On Zeng Shiqiang’s Viewpoint about Plan Implementation with Non-action Theory

Hui-min DENG¹,* and Guo-qing Li¹,²

¹Guangzhou College of Commerce, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China
²College of Foreign Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

*Corresponding author

Keywords: Non-action theory, Plan implementation, Taoism, Lao-Tzu, Chinese management.

Abstract. This paper analyzes how to apply the doctrine of non-action raised by Lao-Tzu to the art of management, which can be understood as “take action through non-action”. The paper first of all talks about the situation in which the planner is not its executor and analyzes the possible significant division of opinion that may occur. The paper discusses solutions to deal with them put forward by Prof. Zeng under the guidance Lao-Tzu’s non-action theory. The analysis is carried out both from the leader’s perspective and from the perspective of the average employees as well. The author of the paper argues that non-action theory can also be used in our teaching job, so it is worthy of our further study.

Introduction

This paper discusses and analyzes Professor Zeng Shiqiang’s viewpoints on plan implementation with non-action theory (Wu Wei). Wu Wei (Chinese: 無為; English: non-action or non-doing) the leading ethical concept in Taoism, stresses behaving in a completely natural, uncontrived way. Wei (為) means any intentional or deliberated action, while Wu (無) refers for "no, or lacking", without the founder of Taoism, explains Wu Wei as behaving in a completely natural, uncontrived way without any disruption.[1] In this research, the author first of all discusses the situation in which the planner is not its executor and significant division of opinion occurs and raises three solutions to deal with them, such as never to negatively boycott the original plan and takes a positive response on the executor’s part, try to acquaint himself with his colleagues to cultivate personal ties or personal friendship for enabling further communication between both sides, and Solve plan shortcomings by resorting to remedial measures through negotiation privately, etc.. Then the author of the paper analyzes the doctrine of non-action raised by Lao-Tzu, which is applied in the art of management from both sides, from the leader’s perspective and from the average employees’ perspective. The principle of non-action can bring about a kind of inner tranquility both for the supervisor and for the employees. By following the non-action philosophy, the supervisor, without making extra efforts, is able to lead the team to achieve high efficiency of group work.

Target-oriented Plan Implementation

Prof. Zeng raises two situations in implementing the plan.[2][3][4] One is that the planner is also its executor, generally speaking, if meeting obstacles during plan implementation; he will never speak them out. Rather, he will seek possible solutions to surmount them silently. Even he has succeeded in overcoming the difficulties he has run into and made contributions to the company, he had better simply consider it as a way to gain experience, rather than to claim credits for it, because the plan is made by himself. The other is that supposing the planner is not its executor, most probably significant division of opinion will inevitably occur. There are generally three situations discussed as follows which would cause both parties to accuse each other, thus undermining the effect of plan implementation:
First, the planner lacks in practical experience in actual plan implementation, and tends to make mistakes in the aspects of time allotment, order of the steps and personnel arrangement. However, if the plan executor straightforwardly reports it to the leader, or calls the planner’s attention to his own mistakes, it would publicly expose the planner’s weakness and mistakes, and the planner would feel humiliated and lose his “face”. Being embarrassed, the planner may in turn accuse the executor of his incompetence in carrying out the plan, and he may even use some lame arguments and perverted logic to defend himself rather than acknowledge his mistakes, thus resulting in further difficulties in coordination between both parties.

Second, significant differences exist between the cognition and evaluation standards of the planner and the executor. In that case, conflict is bound to occur due to the dividing opinions of both parties. For example, the supporting measures, which are given priority by the planner, are generally ignored by the executor, as he finds them hard to implement under the current situation with the available sources. Besides, modifications to the details at work also induce different responses from both parties. Similar cases frequently take place, causing both sides to become harsh judges of each other and eventually lose their mutual trust.

Third, the executor fails to fully understand the essence of the original plan, and thus interprets it in a way different from what the planner has expected. There is no malicious intent harbored by both sides, but the result turns out to be frustrating. Even though the planner laboriously and repeatedly reminds the executor of the key points of the plan, he does not necessarily get positive response from the executor, for the latter might consider himself to be always in the right, unaware of his limited knowledge on the whole plan. Poor communication between the planner and the executor builds an invisible barrier that seems hard to break.

The commonly-seen situations, if not handled properly, may spell an undesirable consequence: the plan is well designed but poorly executed (Here we focus our attention on the executor, and ignore the above-mentioned first possibility: the planner lacks in practical experience in actual plan implementation). There are two possible conditions for such a result: firstly, the executor is not wholly dedicated to the job or collaborative with the planner, he may even embarrass the planner by intentionally committing mistakes. Secondly, the executor is willing to collaborate with full efforts, but problems still occur during the plan implementation due to cognition gap of both sides or the executor’s lack of understanding of the plan. Neither of the causes is beneficial to both parties, and it highlights the necessity to make prior estimation on plan implementation and improve its performance and benefit as well. Only when the plan is both well designed and implemented can achievement be made eventually.

In fact, the main duty of the plan executor lies neither in evaluating the plan in order to uncover its shortcomings, nor in blindly following it. Rather, the executor should be target or outcome-oriented, and strive to guarantee the desired results. The three main points discussed as follows are suggested for reference:

First, most experienced staff finds it difficult to follow a plan strictly in accordance with its designed steps in that the plan usually differs from the actual situation. On the other hand, it is also not easy even for veteran executor to grasp every detail of the plan, which causes him to frequently accuse the planner of being an armchair strategist and making impractical plan. However, putting his feet down on plan implementation, the executor should avoid being critical and captious, since it is virtually impossible even for the most thoughtful planner to fully anticipate a succession of variables. Instead, he ought to deem it a great opportunity for him to thrive on challenge and prove his own competence at handling difficulties. It is never a wise act to angrily criticize the impracticality of the planner, or to negatively boycott the original plan. At this point, the executor, being fully aware of the planner’s intent, should ponder over the alternative solutions, make in-depth analysis as well as do corresponding adjustment to perfect the plan and facilitate its implementation. Such a positive response on the executor’s part, doubtlessly, will be much appreciated by the planner, who is now more ready to accept the changes made by the executor. As a matter of course, contradiction is dismissed in favor of between both sides.
Second, communicating on a regular basis between the planner and the executor helps to build up a relationship of mutual trust and understanding. The aim of the plan, for example, needs to be thoroughly explained to the executor at the opportune moment through a well-established interpersonal relationship. In Chinese society, people tend to consider “business is business” if their communication is exclusively built on colleagueship,\(^5\) which might end up with no room for establishing personal ties, and cause both sides to lose face. Preferably, one should try to acquaint himself with his colleagues to cultivate personal ties, or personal friendship in particular, with them. Such a personal relationship can provide much convenience for enabling further communication between both sides when talking about business, as it is based on both sense and sensibility.

Colleagues are generally mindful of personal gains and losses, while friends are more tolerant, negotiable and thoughtful. Friendship smooths the way for people to talk about business and fosters a more positive interaction between both sides. In friendly atmosphere, conflict arising from the work can be negotiated peacefully without hurting the communicators’ “face”, or incurring any shame-induced feeling of anger (which is a typical response of the Chinese people when facing embarrassment). Friendship also opens the door for the communicators to objectively see the discrepancy between making and operating the plan, urging them to seek possible ways to make adjustment and complement. Only on the solid ground of a positive friendship can the planner and the executor create sustainable collaboration filled with dedication and sincerity.

Third, both the planner and the executor should bear in mind that “contributions fade out over time while faults stay”. Two pieces of interpretative message can be drawn from this statement: one is that contributions will soon be forgotten, or even be denied later, and the other is achievement should be modestly attributed to the other party. People should keenly recognize that “credit is taken by sharing rather than stealing”.\(^3\)\(^5\) If both the planner and the executor compete for taking all the credit, it is bound to result in both sides having no credit, while contrarily, sharing the credit of contribution wins approval and recognition for both sides. Therefore, any shortcomings of the plan, if discovered during plan implementation, should not be exposed publicly, but be solved by resorting to remedial measures through negotiation between them privately.

Give public support to the ideas of your counterpart in the face of the executive personnel which will facilitate the private negotiation in Prof Zeng’s opinion. And the executor is advised to stick to the original plan and pay due respect to the planner. Besides, Prof. Zeng thinks that he’d better talk business with the planner in a manner of friend-to-friend.\(^2\)\(^6\) On the planner’s part, a carefully-cultivated friendship with the plan executor helps to improve communication efficiency. After all, negotiating with “one of your own” (the way that the Chinese usually call a close friend) is considered much easier than arguing with people having no ties with you. Noteworthy is that the planner, if the planner finds it difficult or impossible to make friends with the executor, only considering him to be a mere speaking acquaintance of the executor, he had better seek help from a middleman to help him bridge the relationship between them. This is also a remarkable way to get success.

Non-action Manner in Leadership

Obstacles in the execution of the plan include the executor’s poor understanding of the plan, his inadequate ability in carrying out the plan, low competence and morale at work, chaotic schedule of implementation, personal attitudes unfavorable towards the planner, but the biggest obstacle comes from the weakness in the team leader’s leadership.

In the context of contemporary management, it is much unlikely that plan implementation could be the work of a single individual, but rather the result of joint efforts made by a team. Whatever size the team is, its leader plays the most important role in holding his team together and extracting the best out of the team members. Excellent leadership qualities help to boost team morale, enhance team performance and coordinate the relationship between the executor and the planner. Meanwhile, he
should also try to foster a more in-depth understanding of the plan, and build up closer ties with all the concerned operating units.

In terms of plan implementation, a good leadership style is supposed to possess the following qualities:

First, the leader should be enthusiastic, passionate and committed to any tasks assigned by the top manager, presenting a strong will in bringing plans to its full implementation. Much influenced by the positive power of the leader’s personal attitude, members of the team will naturally be more dedicated and cooperative at work. Certainly, the leader should also show more sincere concerns for the members about their daily work and life, and assign tasks reasonably according to their capabilities.

Second, the leader should show strong trust and confidence in team members, holding a firm belief that joint efforts made by all members will eventually yield good result and bring success to the whole team. Generally, team members tend to be easily affected by the leader’s expectations on them. Their work willingness and dedication will be greatly enhanced if the leader sets positive expectations on them. Contrarily, their willingness and dedication will be much dampened if the leader shows less respect and confidence in them, which would make the team members become distanced from them, and even indifferent to the plan implementation, thinking to themselves that the accomplishment of the task is none of their concern.

Third, the leader should be outcome-oriented and stay resolved to fulfill the task with desirable result, which can motivate his team members to work harder for better achievements. However, if the leader seems to be indifferent to the outcome, the morale of the whole team tends to drop, which subsequently leads to a lack of discipline and reduces the members’ willingness to try their best.

To cultivate such leadership qualities, the leader is advised to draw inspirations from the spirit of “non-action” advocated by Taoism[1], relying on all the staff to achieve everything.

People will think of Lao-Tzu whenever the philosophical idea of Wu Wei is mentioned. In Tao Te Ching, Lao-Tzu introduces his ideal of the “enlightened leader” who, by embodying the principles of Wu Wei, is able to rule in a way that creates happiness and prosperity for all the people in world.[1] Wu Wei has also found its expression in management in the modern context, and seemingly provides unique guidance for its actual practice. Nevertheless, there are still some voices of doubt from some western scholars who questioned the validity of this viewpoint: can doing nothing really lead to the achievement of everything? Who is willing to appoint a carder who does nothing at his position at all? It is obvious that they have interpreted Wu Wei “doing nothing” from the perspective of its literal meaning, thus failing to grasp its real connotation.

In an era featured by various management styles and cultures, Lao-Tzu’s viewpoint rings the bell for those who work in management particularly. Generally speaking, the managerial staff often unconsciously fall into the pitfall “manage for management’s sake”,[2][3][5] and make futile managerial practice that helps to increase nothing but the management cost. The leader, similarly, tends “to lead for the sake of leadership”, [2][3][5] which often undermines the working efficiency of the team and results in drop in morale.

Admittedly, there are leaders who recklessly insist on interfering with their subordinates’ work, even the smallest details of the subordinates’ jobs. Such action represents the Taoist concept of You Wei (meaning doing or acting) and has been firmly opposed by Lao-Tzu, who pointed out that “the more prohibitions the government imposes on its people, the direr poverty its people will sink into; the more rules the government sets on regulating the society, the more chaotic the society will turn into.”[1]

Lao-Tzu’s insights on the potential harms brought by “too much doing” shed light on managerial practice in the contemporary society, because in management, as it were, the superior in charge of the work is always “interfering too much”, which would make his subordinates feel at loss as to what to do, or unwilling to play their subjective initiative in their work.[6][7] As the result, the superior’s cordial working enthusiasm, or even his faith in his subordinates fails to evoke any positive feedback. What’s worse, the subordinates become overcautious and have no idea about how to act according to
the changing circumstances or what to do at the right time, which will definitely prevent them from achieving the satisfactory result in the implementation of the plan.

In fact, Lao-Tzu has expounded on the impacts of non-action in great detail. In Chapter 57 of Tao Te Ching, the sage says, “I, as a leader, practice non-action, and the people become self-educated; I love quietude, and the people become spontaneously upright; I take no measures, and the people enrich themselves; I have no desires, and the people naturally become simple in leading their lives.”

It is apparent that Wu Wei does not mean doing nothing by its literal meaning, but encapsulates the profound philosophical connotations of “letting things take their own course”, with emphasis on “taking no action, harboring no desires and quietude” as the core aim. Its main points can be explained as follows:

First, “taking no action”, if dealt with from the leader’s perspective, means to encourage the subordinates to give play to their initiative without imposing any interference; if dealt with from the perspective of the average employees, it means taking actions and making their due contributions without being interfered by their leaders, or within the framework of non-intervention, which is supposed to be only confined to the work assigned to them by the leader. Besides, “taking no action” can also imply that both the leader and the staff should be modest without showing off, or making the achievements widely known or taking all credits to themselves. Lao-Tzu has gains insight into the root of disharmony and conflict between people, which he concludes as the fact that all people have the desire of possession, and the possessive nature can grow relentlessly if without restriction. Therefore, he advocates, as he writes down in Chapter 81 of Tao Te Ching, that “the way of a saint is to act naturally without contention.” This philosophical thinking has found expression in modern managerial practice, where people are advised to utilize their individual expertise and skills in a natural way without striving for fame and gains. As for the team leader or superior, he had better lead his members or subordinates in a “non-interference” attitude, if so, the whole team, undoubtedly, will be more united and dedicated, which subsequently brings about the achievements of everything effortlessly.

Second, “harboring no desires”, dealt with from the leader’s perspective, means to lead the subordinates with a heart free of desires, which will help them to naturally lead a simple life. The “desire” discussed here does not refer to the inborn lust of human being, but rather a kind of scheming. A great number of cases have already proved that a leader, if he or she always plays politics to meet his own desires, can only prevent the subordinates from keeping their minds on the work, as most of them have to be on guard against him, fearing that the dishonest leader would treat them unfairly and consider them uncooperative, or even worse, remove them from the office. Thus, if the leader can be fair-minded without harboring any unjustifiable desires, the subordinates could act more conscientiously.

Third, “quietude” refers to a kind of inner tranquility. In Taoism, tranquility refers to a neutral stillness of the mind that helps to renew the tired soul and leads to regeneration. The inner tranquility cherished by the supervisor, means that he should be empty of selfish desires, and should take an open and inclusive attitude towards his subordinates. Such a leader can also help the subordinates develop inner tranquility, with which the employees will become modest and tolerant to different opinions. By following the philosophy of “quietude”, the supervisor, without making extra efforts, is able to lead the team to achieve high efficiency of group work.

Accordingly, the leader is suggested to adhere to the following three points in managerial practice:

First, never interfere in the matters that the subordinates can handle on their own. A successful leader excels in enhancing the subordinates’ level of participation at work and allowing them more freedom to fully display their talents and skills rather than attending to everything personally, which can as well foster a sense of belonging and accomplishment among the subordinates.

Second, put forward problems and do not provide ready solutions. In this way, the subordinates will be motivated to seek the solutions self-reliantly, while the leader should step aside to make evaluation and only provide guidance if necessary.
Third, take full responsibility for the job and never play politics and attempt to shirk it. The subordinates, generally, feel much uneasy and shamed if they make mistakes at work for which their superior has to shoulder full responsibility. Hence, they will be more diligent and attentive in doing their part of job lest they should get the superior into troubles.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes the doctrine of non-action raised by Lao -Tzu, which, applied in the art of management, can be understood as “take action through non-action”. In this paper, the author first of all discusses the situation in which the planner is not its executor and analyzes the possible significant division of opinion that may occur. The paper discusses three solutions to deal with them put forward by Prof. Zeng, such as never to negatively boycott the original plan and takes a positive response on the executor’s part, try to acquaint himself with his colleagues to cultivate personal ties or personal friendship for enabling further communication between both sides, and solve plan shortcomings by resorting to remedial measures through negotiation privately, etc.. All these solutions are in fact closely connected with Lao-Tzu’s non-action theory which is explained by Prof. Zeng from two angles. From the leader’s perspective, it means to encourage the subordinates to give play to their initiative without imposing any interference; from the perspective of the average employees, it means taking actions and making their due contributions without being on guard against their leaders. The principle of non-action can bring about a kind of inner tranquility, which, cherished by the supervisor, means that he should be empty of selfish desires by taking an open and inclusive attitude towards his subordinates to help the subordinates develop inner tranquility, with which the employees will become modest and tolerant to different opinions. By following the non-action philosophy, the supervisor, without making extra efforts, is able to lead the team to achieve high efficiency of group work.

Non-action theory can also be used in our teaching job, namely to encourage students to give full play to subjective initiative and carry out independent learning. It is worthy of our further study.

Acknowledgement

This article is the phased achievement of Chinese-Foreign Language Cooperative Education of Language Teaching Team, Undergraduate Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project of Guangdong 2017 (2017SJXJTD01).

References

[1] Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Shanghai Classics Publishing House, Shanghai, 2006.
[2] Zeng Shiqiang. Ying zai zhongguoshi guanli, Guangdong Economy Publishing House, Guangzhou, 2001.
[3] Zeng Shiqiang. Guanli de aomi, Guangdong Travel & Tourism Press, Guangzhou, 2016.
[4] Zeng Shiqiang. Zhongguoshi guanli shiyong shouce, Beijing United Publishing, Beijing, 2014.
[5] Zeng Shiqiang. Guanli siwei, Beijing United Publishing, Beijing, 2014.
[6] Zeng Shiqiang. Yuanrong de renji guanxi, Peking University Press, Beijing, 2008.
[7] Zeng Shiqiang. Laozi de rensheng zhihui, Guangdong Economy Publishing House, Guangzhou, 2016.