

## Parables of Leadership

by W. Chan Kim and Renee A. Mauborgne

Students of management have sought for years to understand why the very same activities lead to renewal in one company and to more of the same performance in another. Almost always the answer that is given is LEADERSHIP, the ability to inspire confidence and support among the men and women on whose competence and commitment performance depends. Yet while we intuitively recognize leaders whenever we meet them, it has never been easy to answer the question:

What is leadership?

The essence of leadership cannot be reduced to a series of personal attributes nor confined to a set of particular roles and activities. It is like the challenge of describing a bowl: we can describe a bowl in terms of the clay from which it is made. But a true picture must include the hollow that is carved into the clay - the unseen space that defines the bowl's shape and capacity.

We have searched for ways to capture the unseen space of leadership. The longer this search went on, the more we found ourselves talking about lessons which one of us first heard as a youth in the temples of Kyung Nam, province of Korea. These lessons came from Oriental masters who taught the wisdom of life through parables, and they gave us a fresh understanding of the essence of leadership. They provided us with the inspiration and insights we needed to create parables that could capture the unseen space of leadership.

The parables that follow show the essential qualities of leadership and the acts that define a leader; the ability to hear what is left unspoken, humility, commitment, the value of looking at reality from many vantage points, the ability to create an organization that draws out the unique strengths of every member. These parables provide an occasion for reflecting on the essence of leadership as well as on one's own work and life.

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## The Sound of the Forest

Back in the third century A.D., the King Ts'ao sent his son, Prince T'ai, to the temple to study under the great master Pan Ku. Because Prince T'ai was to succeed his father as king, Pan Ku was to teach the boy the basics of being a good ruler. When the prince arrived at the temple, the master sent him alone to the Ming-Li Forest. After one year, the prince was to return to the temple to describe the sound of the forest.

When Prince T'ai returned, Pan Ku asked the boy to describe all that he could hear.

"Master," replied the prince,  
"I could hear the cuckoos sing, the leaves rustle,  
the hummingbirds hum, the crickets chirp, the grass blow,  
the bees buzz, and the wind whisper and holler."

When the prince had finished, the master told him to go back to the forest to listen to what more he could hear. The prince was puzzled by the master's request.

Had he not discerned every sound already?

For days and nights on end, the young prince sat alone in the forest listening. But he heard no sounds other than those he had already heard. Then one morning, as the prince sat silently beneath the trees, he started to discern faint sounds unlike those he had ever heard before. The more acutely he listened, the clearer the sounds became. The feeling of enlightenment enveloped the boy.

"These must be the sounds the master wished me to discern,"  
he reflected.

When Prince T'ai returned to the temple, the master asked him what more he had heard.

"Master," responded the prince reverently,  
"when I listened most closely, I could hear the unheard - the  
sound of flowers opening, the sound of the sun warming the  
earth, and the sound of the grass drinking the morning dew."

The master nodded approvingly.

"To hear the unheard," remarked Pan Ku,  
"is a necessary discipline to be a good ruler. For only when  
a ruler has learned to listen closely to the people's hearts,

hearing their feelings uncommunicated, pains unexpressed, and complaints not spoken of, can he hope to inspire confidence in his people, understand when something is wrong, and meet the true needs of his citizens. The demise of states comes when leaders listen only to superficial words and do not penetrate deeply into the souls of the people to hear their true opinions, feelings, and desires."

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### Fire and Water

In the fourth century B.C., hidden within the state of Lu, lay the district over which Duke Chuang governed. The district, though small, had prospered exceedingly well under Chuang's predecessor. But since Chuang's appointment to the post, its affairs had deteriorated markedly. Taken aback by the sad turn of events, Chuang set out to the Han mountain to seek the wisdom of the great master Mu-sun.

When the duke arrived at the mountain, he found the great master sitting peacefully on a small rock looking out at the adjoining valley. After the duke had explained his situation to Mu-sun, he waited with bated breath for the great master to speak. Contrary to Chuang's expectation, however, the master whispered not a word. Rather, he smiled softly and gestured to the duke to follow him.

Silently they walked until before them lay the Tan Fu River, whose end could not be seen, it was so long and broad. After meditating on the river, Mu-sun set out to build a fire. When at last it was lit and the flames were aglow, the master had Chuang sit by his side. There they sat for hours on end as the fire burned brilliantly into the night.

With the coming of dawn, when the flames no longer danced, Mu-sun pointed to the river. Then, for the first time since the duke's arrival, the great master spoke,

"Now do you understand why you are unable to do as your predecessor did - to sustain the greatness of your district?"

Chuang looked perplexed; he understood now no better than before. Slowly shame enveloped the duke.

"Great master," he said,  
"forgive my ignorance, for the wisdom you impart I cannot

comprehend."

Mu-sun then spoke for the second time. Reflect, Chuang,

"on the nature of the fire as it burned before us last night. It was strong and powerful. Its flames leapt upward as they danced and cried in vainglorious pride. No strong trees nor wild beasts could have matched its mighty force. With ease it could have conquered all that lay in its path."

"In contrast, Chuang, consider the river. It starts as but a small stream in the distant mountains. Sometimes it flows slowly, sometimes quickly, but always it sails downward, taking the low ground as its course. It willingly permeates every crack in the earth and willingly embraces every crevice in the land, so humble is its nature. When we listen to the water, it can scarcely be heard. When we touch it, it can scarcely be felt, so gentle is its nature."

"Yet in the end, what is left of the once mighty fire? Only a handful of ashes. For the fire is so strong, Chuang, that it not only destroys all that lies in its path but eventually falls prey to its own strength and is consumed. It is not so with the calm and quiet river.

For as it was, so it is, so it will always be: forever flowing, growing deeper, broader, ever more powerful as it journeys down to the unfathomable ocean, providing life and sustenance to all."

After a moment of silence, Mu-sun turned to the duke.

"As it is with nature, Chuang, so it is with rulers. For as it is not fire but water that envelops all and is the well of life, so it is not mighty and authoritative rulers but rulers with humbleness and deep-reaching inner strength who capture the people's hearts and are springs of prosperity to their states.

"Reflect, Chuang," continued the master,  
"on what type of ruler you are.  
Perhaps the answer that you seek will lie there."

Like a flash of lightning, the truth seized the duke's heart. No longer proud but embarrassed and uncertain, he looked up with his enlightened eye. Chuang was now blind to all but the sun rising over the river.

## The Lesson of the Babbling Brook

The time was the fourth century B.C., the period of the Warring States in China. The grand general of the Chin State was seated in his chamber in the king's palace with Meung, the soon-to-be-appointed general of the Third Division, at his side. A messenger, Lieutenant Yu, had just arrived with a report on the logistics of the upcoming battle between General Li's First Division and the Second Division of the Wei State, led by General Su.

"Grand General," said Lieutenant Yu,  
"I bring good news. The First Division enjoys a significant advantage - our troops outnumber the Second Division's four to one, weaponry is in abundant supply, and the regiment remains well fed. General Li bids me assure you that victory will be ours, the Chin flag will fly forever."

As the grand general glanced at the report, a look of anguish came over his face. He clenched his fists and ordered Lieutenant Yu to dispatch reinforcements and return to the battlefield at once.

After the lieutenant had fled, the grand general walked over the balcony and looked out to the horizon.

"Alas," he said to Meung,  
"yet another division of our state will fall."

Meung was perplexed.

"Grand General," he said,  
"forgive my impudence, but I fail to understand your conviction. General Li's division has many times the manpower and weaponry of General Su's division, and yet you are convinced victory will NOT be ours. How can this be?"

The grand general looked somberly at Meung but did not answer. Instead, he brought Meung to a large lake behind the palace. When the grand general and Meung were seated on a rock, the general threw a small piece of paper into the water. It did not move but simply floated on one spot. After observing the still piece of paper for some time, Meung became restless and inquired again:

"Grand General, what does this mean?  
I have meditated on the paper for more than one hour, and your lesson has not enlightened me nor provided the answer

to my question."

Once again, the general did not respond but had Meung follow him. They walked until they came to a very narrow, babbling brook. Again the grand general threw a small piece of paper unto the water. This time it did not stand still but sailed swiftly along and vanished. The grand general turned to Meung,

"Now do you understand why General Su's regiment will carry the day and not ours?"

Meung, still perplexed, asked the grand general to explain further.

"Meung," said the general,  
"the first regiment is like the lake, large with much weaponry. But note General Li's position. He so arrogantly assumes victory that he does not fight. He has stationed himself behind the back line. It is not so with General Su. He is in the front line, side by side with his troops, and he has placed the rear of his regiment next to the river. His commitment to die in order to win will beget the troops' commitment in turn. Just as the babbling brook, which rushes in one direction, carries the paper easily while the large lake cannot, so it is that a regiment small in size but unified in commitment will win. Remember, weaponry and manpower are important, but it is the general's commitment that determines victory."

Four days later, Lieutenant Yu and his reinforcements arrived at the site of the battle. The Wei not the Chin flag graced the sky. The First Division had been defeated.

## The Wisdom of the Mountain

In ancient China, on top of Mount Ping stood a temple where the enlightened one, Hwan, dwelled. Of his many disciples, only one is known to us, Lao-li. For more than 20 years, Lao-li studied and meditated under the great master, Hwan. Although Lao-li was one of the brightest and most determined of disciples, he had yet to reach enlightenment. The wisdom of life was not his.

Lao-li struggled with his lot for days, nights, months, even years until one morning, the sight of a falling cherry blossom spoke to his heart.

"I can no longer fight my destiny," he reflected.

"Like the cherry blossom, I must gracefully resign myself to my lot."

>From that moment forth, Lao-li determined to retreat down the mountain, giving up his hope of enlightenment.

Lao-li searched for Hwan to tell him of his decision. The master sat before a white wall, deep in meditation. Reverently, Lao-li approached him.

"Enlightened one," he said.

But before he could continue, the master spoke,

"Tomorrow I will join you on your journey down the mountain."

No more needed to be said. The great master understood.

The next morning, before their descent, the master looked out into the vastness surrounding the mountain peak.

"Tell me, Lao-li," he said, "what do you see?"

"Master, I see the sun beginning to wake just below the horizon, meandering hills and mountains that go on for miles, and couched in the valley below, a lake and an old town."

The master listened to Lao-li's response. He smiled, and then they took the first steps of their long descent.

Hour after hour, as the sun crossed the sky, they pursued their journey, stopping only once as they approached the foot of the mountain. Again Hwan asked Lao-li to tell him what he saw.

"Great wise one, in the distance I see roosters as they run around barns, cows asleep in sprouting meadows, old ones basking in the late afternoon sun, and children romping by a brook."

The master, remaining silent, continued to walk until they reached the gate to the town. There the master gestured to Lao-li, and together they sat under an old tree.

"What did you learn today, Lao-li?" asked the master.

"Perhaps this is the last wisdom I will impart to you."

Silence was Lao-li's response.

At last, after long silence, the master continued.

"The road to enlightenment is like the journey down the mountain. It comes only to those who realize that what one sees at the top of the mountain is not what one sees at the bottom. Without this wisdom, we close our minds to all that we cannot view from our position and so limit our capacity to grow and improve. But with this wisdom, Lao-li, there comes an awakening. We recognize that alone one sees only so much - which, in truth, is not much at all. This is the wisdom that opens our minds to improvement, knocks down prejudices, and teaches us to respect what at first we cannot view. Never forget this last lesson, Lao-li:

what you cannot see can be seen from a different part of the mountain."

When the master stopped speaking, Lao-li looked out to the horizon, and as the sun set before him, it seemed to rise in his heart. Lao-li turned to the master, but the great one was gone. So the old Chinese tale ends. But it has been said that Lao-li returned to the mountain to live out his life. He became a great enlightened one.

## The Wheel and the Light

Back in the third century B.C., the outbreak of fighting following the collapse of the Qin Dynasty had just ended. In its place now stood the Han Dynasty, whose emperor, Liu Bang, had consolidated China into a unified empire for the first time. To commemorate the event, Liu Bang had invited high-ranking military and political officials, poets, and teachers to a grand celebration. Among them was Chen Cen, the master to whom Liu Bang had often gone for enlightenment during his campaign to unify China.

The celebration was in full swing. A banquet grander than any ever seen was being held. At the center table sat Liu Bang with his three heads of staff:

- Xiao He, who administered the logistics of unification;
- Han Xin, who organized and led the fighting activity; and
- Chang Yang, who formulated the diplomatic and political strategies.

At another table sat Chen Cen and his three disciples.

While food was served, speeches given, honors presented, and entertainment performed, all looked on with pride and exhilaration - all except Chen Cen's three disciples, who sat awestruck. Only midway through the festivities did they utter their first words.

"Master," they remarked, "all is grand, all is befitting, but at the heart of the celebration lies one enigma."

Sensing his disciples' hesitation, the master gently encouraged them to continue.

"At the central table sits Xiao He," they proceeded.

"Xiao He's knowledge of logistics cannot be refuted.

Under his administration, the soldiers have always been well fed and properly armed, whatever the terrain.

Next to his Han Xin. Han Xin's military tactics are beyond reproach.

He understands exactly where to ambush the enemy, when to advance, and when to retreat. He has won every battle he has led. Last is Chang Yang. Chang Yang sees the dynamics of

political and diplomatic relations in his palm. He knows which states to form alliances with, how to gain political favors,

and how to corner heads of states into surrendering without battle. This we understand well. What we cannot comprehend

is the centerpiece of the table, the emperor himself.

Liu Bang cannot claim noble birth, and his knowledge of logistics, fighting, and diplomacy does not equal that of his

heads of staff. How is it, then, that he is emperor?"

The master smiled and asked his disciples to imagine the wheel of a chariot.

"What determines the strength of a wheel in carrying a chariot forward?" he asked.

After a moment of reflection, his disciples responded,

"Is it not the sturdiness of the spokes, Master?"

"But then, why is it," he rejoined,  
"that two wheels made of identical spokes differ in strength?"

After a moment, the master continued,

"See beyond what is seen. Never forget that a wheel is made not only of spokes but also of the space between the spokes. Sturdy spokes poorly placed make a weak wheel. Whether their full potential is realized depends on the harmony between them. The essence of wheelmaking lies in the craftsman's ability to conceive and create the space that holds and balances the spokes within the wheel. Think now, who is the craftsman here?"

A glimmer of moonlight was visible behind the door. Silence reigned until one disciple said,

"But master, how does a craftsman secure the harmony between the spokes?"

"Think of sunlight," replied the master.

"The sun nurtures and vitalizes the trees and flowers. It does so by giving away its light. But in the end, in which direction do they all grow? So it is with a master craftsman like Liu Bang. After placing individuals in positions that fully realize their potential, he secures harmony among them by giving them all credit for their distinctive achievements. And in the end, as the trees and flowers grow toward the giver, the sun, individuals grow toward Liu Bang with devotion."