve.

When the society is in an economic monoculture, even though the enterprise styles are slightly different from each other, they wouldn't be so far away. Now with the society getting more and more diversified, the difference of enterprise cultures is becoming more and more obvious. As the manager, what is important to him is to take the responsibility of making decisions. If there is no one in an organization who can do it, everything has to go under public hearings and notarizations, then different people hold different opinions, how can the effective management come into being?

Prof. Zeng explains that no one is in favor of dictatorship because no matter how smart and able the dictators are, they are human and can make mistakes. A slight error or flaw in the plan would lead to terrible consequences. In order to dodge the situation that economic development lags behind, Chinese people are more and more realizing that the ideal state is a kind of autocracy, in which people can voice their personal opinions freely before the final decisions are agreed upon by the top leader. But once the decisions are agreed upon, they must be implemented resolutely and firmly. Anyone who dares to challenge them would be punished. So, the Chinese style democracy is actually a kind of democracy or enlightened despotism. Our corporate culture constructed in this manner is more in line with the actual needs, more conducive to realizing harmonious cohesion, and more likely to generate the

collaboration power, namely, to achieve harmonious conditions and consensus in diversified individuality.

5. A Discussion of the Principle to Resort to the Reasonable “Middle Course” to Have the Interpersonal Harmony Achieved

The Chinese ethics gives attention to five cardinal relationships: ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, brothers and friends, of which the relationship between husband and wife is considered to be the most important. The Family Divination (in I Ching, telling people about family management) clearly explains that “All great truth starts from the relationship between husband and wife”. When used in management, Prof. Zeng thinks that it implies if a husband cannot live together harmoniously with his wife, how can he get along well with his colleagues, and how can he do a good management job.

Prof. Zeng argues that a person's character can be estimated from his morality tested from the perspective of interpersonal relationship with other people, especially from the relationship between husband and wife, which makes the greatest contribution to building up a harmonious family. This principle of keeping a harmonious family from self-cultivation can also extend as far as to the organization management. The profoundly hidden logical relationship between them is illustrated in the following way by Prof. Zeng: the organization is composed of the individual families, then if the couple gets along well, the experience obtained from building up and maintaining the family harmony can in turn be used in the organizational culture, then the organization can thrive, since the organization possesses great similarity with the family in many aspects and levels. Prof. Zeng believes that there will be unexpected benefits in building up a thriving company if the manager pays great attention to the important role of the harmonious families of his colleagues. In short, harmonious families make the greatest contributions for employees to work happily, thus a must for building up the success of the business.

How to apply the Chinese ethic in management? The answer is that in a company, the Boss is just like the parents in a family, and always the person to whom average employees must show their respect and always hold a modest attitude. However, that does not mean that subordinates and staff should make up for the boss. On the contrary, as a successful leader, he cannot be too strict with his subordinates, nor too lenient and tolerant either. Then how to become a good leader? Prof. Zeng thinks that a leader should avoid keeping the subordinates at arm's length or being too casual owing to familiarity. It's best to find a balanced point by reaching a kind of appropriate moderation between them based upon specific conditions, specific occasions, specific affairs and specific people, which can be understood as justice even if without equality. For Prof. Zeng, the key point of human relations is around the principle of “justice but inequality”. The ancient Greeks advocated that “Justice is the summary of all virtues.” Aristotle believes that justice must be legitimate and fair, while the Chinese think that there exists a distinctive difference in the explanation of connotations of “Justice”. Justice has to be first of all reasonable (reasoning is above the law), and sometimes it is extremely difficult or even impossible to be both just and completely impartial in a company management, for it is not an easy job to do be both just and impartial because of too many flexible factors to be taken into account. Therefore, the manager or the superiors have to carefully deal with the interpersonal relationship, make continuous improvements in order to have a good human relation set up.

One of the characteristics of Chinese management is people oriented. Therefore, the relationship between the superior and subordinate appears particularly important. If a subordinate failed to get along well with his superior, it would be completely impossible for him to put his ability into full use, even if he is very capable. For the superior may employ “the frozen strategy”, which means that the superior would deprive his subordinate of every chance to do whatever he should and is able to do, thus making him become a “frozen man” and impossible to bring talents into play. Or the subordinates may be assigned to do the job beyond their scope according to the last item “else or others” of the job specification. Under such circumstances, if not resigning, the subordinates will have to endure a great deal of suffering. This trick can easily drive the subordinate away or crazy.

However, supposing a subordinate is good at yes singing rather than voicing their own ideas frankly, sooner or later, he would get his superiors and the whole organization into trouble. Such a type of subordinates can't be highly thought of by their boss. On the other hand, the subordinate's fate may still be sad, since the boss would tell him to do whatever he would like him to do at his disposal.

To solve this thorny problem, the best way is to convert the dialectical way of looking at things into the tripartite division to look at things, the wisdom of which lies in the fact that this tripartite division can help the subordinate to work out a suitable compromise and strike a kind of balance between the two extremes. Thus, a third new way has come into being, which is called the reasonable middle course and can be explained as complying in appearance and adjusting in action.

Prof. Zeng makes a detailed illustration for his opinion.

First of all, bear it in mind that being cautious in putting forward any criticism to the superior so as not to be regarded as rebelling against him. However, that does not mean that subordinates have to obey their instructions to the letter. In fact, what the boss really concerns is the result rather than blind compliance. So the boss often teases those who have been following the regulations or his instructions strictly without achieving any satisfactory results by saying that, “Rules are dead, and man is alive. A little change would probably bring about good results. So I'm always wondering whether you have moved your heads when doing this work.” What makes people really amused is the following words “if I tell you to die, would you really go die?” Therefore, it won't do to contradict what your superior says, and neither will it do to obey the boss completely, which throws subordinates in a corner. How to find a way to get out of the dilemma?

Prof. Zeng provides the following answers. Supposing instructions from high up are correct and feasible, subordinates, of course, must carry them out faithfully by putting them into practice without hesitation. However, if not, subordinates should not blindly implement them, because if they do so they themselves would have to accept the unpleasant consequences.

In the Chinese society, everyone has to be aware that there is only "weak implementation, but no wrong policy." If the decisions made by the superior have serious errors, or even minor faults, subordinate has to set out to carefully correct and modify them in execution so as to produce the effect of "score a lucky hit". Only in this way can their superiors get relieved and satisfied, and then give their subordinates more trust and praise.

Prof. Zeng put forward a kind of countermeasures. It is known that from the ancient times to the present, there have been countermeasures under the policy. Countermeasures are not employed deliberately to oppose the policy from above, but to modify the policy according to the practical situation they are in, which will guarantee the effective implementation of the superior's instructions. However, in order to maintain the superior's face, modification work can only be done secretly without saying it out to avoid hurting the superior's face and causing terrible results. The subordinates must say everything is strictly handled according to instructions from above, but in reality, they are allowed to make reasonable adjustments according to the actual circumstances. In fact, it can be regarded as "the doctrine of the mean". Chinese people do not judge things by classifying them simply as right or wrong, but as long as they think that it sounds reasonable, they would accept it. Going to extremes does not agree with the Chinese management style. Only rational ostensible obedience can satisfy the requirements of rationalism. [9]

The people-oriented Chinese style management emphasizes close cooperation among the staff. Every man has a desire to be independent and to bring his subjective initiative into full play. So in Chinese style management, the general manager's duty is to draw up a feasible general policy, and do his uttermost to give the fullest play to the subordinates' subjective initiatives; and subordinates' duty is to take an automatic attitude to make rational policy adjustments according to the actual circumstances they are in, and work diligently and conscientiously in order to complete the tasks assigned by the superior successfully.

Chinese people are always saying that it's no use only working hard and obeying the rules of the superiors blindly without moving their heads, which often fails to live up to the expectation of their superiors. It has to be acknowledged that working conscientiously is very important. However, since the internal and external environments are constantly changing even after the policy has been agreed upon, if subordinates and employees cannot have their initiative bring into a full play and make corresponding changes and adjustments, no doubt they cannot do a satisfactory job, and would even get their superiors into trouble. The best way is after having got a task, subordinates should keep an eye on constant changes of the working condition and make careful corresponding adjustments. Under the guidance of the basic principles of the policy made by their superiors, subordinates should go to great lengths, if possible, to actively make some specific rational plan modifications for the work on hand based upon the specific actual circumstances. It is believed that this type of subordinates can be regarded as talented employees because they implement the superiors' policies positively, actively and flexibly for the benefits of the company. They are worthy of the expectation of the superiors and deserve their superiors' appreciation and praise.

6. Conclusions

This paper makes a detailed discussion and analysis of the importance of the interpersonal relationship in the Chinese style management and how to build up a harmonious interpersonal relationship in order to be successful in the company management. The discussion is carried out with the help of some Chinese philosophical thoughts.

The discussion is carried out with help of the Chinese ethic relationship which advocates seniority rules, implying people, as social beings have their different social

roles. It is the same for the relations between the leaders and subordinates in the Chinese modern business, all of them have their own different positions and assume different responsibilities. This kind of seeming inequality but actually being reasonable is based upon the theory “rational injustice” instead of “irrational justice”.

Great Harmony realized in achieving consensus in diversified management is supposed to be the dreaming goal for a business. If the company wants to survive, the most important thing is to establish a great harmony, or the consensus between the leader and the subordinate, and among the employees. Prof. Zeng argues that to achieve a harmonious state, a kind of autocracy has to be accepted, in which people can voice their personal opinions freely before the final decisions are agreed upon by the top leader. But once the decisions are agreed upon, they must be implemented resolutely and firmly. Our corporate culture constructed in this manner is more in line with the actual needs, more conducive to realize harmonious cohesion, and more likely to generate the collaboration power.

Since there are too many changing and flexible factors to be taken into account, superiors have to carefully deal with the interpersonal relationship, and make continuous improvements in order to have a good human relation set up. Then the superior should convert the dialectical way of looking at things into tripartite division to look at things, striking a kind of balance between the two extremes: the reasonable middle course explained by Prof. Zeng as complying in appearance and adjusting in action. In people-oriented Chinese management, countermeasures under the policy are supposed to be appropriate ways, namely rather than deliberately opposing the policy from above, modifying the policy according to the practical situation they are in order to guarantee the effective implementation of the superior’s instructions.

Although the law is lifeless man is a rational being, and the situation has been changing all the time, so people mustn’t stiffly defend the law and its corresponding principles, instead, they should move their minds to look for the ideas about how to make use of the lifeless laws for the benefits of the company, for only the flexibility and constant changes can bring about the survival.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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