

Leadership Insight – Lao Tzu

Greg Whateley

July 2024

*Ancient Chinese philosophy remains very useful today when considering quality leadership traits. **Lao Tzu** (6th Century BCE) provided valuable insights that remain as fresh and relevant today as they did in ancient times. Whether the writings are a collection of wisdom is hard to say – but for the purpose of this discussion the traits of good leadership are worthy of consideration.*

13 suggestions (of collective wisdom) based on the writing of the philosopher include -

Be observant

Watching carefully and learning about your team (in particular) is a most important ingredient associated with good leadership. It is not about you – it is about us!

Give credit

Always put the spotlight on others – this includes publicly acknowledging achievement and ensuring those involved in initiatives are praised and credited accordingly.

Acknowledge success in others

Acknowledging and celebrating success is vital – no matter how significant or otherwise. Acknowledgement comes in many forms – but the most powerful is public praise.

See – Mercandante (2023) - [10 leadership lessons from Lao-Tzu | by Curt Mercadante | Medium](#)

Be an example to others

Leading by example is demanding – but the dividends will be significant.

Be strong but lead with softness

Strong leadership is desirable - but it needs to be coupled with empathy and understanding – hence the reference to ‘softness’. Balance, then, is essential.

Inspire your team to feel ownership

If you can get your team/s to take ownership of various elements of the work – the rewards will be significant.

See – Yuko (2019) - [3 Leadership Lessons from Lao Tzu That Are Completely Relevant Today - Thrive Global](#)

Embrace humility

Taking on senior roles should be accompanied by a degree of humility – arrogance and conceit have no place in quality leadership and management.

Be flexible

The collective wisdom suggests that the road is not a straight one – flexibility and adaptability - are essential elements of leadership – particularly in modern times.

Embrace simplicity

Often the simplest solution or scenario is the best. Simplifying situations whenever feasible can lead to significant returns and achievements.

Cultivate relationships

Internal and external relationships are vital. Little can be achieved in isolation.

Foster creativity

Whenever feasible encourage creative solutions that often challenge the norm.

Be patient

Long term goals are best viewed as long distance runs – not sprints. Best outcomes often require patience and careful consideration.

Be self-disciplined

A primary focus for any good leader is self-discipline. This often is about maintaining a routine despite the circumstances – on site, WFH and/or WFA.

Whether individual thought or collective wisdom the 13 points provided serve as very good advice to modern leaders. At the heart of good leadership is humility and self-awareness. Ensuring your teams are engaged and supported is vital – and acknowledging their success is a key ingredient.

Emeritus Professor Greg Whateley has recently retired from the position of Deputy Vice Chancellor (UBSS) and Chief Executive (GCA). He celebrates 50 years in academia in 2024 – much of this time spent in leadership and management roles.