"The Tao of Leadership: Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching Adapted for a New Age"

Author: John Heider

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Reviewer: Ted Radovich

The Tao of Leadership: Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching Adapted for a New Age is an
interpretation of the classic text based on several translations of the original Chinese.
The author, John Heider, is faithful to the structure and spirit of the 82 individual
chapters of the Tao. His take, however, is original enough to make it worth reading
even if you are familiar with the Tao. This interpretation advocates intuitive management
characterized by minimal intervention and fostered by observation and reflection.
Generally there four recurring themes emphasized in this interpretation: 1)
understanding how things work; 2) empty space; 3) polarity and 4) soft power.

Understand how things work
It's important to differentiate between what is happening and how it happens. Seeing the
method behind the madness will aid in anticipating issues and addressing them before
they occur. There is no book you can read, no technique you can learn or workshop you
can attend that can make you a good leader. Although these things might make a good
leader better, only your mindfulness of group dynamics and awareness of how things
happen can make you effective.

Empty space
The concept of empty space is really focused on being uncluttered in thoughts or
expectations. The author emphasizes reflection/meditation, which is particularly
important when you are too busy- that's exactly the time to reflect. Other specific
suggestions include keeping an open calendar with periods of uncommitted time, and
avoiding jargon and complex theories when communicating with others. It is also
suggested that the leader live simply and frugally, avoiding materialism and fame so as
not to cloud clarity of thought. Ultimately, the leader wants to remain a receptacle- be
receptive, open to process, not filled with an agenda that may conflict with natural group
processes. Oceans are the greatest bodies of water because they lie below rivers tributaries and lakes. A good leader is a servant, so the absence of vanity is important. The leaders job is to ensure success of those below, not to secure a string of successes for the leader. The leaders success arises naturally out of the group success.

**Polarity**
Polarity drives creativity. Classic concepts in the Tao are Yin (feminine, healer, being present) and Yang (masculine, warrior, action). The strongest and most enduring of these is Yin (see below). The good leader works with everyone, not just people she likes. Avoid qualitative labels for people like good or bad, instead think in terms of different polarities, and manage those polarities to facilitate a creative force.

**Soft power**
It's better to allow things to happen than to cause them to happen. This is called soft strength. Don't force issues, let them arise naturally. Storms will often resolve to calm on their own. Every situation starts small, being aware can catch it early with gentle intervention. If gentle intervention fails, don't increase the strength of the intervention, step back. When powerful intervention is necessary, it's a good time for a leader to reassess strategy because even when strong intervention appears successful, there are often unpleasant repercussions. Facilitating natural group process toward a beneficial outcome is better than forcing what you want. A leader endures a lot of conflict. The facilitating leader wears out obstacles the way water wears out rock; therefore a leader's power must be more like water than rock. The strength of yielding is also exemplified by the tree branch bending in the wind. If it does not yield it will break.

Overall, this book advocates a style of leadership congruent with the "Management 2.0" approach highlighted in *DRIVE* by Daniel Pink. Focus less on carrots (rewards) and sticks (penalties), and instead provide autonomy, opportunity and foster creativity. One thing conspicuously absent in the book is any acknowledgement of the importance that selection of team members are to this process. The assumption is that the leader is already working with a skilled, functional team which may not be the case.