

Mencius on Management: Managerial Implications of the Writings of China's Second Sage

by

Charles A. Rarick

Purdue University - Calumet, Indiana, U.S.A.

Often referred to as China's Second Sage, Mencius maintained and strengthened the Confucian tradition and added his own views on topics that are relevant to modern day managers. Mencius made managerial recommendations in such diverse areas as corporate governance, interpersonal relations, economic development, and human resources. The focus of this paper will be on Mencius' management and leadership advice.

1. Introduction

Mencius is a well-known and revered figure among the Chinese. He is perhaps second only to Confucius as the most important philosopher in Chinese history. Mencius lived during the Warring States Period (475 BCE – 221 BCE) and witnessed its horrors. He was born in 372 BCE in the State of Zhou, not far from the birthplace of Confucius. Mencius was raised by his mother and the familiar Chinese story, "Mencius' Mother Moves Three Times," illustrates their close bond. In it, the mother's concern for her son was so great that she moved the family three times so that young Mencius could develop to his fullest potential (Xu & Zhang 2007). Mencius, like Confucius one hundred years before him, travelled the country offering advice to different rulers. He was a devoted follower of Confucianism, and he expanded and modified the doctrine of the Great Sage. Mencius believed in the inherent goodness of humankind. This humanistic orientation is central to the advice he offered rulers, and can be found in a text called Mencius, or The Book of Mencius (actual authorship is difficult to determine, and it is possible the book was actually written by his followers rather than the philosopher himself). In this text we find advice covering a wide range of topics including duty to parents, ethics, and social etiquette. The text also provides an interesting early look at Chinese managerial theory.

During the Warring States Period of Chinese history, a number of different kingdoms competed for territory. The result was much bloodshed and an eventual consolidation of the various fiefdoms under the rule of the strongest force, that of Qin (Chin) in 221 BCE (the Qin ruler would become China's first emperor). Advice on winning battles and managing the state was sought after by the various rulers

of Mencius' time. While the General Sunzi (Sun Tzu) provided advice on battle strategy, Mencius offered advice on the management of states to many important rulers of his day. It should be noted that in ancient China the merchant class was not held in high esteem. Thus it was beneath a scholar such as Mencius to offer advice to business operators. The only organizations of size were states, and few, if any, concerned themselves with proper business management. However, Mencius' advice is also useful and relevant to the management of modern organizations. This paper looks at the work of Mencius in a content analysis research framework in order to show that his ideas are not only consistent with modern managerial theory but may also provide a better managerial paradigm.

2. Humanistic Management

Mencius is well-known for his belief in the inherent goodness of humankind. He is perhaps in greater agreement with Laozi and the Daoists than with Confucius (who never proposed that humans possessed innate goodness) in this regard. Mencius believed that all humans were born with a nature that gives them the ability to relate to the suffering of others. He states, "No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others" (Mencius, 2004). Mencius gives the example of a small child falling in a well and the immediate grief complete strangers feel when witnessing the event. This humanistic orientation is seen throughout his writings, especially in recommendations for the relationship between rulers and their subjects.

Mencius is believed to have been taught by the grandson of Confucius, and he helped maintain the Confucian tradition in China. At the time, Confucianism was facing competition from competing philosophies, and Mencius became the leading advocate for maintaining a Confucian society in China. While there has been some debate on the influence of Mencius on Chinese cultural development (Chan, 2002), most Chinese scholars feel that he both followed and modified the Confucian tradition. He continued Confucianism as it relates to relationships and benevolence, but differed in terms of respect for authority. Confucius placed an emphasis on one's duty to authority figures, while Mencius placed a greater duty on the need of leaders to be kind and caring to their followers. The emphasis in Mencius was not on the authority of the ruler, but rather on the proper role of the ruler towards his subjects. Mencius maintained the importance of proper care of the people in the affairs of state by saying, "The people are the most important element in a state; next comes the gods of land and grain; least of all the ruler himself" (Xu & Zhang, 2007). He promoted the concept of the Mandate of Heaven (an idea that actually dates to the much earlier period of the Zhou Dynasty) which meant that if a ruler did not perform properly the people would be morally right in seeking his removal, even through violent means. Thus, the ruler must maintain a humanistic orientation towards his followers and provide for their needs or risk losing their support.

Mencius adhered to the basic doctrine of Confucius and accepted its Five Virtues: ren, or benevolence; li, or propriety; xin, or trustworthiness; yi, or righteousness; and zhi, or wisdom. Mencius placed a great emphasis on ren and yi

in the role of a proper ruler. Additionally, while Confucius placed a great emphasis on deference to authority, Mencius was more critical of the rulers of his day. He imposed a greater burden on them than Confucius did when it came to fulfillment of their duties. As Mencius states, “A good ruler is always respectful and thrifty, courteous and humble, and takes from the people no more than prescribed” (Mencius, 2004). For Mencius, a leader who does not rule with humility and kindness is unfit for office. Both Mencius and Confucius emphasized the importance of benevolent leadership, but Mencius took the concept further and criticized early Chinese rulers for their selfish actions. He trusted that with good leadership people would act in the proper manner and society would improve due to the inherent goodness of humankind. These opinions and critical assessments were given at personal risk and without fear for his own safety.

3. Benevolence and Virtue in Management

Mencius did not hesitate in stating his opinion when he found rulers lacking in benevolence towards their people. In a famous exchange between King Liang Hui Wang and Mencius, the king was told, “As the leader of the country, you seek only the best for yourself personally. As the leader of the country, you should advocate benevolence and righteousness” (Xu & Zhang, 2007). His approach also had a utilitarian focus, so Mencius appealed to the motives of the rulers of his day. In speaking to King Qi Xuan Wang Mencius said, “If a king shares the worries and concerns of his subjects and makes policies that enable them to live and work in peace and contentment, there is no force in existence that can stop him uniting the world” (Xu & Zhang, 2007). Even though Mencius promoted his philosophy through an appeal to the ruler’s success, he still maintained the importance of benevolence in the role of the leader. In he stated, “Benevolence brings honor; cruelty, disgrace” (Mencius, 2004). Concerning benevolence, Mencius was in agreement with Mozi about the concept of universal love. The Mohist belief that tradition should not dictate morality is consistent with Mencius’ viewpoint, but differs from Confucianism. Morality comes from the practice of impartiality and a collectivist love for others. Both Mencius and Mozi believed that people in positions of power possessed an ethical duty to act in the best interest of the people, and that when this was not the case the mandate of leadership was lost. Thus, he believed that Confucian dictates of respect for authority should not prevail over cruelty and disgrace.

Mencius spoke very highly of the sage kings of ancient China: Yao, Shun, and Yu. Perhaps the most exalted of the three, Yao, was respected for his virtue. He lived a simple life and worked for the benefit of the people. When he became too old to rule he passed over his incompetent son as successor and instead chose Shun, whom the people had chosen to be their next ruler. Yao was practicing an early form of democratic leadership. Yu followed Shun as ruler and was selected for his work at controlling the serious problem of flooding which plagued the region. The devotion, hard work, and success he demonstrated at the task, gained him the peoples’ respect (Zhang, 2007). These three men, referred to as the Ancient Kings of High Antiquity, were used as role models for proper management in the

teachings of Mencius. As he stated, “Wise kings of antiquity devoted themselves to goodness, forgetting their own exalted position” (Mencius, 2004). Mencius believed that it was possible for any man to become a Yao or a Shun (Mencius, 2004). According to Mencius, great leadership potential is in every person, but the person acting as leader must adhere to the Dao. The Dao refers to a special skill or ability, and working with the natural order in order to achieve harmony. Mencius makes references to the Daoist perspective, explaining that a leader also needs to possess qualities in addition to benevolence and virtue: “Goodness alone is not sufficient for government” (Mencius, 2004).

At the same time, Mencius lived during the Warring States Period and had to adapt his message to suit it. His advice on strategy had a human focus. For example, in speaking with King Liang Hui of the State of Wei, Mencius said:

If you adopt a benevolent policy, you will have standardized laws, a strong economy, a well-educated and ambitious people. If, at that time, you decide the moment demands an assault on another state, none shall be able to resist your combined power at that time (Xu & Zhang, 2007).

Mencius also offered his advice in areas of human development, benevolent leadership, and economic reform. In each of these areas he promoted the belief that the strength of a state came not from its physical assets, but from the skill and will of its people.

4. Respect and Service to Others

Mencius was a strong advocate in the development of human potential. His belief that the most important asset of a state or organization is human capital is one that endures today. Mencius was concerned about the development of people (e.g. giving them proper responsibilities, utilizing their abilities). He made this comparison:

A man, who, since his childhood, has been acquiring knowledge, naturally wishes to put that knowledge to use when he grows up. Now what would happen if the King were to say to him, “Just put aside what you have learned and do as I tell you”? Suppose we have here a piece of uncut jade. Even if its value is equivalent to ten thousand yi of gold, you will still have to entrust its cutting to a jade-cutter. But when it comes to the government of your state, you say, “Just put aside what you have learned and do as I tell you.” In what way is this different from teaching the jade-cutter his job? (Mencius, 2004).

Modern management theorists advocate various aspects of participative management and employee autonomy. Mencius saw the value of these relatively new concepts many years ago.

Closely related to this view, Mencius recommended that leaders listen and learn from their followers; “Today there are many states, all equal in size and

virtue, none being able to dominate the others. This is simply because the rulers are given to employing those they can teach rather than those from whom they can learn” (Mencius, 2004). In this regard, Mencius saw a more humble role for the leader, one modeled on Shun. In referring to Shun’s practice of listening to the ideas of subjects, Mencius says: “From the time he was a farmer, a potter and a fisherman, to the time he became Emperor, there was nothing he did not take from others” (Mencius, 2004). Shun practiced modern management in ancient China by listening to the ideas of others and putting the useful ideas into practice.

Mencius was an early advocate of good interpersonal relations between superior and subordinate. Mencius felt that in order for a leader to be successful, he/she would have to be liked and respected by the people. As he states: “You can never gain the Empire without the heartfelt admiration of the people in it” (Mencius, 2004). Likewise, respect is viewed as a two-way process and cannot be demanded by a leader. Respect is earned through benevolence and good interpersonal relations. In order to earn respect, one must show true respect to others and to have a genuine interest in their welfare. By respecting those who are led the leader receives the gift of respect. As Mencius tell us:

To feed a man without showing him love is to treat him like a pig; to love him without showing him respect is to keep him like a domestic animal. Respect is but a gift that is not yet presented. Respect that is without reality will not take a gentleman in merely by its empty show (Mencius, 2004).

Mencius placed a duty on the ruler to take appropriate actions rather than relying on authority, rules, and regulations. For example, when speaking to King Hui of Liang, Mencius said:

When people die, you simply say, “It is none of my doing.” It is the fault of the harvest. In what way is that different from killing a man by running him through, while saying all the time, “It is none of my doing. It is the fault of the weapon.” Is there any difference in killing him with a knife and killing him with misrule? (Mencius, 2004).

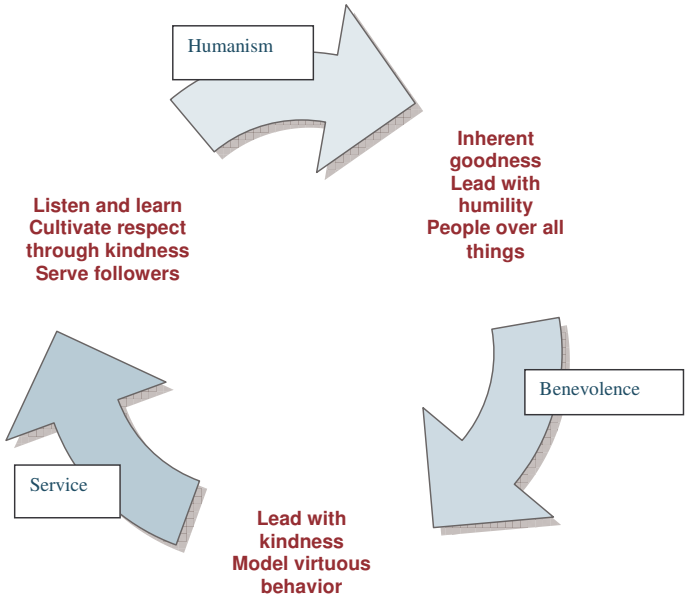
Taking leadership tasks and the responsibility for the welfare of others seriously are important aspects of the Mencius doctrine. He taught that leaders should look within themselves:

If others do not respond to your love with love, look into your own benevolence; if others fail to respond to your attempts to govern them with order, look into your own wisdom; if others do not return your courtesy, look into your own respect. In other words, look into yourself whenever you fail to achieve your purpose (Mencius, 2004).

The success of a state or organization begins and ends with its leader. This is why Mencius placed so much responsibility on the proper behavior of the leader. As Mencius says, “When the prince is benevolent, everyone else is benevolent;

when the prince is dutiful, everyone is dutiful; when the prince is correct, everyone else is correct. Simply by rectifying the prince one can put the state on a firm basis” (Mencius, 2004). In many ways, Mencius promoted a leadership role that is consistent with that proposed by Greenleaf (1977) and others, referred to as servant leadership. Servant leadership views the leader as a steward of the people and the organization. This view of leadership can be clearly seen in Mencius’ texts, and supports the view that he was a management theorist ahead of his time. His theory of management can be divided into three parts, as seen in the model below.

Figure 1: Management Theory of Mencius



The management theory of Mencius is a cycle that begins with a humanistic orientation towards others. This orientation causes managers and leaders to look for the inherent qualities of goodness in all people, to lead with humility, and to always place people first in decision-making. A leader who has a humanistic orientation practices benevolent management, leading people with kindness and virtue, while also acting as a role model. Such a leader listens to the opinions and ideas of others, and cultivates respect through kindness and service. The process is a continuous cycle that builds upon itself.

5. Conclusion

Although the text Mencius wrote is over two thousand years old, it has many timely managerial and leadership prescriptions. In addition to addressing issues such as humanistic management, the importance of virtue, the building of human

capital, and good interpersonal relations, Mencius also tackles recent issues of managerial importance such as corporate governance. For example, there have been efforts to separate the positions of CEO and Chairman of the Board in order to balance power and to ensure that no one individual is held unaccountable for his or her actions. Mencius addresses this by stating, “Gentlemen should not hold office by heredity; separate duties held under different offices should not be held concurrently by the same man; the selection of gentlemen should be appropriate” (Mencius, 2004). Mencius also advocated a more modern approach to economic development. He refers to the desirability of cutting taxes in order to generate prosperity for villagers. He was also an early supporter of tax reform and supply-side economics.

Management ideas come and go but some concepts remain timeless. Writing over two thousand years ago, Mencius offered advice that is as relevant to modern managers as it was for ancient Chinese rulers. As Mencius himself stated, sometimes it is useful to “look for friends in history”. Being, as they are, consistent with modern managerial theory, his words of wisdom have stood the test of time.

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