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**A Contrary Take on Executive Clout, Inspired by the *Tao Te Ching***

**Tom Soma**

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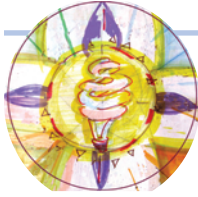
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## Paradoxical Leadership: A Contrary Take on Executive Clout, Inspired by the *Tao Te Ching*

**Tom Soma**

Executive Director of Ronald McDonald House Charities in Portland, Oregon

**paradox** n. 1. A seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true....  
4. A statement contrary to perceived opinion.<sup>1</sup>

*“There go my people. I must find out where they are going so I can lead them.”*

—Alexandre Ledru-Rollin

Ledru-Rollin’s quote was sent to me by a trustee shortly before an annual board retreat. We were in the midst of a year-long planning process, feverishly eliciting and consolidating a vast array of input into what would become a new strategic plan. This being the second such exercise during my tenure, I was especially invested in both the process and product. But while clearly the organization’s leader, I was *not* out ahead of the troops. And that wasn’t bad!

As the trustee was hinting, the most effective CEO isn’t necessarily a “top-down” person. In fact, he recognized what I was coming to enjoy most about my job—the fact that our board and staff were comprised of passionate, enthusiastic professionals with a broad range of experience and expertise. We had *many* leaders—and my most significant contribution would be engaging and empowering the wealth of talent in front of me!

While insecure administrators might be threatened by a suggestion (even in jest) that they were being outpaced by their subordinates and volunteers, I considered the quote a compliment—and turned it into a PowerPoint slide to launch the retreat. Whether due to advancing age or tenure, I appreciate (though don’t always incorporate) a behind-the-troops approach to leadership alluded to by Ledru-Rollin, whose reflection is actually rooted in an ancient text that simultaneously defines and guides the paradoxical leader: *Lao-tzu’s Tao Te Ching*.

“If you want to lead the people,” Lao-tzu notes in the 66th of his 81 axiomatic chapters, “you must learn to follow them.”<sup>2</sup>

Though little is known about the man, much of Lao-tzu’s wisdom has found its way into the vernacular. The 2,500-year-old *Tao* is the reputedly second most translated book in the world, behind only the Bible. If you’ve ever wondered about the expression, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” you’ll find it in chapter 64.

Much has been written about organizational leadership. Between Warren Bennis, Jim Collins, Stephen Covey, Larry Wilson, and all the other contemporary gurus, there’s plenty of advice about how CEOs might incorporate “powerful lessons in personal change” to guide their organizations from “good to great.” I compiled my favorite principles into a single-page handout several years ago. While the finished product was succinct, it struck me as merely a repackaging of the same old stuff.

After two decades of working with and observing CEOs, and a decade in the role myself, I’m not sure there are any quick fixes or foolproof techniques for managerial success in our increasingly complex world. And I’ve noticed that it’s far easier to bestow advice than to abide by it, especially when those upon whom it’s conferred aren’t in a position to hold you accountable! So I traded the professional journals



for my deeper passions: philosophy, theology, fiction, poetry, and drama—all of which contain their own inspiration for both leadership and life. Then I stumbled on the *Tao Te Ching*.

At first glance, just about every verse of the *Tao* appears to contradict some established (though not necessarily well-considered) Western cultural norm—particularly those that apply to leadership. Consider this from chapter 36: “The soft overcomes the hard. The slow overcomes the fast.” Or from chapter 43: “The gentlest thing in the world overcomes the hardest thing in the world.”

I had always envisioned the consummate CEO as the hardest-driving, fastest-running player on the team. But, if I was to take Lao-tzu seriously, I needed to step back and think again. In so doing, I discovered an invitation to consider a significantly different approach to my role, responsibilities, and ultimate value to the organization I lead.

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Before sharing the lessons I’ve found most helpful and relevant, I offer a caution. Perhaps the *Tao’s* most ironic directives are aimed at fools like me who would even consider offering advice on leadership (or anything else, for that matter): “True words aren’t eloquent, eloquent words aren’t true,” chapter 81 points out. “Wise men don’t need to prove their point; men who need to prove their point aren’t wise.” Chapter 56 is even terser: “Those who know don’t talk. Those who talk don’t know.”

So, be warned. This piece is written for an audience of one: me. If by some fate it has fallen into your hands, I urge you to take it with a hefty grain of salt. I’ve compiled this not as a prescription for anyone else, but as a reminder for me. The gathered pearls strike me as not merely interesting, but as vital to my work and life. They’re ideas and ideals to which I might aspire. In their distillation, I hope to define the qualities I find most worthy of emulating—and create a standard by which I might hold myself accountable.

A brief note on the *Tao*: All but one of the passages quoted here have been taken from *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version* translated by Stephen Mitchell. Among the many compelling and poetic translations of this ancient masterpiece, I chose Mitchell’s for its elegant simplicity and accessibility.

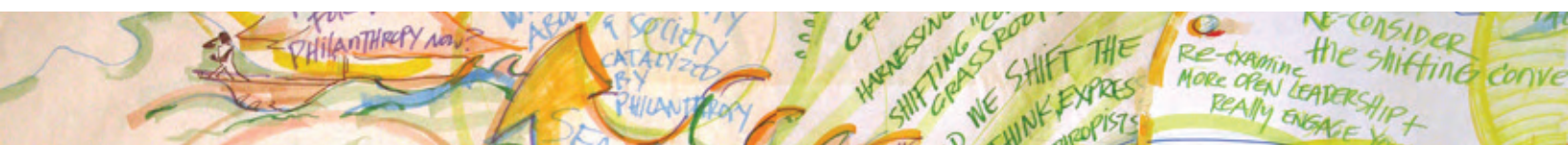
Until recently, if asked to describe a “leader” in a single word, I would have said, “charismatic”—envisioning, as I did (and still do), an intelligent, articulate, and dynamic individual who encourages, energizes, and unites others in pursuit of a noble cause. “Charisma,” as the American Heritage dictionary notes, is a rare quality—one attributed to those precious few who have demonstrated “an exceptional ability for leadership” and who have secured “the devotion of large numbers of people.”

Certainly *Tao*-inspired leaders are intelligent and articulate. But they possess a different sort of charisma. Rather than appearing dogmatic or competitive (as traditional CEOs are often characterized), they are serene and compassionate. Though open, attentive, and even “radiant” in person, they are not flamboyant. While status and privilege are the expected perks of most upper-level jobs, *Tao*-inspired leaders are satisfied with intrinsic rewards; they epitomize humility and service. Most importantly, perhaps, leaders rooted in the *Tao* effect change through listening, questioning, and nurturing, rather than by directive or decree.

“If you want to be a great leader,” Lao-tzu observes in chapter 57, “stop trying to control. Let go of fixed plans and concepts.” Consider how radical *that* seemed during our planning process!

Lao-tzu doesn’t suggest or imply that organizations dispense with planning. Rather, he urges that organizational *leaders* relinquish their own personal biases. Just to be clear—the *Tao* is addressed specifically to those who occupy or aspire to positions of influence. And the mark of a moderate leader, chapter 59 advises, “is freedom from his own ideas.” The verse continues:

Most importantly, perhaps, leaders rooted in the *Tao* effect change through listening, questioning, and nurturing, rather than by directive or decree.



*Tolerant like the sky,  
all-pervading like sunlight,  
firm like a mountain,  
supple like a tree in the wind,  
he has no destination in view  
and makes use of anything  
life happens to bring his way.  
Nothing is impossible for him.  
Because he has let go.*

“Letting go” is a repeated theme—and surely a reasonable tactic for avoiding the strokes, heart attacks, and other job-related stresses that commonly reduce executive tenure. “The Master takes action,” chapter 64 states, “by letting things take their course. He remains as calm at the end as at the beginning. He simply reminds people of who they have always been.” And, in chapter 48, “True mastery can be gained by letting things go their own way. It can’t be gained by interfering.”

In addition to facilitating a longer, healthier life, such a countenance generates other tangible benefits. Mentally, it enables greater clarity; in the workplace, it engenders intense loyalty.

But how does one attain such remarkable presence? As the *Tao* emphasizes, leaders must have deep reserves of patience and confidence. “Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear?” chapter 15 inquires. “Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?” Chapter 30 adds: “The Master does his job and then stops... Because he believes in himself, he doesn’t try to convince others.”

Here a confession is in order. As anyone who has ever worked with me will immediately attest, I violate this all the time! I’ve always found it easier to inject an opinion or present a solution rather than wait for a “right action” to arise by itself! Who has the time?

If I were to truly embrace Lao-tzu’s approach, I would be offering far fewer answers and raising far more questions—especially when supervising staff. I *know* the questions (How do *you* see it? How will you address it? What can I do to help?). But *knowing* and *posing* are two different things! I’d do well to cultivate a more inquisitive approach from the outset. There surely are advantages. Such patient inquiry immediately minimizes potential resistance and resentment, and ultimately inspires both responsibility and confidence. It probably ends up *saving* time too.

Admittedly, for this to work, you need the right people. Great teams require great players at every position—and that doesn’t happen overnight. But I believe the *process* of team building (or rebuilding, when addressing underperformance) can also be expedited with two simple questions: “Are you happy?” and “Do you think this is a good fit for you right now?”

When I’ve taken this approach, I’ve had three outcomes—all positive. In the first case (which has played out several ways), employees have recognized either a poor fit or their own unhappiness and departed voluntarily. One employee even went so far as to propose a restructuring that included the elimination of her own job—a proposal I swiftly embraced! In the second case, an employee recognized that her unhappiness *on* the job was actually the result of circumstances unrelated to work. Consequently, she made some personal changes which dramatically improved both her attitude and performance. In the third case, an employee volunteered that her existing responsibilities (which she had fulfilled adequately for several years) were no longer a good fit—so she proposed a modified role that was better suited to both her professional and personal ambitions. Fortunately, over time, we were able to accommodate the change.

Of course, there are days I wonder if I’m up to the task. That feeling, too, the Tao puts in perspective. “Governing a large country,” Lao-tzu offers light-heartedly in chapter 60, “is like frying a small fish. You spoil it with too much poking.”

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In that context, the leader's role is far less ominous. His primary function is simply to guide "without interfering" (chapter 51). Leaders themselves, as chapter 58 points out, must be "content to serve as an example and not to impose (their) will." Above all, leaders should exemplify hope—a temperament that cannot be feigned and must be rooted in a genuinely youthful spirit. Chapter 55 offers the following:

*The Master  
lets all things come and go  
effortlessly, without desire.  
He never expects results;  
thus he is never disappointed.  
He is never disappointed;  
Thus his spirit never grows old.*

The idea of a spirit that is "never disappointed" and "never grows old" resonated more deeply when I was recently challenged to recall "an old and original part of myself" that I was not fully indulging. Immediately, "playfulness" came to mind, and I was flooded with childhood memories of the games I enjoyed from dawn past dusk. Then I wondered, What if I could bring that youthful, playful spirit into the workplace? How would that color my own experience? And how might it rub off on those who report to me?

While I wish I could report astonishing results—both for myself and my staff—that wouldn't be honest. The notion is still new and I'm out of practice. So far, I have managed to add a fourth "p word" (*playful*) to the three other mantras I've lately espoused as organizational best practices: *prudent*, *positive*, and *proactive*. Time will tell whether a tangible spirit of playfulness takes hold. I sense that kind of transformation will require the troops to be out in front of me again! Which only heightens my appreciation for another of the *Tao's* profound lessons: the fact that I don't have to epitomize another "p word": *perfection*.

The *Tao*-inspired leader, far from being immune to mistakes, is one who actually invites and celebrates them. "Failure is an opportunity," Chapter 79 suggests. When a "great man" makes mistakes, verse 61 notes,

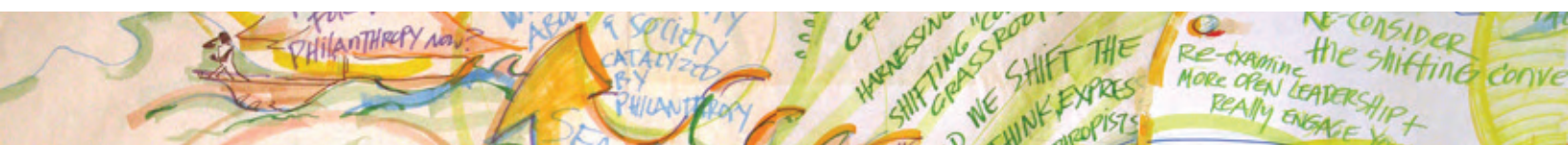
*he realizes it.  
Having realized it, he admits it.  
Having admitted it, he corrects it.  
He considers those who point out his faults  
as his most benevolent teachers.*

Looking back over my decade-long tenure as an executive director, I'm especially grateful for two things. First, the constant evolution of my responsibilities—an opportunity facilitated not by failure, but rather by the gradual, calculated addition of new, more qualified employees. My job description now only remotely resembles the one I willingly embraced ten years ago, and I couldn't be happier. Each change (and there has been a substantial shift at least every two years) has simultaneously increased my own satisfaction and heightened my value to the organization. Second, and more importantly, I appreciate the considerable grace I've been extended by five different board chairs, each of whom has offered patient, nurturing guidance—counsel that has been most benevolent during times I've most needed correction.

In the end, *Tao*-inspired leaders maintain a healthy distance not only from their failures, but from their achievements as well. "The Master...succeeds without taking credit," chapter 77 instructs. The result, from an organizational standpoint, is nothing short of transformational. Chapter 17 eloquently concludes, "When the Master governs, the people are hardly aware that he exists... When his work is done, the people say, 'Amazing: we did it, all by ourselves!'"

This engaging notion struck a deep chord with the four other executives I join monthly for coffee

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and conversation. In our collective consideration of the *Tao*, there was enthusiastic agreement about a few basic implications. Whether volunteering their time or serving in paid positions, the people we're charged with leading all seek community. They *don't* need answers; they *do* want to be seen and heard. Our responsibility is to appeal to the best in them—to point to the summit and empower them to reach for it. And our ability to do so requires a disciplined, centered presence.

Lao-tzu himself, in chapter 67, boils that requisite presence down to three fundamental qualities:

*I have just three things to teach:  
simplicity, patience, compassion.  
These three are your greatest treasures.  
Simple in actions and in thoughts,  
you return to the source of being.  
Patient with both friends and enemies,  
you accord with the way things are.  
Compassionate toward yourself,  
you reconcile all beings in the world.*

In that sense, the challenge of leadership seems eminently reasonable, and the rewards—both personally and organizationally—substantial. Be simple. Be patient. Be compassionate. Then watch what happens.

If I could just stick to it, watching where *my* people go would be pretty interesting. If nothing else, I'd finally know where I'd led them!

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<sup>1</sup>The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, New College Edition.

<sup>2</sup>Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988).



## About this extract

In Spring 2009, Gary Hubbell Consulting convened a think tank of North American nonprofit organization and development leaders. Four topics were selected for discussion, each of which became the focus of an insightful essay by each of the hand-picked attendees. The four topics are: New Perspectives on Leadership, Reimagining the Future of Philanthropy, Development in a Systems Context, and Demonstrating and Communicating Philanthropy's Impact. The resulting e-book, *In Search of New Meaning: Philanthropy, Community and Society*, is available for free download at [www.OnTheCuspPublishing.com](http://www.OnTheCuspPublishing.com). This essay is an extract from that publication.

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