Analysis of Zeng Shiqiang’s “Ming Zhe Bao Shen” Viewpoint and “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling” Management Style

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Abstract. This paper discusses and analyzes Professor. Zeng Shiqiang’s viewpoints on the Chinese philosophical principle “ming zhe bao shen”, namely “being worldly-wise and mind one’s own business” in order to achieve self-protection purpose, and its application in the Chinese Management in the strategy of “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling” with the explanation and examples. As far as management is concerned, Zeng argues that in order to protect themselves, both an employer and an employee need to be able to follow the principle of “ming zhe bao shen”, or “being worldly-wise and mind his own business” and to apply the strategy of “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling” which is the best way for “dissolving problems” rather than “solving problems”, and can help to achieve delightful result to protect themselves and achieve a harmonious environment.

Introduction

Professor Zeng Shiqiang is recognized as the father of Chinese management and has been the best-known and the most admired expert in management studies and practice in China. Prof. Zeng defines management as the course of cultivating oneself and bringing peace and comfort to the others. To be a good manager, one needs to be a good person in the first place; in other words, he should aspire to become a better man and constantly cultivate himself. Only with self-cultivation can he regulate his own family, run his business or manage his career successfully. “ming zhe bao shen”, meaning “being worldly-wise and minding one’s own business” is considered by Zeng as the principle to be adhered to during the process of management, which justifies for the Chinese people’s management thinking “pushing, delaying and pulling” in doing things. In this paper, the Chinese ancient wisdom of “ming zhe bao shen” is introduced, and followed by that, this paper is to explain the gist of the management strategy “pushing, delaying and pulling” held by Prof. Zeng.

Solving Problems with “Ming Zhe Bao Shen”

Reason for Adopting “Ming Zhe Bao Shen”: Self Protection

The principle “ming zhe bao shen” means “being worldly-wise and minding his own business” in his work in order to protect themselves. To Prof. Zeng, modern management has caused the phenomenon of “death from overwork”, which means that employees literally become the casualties of the wars aiming at winning higher efficiency and more profits, and Zeng thinks that this is the result of mal-management, and he thinks that it is by no means the price modern managers want to pay, nor is it a result acceptable to any party involved in the managing process. Nevertheless, there are still many people who unwittingly get involved in the vicious circle of mal-management, and they don’t even know what causes their misfortune when they are lying on their death beds. Zeng argues that “ming zhe bao shen” principle is supposed to be the best strategy to deal with this kind of condition. He firstly talks about it from the perspective of history. [1]

Prof. Zeng thinks that, for the people in power throughout the history, there are three stages of evolvement. The first stage is forging brotherhood. This is a period when leaders value objective
counsel and respect the good advice which is harsh to the ear. The second stage is consolidation of power, during which the favored advisers start to stand out from the alternatives. The ones who are considered loyal and trustworthy will be kept close and be put in important positions by the leaders, while those considered untrustworthy will be prosecuted. And the more capable these dissidents were thought to be, the more pains and suffering would be inflicted upon them. When it comes to the last stage of decline and decadence, the people in power tend to be over suspicious, and the advisers in favor can become the victim of such suspicion overnight. So, this is also the period which calls for their heightened vigilance.

As far as management is concerned, Zeng believes that for employers, it is quite natural for the people in power to be always cautious, even if they're extremely talented and have great foresight. Similar to the people under their leadership, constant vigilance is a must for them as well. Its necessity has been proved by many historical anecdotes in which good-hearted people were always the first to lose their lives when a mean-spirited person or hypocrite was in a high position of power, because of false accusation or persecution.

When reviewing history, most Chinese people tend to focus on criticizing those mean men for causing death of the noble but fail to examine the deeds of the gentlemen who die untimely. Zeng can’t help exclaiming why they didn’t ask the question: for what reason(s) were men of noble characters in history so often easily struck down by the mean men?

Zeng believes that if the gentlemen were ever to self-examine or reflect, they would see almost all of them lack precaution against the petty men. And this is the underlying factor leading to the early death of the gentlemen themselves. If they had applied the principle of “ming zhe bao shen”, avoided sticking their necks out and saved their own skin, they would have outwitted and outlived the villains and despicable ones, possibly resulting in longer periods of peaceful ruling in Chinese history.

Necessity of Employing “Ming Zhe Bao Shen” in Management

Prof. Zeng explains this principle “ming zhe bao shen” from the angle of the modern management. As for the superior, he believes that in the case of dealing with one’s superior, the employee or the subordinate has to be worldly-wise so as not to offend the men on top in any way. For the men on top, they have spent lots of time and energy on their way up, so they simply cannot allow any subordinate’s mistake to pull them down from the high status. Once detecting the possibility of being encumbered by the men under them, if the superior tries to shirk responsibility and shift the blame onto the subordinates, it will be too late for the subordinate to make amends. He would probably regret not being worldly-wise and precautious in getting along with his boss.

As for the superior, one thing Zeng emphasizes is that men in power should bear in mind that love is often the cause of ruin. If his subordinate was a petty man, he would treat the superior’s casual remark as an order and make a big fuss about it, thus making trouble to the community, or even bringing disasters to the leaders themselves. When a superior finds out that the trusted subordinate, whom he regarded highly and depended on, has been betraying him for the sake of personal gains, he would certainly regret not being worldly-wise and take precaution in his relations with his wicked underlings before, but such painful hindsight is meaningless now.

Almost all the emperors throughout the Chinese ancient history knew quite clearly that wise and able men should be appointed to the high social positions, because the divine leaders understood the importance of wise advisers in assisting the rule. Yet what haunted the highest authority was the possibility that the wise men might also be petty men, or in other words, they would reveal their ugly true color when the time came. So, the leaders had to be constantly on guard against any threat of petty men, to follow the principle of “ming zhe bao shen” in the management.

A Discussion of Two Different Ways of Applying “Ming Zhe Bao Shen”

According to Zeng, there are two different ways for “ming zhe bao shen”. One is to protect oneself but causing no harm to others. This is good for oneself and harmless to the others. In other words, these people will refrain from doing harm to others only for the mere sake of self-protection. The other is
that protect oneself by putting others in danger. Zeng thinks that this side of playing safe and being worldly-wise and benefiting oneself at the expense of others, does more harm than good. A tooth for a tooth, and it might backfire, turning the harm doer into the victim of the harm in the end.

A large number of people have a strong aversion to the mentality of “being worldly-wise”, and Zeng thinks that they have every right in doing so if it is the second type of “ming zhe bao shen” that is concerned. The right thing to do is playing safe and being worldly-wise without bringing harm to others. After all, where there is life, there is hope. A wise man knows how to become successful, which can only be guaranteed under the condition that he is physically safe, mentally sound, and staying in a peaceful environment. [2]

“Pushing, Delaying and Pulling” Management Style Obtained from “Taiji Ming Zhe Bao Shen”

Problem Dissolving: Pushing, Delaying, Pulling, Inspired by “ming zhe bao shen”

Westerners value “problem solving” highly, yet they are seldom aware of the fact that a problem solved often has more problems generated. And this is also a major contributing factor to the increasing complexity of modern management, namely, modern management has got caught in the vicious circle of endless problem solving. To tackle this issue, the ancient Chinese wisdom of “ming zhe bao shen” can be used in a manner of “problem dissolving”, namely “turning big problems into small ones, and small ones into no problems at all” (This is an ancient Chinese idiom “sa shi hua xiao, xiao shi hua liao”), a strategy widely applied at work by the Chinese, instead of “problem solving”. [3]

The “problem dissolving” strategy is embodied in reasonable and appropriate “pushing, delaying and pulling”, with its underlying principle bearing resemblance to the philosophy of Taiji (Taiji appears in both Taoist and Confucian Chinese philosophy, where it represents the fusion or mother of yin and yang into a single ultimate, represented by the taijitu symbol). In a sense, Chinese style management is the Taiji way of problem “dissolving”. And of course, there are voices of disapproval against this seemingly passive way of dealing with problems, but disapproval voices mostly come from people who failed to successfully apply the tactics of “pushing, delaying and pulling”, and as a result, ended up resenting the entire idea of “problem dissolving”.

The Taiji moves are nothing more than the gentle and flowing combination of pushing, dragging and pulling, however, a good balance is achieved in the slow-paced movements. Interestingly, Prof. Zeng argues that they correspond to the three tactics of Chinese style which are integrated to fulfill the social purpose of dissolving problems, which is just as Taiji’s individual moves are combined into the organic whole of Taiji [4]. Moreover, though Taiji moves seem weak but really powerful, in the same way, the tactics of reasonable and appropriate “pushing, delaying and pulling”, which also look slow and quiet on the surface, can be integrated to achieve a kind of dynamic balance which will help bring about the success of the management.

In spite of being long accustomed to using “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling”, many Chinese today reproach the application of these tactics, calling them an ill-habit. Ironically, the reason behind their criticism is that the westerners believe that “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling” are the typical Chinese style of time-wasting and are acts of irresponsibility, for some western scholars do not have a deep understanding of China's national conditions and Chinese character, and only pay their attention to the surface of the phenomenon. As for the Chinese who have sided with these westerners, it is because they have their better judgment clouded by their blindness in pursuing western style management. For further understanding of this problem, let’s look at Prof. Zeng’s explanation of it.

Zeng’s Explanation of “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling”

Zeng makes a very objective description of the manage strategy “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling” from positive and negative perspectives. First ,“Pushing (推 tui)”. Zeng claims that this character “Pushing
Therefore, it is necessary for us to examine the right way of applying the three tactics.

Application of “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling” in a Positive Way

Prof. Zeng puts forward his opinion about how to apply “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling” in a positive way and its advantages in applying this strategy.

Firstly, one should be either the executor or the receiver of the three actions. One shouldn’t and cannot always take advantage of different situations by “pushing” difficulties towards the others in order to achieve the self-protection effect of “ming zhe bao shen”, in the same way, he cannot always “push” himself to meet the difficulties head-on either. Only under certain circumstances which is reasonable and beneficial to “push” the responsibility onto a third party, this strategy can be used. So, there is no fixed rule in applying the three tactics of “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling”, and only under the circumstance that it is justifiable to “push” the wrong action taken towards another party, it could be deemed the wisest and most reasonable, and can successfully result in self-protection goal of “ming zhe bao shen”.

Secondly, one can think thoroughly before taking any of the three actions. Take “Tui: pushing or putting off” and “Tuo: delaying” as an example. If one makes a good use of them, he can buy himself some time to consider the next move. The time bought can then help to defuse risks and increase chance of success. Supposing one is asked to promise or do something, instead of flatly refusing or declining the other party’s request on spot, he can find an excuse and wisely postpone answering so as to provide a better solution. All these reflect the Chinese style of diplomacy and management.

Thirdly, right employing the strategy “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling” can help create a less competitive environment and result in less hurt-feeling. The Chinese like to compare and compete with each other, and for them, almost anything can become a filed for competition. Once a competition is started, they would often take it seriously, as a life-or-death struggle to be won by fair means or foul. Being fully aware of and alarmed by this self-destructive nature of their compatriots, the wise men in the history therefore devised the three tactics, allowing conflicts and discords to be
replaced by polite declining and modest compromising. And, even though the actions of pushing, delaying and pulling appear to be soft and gentle, they are in fact combat moves in disguise. For the Chinese, who tend to lose their temper or get emotional easily, using the three tactics to ensure their own safety.

Zeng employs a vivid example to illustrate his viewpoint. For example, when a person accepts a work assignment from his superior without the slightest hesitation, or even appears to be joyful, his superior would naturally assume that this man is having too light a workload and would probably assign more new tasks to him. By then, if the subordinate still takes whatever came his way without any “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling”, he will find himself buried in work if not at the risk of jeopardizing the entire work deployment of his team. Moreover, when he is not able to complete all the tasks he took on, he makes himself a prey to office gossip. He will be deemed as either an apple polisher who tries too hard to impress the superiors, or an ostentatious egotist who seeks the limelight at work. Either way, he is falling rapidly out of favor with his colleagues. [5]

Then how to protect himself from being hurt? Zeng puts forward a very useful suggestion. Supposing the task is one that has been shunned by many other team members, the person should accept it, after only a ritual of polite declination. By doing so, he can spare his superiority’s embarrassment of having no authority at work and avoid being misunderstood as putting on airs. However, when it comes to an assignment which is the subject of hot pursuit among most or all team members, he should refrain from taking it by humbly declining at first, explaining that he simply cannot take what the others are all eager to take. Only under the circumstance that the others insist on his doing so, can he take it. Handing over the opportunity to the coworkers in this way implies that he harbors friendly intention, and really helps prevent hard feelings and rivalry. Thus, self-protection of “ming zhe bao shen” is achieved through reasonably and flexibly employing the strategy of “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling”.

Conclusion

This paper discusses and analyzes Prof. Zeng’s viewpoints on the Chinese philosophical principle “ming zhe bao shen”, namely “being worldly-wise and mind one’s own business” in order to achieve self-protection purpose, and its application in the Chinese Management in the strategy of “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling”, which is tackled with the explanation and examples. As far as management is concerned, Zeng argues that in order to protect themselves, both an employer and an employee need to be able to follow the principle of “ming zhe bao shen”, or “being worldly-wise and minding his own business” and to apply the strategy of “Pushing, Delaying and Pulling” which is considered by Prof. Zeng the best way for “dissolving problems” rather than “solving the problems”, if used properly, and can help achieve delightful result to protect themselves and a harmonious environment.

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