

The Balance of Art and Science of Leadership -- A Dunman High School Perspective

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Received: 2 Jun. 2013, Revised: 17 Jun. 2012, Accepted: 30 Jun. 2013

Abstract: This paper addresses the two strands: 1) what works when leading people; and 2) what works when improving schools. We draw from our empirical study with a Dunman High School perspective to examine a) the science aspect of leadership, and b) the art aspect of leadership. The former stems mainly from western theories; while the latter has its origin from the east, especially from ancient China. The paper tries to tap an integrated approach of synthesizing both western theories and eastern philosophies available in the Chinese classics. The structure of this paper comprises 1) our perspective of successful school and school leadership; 2) the attributes of a successful school leader, who demonstrates “vision, inspiration, and servant leadership” qualities, with strong characters of being “perceptive”, “perseverant”, and “prudent”; and 3) the principles for the top leader to establish and maintain sound personal and working relationships with his people. We conclude that this hybrid model of the science aspect of structure/system and the art aspect of people/culture, once in place, will function well in an effort of leading the people more effectively, and in improving the school dramatically.

Keywords: Successful school, the art and science of leadership, leadership attributes, principles, relationship management

I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is a complex, multi-cultural, integrated and unstable one. There is no one best way, or only way, to solve a problem or make a decision. In addition, there is hardly any existing model or standard approach to follow to effectively lead an institution in such environments characteristic of complexity and uncertainty. The rapidly changing environments with these characteristics remind people that there are increasing numbers of variables and related elements which entail creative thinking to understand and to find tools for handling them.

1.1 In our leadership experiences, we have observed that solving a complex and difficult problem, or to make a decision under such situations only based on simple skills and knowledge will appear inadequate for the leader. Hence it is imperative for scholars and practitioners to examine, or with new perspectives, establish multi-cultural and hybrid approaches in the practice of leadership.

1.2. This paper is the result of our empirical study from a Dunman High School perspective, to offer a “balance of art and science of leadership”, which we believe will be the future trend of successful leadership, and relevant for school leadership as well. Our paper examines the art aspect of leadership; the science of leadership; and an integration of the two aspects as a balanced model. The art of leadership was originated from the east, especially from ancient China, with a rich literature of the Chinese classics such as the *Book of Changes (I Ching 《易经》)*, the *Book of History (Shang Shu 《尚书》)*, Confucius Analects (*Lun Yu 《论语》*), etc. The science of leadership model stems mainly from the western theories, with a focus on structure, system, models, framework, and standard operation procedures (SOP).

II. THE MODEL OF A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

A successful school needs to have sound structure, system, framework, and standard operation procedures (SOP) to work with, in order to allow all the members to follow the same standard and to take on specific procedures.

In the modern country like Singapore, all schools run in a highly organized, structured and systematic way. The Ministry of Education (MOE) provides a good number of centralized systems and models, such as the School Excellence Model (SEM), Balanced Score Card (BSC), Enhanced Performance Management System (EPMS), and so forth. In addition, the roles and responsibilities at each level of job scope are clearly spelled out, leaving no ambiguity in respect of term of reference.

2.1 An integrated approach of successful school and leadership

This high structured and systematic school management is typical of the practice of SOP which provides clear step-by-step work flows, to bring about expected changes and to guide rational decision-making.

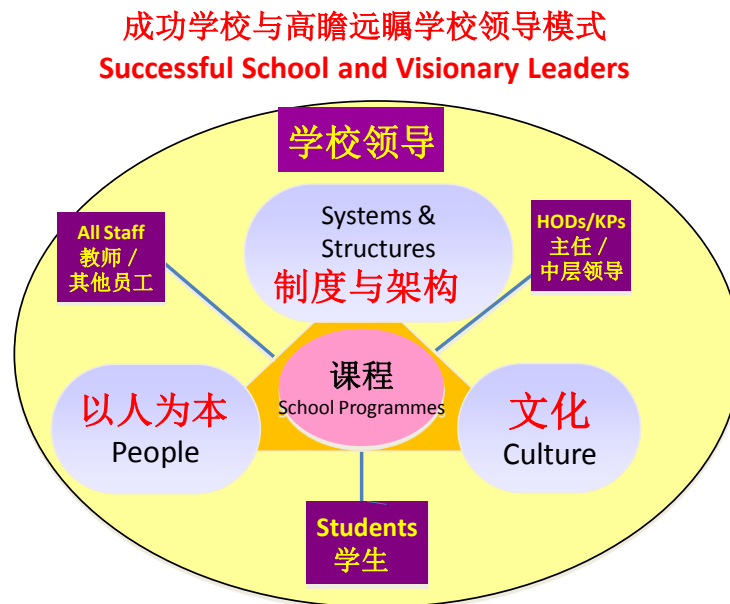


Fig. 1. Successful school and visionary leaders

Meanwhile, we hold that a successful school also needs the leader who looks into the human aspect, which belongs to the art aspect with soft skills, such as “human relationships”, “emotional quotient” (EQ), etc. In the process of successful schooling of the students, the “people” and “culture” are the two façades which we find necessary to be included in leading a school, and any human organization alike. An integration of the two façades of people and culture as an organic part of the system is exhibited in the above Figure 1.

2.2 The elements of the management of a successful school

As offered in Figure 1, both of “system, structure” and “people, culture” should be in place and visible for successful leadership to take place. In operation, this reveals the three major elements as follows—

- Setting up of the system and structure
- Focus on the people
- Building a good school culture

The uniqueness of such an integration of the human element, as shown in Figure 2, is that the school leader pays attention to the humane aspects like feelings and growth of people, while attending to procedural parts of operation, to ensure the realization of school excellence.

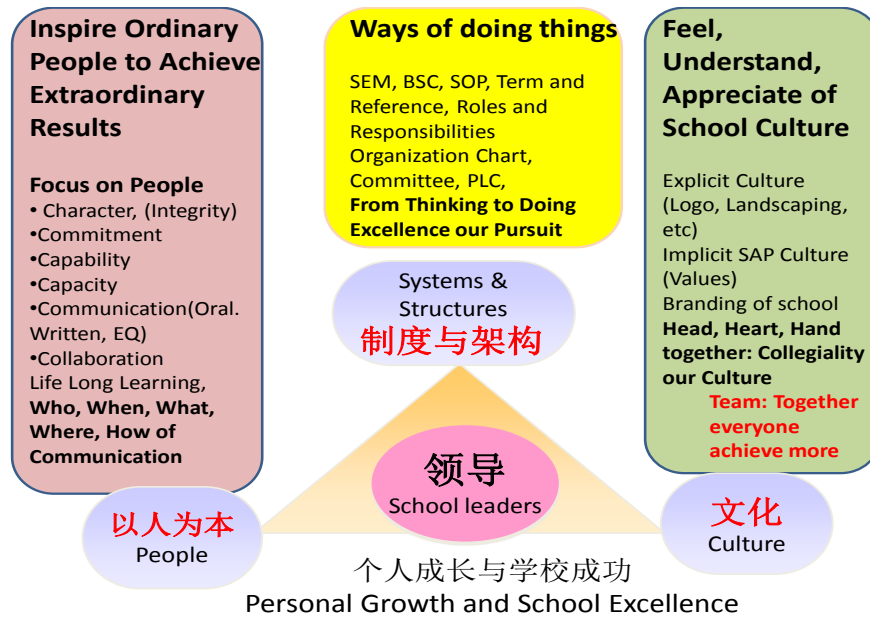


Fig. 2.

2.3 The rationale of integrating the “people” and “culture” elements lies in that school excellence is manifested in personal growth of the students and staff, including their characters and capabilities. What is worth emphasizing here is the core of culture, that is, the philosophical perspective of school leadership at Dunman High School. The statue to Confucius standing at the center of the campus reminds all the staff and students to learn to possess eastern values and virtues so as to have a successful life. As the same time, the name of the School in Chinese, Dunman (*De Ming* 德明), is drawn from the *Great Learning* (《大学》), one of the *Four Books* (in Liu, 2006, p. 177) of the most prominent Chinese classics, which reads—

The great learning is exemplified in amplifying the credible virtues a person possesses (大学之道, 在明明德).

The original idea of amplifying credible and bright virtues (“*Ming De*” 明德) is from the Passage of *Kang Gao* in the *Book of History* (尚书) • 《康诰》 that advocates the philosophy of education as “*ke ming de*” (“克明德”, 能够弘扬光明的品德).

III. THE ATTRIBUTES OF A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADER

A successful school leader should be a strong instructional and curriculum leader who is able to put the child in the center of everything he does in the school, i.e., providing student-centered leadership (学生为中心). He should possess and practice the following three qualities of “vision, inspiration, and servant leadership”.

3.1 A visionary leader (高瞻远瞩领导) is one who has the wisdom (智慧), e.g., from the ancient Chinese perspectives. Being visionary requires the leader 1) to be able to have a holistic view and hands-on skills (大处着眼, 小处着手); and 2) to be perceptive, with a disposition and intellectual capability to understand the world around and to foresee the future. In Passage 5, Part 2 of the Thematic Analyses (易经) • 《系辞下传》, it is advocated that a strong leader should possess the four-façade capacity in perceiving—

- the micro and subtle (知微),
- the macro and conspicuous (知彰),
- the soft and flexible (知柔), and
- the hard and unyielding (知刚).

3.2 An inspirational leader (鼓舞人心领导) is one who has a kind heart (善心) and is able to inspire others to work hard and work smart. The key behavior of such a leader is inspiring others to perform better, that is, “inspiring ordinary people to perform extraordinary results”.

3.3 A servant leader (公仆型领导) is one who has diligence and the willingness to provide service to others (勤奋公仆). In doing so, the leader practices the ideas of 1) “the leader as developer” to create opportunities for subordinates to grow (Zhang, Lin and Foo, 2012); and 2) “trusting and trustworthiness” (用人不疑, 疑人不用).

In the practice of “the leader as developer” for the middle managers, namely, the HOD’s, the mechanism of design and designation of responsibilities to equalize their power is found crucial for developing those in the middle of the hierarchy. The thought in the First *Gua* of *Qian* (乾) is of relevance in this respect: 1) the leader himself is diligent (*qianqian* 乾乾), and is genuinely developing others; and 2) designating them the same power (群龙无首) to preempt a vicious competition. The leader, as the “developer”, controls and capitalizes the situation where the management team in the middle level is encouraged to have a virtuous competition among them. There have been lessons to designate an HOD as “the Larger HOD” who became ascending and domineering after a few months of the appointment. The main reasons have been psychological and organizational politics factors.

It is worth mentioning that in the modern Chinese language, this idea of equal power allocation (*qunlong wushou* 群龙无首) is often interpreted as “a scenario of chaos” that bears a negative connotation because of its literal meaning as “no head among the dragons”. Therefore, in application, the correct and positive notions are to be used for managing and developing the capacity of those in the middle layer.

Becoming such a leader entails the leader him-/herself to be equipped with both the western and eastern philosophies, understanding some of the important beliefs in the ancient Chinese classics, as well as the important educational leadership theories from the west, to actualize—

*a wisdom in the mind,
an inspirational heart, and
a pair of hardworking hands.*

3.4 Successful leaders possess strong personal characters. Different situations require leaders to demonstrate or amplify certain characters in handling the situations they are in. In *I Ching*, a number of special personal characters (“attributes” in leadership terms) are identified for leaders to learn to possess. The most typical ones are “perceptive”, “perseverant”, and “prudent”. The first character of “perceptive” has been addressed earlier in 3.1.

3.5 *Being perseverant* In the First *Gua* of *Qian* (乾), “perseverance” (自强不息) is reiterated as the fundamental quality of a leader, with the following elements in nature: determined, courageous, and creative. Being perseverant implies—

- 1) The leader’s actions are belief-supported.

When the leader believes in what is true, he would make determinations to strive for realizing it.

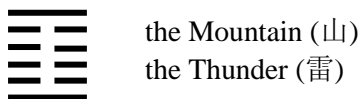
- 2) During the course the leader works in, he demonstrates the courage to face difficulties squarely. He is persistent and resilient when in setbacks.
- 3) The leader's being courageous involves being tenacious, which would enable the leader to generate new ideas and to create new products.

The relevance of tenacity is found in Badaracco's (2002) book entitled *Leading Quietly* which promotes "three quiet virtues", namely, "restraint", "modesty", and "tenacity". "Tenacity matters because quiet leaders often face uphill battles in which they have relatively little power." "In many cases, they are alone, isolated, and have to work hard and long to achieve what they believe is important." As the result, such qualities would endow the leader to be productive and competitive: He makes what he does substantial and sustainable, influencing the people around him positively.

"Perseverance" has been held as a value for thousands of years in the Chinese culture. It has been so wise for ancient Chinese thinkers to advocate "perseverance" as a value. With this value, a perseverant leader holds "continual learning" as a value. John Pepper, the then Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors of Procter & Gamble Company, in his book *What Really Matters: Service, Leadership, People, and Values* (2007) addresses the quality of the leaders of P&G the ability of balancing the core corporate values and creating the organizational future (p. 115) and the values of "continual learning", and "courage" (p. 179).

3.6 *Being prudent* The quality of the leader to be prudent is advocated in the Twenty-seventh *Gua* of *Yi* (颐).

The symbol



This hexagram is composed of the lower trigram of the Thunder (*Lei* 雷) and the upper trigram of the Mountain (*Shan* 山). The two trigrams form up a graph of a mouth, with the upper and lower jaws and the teeth, symbolizing the main functions of the mouth to take nourishment. The Thunder roaring through the Mountain (山下有雷) stands for a person's self-reliance on nutriment, and his responsibility of what he speaks about. The Chinese saying that "diseases come in from the mouth, and disasters come out also from the mouth" (病从口入, 祸从口出) warns people to be cautious in what he takes in and what he speaks out. The principle of being prudent in wording (慎言语) is thus set from this scenario, to guide the leader in his interactions with his followers, to express ideas after they have been well thought through, for otherwise, it is the leader who takes the responsibility if the ideas are not appropriate.

Drawing from his more than forty years of political life in the court as the Prime Minister, the aforementioned *Guan Zhong* (管仲) stated that "one must be sensible in wording; if the language is not well phrased, it will backfire" (言不周密。言不可不慎, 反伤其身 in Passage 11, *Zhou He* (宙合) of *Guan Tzu* (《管子》)). *Guan Zhong* was extremely insightful of the implications of this principle in *I Ching* which had come into being only about 300 years before his times; and was ultimately astute of the political settings in the court.

In Passage 8, Part 1 of the Thematic Analyses (易经) • 《系辞上传》, the thought of prudence is elaborated as follows:

- Words and deeds are the pivot which the leader stands upon. The turning of the pivot determines the fame or shame of the leader (言行君子之枢机).
- Inappropriate words and deeds may yield ripple effects, bringing about emotional turmoil or confusion (乱之所生也, 则言语以为阶).

3.7 Badaracco (2002) talks about prudence as a virtue: “Aristotle believed that prudence and temperance were two of the central virtues of responsible action. Both involve balance, patience, and restraint.” Clearly, in political philosophy east and west alike, it is pivotal for top leaders and managerial leaders to practice prudence. Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) was praised by the Chinese leaders before him with a well-known Chinese saying of “sagacious thinking and principle-based action (行方思圆).

3.8 In the rich literature of the Chinese classics, “sensible words” (慎言) and “prudent deeds” (慎行) are found in numerous places addressing political and organizational leadership. With regard to followership, ancient Chinese thinkers also put forward proactive behavior as “following willingly” (*sui* 随), and “responding favorably (*he* 和). The prerequisite, nevertheless, is the leader’s sensible words, to expect favorable response; and prudent deeds, to invite willing followers. The power of influence of the leader stems partially from his being prudent (Zhang and Chua, 2009, p. 210). As for subordinates, it is also practical for them to apply the principle of prudence. In my lectures on organizational leadership/followership, and in management consulting, I recap the idea— “speaking out when you have well thought through; and working on what has been discussed with any existing ambiguity clarified” (没想好别说; 没说好别做).

As we have seen, ancient Chinese philosophers possessed the astuteness to identify crucial personal characteristics such as “perceptiveness, perseverance and prudence” for leaders to acquire. The characteristics have long been regarded as values and virtues in the Chinese leadership philosophy. This is one of the testimonies of the Chinese wisdom on effective leadership in *I Ching* which has been utilized and developed by well-known military strategists like *Sun Tzu* in *The Art of War* (《孙子兵法》) and his descendent *Sun Bin* in *Sun Bin Strategies of War* (《孙臆兵法》). In their works respectively, a list of leader selection criteria, is clearly established for selecting soldiers and conferring them the title of general. “Being intelligent” (智) is found in the lists, expecting would-be generals to be able to read, respond and control the fast-moving situations in the battle fields.

IV. STRATAGEMS IN RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Chinese intelligence is found in *I Ching* in setting principles for the top organizational leader to establish and maintain sound personal and working relationships with the managers at the middle level and the front-liners.

4.1 The principle of doing substantial things before planning (君子以作事谋始)

This principle is drawn from the Sixth *Gua* of *Song* (讼). A newly appointed leader is normally and reasonably given a mission by his higher-ups when assuming the leading position in an organization. While the mission may take a few years to realize, the pitfall is usually that the leader plans first and announces new initiatives, to show all the members of the organization that he is righteously designated, capable and ready to lead. Unfortunately, more often than not, this approach is ineffective, simply because the new leader does not know his people and the situations well yet; and more importantly, he is not yet recognized by the members as their leader. The fundamental issue whose existence the new “leader” may not be willing to accept is that the leader is not an insider at this stage. He is reflecting on his original intention to carry out the mandates from the higher-ups, which keeps himself at a distance from his people.

The principle of doing substantial things first reminds the new leader to be people-oriented, instead of desk-oriented first; do things at hand with them, and to familiarize himself with the current situations, so as to have the language in common with his people. Hence this approach is very relevant for a new leader to be known and recognized; and therefore helpful for the leader to become an insider sooner.

4.2 The principle of engaging others after the leader’s adaptation and adjustment

This principle is drawn from Passage 5, Part 2 of the Thematic Analyses (《易经》•《系辞下传》). It is about the leader's self-cultivation before his efforts on establishing positive relationships with his people. The conception is denoted as—

- Getting all settled down before moving up or forward (安其身而后动);
- Collecting his thought and adjusting his mood to make well-phrased and acceptable statements for his people to listen and appreciate (易其心而后语); and
- Ascertaining trust in relating with others before making requests (定其交而后求).

It is further stated that only at this level of self-cultivation in the above three aspects will the leader be able to get along well with the people under him. The second aspect above is about mood which is a mental status influenced by one's emotions. Ancient Chinese thinkers were well aware that emotions were infectious. They were intelligent enough to include in the leader's efforts to build relationships with people. Recent studies (e.g., Goleman, *et al.*, 2001) prove again and again the imperativeness for leaders to be good at adjusting their mood by controlling or expressing appropriately their emotions. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee point out the importance of such attunement of emotions in people staying together as: "Group member inevitably 'catch' feelings from one another. Moods that start at the top tend to move the fastest because everyone watches the boss. ...Domino effect ripples throughout the company" (pp. 32-33).

A warning that follows the statement of the principle of engaging others in *I Ching* reads—

- When the leader is taking an action too reckless of the consequences, his people will show reluctance or simply refuse to follow him (危以动, 则民不与).
- Seeing their leader ascending and resorting to coercive measures, the people will not respond favorably (惧以语, 则民不应).
- When the leader makes requests before trust is built in the relationships, his people will react adversely (无交而求, 则民不与).
- Entrenched in a vulnerable situation with no support from his people, the leader may see a villain appearing from behind the scene, taking advantage to add insult onto injury deliberately (莫之与, 则伤之者至矣).

Reciprocal relationships characteristic of trust between the leader and his people are not built in a day, which is supported by Covey (2009) who states that "[J]ust as you can't hurry a tree from a seed to a flower, you can't speed up a relationship with a team member. It takes time for people to build trust with each other."

Cultivation also requires the leader's ability to tell the loyal from the betrayal. *Yan Ying* (晏婴), the Prime Minister of the State of *Qi* (齐国), who was renowned for his mastery of Chinese wisdom, presented this talent when consulted by Lord *Jing Gong* (景公) on the topic of possible issues in governing the state and people (临国莅民所患何). *Yan Ying* articulated that there were potentially three kinds of issues because of the three types of ministers—

- Loyal ones who are not trustworthy (忠臣不信);
 - Trusted ones are not loyal (信臣不忠); and
 - The ministers are not aligned with the will of their Lord (君臣异心).
- (in Passage 29, Volume 3, Book III of *Yan Tzu* 《晏子春秋》)

Yan Ying continued to advise that—

- The loyal ministers must prove to be trustworthy (无忠而不信);
- The ministers who are trusted must verify their loyalty (无信而不忠); and

- When the Lord and his ministers have shared destination, the people of the State will enjoy their lives (君臣同欲, 而百姓无怨).

These three methods display the Chinese intelligence of screening people. They are not requirements from the leader to his followers, rather, they are the facets of understanding and selecting managerial leaders as the homework on self-cultivation by the leader. On the topic of principle setting on screening the right people to promote, *Ji Tzu* (箕子), a renowned minister in *Shang* dynasty (商朝) who was the most shrewd in political leadership, advocated the most important principle of “promoting those aligning to the paramount leader, then the rest will follow” (会其有极, 归其有极). This is presented as a highlight in the Passage of *Hong Fan* (洪范) in *The Book of History* (尚书) • 《周书Li and Wang, 2007).

4.3 The principle of indirect management

When there is an issue in relationships between the middle manager and a staff member at the base level, the staff member would go over the head of the manager to see the top leader. This is more likely in a Chinese cultural setting where the staff member is advancement-oriented rather than achievement-oriented. The Forty-fourth *Gua* of *Gou* (姤) offers a principle telling the top leader to manage the situation indirectly.

The symbol



the Sky (天)

the Wind (风)

This hexagram is composed of the lower trigram of the Wind (*Feng* 风) and the upper trigram of the Sky (*Tian* 天). The Wind sweeping across the Sky (天下有风) represents the Wind coming across or meeting unexpectedly (*Gou* 姤 meaning 邂逅) all kinds of things. In this scenario, the Firm (刚, the five whole lines) is domineering, while the Soft (柔, the broken line at the bottom) quietly comes into view. Applied in leadership, symbolically, the upper trigram (the three whole lines) stands for the top leader; the second and third lines (whole lines, *yang yao* 阳爻) in the lower trigram stands for the middle managers; and the first line (the broken line, *yin yao* 阴爻) at the bottom represents a villain (*xiaoren* 小人).

When there exists a person of vile characters, called *xiao ren* in Chinese (literally “small person”) among staff members at the base level, who tends to challenge the authority or make troubles to the top leader, a wise guidance is for the top leader to deal with the situation indirectly through a middle manager who is the reporting officer of the person concerned.

The rationale of this indirect management is that if the top leader called in the *xiaoren* (小人) concerned and handle directly, the *xiaoren* would likely challenge the authority, or simply deny all his wrong doing, even make a scene in the leader’s office, to give the top leader a hard time. The effectiveness of the top leader’s indirect management was shown in the aspects of 1) when someone at the base level (the broken line, *yin yao* 阴爻 in the hexagram) made trouble, which was unfavorable to the top (对上不利, the upper trigram 上卦), the top resorted to firmness, as represented by the middle whole line, *yang yao* (阳爻, 刚中) to deal with (道牵制柔); and 2) this was done through supporting the reporting officer to apply assertiveness as represented by the middle whole line in the lower trigram. The key actions taken by the top leader and the head were—

- Taking the middle as a buffer to avoid unnecessary confrontation;
 - Strengthening the middle to handle the tough at the bottom;
 - Not being indulgent (不姑息) towards such a behavior from the base level;
- Did not allow this situation to prevail (不让形成气候);

- Taking a sweeping manner to implement the final decision (政令如风). The upper trigram of the hexagram, the Sky, symbolizes mandate while the lower trigram, the Wind, symbolizes implementation (天下有风).

4.4 The leader's integrity and self-protection

In support of the above principle of indirect management, another relevant idea in the Thirty-third *Gua* of *Dun* (遯) shows the leader's action of keeping such a "small person" at a distance (远小人). This does not imply that the leader dislikes or shows the hatred, but displays a stand on dignity (不恶而严). This powerful approach has been proven often in organizational lives as a judicious move taken by the top leader. The principle and approach in both of the Forty-fourth *Gua* of *Gou* and the Thirty-third *Gua* of *Dun* reveal the Chinese wisdom in providing advice to the top leader for managing relationships—

- Be qualified in the position (当位);
- Be ratified in decision-making (当权); and
- Practice self-protection while showing inviolability.

Batten (1998) advocates "[N]ot be deterred by small people" in his writing on insights on leadership. His use of the term "small people" seems to come from the Chinese classics. His ideas on the leader's self-protection are parallel to the above advice: 1) securing maximum participation from the key personnel in major decision-making; and 2) moving resolutely towards the actual practice of management by integrity.

Therefore, in the mind of a Chinese leader who is perceptive of the above ideas, the sense of crisis addressed in section 2.2 is predominant in his thinking of handling managerial issues, no matter the organization he is leading be in good shape or in chaos. The influence of the Chinese philosophy expressed in *I Ching* has been so strong that the Chinese wisdom has formed up a strong belief that the sense of crisis will lead to expected results in uncertainty.

V. CONCLUSION

An understanding of both the western and eastern educational philosophies and theories will provide a balanced view when dealing with complex situations, as in decision-making by a great leader—that is what we are exploring in the domain of a balance of the art aspect and the science aspect of a successful leader.

In the on-going process of leading a school to its success, the leader should be able to ride of the changes with a capability to manage the system and structure, and to establish a culture for nurturing the people to grow together with the school. In so doing, the leader must be the one demonstrating the three qualities of "vision, inspiration, and servant leadership" qualities, with strong characters of being "perceptive", "perseverant", and "prudent". These qualities ensure the leader's effectiveness in establishing and maintaining a sound personal and working relationship with his people. These are the core ideas from a Dunman High School perspective, to reach a hybrid model of the science aspect of structure/system and the art aspect of people/culture. We believe that once in place, the model will function well in an effort of leading the people in a more humane way, and in improving the school dramatically.

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