Coaching with Confucian Values:
Reflections on Coaching Asian-Americans

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Asian Philosophy

Confucianism, arguably the most influential philosophy which has permeated Chinese society since 500 BC, can be described by the following characteristics: persistence, self-discipline, fatalism, humility, avoidance of shame; familial piety; respect for tradition, authority and social hierarchy; reciprocity of favors; subordination of one's personal or private concerns; male dominance; duty; obligation; and valuing education (Note 1).

The rise of Taoism occurred at approximately the same time in Asian history and is characterized by the concept of the Yin and Yang, opposite and complementary forces. Taoism stresses the importance of balance to ensure social and political harmony (Note 2).

In 200 B.C., Buddhism, made its way into China from India and Tibet. Buddhism teaches mindfulness, understanding, and love. All three philosophies help define the culture and behaviors of many Chinese. These values and are often grouped collectively under the term of "Confucian Values."

At the risk of stereotyping a complex society and ignoring the life experiences that shape each individual, the following outline, from the Leadership Education for Asia Pacifics (LEAP, an organization whose objective is clear from its name) characterizes how the impact of over 2,500 years of Chinese philosophy may show up in the workplace and social situations (Note 2):

1. **Self Control / Discipline**
   - Speaks only when spoken to
   - Inner stamina/strength to tolerate crisis
   - Solid performer
   - Doesn't show emotions
2. **Obedient to Authority**
   - Respect those who lead
   - Loyal
   - Trustworthy
   - Follow through on assignments

3. **Fatalism**
   Acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty
   Patient
   Ability to accept things as they are
4. **Humility**
   Low need for individual visibility
   Power is shared with others
5. **Collective decision-making**
   Collective responsibility and ownership
   Interdependence
   Strong teamwork

The Downside of Confucian Values

Based on a poll of mainstream leaders, the same organization (LEAP) also summarizes how stereo-typical behaviors based on Confucian values may be misinterpreted in the workplace (Note 2):

Common Behaviors of Asia-American Colleagues	Common Misinterpretation by Mainstream U.S. Colleagues
Quiet, doesn't speak up	Isn't interested; knows it all; or doesn't understand and is afraid to show ignorance
Not assertive (vis-à-vis mainstream values)	Lacks leadership skills; unable to be authoritative when necessary
Limited facial expressions, lack of demonstrative behaviors	Has no investment in the matter at hand; has no feelings
Avoids making presentations and other speaking in public	Not interested; lacks knowledge or data; secretive, unwilling to share; lacks confidence
Indirect eye contact	Lacks respect for colleagues; no confidence; no interest; no sensitivity to others' facial cues
Never complains, is a diligent worker	Well suited to merely do the work

American coaches of Asian managers need to insure that their suggestions and feedback to their coachee demonstrates their (the coaches') understanding of Confucian values. Coaching in full awareness of Confucian values can enable Asian-American coachees to adapt their rich heritage

to the Western business world and thereby to attain their fullest potential in U.S.-based companies. Coaches of mainstream American leaders can enable them to recognize, and to give respect and visibility to, the strengths of their Asian-American employees so that those employees will be able to develop and adapt in a way that ensures the best outcome for their company.

Coachable Issues

During interviews with successful leaders of Asian heritage, three "coachable issues" -- Finding Their Voice, Putting Authority in Perspective, and Transitioning to Leadership -- were identified as being the most useful for younger and/or more recently arrived Asian heritage corporate employees.

1. Finding Their Voice

Wu Song decided to emigrate here from mainland China to study for his Ph.D. After graduation, he went to work in the pharmaceutical industry. "Working hard and contributing one's best is drummed into most Asia children by their parents. The impact of hard work on success is indeed very important, but here in the U.S. it is not enough. You need to let people know what you did. This is very different from China, where you are taught to be humble." It is hard for Wu Song to unlearn humility. Self-promotion makes him uncomfortable, even when he sees others doing it.

Amy grew up in Taiwan and is now the CFO for a division of a Fortune 500 company. "Chinese parents generally put great premium on hard work and education. Parents plan for their kids' education beginning in grammar school. Students in China typically spend 12 hours in school, then sometimes go to more classes in 'cram schools' if they need to beef up on certain skills."

Amy goes on to say, "Generally Chinese are uncomfortable speaking up. In school, they take notes. They do not ask a lot of questions. They memorize and take tests. There is very little classroom participation. Also, for those not born here in the U.S., language is a problem; they are self-conscious because of their accent. However, the main reason they do not speak up is that they just were not raised that way. Being assertive is difficult. They have been taught that confrontation is not respectful. They need to learn the skills to confront problems and issues in a business-like manner."

Amy gave specific examples of how being nonassertive has held back some talented Chinese employees. "In my firm's Finance Leadership Development Program, some Chinese students do not get good assessments from their supervisors because of their reticence to speak up and express their ideas. Their supervisors are concerned about their ability to be assertive and lead. Therefore, they are not given regular full-time jobs. They are all picked from the best business schools where they have received good grades, but some cannot compete with their Western colleagues because of this issue."

Rohit is vice president of R&D in a large pharmaceutical company and active in a mentoring program for new Asian employees. He reiterates this need to speak up. "There are definitely cultural differences as to how aggressive one should be. Sitting in a meeting and never speaking,

unless you are specifically asked to speak, can really hold you back in the U.S. corporate environment. You have to be able to sell yourself and your ideas."

Jun grew up in mainland China, the daughter of prominent social science professors. She agrees that working hard and getting the best education is so important in the Chinese family. She recognized the need to speak-up in order to move up the corporate ladder; however, her experience during the Cultural Revolution was an added barrier to overcome. She explained, "You know, I seldom tell my opinion, publicly, even if asked. I was only seven when Mao began the Cultural Revolution. In the beginning, Mao encouraged people to freely share their opinions, claiming they were important for developing the best systems and programs for the young and new China. My parents spoke out with honesty, love, and trust for their respected leader. Soon my father was isolated from my family for several months. He was criticized publicly and even tortured in front of hundreds of the faculty members and college students with whom he worked everyday. After he returned home, our entire family was closely monitored by students who were specially assigned to live in our apartment. I witnessed all that happened to my parents, my family, and my friends' families, and that experience has influenced me ever since."

Ronald Takaki and Helen Zia trace the immigration history of Asian-Americans (Notes 3, 4). They note that this group faced brutal prejudice, backlash, unfair immigration laws, and discrimination in the workplace. Both authors make a clear point that this practice of working hard and saying nothing has in some ways made it harder for Asian-Americans as a group to avoid exploitation.

The need to speak up is clearly a coachable issue, and it's one that's recognized by Asian-American themselves. An understanding of differing cultural values is essential in making wise decisions about working with an Asian coachee. On the other hand, nothing replaces listening to his or her individual stories and trying to figure out what other experiences and feelings may influence this common behavior. It's always difficult for anyone to overcome a strongly held societal and family value. But when the value in question is strengthened by a personal experience such as Jun's during the Cultural Revolution, the boulder becomes a mountain.

How might a coach approach the issue of "speaking up" with an Asian coachee employed in an American corporation? *An approach that incorporates one or more other Confucian values has the potential to be successful.* The distasteful behavior of self-promotion and talking about your own accomplishments can be reframed in terms of duty and in-group loyalty. Reporting on the timely completion of an assigned project is a well-understood requirement of good employees. Speaking up on behalf of your staff also appeals to the sense of in-group loyalty that is so strongly held by Asian coachees. For example, although Jun feared expressing her opinion openly, she had no trouble putting together a convincing plan to prevent her staff members from being moved to crowded, undesirable laboratory. Her duty and commitment to her "corporate family" became stronger than her fear of expressing herself.

Role playing to practice typical responses in a team meeting, or to prepare for a presentation, is an excellent way to build confidence. If combined with word-choice and speaking practice, this can be especially important and valuable for coachees who are unsure of their command of English.

Coaches can coach mainstream supervisors to encourage Asian-American employees to speak up in the following ways: Ask the employee for updates and opinions during team and staff meetings; give immediate positive feedback when the employee voluntarily speaks up; make speaking up a performance goal; and encourage Asian employee to practice spontaneous public speaking through organizations such as the Toastmasters.

2. Putting Authority in Perspective

"My Chinese students consider it disrespectful to challenge a professor," says Nigel, a physics professor with Chinese students in both the U.S. and China. "It takes about two years before they are comfortable expressing and pursuing their own ideas in class. I tell them that we can't advance the field of physics if they simply accept everything the professor says. Besides, it isn't any fun for me. Challenge me! Then we will *both* learn more!"

Says Li Lan, a Ph.D. student at Beijing University, "I really love literature and history. It comes easy for me. So my parents thought I should challenge myself and study science. It is also much more practical and easier to get a good job." Li Lan's respect for her parents' wishes prevented her from pursuing her dream.

"I am so frustrated with Ping!" exclaims Dr. Danielson, the M.D. on a project team. "Whenever I ask him for his approach on this product, he responds by asking me what I want, or what I think. He is the expert in product development, so why is he asking me?" But to Ping, the "Medical Doctor" title commands respect to the point that he feels compelled to defer to Dr. Danielson.

When asked what he expects from the leaders in his organization, Wu Song responds, "I like to hear what approach my boss wants to take early in a project. Then I can plan and anticipate any problems." Wu Song also defers to his supervisor's ideas rather than suggesting his own.

Respect for authority may have served Chinese well in Imperial and later Communist China. Today, however, this behavior can stand in the way of their personal and professional development in the U.S. Coaches can assist their Chinese coachees by helping them understand that their advancement in academic or corporate America depends upon a visible demonstration of independent thought.

Negotiating the wide range of leadership styles in the West can also be challenging. Coaches can help their Asian-American coachees to understand "situational leadership" in which one leader can display a wide range of styles -- from command-and-control to consensus-building -- depending on the situation. A coach will serve Asian coachees well by helping them to learn when it's best to "salute and do" and when it's best to state their own ideas and even put forward contrary opinions.

Coaches also need to help mainstream supervisors understand the deep respect that Asian employees feel for authority. Respect for authority certainly has its useful aspects, and the objective is not to push Asians to abandon it completely! On the other hand, coaches need to encourage mainstream supervisors to solicit independent ideas from their Asian direct reports, to empower Asian employees to express new ideas without waiting to be solicited, and to give them

positive feedback for doing so. This will gradually build the Asian's confidence and help them to moderate their traditional deference to authority.

3. Transitioning to Leadership

"I don't know if I ever really had a desire to be a doctor," recalls Christine Poon, a senior executive of Johnson & Johnson, during her interview with *DiversityInc* magazine (Note 5). "I just didn't know anything else to be". After graduating with a Master of Science and working for a time in a technical position, she moved into the business world and found she loved it. She excelled as few others have, and is now a member of J&J's executive Committee and worldwide chair of the firm's Medicines and Nutritionals business unit.

Vincent, a research fellow at a Fortune 500 company, wishes that the sciences weren't stressed so strongly in Asia. "There is a belief that in technical fields, language is not a barrier, so you have a better chance of succeeding. However, in the U.S., you see a lot more business people on the covers of *Fortune*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* than you do scientists. I have had a good career as a scientist. However, I don't feel I get the recognition that my colleagues with MBA's receive. A person's technical strength sometimes is a weakness for transitioning into a business position."

"I am a good scientist", says Kathy, a principal scientist in product development, "but I know I can do more. I want my ideas to be heard. I know I can make our development process more efficient. I see others with less experience being promoted to leadership positions. What do I need to do to get there?"

Feeling stuck in a technical field is somewhat akin to the Hawaiians in the canning factories in Alaska, to the Chinese railroad builders in the late 1860s, and to the Asian Indian farm workers stuck in their low-paying jobs. Although the conditions of a scientist in his or her well-lit air-conditioned laboratory are considerably better than the conditions those laborers endured, the feeling of exploitation is similar. Their scientific knowledge and work ethic are acknowledged, but when it comes time to fill the leadership positions, they rarely are the first candidates that come to mind. There is an assumption among many mainstream American leaders that Asian scientists actually shun leadership roles. In individual cases this may be true. Tragically in other cases, there is a potential leader just waiting to be recognized, to be asked, and to be developed.

Coaching Asian technical experts to let their desires become known is vital to their advancement. Rohit, who made the transition into leadership, tells his mentorees, "You can't just work hard and expect that promotion into leadership positions will happen automatically. You have to tell your manager what your career goals are so that he or she will become your advocate. If you don't get their support, you have to network and look for opportunities by yourself."

It can be very helpful to coach Asian-Americans through these crucial conversations prior to their actual meeting with their supervisors. Giving your coachees examples of Asian role models and suggesting mentors can smooth the way to their recognition and advancement. If an Asian affinity group exists within a company, coaches can encourage the coachee to tap into that network.

In addition, coaches can challenge mainstream supervisors to recognize the leadership potential in their Asian-American direct reports. Remind the mainstream leaders that different leadership as well as thinking styles result in better problem-solving and more creative solutions. This is vital to full utilization of the talent within their organization.

"She has a great leadership style that is very inclusive; people really feel like they want to be a part of her team," says Rose Crane, a long-term direct report of J&J's Christine Poon. Adds Carolyne Kong, another associate of Poon, "Being humble translates into a unique leadership style. She doesn't roll over. She's very direct. She's been able to master that wonderful balance" (Note 5).

A skillful coach can help a mainstream supervisor to present a promising Asian employee with a specific opportunity to lead. Because of cultural tradition, the mainstream leader may have to persist a bit with the Asian, insisting that it is his or her duty to accept the offer to lead.

Don, a fourth generation Chinese-American, recalls, "When I was a child, I was taught to turn down an offer for food or drink four times before saying yes. This was a sign that our family was not poor. Imagine my regret when my neighbor's mom offered me a drink and I went thirsty while my playmates enjoyed their lemonade! I quickly learned that some of those Chinese traditions were not serving me well!"

Coaches can assist mainstream supervisors in understanding the Asian cultural values that may be holding a potentially talented leader back. "I was so grateful when my boss encouraged me to get an MBA," says Bing Bing, a Chinese immigrant who started out on the scientific track. "I never had any idea that the company would allow me to do that. I loved going to business school. It was such a broadening experience! Now I am a project manager and I can use my scientific expertise *and* my business knowledge." These are the kind of gratifying words that can be the ultimate outcome of a little direction-giving and encouragement.

Summary

The growth of the Asian presence in the global economy, the rapid increase in immigration from Asia to the U.S., and the advances that *some* of these immigrants have made in professional, corporate, and academic settings all highlight the importance of a focus by the coaching profession on Asian-Americans' unique developmental needs (Notes 6, 7). Cultural influences such as Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophies need to be considered when preparing to coach Asian-Americans. Coaches must probe as well for early experiences that might be influencing beliefs and behaviors.

Three common coachable issues, together with useful approaches to use with Asian coachees and their mainstream leaders, are summarized in the following three charts.

Coachable Issue 1: Finding Their Voice

Approach with Asian Coachee	Approach with Mainstream Supervisor
• Probe the coachee for cultural values and experience-based influences that might be inhibiting him or her • Explain the value that Western cultures place on speaking up, expressing one's own ideas, and confronting issues • Frame speaking-up as a duty • Rehearse the coachee's performance when he or she is presented with an opportunity to speak up during meetings • Rehearse the coachee's formal presentations • Rehearse crucial conversations with peers and supervisors to confront issues	• Coach the supervisor or team leader to specifically ask Asian subordinates for updates and opinions during meetings • Suggest to the supervisor that he or she make speaking-up a performance goal • Counsel the supervisor to give positive feedback when Asians *do* express opinions, report accomplishments, or confront issues in a professional manner • Encourage the supervisor to, in turn, encourage promising Asian employees to attend Toastmasters or the equivalent long-term presentation training

Coachable Issue 2: Putting Authority in Perspective

Approach with Asian Coachee	Approach with Mainstream Supervisor
• Listen for cues about the coachee's views and fears with respect to authority. • Explore the coachee's assumptions about how American authority-figures *view their own authority* • Explain Western professionals' casual *yet still respectful* stance towards authorities [continued next page]	• Coach the supervisor to encourage Asian employees to pursue and publicly express their own ideas • Coach the supervisor to publicly invite Asian team members to express his or her ideas, then give positive feedback • Suggest that the supervisor withhold his or her own ideas until Asian subordinates fully express their own ideas

• Provide examples of how Western professionals value independent thinking and self-expression • Role-play examples of situational leadership, e.g., when to "salute and do" and when to counter with one's own ideas	• Modify the performance management system to reward the pursuit and public expression of one's own ideas

Coachable Issue 3: Transitioning to Leadership

Approach with Asian Coachee	Approach with Mainstream Supervisor
• Guide Asian coachee to visualize, role-play, and then directly articulate his or her own career goals to the supervisor • Encourage Asian coachee to find a mentor who will understand Asian values and be able to guide him or her in setting and attaining ever higher career goals • Counsel the coachee to seek networking resources within and outside the firm • Assist the coachee to come to feel comfortable about asking others for advice and assistance with respect to career objectives	• Coach the supervisor to see, and to appreciate, the Asian coachee's different but useful leadership style • Encourage the supervisor to directly ask the Asian coachee about his or her career goals...and to ask again and again • Coach the supervisor to frame the pursuit of leadership opportunities as a duty for highly able Asian subordinates

Notes

1. Wu, Diana Ting Liu, *Asian Pacific Americans in the Workplace*, AltiMira Press, 1997, p. 61.

2. Tokunaga, Paul, *Invitation to Lead: Guidance for Emerging Asian American Leaders*, Intervarsity Press, 2003, p. 211.

3. Takaki, Ronald, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, Back Bay Books, 1998, p. 475.

4. Zia, Helen, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*, Farrar, Staus & Giroux, 2000, p. 30.

5. Austria Farmer, Melanie, "The Powerhouse Who Leads a Billion-Dollar Business," in *DiversityInc*, July 2003, p. 2.

6. Fishman, Ted C., "The Chinese Century," in *The New York Times Magazine*, July [?], 2004, p. 24.

7. Lowenstein, Roger, "Help Wanted," in *The New York Times Magazine*, September 5, 2004, p 59.