Asal

Professor

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Title: Leaders

In the 21st century, even as human beings have rapidly progressed, advice and recommendations from texts and thinkers from centuries or millennia ago regarding leadership qualities are still highly influential and relevant to the modern world. In the writings of Lao Tzu, Sun Tzu, and Machiavelli, leadership qualities have remained a prominent subject of discussion. A number of traits that were emphasized within their writings, such as discipline and intelligence, charismatic personality and developing a strong and autonomous team, and instilling admiration within your team have been noted as key traits in successful leaders. Analyzing the lives and performances of business leaders Jack Ma and Elon Musk, it is observed that the policies they adopted reflected a number of traits discussed in these earlier writings which may have played a key role in determining their overall success in business and leadership.

Sun Tzu defined five distinct traits in a powerful leader, in his book *The Art of War,* which includes: credibility, intelligence, discipline, courage, and humanness. In each organization, a certain culture exists because of the way they do the business (S. Tzu). Lao Tzu sees this culture to be ‘Tao’, which is impacted by and impacts personnel and teams at different levels, while especially being impacted by the leader (L. Tzu). According to Sun Tzu, an intelligent leader is one in whose work competence is reflected in every aspect. These include technical proficiencies, as well as the ability to understand the challenges and needs of their organization and teams, while also have an understanding of where an organization stands compared to its competitors. Moreover, Sun Tzu stresses that the leader’s role is to “prepare his forces for all tactical contingencies that may arise in the field of battle.” (S. Tzu). The advice alludes to the importance of building efficient security programs.

In the case of Jack Ma, he can be seen exemplifying a number of these traits. He embodies characteristics of an intelligent and a responsible leader beyond just having a vibrant personality. He possesses global intelligence which can be reflected in the way that he adapted and continues to adapt his organization to global diversity, by collaborating with various industries and activities across the world. This allowed Ma to gain a unique insight about enhancing his own organization while making efforts to predict competition in order to stay ahead.

Moreover, regarding the followers, Sun Tzu said, “Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look upon them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death.” Tzu emphasis the importance of making followers feel confident and safe, and that they are on the correct path towards victory. In this regard, Jack Ma's insistence on ethical business practices reassures his teams and followers regarding the vision of their leader. Nearly 370 product listings were removed, and 400 people were put in jail; as a result of Alibaba's anti-piracy campaigns. Moreover, he made use of artificial intelligence programs to distinguish between credible and less credible suppliers. This assures the companies operating through Ma’s platform that they are secure, and it adds to the trust and confidence they have in working with him.

A key characteristic of a successful leader, according to Machiavelli is for them to have an outstanding personality. A charismatic personality is significant in its ability to motivate performance from followers and enhance communication with teams. For Machiavelli, “…above all a prince must scheme to give himself the fame of a great man and of excellent judgment in every action” (Machiavelli). Charisma and personality influence the way a leader exercises his or her authority, and although no one is born as a perfect leader; however, certain styles of leadership are more helpful in building a special relationship with followers. In *The Prince,* Machiavelli is of the view that a sign of a successful leader is the results and the behavior he is able to inspire in his followers. Elon Musk’s style of leadership highly reflects these traits. It can be seen from one of his emails in which he described to his teams how much importance a worker’s wellbeing and safety carries for him. He ordered reporting every workplace injury and incident to him directly with no exceptions. He then personally met every injured employee to understand their concerns and placed great emphasis on the need for managers to place the safety of their teams above their own (Vesnesky). The form of communication he used and the response he elicited from his managers and teams reflected his ability to motivate them into addressing safety concerns within the organization. Moreover, Machiavelli also stressed on having faithful and capable teams and choosing the right ones for the task. It is possible to see these traits in Musk's leadership when he particularly selected employees for Tesla Motors and SpaceX that are themselves as innovative, hard-working, productive and working on self-initiative, as Musk himself does. Therefore, he not only has an uncanny ability to make people trust his vision, and inspire them, he also goes to great lengths into ensuring that he has the right person for the right task available (Maitre).

According to Lao Tzu, “The best leaders are those the people hardly know exist. The best leaders value their words and use them sparingly. When she has accomplished her task, the people say, "Amazing: we did it, all by ourselves!” (L. Tzu). The advice from Tzu lays emphasis on the importance of creating a team that does not have to depend on its leader’s instructions or presence all the time to achieve an objective. This characteristic is a trademark of Alibaba in which Jack Ma created a certain corporate structure that planned a transparent succession in its roles for over 10 years. Clear roles are defined whose significance is visible in all areas of management and business to create a self-governing structure that organizes itself based on policy (Laubscher). Similarly, in Tesla motors, the key leaders are not seen to be celebrities, nor is the organization seen depending on individual names. Rather the entire emphasis is on the product and its design, rather than the people who develop them (Hull and Pogkas).

To conclude, a hallmark of modern leadership is to be adaptive and innovative, while being relatable and open. Moreover, a strong leader has to be persuasive and resolute at the same time. When the personalities and decisions of Jack Ma and Elon Musk are observed, it is seen that they adopted reflected a number of traits which were discussed in earlier writings of Tzu and Machiavelli, that have played a key role in determining their overall business success.

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