

## Managing People Reflections on an Old Chinese Proverb: “San Lao Si Yan” (3 ‘Olds’ and 4 ‘Stricts’)

**Prof. Dr. K. C. Patrick Low Ph.D.**

Chartered Marketer

Certified MBTI Administrator & Certified Behavioral Consultant/ Chartered Consultant

Visiting Professor, HRM, University of South Pacific

Visiting Professor, Dean, Construction Technologies, Infrastructure and Management

Director, Scientific Center (Kazakh Leading Academy of Architecture & Civil Engineering

KazGASA/ Kazakh American University: KAU) (26 May 2017- 2 Jan 2018)

### Abstract

*In this paper, the practitioner-academician author seeks to uncover and examine the meaning of the Chinese proverb: “san lao si yan” (3 ‘Olds’ and 4 ‘Stricts’). And spiced with several other Chinese proverbs, “san lao si yan” is explored in the light of Chinese thoughts of honesty and linking it to human resource management: that is, managing, recruiting and selecting such people. The Chinese proverb too nicely explains the need for people of such qualities; “san lao si yan” is better explained as giving excellent guidelines to people management.*

**Keywords:** Honesty, strictness, standards; discipline.

### Introduction

The practitioner-academician author came across this interesting Chinese proverb, “san lao si yan” (3 ‘olds’ and 4 ‘stricts’) when he was reading Mah’s (2003: 281) *A Thousand Pieces of Gold*. It is often important and good to develop a “success profile” of the ideal employee for key positions in one’s company that are critical to the execution of one’s business plan. And a competent person with “san lao si yan” would fit the bill, in part or mostly, if not wholly. Basically, the organization must know what kind of person they need; one must define one’s requirements (Stone, 2013; Alagan, 2011; Maxwell, 1993) – for example, those with among other things, possessing good qualities such as “positive attitude”, “leadership”, “integrity”, “people skills”, “trustworthy”; “responsible” and “self-discipline” as well as “resilience” (Maxwell, 1993: 186-188). Personal qualities of the selected people or employees are seen as “how the candidate will be expected to behave (**honestly and being disciplined**) in carrying out the job, such as working with other people, exercising leadership and influencing people” (Armstrong, 2006: 446; **bold author’s**).

People are important resources and the key to military success (attributed to Sun Tzu, cited in Michaelson and Michaelson, 2011) and even any business success (Low, 2018; Stone, 2013; 2002; Michaelson and Michaelson, 2011; Alagan, 2011; PHP Institute Inc., 1994; Maxwell, 1993). And the pressures of competition, cost saving, downsizing and global skill shortages have made the recruitment and selection of quality people a top priority (HR Focus, 2000; Stone, 2013; 2002). And the organization must really make a good or strategic selection with good selection criteria – “key factors in making a decision to hire or not to hire a person. (These) may include qualifications, experience, knowledge, skills, abilities or aptitudes. Selection criteria should be job-related” (Stone, 2013: 252) – consistent with the organization’s direction and culture (values) as well as how well it works or operates in the setting. To this author and as in this paper, one can also add the personal qualities of character and integrity – as it is related to work and organization as well as managing others.

### Paper’s Aim and Objectives

Valuing people, “people before products” (Matsushita Konosuke cited in PHP Institute Inc., 1994: 54) is a good business strategy (Michaelson and Michaelson, 2011; PHP Institute Inc., 1994; Maxwell, 1993); excellent companies want, get, motivate and retain excellent people or employees (Stone: 2013; PHP Institute Inc., 1994; Maxwell, 1993).

Once lost, honesty and integrity is almost impossible to get back. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the post-World War II general and United States President once said that, “The supreme quality for a leader is unquestionably integrity. Without it no real success is possible.” (cited in Price and Price, 2013: 143). When equipped with “san lao si yan”, a person can have towering strengths. This research review paper seeks to uncover and examine the Chinese proverb, “san lao si yan” (3 ‘olds’ and 4 ‘stricts’), and the proverb is assessed in terms of Chinese thinking or reasoning of honesty and connecting it to human resource management or managing, recruiting and selecting people of such qualities. “San lao si yan” is better explained as truly giving brilliant guidelines for leaders and managers to succeed with people.

Excellent organizations such as Westpac, Asia Matsushita and Microsoft do strategic selection; they ensure that their employment activities are aligned with their business strategies so as to produce positive contributions to their organizational performance (Williams and Dobson, 1997; also cited in Stone: 2013; PHP Institute Inc., 1994). Leaders (Maxwell, 1993) or skilled people who are like-minded, honest and disciplined (that is, of like-values and attitude) with the organization are recruited and selected. Most if not all businesses want their people to have the right qualities they value and the disposition to respond well to things and people – more so, on what they value.

Michaelson and Michaelson (2011: 267) spoke of personal characteristics for success within and without the organization; they highlighted the success rules as one, “integrity is a powerful force”, two, “moral integrity is the bedrock of your reputation” and three, “either you have integrity or you do not have integrity”. This only shows that a leader/ manager should possess “san lao si yan” (3 ‘olds’ and 4 ‘stricts’) and hire people with “san lao si yan” as well as manage people in that “san lao si yan” fashion or style. Here it is necessary to have moral clarity in managing people in the same way as what is said by former Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu, that is, there should be “moral clarity”. (He highlighted the basic importance of “moral clarity” in describing key components necessary to winning the war against terrorism.) Moral clarity is simply being clear about what is right and wrong.

And there are no double standards – in one’s integrity and in one’s dealing with and managing others; to quote Confucius: “The Master said, ‘The man of wisdom is never in two minds about right and wrong; the man of benevolence never worries about the future; the man of courage is never afraid.’” (*The Analects*, IX verse 29) (Lau, 1979: 100).

### ***The 3 ‘Olds’***

Dictionary.com (2014) defines honesty as the quality or fact of “being honest” and that is, ensuring more of making sure that one maintains “uprightness” and “fairness” in one’s dealing with others. There is, as the dictionary further defines “truthfulness, sincerity, or frankness”; there’s also “freedom from deceit or fraud”.

Here, we can take it as “character” (Price and Price, 2013) and what Maxwell (1993: 187) described “integrity” that is, “trustworthy, good solid character, words and walk are consistent”. In the proverb: “san lao si yan”, “san lao” means honesty in thought, deed and words and they basically capture the need to upkeep one’s integrity. In Confucian terms, one cultivates oneself to be the superior man or gentleman (lady) (*junzi*) (*The Analects*, I verse 6) (Lau, 1979: 59 – 60). “San lao si yan” sets one to start one’s engine and to start preparing and plan. One, in Sun Tzu’s parlance, indeed heads for the physical and mental high ground; one too establishes one’s mental high ground in the areas of one’s moral beliefs or values, personal integrity and motivation towards success.

Interestingly, honesty, “straightforwardness” and personal ethics is also rolled or embedded in professionalism. In this regard, one respondent who knew that this researcher was writing a review research paper told this researcher these: “Honesty is the straightforwardness... simply the ‘competence’ and that the person can do the job... in other words, he is a professional. And a business owner or the Human Resources Manager will find him ‘responsible, dependable and there’s this comfort feeling safe’ leaving the person to take care of one’s business... and also to diligently take care of one’s staff”. O’Hara (2014) also highlighted that one must be good at one’s job (and if one is not good at one’s job, one can forget about one’s employees’ trusting one). One must update one own skills and follow through on commitments. All these coincide in most ways what BusinessDictionary.com (cited by Ford 2014) defined as professionalism, that is, “meticulous adherence to undeviating courtesy, honesty and responsibility in one’s dealings with customers and associates, plus a level of excellence that goes over and above the commercial considerations and legal requirements.” Ford (2014) added that, “Professionalism is not about your job title or self-proclaimed worth. It is not about self-perception at all.

Professionalism is about personal ethics, quality work and a quality attitude”. And one needs to always up-keep one’s highest level of integrity. With that, others also trust the person doing the job or giving the service. “Tears cannot put out a fire”; here, dishonesty or weakness will lead one to nowhere. Verily Human Resources should not recruit or select an unethical person or anyone with a defective character to be an employee since this would be courting trouble to the business, similar to “rearing tiger to court calamity” (“yang hu yi huan”; Mah, 2003: 362). Hence reference checks such as employer checks and customer and background/ outside parties’ checks are critical; most employers do so before employing the staff (Stone, 2013; Alagan, 2011).

On contrary, when recruiting and selecting the right people into one’s organization, one would also want to procure people of integrity (Maxwell, 1993; Stone: 2013). Solid as a rock, a person of character and integrity is both robust and professional; it is difficult to knock off his or her reputation or reduce his or her stature, as one Chinese saying goes: “slander cannot destroy an honest man: when the flood recedes the rock is there”.

A person’s character and integrity is really important and is a vital ingredient of leadership (Maxwell, 1993; Low and Ang, 2012; Achua and Lussier, 2010; Stone, 2013; Low, 2014). It is overall too about not putting oneself above others as mentioned by Soichiro Honda (1996) and Matsushita Konosuke (PHP Institute, Inc. 1994). Low (2014) spoke of leaders who should be honest, sincere and stand tall. These days, however, in the post-Enron climate of business, all of us want leaders to raise the ethical bar – or if not up it, then at least read about (Pava, 2003, also cited in Low, 2014) or be aware of it. Some leaders are “smiling up whilst kicking down”, acting immorally, breaking promises, and putting personal agenda ahead of what is right for the organization; and saying one thing and doing another (Price and Price, 2013: 144). Being honest and of high integrity is of vital importance; as a business leader, one needs to create greater moral sensitivity in the business-corporate sector and the world is to have leadership lessons drawn from the sacred texts aka ancient wisdom such as the Bible, the Buddhist Sutras, the Torah or the Koran (Low, 2014).

The Chinese has this saying – “beware of people with shifty eyes” (meaning they are of devious character, underhanded or crafty). Ordinarily so, in business, people indeed prefer to deal with honest people – honest prospects, honest customers, honest suppliers and the many honest others. When a supervisor, seller or a person is honest and candid in whatever (s)he (thinks,) says and does things in an honest fashion or evenhandedly, one gets comfortable in relating with him or her. Employees, customers and other people would certainly feel wholesome or good when talking and relating to him or her; (s)he is not a fake, insincere or hypocritical. And one does not feel that one would be cheated, deceived, easily tricked, and feel blamed or resentful; one can communicate well with him or her. This is relevant and good for business; after all, people like to do (more, honest) business with honest persons.

The three ‘Olds’ spoke of the three different types of honesty which will be further examined as follows:

### ***Honesty in Thought***

To restate one Chinese proverb: “if you stand straight, do not fear a crooked shadow” as “if you think straight, do not fear a crooked shadow”, then, no bad actions or consequences ensue, and one then enjoys a good conscience. Another Chinese saying: “Clear conscience never fears midnight knocking” is applicable here too. There is thus no remorse, guilt or any ill feeling; “a clear conscience is the greatest armor” (Chinese proverb) and one goes on doing one’s job and having an honest living.

According to Confucius, “Chi Wen Tzu always thought three times before taking action. When the Master was told of this, he commented, “Twice is quite enough.” (*The Analects*, V verse 20) (Lau, 1979: 79). One too has constant reflection and self-checks. The evidence here lies in *The Analects*, I verse 4). (Lau, 1979: 59) in which, “Tseng Tzu said, ‘Every day I examine myself on three counts. In what I have undertaken on another’s behalf, have I failed to do my best? In my dealings with my friends have I failed to be trustworthy in what I say? Have I passed on to others anything that I have not tried out myself?’”

In other words, one must also learn from one’s thinking: “(If one) does not learn from others, one will be in peril” (*The Analects*, II verse 15) (Lau, 1979: 65). Honesty in one’s thought carries the notion of clarity; one also knows one’s thoughts. One, in fact, knows what one wants and what one stands and strives for. One knows or is duly aware of one’s values or key beliefs and “what is or is not appropriate behavior” (Stone, 2013: 252). One learns, (correcting) and “work(ing) with conviction.” (Matsushita Konosuke cited in PHP Institute Inc., 1994: 64).

Over the centuries, other than Confucianism, Taoism and other philosophies, Chinese thinking has also been more or less affected or influenced by Buddhism (Fung, 1948). And in Buddhism, as Buddha once said (cited in Andersen, 2012) “All that we are is the result of what we have thought. The mind is everything. What we think we become.”

Honesty in thought entails purity of mind and intention (Dalai Lama, The, HH with Chan, 2012). Lustful, bad or dishonest thoughts can lead to dishonest or bad actions, and such bad actions can include bribes, scams, swindles and extra-marital affairs. If one has good intention, whatever deeds, actions and the consequences that ensue will be good; only goodness will come or well up from the good intentions. Goodness comes from goodness.

And added to this, honesty in thought must also come with...

### ***Honesty in Deed***

In the words of great business leaders including John D. Rockefeller (1837-1936), J. Paul Getty (1892-1976), Henry Ford II (1919-1987) and Matsushita Konosuke (1894 - 1989), it is success thoughts and actions that count; they make business great (Fenster, 2000; PHP Institute Inc., 1994).

Interestingly, here, the Buddha once pointed out that, “An idea that is developed and put into action is more important than an idea that exists only as an idea.” (Thinkexist, 2013); one needs to bring one’s honest or good thoughts or ideas into fruition; one thinks and does good or honest things.

All of us want to have more money and each of us work hard to earn a living. However, there are some among us who complain or whine that their money is not enough but instead of earning their money, they take the dishonest but easy way, conspiring to cheat and defrauding others to achieve their means. Bad and dishonest thoughts can lead to bad actions, and there have been cases of corruption, scams, dishonest deals and extra-marital affairs that happened. These, for example, included the owner of an online blog shop who offered bargain goods that did not exist; the insurance agent who sold her millionaire client a non-existent premium policy and the four top chefs from luxury hotels charged with corruption in a \$1 million kickback case (Ooi, 2014). And there were also cases of love or lust to be exact, extra-marital affairs and greed such as a rising politician who had to step down hanging his head in shame and an enterprising but dishonest pimp who offered sex with under-aged prostitutes (Ng, 2014). Dishonest or bad thoughts and actions have made many men and women as well as corporations too run afoul of the law.

A good example is like a church bell ringing and calling others to attention to one’s deeds. One’s deeds or actions can be seen clearly by others or the public. Here, honesty in deed means that one’s deeds matches with one’s thoughts, values or what one is convinced with.

And also in managing one’s people, while setting an example or being a role model (Price and Price, 2013; Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Khoo, 2001; Maxwell, 1993), one would want them to “think no evil and do no evil”; one does want one’s people or employees to act honestly and not to be corrupted, cheating, deceiving others; cooking the books and/ or committing corporate frauds.

### ***Honesty in Words***

Honesty and sincerity predominates and must prevail in one’s words. Just as one Chinese proverb highlights that “a child’s words have no guile” ([foxhugh.com/list-of-list/Chinese-sayings/](http://foxhugh.com/list-of-list/Chinese-sayings/)), there is no malaise in a child’s words; one should indeed mean what one says and says what one means. One keeps one’s words (Cohen, 1999). There is also openness in one’s words and communication with one hearing out and listening to those one talks to. One also gets good or honest feedback from others especially from one’s own people. For after all, as in this Chinese saying, “Honest opinions go against your ear while good medicine tastes bitter”; one may not like it but a good feedback helps, serving to prevent a bigger trouble or avoiding to complicate things further.

Moreover, “words have the power to both destroy and heal. When words are both true and kind, they can change our world.” (Buddha, cited in Low, 2010). Of prime importance, one must bear in mind and act accordingly, that is to truly keep one’s word otherwise, “much though he recites the sacred texts, but acts not accordingly, that heedless man is like a cowherd who only counts the cows of others” (Andersen, 2012). Confucius spoke of “doing one’s best and being trustworthy in what one says.” (*The Analects*, VII verse 15) (Lau, 1979: 89).

It is worthy to note that as a leader/ manager, one's words when kept can help to build one's honor and one's relationships with one's people as well as the employees' trust of one, and the reverse can occur when one's words are taken lightly or not kept. The leader's example and actions should be replicated and cascaded throughout the organization.

It is worthy to note that a leader/ manager should not say: "Do what I say and not do what I do". Having to set the example and being ethical, the leader/ manager's "behaviour sets the standard" (Price and Price, 2013: 151); (s)he needs to be dependable and can be trusted. [Here Confucius spoke of: "Set an example for your officials to follow; show leniency towards minor offenders; and promote men of talent." 'How does one recognize men of talent to promote?']

The Master said, 'Promote those you do recognize. Do you suppose others will allow those you fail to recognize to be passed over?'" (*The Analects*, XIII verse 2) (Lau, 1979: 118).]

Note that cultures where people are expedient and deliberately disregard rules may lead to undesirable behavior and a loss of control. Managers/ leaders thus need to be the role model of the right way to behave – if the manager/ leader is regularly breaking the rules, one cannot expect anyone else to abide by them (Price and Price, 2013).

"I can indeed trust my boss; he always say what he means"; "I am certain about her because she always keep her promises"; "I cannot take or accept empty promises and I'm annoyed if someone did not keep her promises" expressed by several interviewees in Low and Ang (2012: 118). When we speak of honesty in words, we take it that: One stands by one's words; in fact, one stands by what one says. It is in Latin: *neum pactum* or "my word is my bond". If one makes a promise, one will carry out and fulfill that promise.

One needs to be decent; one also does not slander others or say anything that may cause a rumor and/ or discredit others and one's organization.

And now we move on to the 4 'stricts'.

#### ***The 4 'Stricts'***

In the Confucian sense, there is a need to "be steadfast in your purpose" (*Confucius – The Analects*, XIX, verse 6) (Lau, 1979: 153). One is (thus) principled (Cohen, 1999; Maxwell, 1993); one guards one's values and principles, and Cohen (1999) took this as part and parcel of maintaining one's integrity. One can thus take it that in the Chinese proverb "san lao si yan", the "stricts" (Mah, 2003: 281) are used as prefix to denote that one must indeed subscribe to these standards and basically, one is to be disciplined, applying self-control, consistency and persistence as well as perseverance to truly act or carry out them; the "stricts" are one's very own discipline, and the standards too must be applied to managing people.

Looking from the Confucian visor, Low (2012a) spoke of self-discipline, a good trait to have and develop, and this is better explained in terms of the Ps, and these 9Ps + 1P (10Ps) are:

O Planning and organizing: "planning and organizing as a self-disciplined way of cultivating good leadership (**the business, the organization and the people**)" (Low, 2012a, bold, author's)

O Personal mastery: "Personal mastery is a journey of individual, personal, continuous improvement. ...it is a way of life that stresses growth and satisfaction in personal and professional life as well as the pursuit of excellence." (Low, 2012a: 5).

O Principles or core values: "A leader has his (her) own set of principles. And there is clarity and significance of the values held, as well as the Confucian leader sticking to them." (Low, 2012a: 6).

O Practice: "Discipline is about practicing, keep on polishing and practicing is about learning." (Low, 2012a: 7).

O Patience: "Being impatient or going against nature for quick results is no good. Self-discipline involves patience. ...discipline is like an investment; we grow it, we get results, but we need to control ourselves and we need to be patient" (Low, 2012a: 8).

O Person of character: "Just like a good building, there is a good foundation; likewise, self-discipline supplies the foundation in building up of one's character." (Low, 2012a: 9).

O (Being) Provided For: "For Confucius, being right and in alignment with the Tao, one is being provided for. Remember TAO is everything and everything is TAO." (Low, 2012a: 9).

O Personal example: A person should be a role model, setting the example and being ethically sound.

O Persistence and perseverance: The Chinese proverb “Ants eat bone” is applicable here. This is a metaphor describing a situation where people trying an overwhelmingly big task or a mammoth project by doing bit by bit with persistence and perseverance. In being self-disciplined, one persists and perseveres; one keeps on going.

O Prudence which is a Confucian virtue. One avoids excesses in expenditure and loves one’s fellow men. (*The Analects*, I verse 5) (Lau, 1979: 59).

### ***Strict Standards for Work***

One should be disciplined to work hard; the Chinese (**Asians**) strongly believe in working hard (Mah, 2003, **bold author’s**).

There should be measurements and standards. And it is commonly said that “what gets measured gets done; what gets done gets paid” (a statement commonly attributed to total quality management). And indeed attention too must be given to one’s job, and as what Matsushita Konosuke (cited in PHP Institute, Inc. 1994: 61) highlighted, “by giving your best to each and every task you take on, and by reflecting on your performance with an honest and unprejudiced eye. If you do this constantly, day by day, eventually you will be able to do your job unerringly”. The point is that one, there should be conscious effort to learn and acquire success in the work (the job) and that two, that standards must be conscientiously applied from day to day.

To define the standard of a work, one needs to define the standards of the performance of the work itself. And in determining performance standards, one needs to consider these:

- What does a good job look like?
- What is the quantity? How many or how much is needed?
- What is the duration or time involved of the work to be done? Simply put, how long should it take?
- When are the results needed?
- How accurate or how good is acceptable?
- Are there budget considerations?
- Are there safety considerations? (Is one safety-blinded or safety-minded?)
- Are there legislative or regulatory requirements that require strict adherence?
- Are there behaviors that are expected in your department to promote teamwork, leadership, creativity, customer service?
- What results would be considered satisfactory?
- What condition will exist when the duty is well performed?
- What are the differences between good, average and poor performance?

### ***Strict Standards for Organization***

All, if not, most organizations want their people to have certain dispositions to respond well to things and people. One would also like one’s officers and employees to be working hard; they should be competent and capable as well as motivated and willing to learn and work (Michaelson and Michaelson, 2011).

There should be Rectification of Names. Interestingly, Low (2012; also cited in 2012b) argued that in the Confucian sense, a leader is a leader, and (s)he should conduct that set of role and responsibilities of a leader, failing which (s)he is not a leader. The author has indicated that, “This may, on the surface, sound like tautology or a circular argument, but a leader should be a leader. This is basically due to the Rectification of Names”. Names, in Confucianism, denote roles and responsibilities (Sun, 2008: 13). One can also add that these give a professional aura or touch. Besides, when given a set of role and responsibilities, the leader/manager should then be disciplined to fulfill those role(s) and responsibilities undertaken. In this respect, Low (2012a) has expressed the various self-discipline ways and pointers that bolster the various leadership qualities and character of a person, making the person a good leader – and manager/ employee of the business.

It is indeed not a matter of anything goes; an organization has responsibilities, duties or obligations to take care. It is also vital for a business organization to carry out its social responsibilities (Lawrence and Weber, 2008). An organization or a business enterprise functions in a community and it needs to return or contributes to the community in which it operates in. An organization also needs to fulfill the needs of all its stakeholders; for example, an organization needs to pay taxes and fulfill its duties to the government, one of its stakeholders. The business enterprise also gives employment to members of the community in which it operates in, and being green, it must take care of the natural environment or the setting in which it is in; it should optimize not waste resources.

In other words, a business has to attend to its social responsibilities while pursuing its traditional economic goals and interacting with its stakeholders. Overall, it is of critical importance that an organization has standards to subscribe, to adhere to and to attain. An organization should maintain its integrity as part of its corporate culture; without this trait, a company will ultimately fall. Quality will be affected. Scandals and scams can also occur (<http://businessstm.com/online-business-blog/the-importance-of-integrity-in-the-workplace.html>).

### ***Strict Standards for Attitude***

One's attitude can build or determine one's altitude or stature. "Attitudes are evaluative. As described by Makin *et al* (1996, cited in Armstrong, 2006: 244). 'Any attitude contains an assessment of whether the object to which it refers is liked or disliked.'" One should be strict and have standards in terms of one's attitude. For the Confucian, all of us need to have discipline and indeed be self-monitoring (see *The Analects*, X, verse 1 (Lau, 1979: 101); *The Analects*, X, verse 2 (Lau, 1979: 101) and *The Analects*, X, verse 3 (Lau, 1979: 101). Having "strict standards" and example-setting, we should not be incompetent, lazy, deadwoods or worse as Mah (2003: 359) pointed out, being "mu hou er guan" (restless monkeys in tall hats, worthless people dressed up as dignitaries).

A person should truly be careful. "When we are foolish we want to conquer the world. When we are wise we want to conquer ourselves." (Maxwell, 1993: 163) "What the gentleman seeks, he seeks within himself" (Confucius cited in *The Analects*, Chapter XV verse 21; Lau, 1979). (S)he needs to be wary of the enemy within, that is, him(her)self – his (her) very own attitude. One, one can just take it easy, easily contented and not necessarily bothered – "Argghh, tidak apa la!" (Never mind, it does not matter; it's of no concern or consequences!), and non-learning (Ignorance is bliss!) sets in. And two, with regard to others, at times, one may fall, wanting to be exclusive and one is being more concerned with oneself (high ego). There is too much relaxing, "chin chye la" (anything goes); and not even putting in any effort to find out or relate with those around oneself ("Who cares?" "My wants and my needs are most important!"). One may also even boast. And the ego gets bigger; one feels high, almighty and even good but morally and spiritually sinks and stinks; ill-informed, going downhill and declining, taking its serious forms, can indeed be exceedingly fast. Dangerously so, before one is aware or knows about it, it sadly happens – moral deterioration with bloated ego takes place. And alas! A hideous monstrosity, bias, prejudice, intolerance and bigotry as well as an extremist – is born. And a person becomes one! Or worse that person is even blind, clueless, callous; insensitive and heartless to it all; "Who says so; I'm not like that!"

Here, in terms of strict standards for attitude, it is also good and practical to quote Michaelson and Michaelson (2011: 94, **bold this author's**); they spoke of:

As a manager at Burger King, Herman Cain tells how he set a standard for friendly service with the "Happy B.E.E.s." The B stood for "Bad moods stay home (**but don't vent on your family, they are not punching bags**)." The Es signified, "Eye contact with customers (**others. Have personal touch**). Everyday." This success with motivational discipline earned Cain an increase in business and a promotion up the ladder. Consistently maintaining high standards creates the environment where discipline is effective and accepted. In these circumstances, morale is high.

Such an attitude also helps to motivate an individual.

### ***Observation of Discipline***

"If a man is *correct in his own person*, then there will be obedience without orders being given; but if he is not correct in his own person, there will not be obedience even though orders are given." (*Confucius – The Analects*, XIII, verse 6) (Lau, 1979: 19). Here, I agree with Bacal (1999: 168) that employees should actively be involved in setting (owning) their own objectives and standards of performance or targets, and to add, being disciplined.

One basic reason why one should be disciplined is that one does what needs to be done and what's to be done. The soldier who is capable of obedience and direction in action is an orderly fighting person.

When passion, desire and lust take over rational thought, bad things happen. And when such things happened, the perpetrators or doers can embarrass the organization and business from which they hail from. Ng (2014) wrote of several cases that happened, and they included: a senior civil servant who faced corruption charges for engaging in extra marital affairs, school teachers and academics who slept with their students; a straight 'A' student who set a world record for having continuous sex with 251 men and a married man running for political office who took "sexy" photographs of his maid. Self-control, restraint or discipline is indeed needed; it needs to be put into practice.

Sandhu (2013) pointed out that tricksters are quick to prey on Man's desire to have more money that is why sleights of hand and ponzi schemes succeed. Even senior finance managers often succumb to greed and lust, betraying their employer's trust to fund their gambling or to lavish expensive gifts on their mistresses. Several white collar crimes including the Nick Leeson ("the man who brought down a bank") and the fall of Barings case were also highlighted.

Confucius spoke of restraint, self-regulation and being happy in simple ways (Low, 2012a). Interestingly, he also spoke of not to be swept away by materialism. "For the lords of the states there are three treasures: land, people and government. Those who value pearls and jade above these are sure to bring disaster on themselves." (Mencius, 2009: 199; also cited in Low, 2013). Surely companies would not want their employees to be materialistic, keep up with the Jones's and be susceptible to deceive, defraud the business or committing corporate fraud against their customers or other stakeholders.

Confucius highlighted, "Man's existence lies in his integrity. A man without integrity can exist merely through his luck." (*Analects of Confucius*, VI: 19, also cited in Low and Ang, 2012). True, to Confucius, "The gentleman understands what is moral. The small man understands what is profitable." (*Confucius – The Analects*, IV, verse 16) (Lau, 1979: 74). It appears, credibly so, that one can resist temptation once but not a hundred or a thousand times; however, in Confucianism, right actions are always vital. And a gentleperson (*junzi*) should be of high integrity and be self-disciplined.

It is necessary to discuss this in this paper since Asian or Chinese companies in particular would recruit people with certain values including those people who are not materialistic, and they would certainly be finicky in picking their people. Moreover, in terms of strategic human resource management, all, if most companies would want their people's values to mirror the business's values, and to be successfully aligned with the business's core values and common goals. With the people united and their values aligned with the business's, there should also be greater employees' buy-in, support and action of the business objectives (Michaelson and Michaelson; 2011).

Undeniably so, personal discipline is equally important. "We cannot travel without until we first travel within" (Maxwell, 1993: 163). Until a person learns how to command him(her)self, it is unlikely that command over others will be successful. Discipline can also build allegiance (Michaelson and Michaelson; 2011). The ideal leader is best described as one who combines excellence as a task specialist with an equal feel for the human aspects of leadership. She understands that it is people rather than techniques that really count. The manager does not have to be liked; however, she does not have to be disliked. Being fair and impartial does not mean being impersonal. At times, hard decisions must be made; when they are not made, the manager abdicates his authority, what manager does not have his political favorites, viewed with envy by others less favored? Therein lies a complex problem: These politicians are often viewed as delivering bad information to the boss who, in turn, is perceived as delivering bad orders.

When standards for the performance of each process are instituted and clearly communicated, then managers can issue praise or criticism based on performance against that standard. One able executive clarified his reason for having standards: "Up-keeping recognized standards guard me from playing favorites and being criticized for playing favorites." While we find a system of standards and measures in manufacturing processes, many other office or service processes work without clearly defined standards. Commonly so, where there are no standards, blame and penalties are inflicted at the management's whim, and the effect is confusion and low morale.

Managing and disciplining people is really about being fair and just and applying the same standards to everyone. Discipline is like what Bacal (1999: 134, **bold, author's emphasis**) indicated, and the author would add that discipline is **honest** "helping through teaching and training" of the person involved. The proverb when applied to managing people reinforces Douglas McGregor's Hot-Stove Rule (<http://www.whatishumanresource.com/hot-stove-rule>) which gives a good illustration of how to impose disciplinary action without generating resentment. This rule draws an analogy between touching a hot stove, and undergoing discipline, that is, they are:

1. When one touches the hot stove, one burns one's hand. The burn was **immediate**. One learns your lesson quickly.
2. One had **warning** as one knew the stove was red hot and one knew what would happen when one touched it. One knew the rules and regulations previously issued by the company prescribing the penalty for violation of any particular rule. (Can be taken as similar to Bacal's (1999) point of preparing/ helping the employee in their performance.)



3. The discipline was **consistent**. Every time one touches the hot stove one gets burned. Consistency in the administration of disciplinary action is essential. Excessive leniency as well as too much harshness creates not only dissatisfaction but also resentment.
4. The discipline was **impersonal**. Whoever touches the hot stove gets burned, no matter who (s)he is.

### Conclusion

Interestingly, being honest is also about knowing oneself, especially when admitting that one has a problem or a matter to resolve as well as one wants to learn, and that is certainly the first step to improving (disciplining) oneself.

With “san lao si yan” lies the Confucian selection criteria too and how to manage people, the Master said, ‘The gentleman is generous without its costing him anything, works others hard without their complaining, has desires without being greedy, is casual without being arrogant, and is awe-inspiring without appearing fierce.’ (*The Analects*, XX verse 2) (Lau, 1979: 159). “San lao si yan” reflects the character, integrity and discipline of a person (an employee), and for such a person, “If wealth is lost, nothing is lost. If health is lost, something is lost. But, if character is lost, everything is lost.” Indeed “a person who receives low mark on character has absolutely no chance of being perceived as a great leader, especially in the long run.” (John Zenger and Joseph Folkman, 2004, *The Handbook for Leaders*; cited in Price and Price, 2013: 144).

Quality people, these days, are not easily gotten and they must be well recruited and strategically selected; “san lao si yan” gives one a good idea of the qualities or traits in which a business’s talents, if not its people or employees should be. And they should also be managed in a “san lao si yan” style with the leader/ manager giving and showing the paradigm and example.

### References

- Achua, C. F. and Lussier, R. N. (2010). *Effective leadership*, South-Western Cengage Learning: Canada.
- Alagan, E. (2011). *Staff selection*, LCA Consultants Pte. Ltd.: Singapore.
- Andersen, E. (2012). ‘The Buddha: 10 quotes for leading (and living) well’, *Forbes*, 12 Jul 2012. Website: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikaandersen/2012/12/07/the-buddha-10-quotes-for-leading-and-livingwell/> Accessed on 18 Sep 2014.
- Armstrong, M. (2006). (10<sup>th</sup> edition) *A handbook of human resource management*, Kogan Page Limited: London/ Philadelphia.
- Bacal, R. (1999). *Performance management*, McGraw-Hill: New York.
- Cohen, W. A. (1999). ‘The critical importance of integrity’, *Canadian manager*, March 1999. Website: [http://www.stuffofheroes.com/critical\\_importance\\_of\\_integrity.htm](http://www.stuffofheroes.com/critical_importance_of_integrity.htm) Accessed on 29 Sep 2014.
- Dalai Lama, The, HH with Chan, V. (2012). *The wisdom of compassion*, Riverhead Books: USA.
- Dictionary.com (2014). ‘Honesty’, Dictionary.com. Website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Honesty> Accessed on 19 Sep 2014.
- Fenster, J.M. (2000). *In the words of great business leaders*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.: USA/ Canada.
- Ford, J. (2014). ‘Define Professionalism’, eHow. Website: [http://www.ehow.com/about\\_4780106\\_define-professionalism.html](http://www.ehow.com/about_4780106_define-professionalism.html) Accessed on 23 Sep 2014.
- Fung, Y-L (1948). *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, The MacMillan Company: USA.
- Gill, S.J. (2010). ‘What gets measured gets done...or not’, The performance improvement blog. 08 Feb 2010. Website: [http://stephenjgill.typepad.com/performance\\_improvement\\_b/2010/02/what-gets-measured-gets-doneor-not.html](http://stephenjgill.typepad.com/performance_improvement_b/2010/02/what-gets-measured-gets-doneor-not.html) Accessed on 19 Sep 2014.
- HR Focus (2000). ‘The top HR issues of 2000’, *HR Focus*, Vol. 77, no. 4, April 2000. p. I.
- Honda, S. (1996). *Good mileage*, Toppan Company (S) Pte. Ltd.: Singapore.
- Khoo, C. (2001). (ed.) *Malaysia savvy*, PHP International (S) Pte. Ltd. and Malaysian Institute of Management: Kuala Lumpur.
- Lau, D.C. (1979). *Confucius – The Analects (Lun Yu)*, Penguin Group: England.
- Lawrence, A.T. and Weber, J. (2008). *Business & society*, McGraw-Hill/ Irwin: New York.
- Low, K.C.P. (2018). (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) *Leading successfully in Asia*, Springer: Heidelberg, Germany.
- Low, K.C.P. (2014). ‘Key leadership insights and lessons from ancient wisdom’, *International journal of business and social science*, Vol. 5 No. 4 [Special Issue - March 2014], p. 172-180.

- Low, K.C.P. (2013). 'Materialism, Confucianism and Confucian', *Educational research* (ISSN: 2141-5161) Vol. 4(5), May 2013, p. 403-412.'
- Low, K.C.P. (2012). 'The classic leadership sins and the way forward through the Confucian Visor', *Global Education Journal*, Vol. 2012 Issue 1, p. 119 - 136.
- Low, K.C.P. (2012a). 'Leadership lessons from Confucius, the 9Ps and Confucian pillars of self-discipline', *Business Journal for Entrepreneur*, Vol. 2012, Issue 1, p. 1 – 15.
- Low, K.C.P. (2012b). 'The Confucian rectification of names and people/ human resource management', *Educational research* (ISSN: 2141-5161) Vol. 3(8), August 2012, p. 662-668.
- Low, K.C.P. (2010). 'Buddha, Buddhism and positive thinking – The way forward In Our Lives', *Insights to a Changing World*, Volume 2010 Issue 3, p. 115-124.
- Low, K.C.P. and Ang, S.L. (2012). 'The theory and practice of Confucian value of integrity: The Brunei Case Study', *International Journal of business and management*; Vol. 7, No. 14; 2012, p. 114-124.
- Mah, A.Y. (2003). *A thousand pieces of gold*, HarperCollins Publishers: Great Britain.
- Maxwell, J. C. (1993). *Developing the leader within you*, Thomas Nelson, Inc.: USA.
- Mencius (2009). *Mencius says*, ZI Publications Sdn. Bhd.: Malaysia.
- Michaelson, G. A. and Michaelson, S. (2011). *The complete Sun Tzu for business success*, Adams Business: USA.
- Ng, P. (2014). *All in the name of lust*, Marshall Cavendish International Asia Pte. Ltd.: Singapore.
- O'Hara, C. (2014). 'Proven ways to earn your employees' trust', HBR Blog Network, 27 June 2014. Website: <http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/06/proven-ways-to-earn-your-employees-trust/> Accessed on 26 Sep 2015.
- Ooi, S. (2014). *All for the money*, Marshall Cavendish International Asia Pte. Ltd.: Singapore.
- PHP Institute Inc. (1994). *Matsushita Konosuke (1894 - 1989) His life & his legacy*, PHP Institute Inc.: Japan.
- Pava, M. (2003) *Leading with Meaning: Using covenantal leadership to build a better organization*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York.
- Peterson, C. and Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). 'Character strengths and virtues', *A handbook and classification*. American Psychological Association: New York: Oxford.
- Price, A. and Price, D. (2013). *Leadership, a practical guide*, Allen and Unwin Pty Ltd.: New Zealand.
- Sandhu, B. (2013). *Financial frauds*, Marshall Cavendish International Asia Pte. Ltd.: Singapore.
- Stone, R. (2013). (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) *Managing human resources*, John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd: Australia.
- Stone, R. (2002). (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) *Human resources management*, John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd: Australia.
- Sun, C.T.L. (2008). *Themes in Chinese psychology*, Cengage Learning Asia Pte. Ltd.: Singapore.
- Think exist (2013). Buddha quotes, Thinkexist.com Website: [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/an\\_idea\\_that\\_is\\_developed\\_and\\_put\\_into\\_action\\_is/200794.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/an_idea_that_is_developed_and_put_into_action_is/200794.html) Accessed on 6 Feb 2014.
- Williams, A.P.O. and Dobson, P. (1997). 'Personnel selection and corporate strategy', in Andersen, N. and Herriot, P. (1997) (eds.). *International handbook of selection and assessment*, John Wiley & Sons: Chichester, p. 242.

## Websites

- [foxhugh.com/list-of-list/Chinese-sayings/](http://foxhugh.com/list-of-list/Chinese-sayings/) Accessed on 21 Sep 2017.
- <http://businesstm.com/online-business-blog/the-importance-of-integrity-in-the-workplace.html> Accessed on 29 Sep 2016.
- <http://www.whatishumanresource.com/hot-stove-rule> Accessed on 29 Sep 2017.