



Father leadership: the Singapore case study

Father
leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – To show and analyse the concept, practice, problems and prospects of father leadership in Singapore. The study also proposes such practices in Asian countries.

Design/methodology/approach – The focus group participants, were mostly of experienced corporate and business leaders, and did not represent a cross-section of the population; they were made of business people because of the peculiarities of Singapore's history and economy.

Findings – The Singapore Government leads the way and father leadership is widely practiced. An analysis is also made of the management approach, problems and prospects of father leadership as practised in Singapore with its practices proposed in other Asian countries.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations include time and costs constraints; otherwise more focus group sessions can be held and the focus group participants, mostly of experienced corporate and business leaders, did not represent a cross-section of the population; they were made of business people because of the peculiarities of Singapore's history and economy. It is argued that a synonymous match exists between the national culture and business culture in Singapore; hence the selection of the business people in the focus group. That synonymous match is primarily because of the country's small size and lack of natural resources, and because since its birth as a modern nation, Singapore is dependent on human capital and relies strongly on its economy for its survival and growth.

Practical implications – The study provides useful lessons for businesses and political analysts outside Singapore to better understand the Government's paternalistic instincts in ensuring the long-term sustainability of Singapore's economy and her citizenry.

Originality/value – The article provides a continuing perspective on governance and management in Singapore. It also extends existing studies into Confucianistic societies/ societies that are perceived by the outside world as being autocratic.

Keywords Leadership, Government, Confucianism, Singapore

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Perhaps one may think that such an old-fashioned notion may no longer apply, this may not be true, it can still make a comeback; and even so, rather strongly. In this paper, leadership is examined through the visor of the fatherly way, and the Singapore paradigm leads the way.

Research objectives

This study attempts to answer the following questions: What are some of the qualities that Asian leaders should possess? How should Asian managers be different from those in the west? One answer comes from these questions, and that is Asian leaders and governments need to practise a benevolent type of leadership, the father leadership



style. The research will also examine the problems and prospects of leadership, the fatherly way as practised in Singapore and propose its practices in Asian countries.

Literature survey

The roots and support for father leadership

The Singapore Government, having a tight grip on Singaporean politics, is also blessed with a civil bureaucracy that is “efficient” as well as having “considerable clout” (Gale, 1999, pp. 2-3); Singapore has often been labelled as a nanny State (Tay, 2001, p. 24) with the Government looming too large in too many sectors, of course, the Government’s reasons being political stability. In Low (2002) study, the value of governmental support and involvement is selected as one of the 12 Singaporean values. Such a value of governmental support and involvement is akin to the value of the benevolent father that is a common value, often resurfaced, if not widely practised in Asian societies.

In India, for example, there is the practice of “paternal authoritative-ness” of the leader (Brislin, 1993, p. 275; Kumar and Saxena, 1983; Sinha, 1980). Paternal authority captures the expectations of concern and nurtures the belief that people or staff should be treated like the leader’s family members. Desirable qualities in a leader are to be expert and knowledgeable – knowing what to do in a wide range of situations for the people’s good. The leaders are obliged to not only ensure political stability but also to give good advice and offer help to the people. Similar results are reported by Yao (1987) study in the People’s Republic of China (PR China) that endorses the concept of “paternal authoritative-ness”; there, the leaders need to be strong, effective and knowledgeable. The Chinese value system and working style is still dominated by a traditional value system.

Methodology

“Group depth interviews” (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990, p. 9) or focus groups – “talk and probe” individuals (Low, 2002, p. 60) – serve as a valuable tool for academic researchers, particularly in the social sciences such as in the study of culture (Low, 2002; Morgan, 2002; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Though commonly used in marketing-research contexts and most academics tend to restrict to these focus group applications (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000; Fontana and Frey, 1994). Critics may raise the issue that focus groups are perhaps more useful for preliminary or exploratory studies; however, focus groups, as exemplified by Low and Alpeisssova (2004), Low and Or (2004) and Low (2002) research, have been helpful in such socio-cultural studies.

Edmunds (1999) refers to focus groups with five members as “mini focus groups”; with fewer members, there was more emphasis on the topic. A total of three focus groups of five members each were held, and as a rule, three or four focus group sessions are usually sufficient (Aaker and Day, 1986, p. 124).

The focus group members comprised business and corporate leaders who were selected from the researcher’s contacts; they had much business experience. The five Singaporean business leaders (three males and two females) were from various industries. Of these five members of the focus groups, the first, a Chinese Singaporean male, had 24 years of management and business experience. He had also previously worked in several governmental subcommittees. The second was a Malay male managing director working in the Singapore’s travel and entertainment industry for the past 18 years. The third, an Indian male Singaporean had several corporate

leadership experiences, spending a total of 26 years in the public relations, distribution and retail industry, before running his own printing company for the past ten years. The fourth, a Chinese female corporate leader from the private sector, had over 17 years of marketing experiences. The fifth member is female Chinese professional, married to a Eurasian Singaporean. She had an extensive human resource experience, working for 18 years in both Singapore banks and finance companies.

Thus, the three focus groups' members were selected to reflect the good racial mix, representative of the Singaporean society. They were also selected because of their varying business experiences, having worked in human resource management/corporate leadership, and in various Singapore industries for at least 15 years. The focus group meetings officially started on 30 November 2002 and ended on 16 February 2003 with each focus group meeting lasted for about slightly more than two hours, normally with a ten-minute break in-between.

To "create a relaxing and open atmosphere" the focus group members' participation, the researcher-cum-moderator was "polite, open and encouraging" (Low, 2002, p. 64), telling members that there were no right or wrong responses. Encouraged to express their ideas, they expressed them freely. However, during some focus groups' discussions, some members got carried away and their listening skills deteriorated when certain politically sensitive topics were discussed. The researcher-cum-moderator responded by requesting the members to speak clearly and one at a time to avoid a noisy jumble of comments while ensuring a smooth flow in the note-taking.

For the third focus group meeting to ensure easier note-taking, this researcher enlisted a PhD candidate to help him moderate or facilitate the focus group discussions.

Findings

The basic thinking of the focus groups was that, since independence, the Government had led and grown businesses through Government-linked companies (GLCs) and some, such as Sembawang Shipyard, Development Bank of Singapore, and Singapore Airlines, had also become national icons. The Government provided roads, the port, an airport and other infrastructure facilities judged to be excellent. Singaporeans expected the Government's supporting role. Though others might call it strategy or policy, the focus groups affirmed that Governmental support/involvement in business was fast becoming a value.

While all the focus groups agreed that the value of governmental support and involvement supplies political stability and industrial peace to the island Republic, the majority, 80 per cent of the focus groups also stressed that the Government:

Pioneers and leads the way such as in overseas ventures and in foreign investments as in the Suzhou and other People's Republic of China projects.

Singaporeans and Singapore companies do enjoy political stability – this helps a lot in attracting businesses. Political stability also attracts foreign investments.

Singapore companies differ from foreign companies in that here, our Government plays the role model, leading the way, e.g. as in overseas investments and ventures. The stable Government helps encourage investments.

The words: “pioneers and leads the way”, “provides for”, “guides”, “supporting”, “coming in”; “leading the way”; “role model” were mentioned 144 times. The word “fatherly role” was mentioned nine times. The word “political stability” was mentioned 56 times.

On infra-structural development, all the focus groups members agreed and commented that:

Governmental factor does help our business, e.g. our retail outlets are located near MRT stations, bringing the people or customers closer to us.

Our roads, telecommunications and whatever helps build Singapore’s image as being efficient and effective. We can (also) attract investments and better sell ourselves abroad.

The Government has provided good schools, an educated workforce supplies quality labour for our businesses; the Government has laid a very good infra-structural and telecommunications systems; and these contribute to overall, building a pro-business environment.

Thanks to our Government ... Singapore has the largest port. Changi Airport’s one of the best airports. [There are] good roads and an efficient transport/communications system”. Good infrastructure helps the transportation of our products; and ... business communications too. Indeed, Governmental factor adds to the efficiency and effectiveness of the way we run our business.

The words “facilitated”, “helped”, “aided” were mentioned 37 times. Virtually all the focus group members noted that the governmental institutions such as The Monetary Authority of Singapore, the Republic’s *de facto* Central Bank, were well run; they highlighted that Singapore emerged reasonably well from the financial crisis that swept across the region in late 1997.

The Government’s “fatherly concern” is further illustrated in the following focus group member’s comment, that is:

The Government is pro-business and with a good cause. It does have the business in mind when implementing policies.

The focus group members mentioned the term “pro-business” 25 times. These findings coincide with the fact that government agencies are now made to put in more efforts to be business-friendly; they are to be benchmarked according to how business-friendly their rules are while entrepreneurs can also give their feedback on these rules (*The Straits Times*, 2004). Additionally, 80 per cent of the focus groups members agreed and commented that: “our strong Government helps us to sell our brand and image overseas”. A total of 25 such references were made by the focus groups.

The words: “fatherly”, “more like a father” “patriarch” and “paternal” were referred to 41 times; and the word: “nanny” were mentioned at least, nine times. The focus groups also agreed and commented that in the father leadership or Confucian heritage culture, experience and seniority is valued. “Like a father, the government also promotes filial piety” (20 such references were made). At least 31 references to “seniority” were made. Here, several focus group’s members cited the importance of seniority, age, wisdom and experience as mirrored in the familiar Asian proverb “without old portraits in the hall, a family cannot be said to be established”. This

triggered focus groups' discussions on retirement age; they cited the Government's raising the retirement age as a means of augmenting the working population. The focus groups also highlighted the then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's example of still serving in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO)/Cabinet in an advisory capacity, and the younger Cabinet Ministers tapping in to his expertise and experiences. Interestingly, they also pointed out that perhaps Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong would also stand in as the advisor to the Cabinet should he retire.

Analysis and discussion

The research reinforces Low (2002) study where the value of Governmental support and involvement, getting 93.75 per cent respondents' endorsement, and this can also be seen as endorsing Confucian beliefs. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Premier, was the most prominent of the protagonists of Confucian values, perceiving the Confucian way of life and organizing society as correlated to Singapore's success. Here, in accord with Confucius, "unless the Government is in the hands of upright men, disaster would befall the country. By the way, in this respect, the PAP also believes the same thing" (Goh Chok Tong, 1982 quoted in Bellows, 1989, p. 216).

The Government, like a benevolent father, looks after the people's welfare (Zhang, 1999, pp. 66-67). Here, the preferred management style is that of firm control and, at times, explicit direction, but essentially doing good for the society (Scarborough, 1998) and the efficient political leadership together with the hardworking workforce has helped build Singapore (Tan, 1989; Lu, 1998).

Here, one can also argue that although there have been much talk on raising the spirit of entrepreneurship in the Republic, it was again very much government-led and not led by some private bodies or personal initiatives. For example, even the national movement, the Action Community for Entrepreneurship (ACE) is a top-down initiative, with a public sector secretariat and led by a minister, no less (Long, 2004).

Explicit direction is especially required when one analyses the applications of Hersey and Blanchard's "Situational theory of leadership" (Daft, 2000, p. 515) as in the early years of a country's development – with the populace's prevailing low level of education (presumably, the followers' readiness can be taken as not able and not willing), a strong, telling leadership ("provide specific instructions and closely supervise performance") is necessary to lay the foundations for economic development and growth.

A case in point is that of Indonesia. Under President Suharto, Indonesia gradually recovered from the economic morass into which it had fallen under Sukarno. Until 1998, Suharto was the strongman who, during 32 years of his regime, directed the energies of the people, bringing political stability and prosperity to Indonesia. The turbulent and violent aftermath of Suharto's collapse – the ethnic conflicts, severe economic crisis and other problems, indeed so, dictate a strong, directing leadership to grow the nation's political stability and economic development. Today, six years after Suharto and three more presidents, Indonesia shows signs of progress; President Sukarnoputri then introduced direct presidential elections and the present President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was elected in the September Polls 2004. Thus, the "bapak" or father figure must be there. "The stability factor that has long been lacking in this country is now there," says Jochen Sauter, manager of the German Chamber of

Commerce and Industry in Jakarta (<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/edit/archives/2003/05/21/2003052022>).

With a multicultural population (77.8 per cent Chinese; 14 per cent Malays; 7.1 percent Indians; and the rest of the population, consisting of the Eurasians and others (Singapore Census of Population, 2000), the island-Republic of Singapore indeed needs a strong government and certainly, it cannot be denied that there are always potential “fault lines” along racial/ethnic lines that are usually human, emotional and fragile (Koh and Ooi, 2002, p. 260). Just as few would have believed it after Suharto was pushed out when ethnic conflicts and naked violence exploded across the country, multi-racial Singaporeans certainly wants a good government too, one that is capable of being fatherly, fair and sensitive to their needs.

The Singapore Government does “provide the necessary infrastructure” with a “politically stable” and “conducive environment for the growth of business”. Singapore’s success is bolstered by the Government’s continuous efforts in laying down the required support, and infrastructure. Singapore has continued to be “the premier hub status in the Asia-Pacific”; in fact, it has won several accolades (Chin and Tongzon, 1998, pp. 83-114) including for “Singapore’s Changi Airport . . . one of the best in the world” and in a business-traveller magazine survey, “the best for baggage retrieval . . .” (Tan, 1992, p. 23). With regard to the Singapore port – in spite of competition and cheaper port facilities’ pricing with some players such as Evergreen and Maersk having moved from Singapore to neighbouring Johor Baru, Singapore is seen as “the best port in Asia and it is the world’s busiest container port” (Goh, 2001a). *The World Competitiveness Yearbook 1999* ranked Singapore as the most attractive location in the world, apart from the USA, as a manufacturing hub (Institute for Management Development (IMD), 1999).

Singaporean children today too are going to better schools than before. The Singapore Government sanctioned the use of Central Provident Funds (CPF) savings for tertiary education in 1989 (Low, 2002).

In 1998, Richard Hu, Minister for Finance, announced off-budget measures for education involving a total of S\$282 million, including S\$22 million for improvements in polytechnic CAD-CAM facilities, S\$22 million for Nanyang Technological University’s computer upgrading programme, and S\$30 million for new IT equipment for secondary schools still under construction (Hu, 1998; Davie, 1999, p. 1, both cited in Low, 2002). The Singapore Government invests in university education, seeking to make local universities “world-class” and “best in the region”; and “with Singapore’s ambition to be the knowledge center of the region, it is only natural to emphasise research and development” (Cham, 1998, pp. 35-40).

Table I reveals the educational status of Singaporean workers. Table II shows the education, literacy and language of Singaporeans in percentages are on the rise due to the Singapore Government’s emphasis on education.

Educational status	1974	1990	1995
Primary and below (%)	71.7	33.7	24.6
Polytechnic/university (%)	2.4	10.2	21.4

Table I.
The educational status of
Singaporean workers

Source: *The New Paper*, 23 August 1997

Here, the Government’s provision of education and political stability is all the more positively associated to this value of Governmental support and involvement. A strong Confucian undertone exists; paternalism exists alongside the “confidence of the people in the ruler” Lin (1938), and being an orderly society is seen as a top Asian value (Low, 2002; Bjerke, 1999, p. 148; Naisbitt, 1994, p. 73).

With such Governmental efforts, Singaporeans are satisfied with the delivery of the goods; this mutual relation was a distinguishing feature of Confucian political ideology (Sie, 1997, p. 69; Zhang, 1999), and parallels the study of Kau *et al.* (1998) of Singaporeans’ happiness level “with the way the Government runs the country”. As well, the Singapore business community/public can rely on a “Public Service which is determined to outdo itself in serving them” (Lim, 1998, p. 131); the study confirms Low (1998) study – a Government-made Singapore, creating a unique brand for Singapore, also ensures the nation’s economic and political viability and survival.

True, one can also argue that Singapore’s small size, roughly the size of Chicago with the same population, probably provides an overwhelming reason for the success of this Singapore model and this could be a possible attribute for the controlled development and success of the Singapore Government’s paternalistic leadership model. Singaporeans are also hardworking. Perhaps too, “success has many fathers”, as an old Asian saying goes but indeed, father leadership has helped to build the Singapore brand. And one cannot deny that thus far, the vision and the efficient civil service, subsumed under the father-leadership provided by the Government that has contributed to sustain Singapore’s economy and her citizenry.

Problems and prospects of the father leadership way

Father leadership is not without its problems. It can also raise problems in the South-East Asian and the Bangladeshi context; more so, when leaders adopt a paternalistic leadership style, certain strategies and practices may not be healthy. These can include patronage, nepotism, favouritism, *cronyism*, cliques and political manipulation (Westwood, 1992, pp. 138-139, *italics mine*).

Granted that such problems do not exist in Singapore, Haley and Low (1998) pointed out that Governmental policies have produced great economic successes but, paradoxically, the Government’s ideology and action, and even its undoubted success, entail apparent failure. This study confirms Low (2002) study, most focus group members, 80 per cent, cited Singaporeans being less entrepreneurial (these were referred to 25 times) and this could be further explained by Haley and Low (1998)’s analysis that as Singapore ever more successfully achieves the ruling People Action Party’s (PAP’s) goal of effective nationhood, it becomes more deeply enmeshed within the global capitalist system. As Singapore becomes more technocratic, its citizens appear to lose the creativity and entrepreneurship it needs to prosper in a rapidly-changing, global context (Low, 2004; Haley, 1998).

General literacy rate	1990	2000
Aged 15 years and above	89.1	92.5

Source: Census of Population (2000)

Table II.
Education, literacy and language of Singaporeans

The acid test for Singapore to make advancements in entrepreneurship in this father leadership environment is when the people make their own initiatives. When the teenagers grow into adults, they take their own responsibilities. Role-modelling the Government-link Companies (GLCs), Singaporeans can capitalise on the Singapore brand name while tapping what the Singapore government has done well for them such as providing good roads, infrastructures and telecommunications; they can then make more overseas business ventures.

As an analogy, the Government is the father, driving the Singapore family car, and has steered it well in the past, with the passengers being happy to trust the driver-father's good sense to go in the right direction. Times are changing, however, and the driver-father is starting to see that he must attend to the wishes of the family-member passengers and try to involve them in selecting the direction and choosing the routes.

Yet Singapore society is very much like a working adult who still lives at home with his or her parents. Mother still cooks for him and her and father pays the mortgage. Since independence, almost everything has been taken care of by the Singapore Government; the Singapore Government has, in fact, done very well in terms of looking after Singaporeans in terms of housing through Housing and Development Board (HDB) and Singaporeans' future through their Central Provident Funds (CPF). This form of governance/management has worked well with the majority. However, several critics have raised the issue that this may create Singaporeans' over-dependence on the government. One recent study on whether Singaporeans are ready for retirement, Low and Or (2004) highlights that it is "perhaps natural for the people to take things for granted; and these include freedom and financial security with nurturing parents and a fatherly government". Thus, independence and dependence sit uneasily together.

Besides, when having the father leadership way, it is both necessary and good to highlight here that even in the context of a broadly well-managed and highly successful economy though "unabashedly authoritarian government" (Haley, 1998, p. 346), there exists a strong need to also cast a critical eye on public policies. Ngiam Tong Dow, a former civil servant and now chairman of the Housing and Development Board, had voiced this out, indicating that there can be several policy missteps in areas such as education, transport, public finance, exchange rate policy, land pricing and housing (Khanna, 2004, p. 14). Nonetheless, the Singapore Government does attempt to recreate Singapore, getting inputs for the political, social and cultural aspects of the nation's survival or even its greater prosperity (www.remakingsingapore.gov.sg/)[1]. Recently, the government as the father is applying more the selling style: explain decisions and supply opportunities for clarifications and occasionally, the participating style: "share ideas and facilitate in decision making", since the citizens are better educated which in a way, denotes being "able" but "unwilling" in terms of follower readiness in the Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership context (Daft, 2000, pp. 515-516). One such example is that of the Singapore Government's pro-baby measures, selling to Singaporeans that it wants to address the baby-shortage problem and encourage more singles to marry; the new Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted this during the 2004 National Day Rally (Chia, 2004; *The Straits Times*, 25 August 2004).

When compared to the Malaysians, Singaporeans are almost the same; however, Malaysia's paternalism differs from the Singapore culture in that the former has its

roots in the Malay or Bumiputra (*sons-of-the-soil*) culture's respect for the elders, seniority, the values of a hierarchical society and, in part, the Muslim faith (Asma, 1996; Hofstede, 1980; Renwick and Witham, 1997). According to the Malay *adat* (customs), age and leadership is valued; the older person is respected; one respects one's parents (Norazit, 1998).

The Malaysian leadership style under its former Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, can also be assessed as practising father-leadership. In Dr Mohamad's view, Asian leaders need to assume and assert true leadership, seize the initiatives in terms of ideas and thoughts and get their people's respect. He viewed that some countries "suffer from too much democracy", with too many political parties; and even if good leaders were elected, they cannot finish their work or produce results within a short time (*Today's Manager*, 2004/2005, p. 18). It appears that the West or some may suspect that governments are not democratic because the government party remains in power for so long. However, he argued that if the people choose the same party and the same leader, then it is the people's democratic right to do so as long as proper elections were held. He also cited some undemocratic leaders in the past such as China's Deng Xiaoping who have dragged their countries and people kicking and screaming into the modern world (*Today's Manager*, 2004/2005).

In the USA, an antagonistic relationship between the Government and private business exists (Enderle, 1995, p. 100) and the Americans would consider Government as an intrusion, interfering in their privacy. But this stands in contrast to the Singapore situation, where the Government takes care of its citizens through the Central Provident Funds. Public housing, home ownership, "dividend-paying" or subsidies such as the CPF Housing Grant launched in 1994 given to encourage married children to live with their parents (Low, 1998) all testify to the fatherly, benevolent care accorded to the people by the Government. By contrast, Hongkongers never had the same sort of nurturing. What Westerners may regard as an interference in the private lives of citizens (Jose and Doran, 1997), the Singapore Government, very much-Confucianism-influenced, like any concerned father takes care and even gets its single daughters match-made through the Social Development Unit (SDU). The initials: SDU, the joke goes, stands for single, desperate and ugly; the government tries to match using speed dating and Chinese zodiac dates. Its web site, www.lovebyte.org.sg, offers dates via cell-phone text messaging, and information on the baby bonuses (Nakashima, 2004, p. A13).

It seems that nowhere in the world except in Singapore where the Government – like a father – shapes population policies based on the belief that graduates produce better babies (in 1983, the Singapore Government announced a graduate mothers scheme that granted privileges to children of graduate mothers. Less-educated, low-income mothers under 30 years of age given \$10,000 if they themselves sterilised after their first or second child) (www.scwo.org.sg/resource/mile_sgwomen.html). The government, presently, is taking several measures to encourage higher birth-rates. Medisave from the Central Provident Funds can now be used for pre-delivery and delivery expenses incurred for all Singapore children born or after 1 August 2004 and for expenses incurred on procedures aiding conception, such as In-Vitro Fertilisation (*The Straits Times*, 2004).

Now, we turn to corporate leadership and management; Chinese management can be seen as very much similar to Japanese management. The Japanese also

believe and practise “*oyabun*” or “father” leadership (Hanada and Yoshikawa, 1991). The corporate leader is committed like a father to look after his staff’s welfare; his staff on the other hand are committed and remained loyal to him. With mutual commitment and loyalty, the “*wa*” (harmony) spirit is fostered, thus ensuring industrial peace. Both the manager and his staff behave like a father and his children in one happy family.

Indonesian companies also practise father leadership way. Indonesian workers, generally obedient, tend to expect employers to provide transportation and refreshments such as a constant supply of drinking water (Low, 2005; Low, 2000). In staff training, coaching and mentoring becomes critical. The manager is like a father looking after the children’s interest and needs. *Sumonggo dawuh* is practised. *Sumonggo dawuh* can be interpreted as the way in which a staff acknowledges his supervisor as an example to follow (Low, 2005, p. 32; Low, 2000).

Where Singapore companies are concerned, it can be further argued that they have one trait that stands out as different from the direct American companies’ hiring and firing ways, and almost like the Japanese companies in their father “*oyabun*” leadership “*kacho*” (the employers/management takes care of their employees with reciprocal relationships) (Hanada and Yoshikawa, 1991, p. 39, 40; Keeley, 2001, pp. 45-46; Hodgetts and Luthans, 1997; March, 1996; Mitsuyuki, 1985). In Singapore companies, there is this particular *feeling* trait or “*kum cheng*” (Hokkien dialect) (“*Ganqing*” – Mandarin) (relationship-based with a sense of mutual loyalty) value that exists. Singapore companies show care and concern for their employees and they want their people to feel concerned and care for the company (Adler, 1997, p. 52; Low, 2002).

Coining the term “Singapore’s Confucian heritage cultural model”, Low (2002) argues that like benevolent fathers, the corporate leaders or managers, use more saliva than drinking tea – meaning talking, coaching and taking personal interest in the employees’ welfare. So, the business is run based more on good relationships, and employees are treated like all in the family situation; leaders also view their enterprises as an extension or part of their traditional families (Adler, 1997, p. 52; Siew, 1987, Chong, 1987; Lee, 1996, Sheh, 2001). Informality and intimacy exists – with everyone undertaking a variety of activities to meet daily performance demands (Siew, 1987; Ng and Ng, 1996; Bond, 1991; Chan and Chiang, 1994, pp. 55-56; Lasserre and Schutte, 1995, p. 105; Low, 2001, pp. 98-99; Low, 2002). Here, it only implies that within such a corporate culture, good conduct is stressed, and that leaders and members are expected to be both reliable and trustworthy to one another.

True, some critics may also point out that the Singapore model does not work effectively outside Singapore especially in People Republic of China: PRC. The “neo-authoritarian Singapore” in an alien environment (authoritarian PRC) overlooks competition to the Singapore government. Singapore has met harsh reality, and the Singaporean industrial parks are no more profitable or well managed (Tessensohn, 2001; Law, 1996). They may also cite the recent China Aviation Oil (Singapore) Corp’s collapse (Presek, Jr, 2004). However, let’s not get carried away; “many observers think China aspires to become a giant Singapore – a place that embraces free markets, yet with a stern guiding government hand” (Presek, Jr, 2004, p. 24), a tribute to the Singapore father leadership model. (Haley (1998) speaks of Chinese cadres, taking inspiration from Singapore’s high-growth with strong governmental hand in

development and its exacting standards, have been writing blueprints for environmental and building regulation and land-use planning.) In fact, a side-argument here, some even believe that the USA, with its ever-growing amounts of debts, can be overtaken by China as the world's dominant economic power, and they may be right (Presek, Jr, 2004).

Next, although one may perhaps argue that all Asians are not the same and each Asian country may offer different reasons and rationales for their unique brands of paternalism or Confucianism (Haley *et al.*, 2004; Haley *et al.*, 1998), in Asia, the argument that "father still knows best" appears to have some cultural acceptance in several Asian countries. Again, where the Americans would consider Government as an intrusion, disturbing their private affairs, this is not so in the Asian context. Take Vietnam for example, small businesses have boomed since the government passed a new law making it easier to set them up. Vietnam has become one of the fastest-growing countries in Asia (*The Economist*, 2004).

Another recent example is that in Japan, a few terrified private citizens returned home after an awful captivity ordeal in Iraq. However, they were not warmly received. Why did they ignore the government's advice against going to Iraq and then get captured by kidnappers? Are they taking matters into their own hands? The Japanese government not only refused to negotiate with the kidnappers who eventually released the captives after intervention by Muslim clerics but also billed them at least US\$21,700 towards the cost of bringing them home safely (Plate, 2004). These individualistic citizens were disobedient to their father.

Basically, the father cares, disciplines yet administers the dosage accordingly and to the mutual benefits of all concerned; here, trust is the key. Trust needs to be built between the leaders and the followers. The leader, the authority figure must, in the first instance, be evidently competent, and he needs to be there through the thick and thin. Besides, fathering families may at times require fathers to give the bitter medicine, take an unpopular measure or sometimes an even painful, non quick-fix approach; and that the children will just have to understand, learn and adjust. And at times, talking with each other – or using more saliva than drinking tea – helps.

Limitations

Though one criticism that may be levelled at this study could be that the focus group method is not ideal for such topics like this and some critics may argue that it carries some political threats to participants, the focus group meetings were run in a relaxing manner. Participants were expressive, more so, because they felt assured of the absolute anonymity and confidentiality.

Another limitation is the time and cost constraint; hence, additional focus groups have not been formed and met. If more focus groups were assembled, the research would have had a bigger sample that could otherwise be even more representative.

Another limitation and perhaps this researcher's learning point is that depending on budget, separate professional moderators should be appointed in future research. Separate moderators could help the researcher to keep the discussions on track and, at the same, enable note taking to be done separately.

Though some critics may also add that the choice of the focus group participants may be problematic since the composition does not represent a good cross-section of the population. The focus group participants represented more of the business

community in the society; these experienced corporate and business leaders were asked because of the peculiarities of Singapore – its history and economy. A synonymous match exists between the national culture and business or corporate culture in Singapore (Low, 2002), hence the selection and inclusion of the business people in the focus group. To explain further, that synonymous match is primarily because of the country's small size and lack of natural resources, and because since its birth as a modern nation, Singapore is dependent on human capital and relies strongly on its economy for its survival and growth.

As put forth by Low (2002), the use of best experts in the focus groups helps; they are able to provide more accurate evidence, very much the same as courts of law getting expert witnesses. For a helpful and appropriate use of focus groups in cultural studies such as this study or in finding the national culture of a particular country lies in getting members of the focus groups who are locally relevant experts. This is because, in certain countries, certain sectors or fields need to be emphasised since they serve as critical inputs to the national cultures involved. For example, in Indonesia, in finding the national culture and core values of that country, the focus groups should consist of experts – among them, the *mullahs* and the *ulamas* (Islamic leaders and religious teachers), and the farmers. This is because Islam is the country's key religion, and the agrarian way of life have influenced much of Indonesia's history, politics, economy, leadership, and way of life.

Scope for future research

The research indeed highlights the “fatherly” theory in an “authoritarian society” such as Singapore; but the theory has not been tested in the USA or the UK and the less authoritarian societies. In less authoritarian societies, its applications have not been universally proven; however, this can be the future scope of research.

This research also indicates that the “fatherly” theory are practised in small and medium businesses in Singapore since they are influenced by the national culture; as such, this also calls for further research to examine what further opportunities and benefits such practises may bring. Such “fatherly” theory may also be practised in small and medium businesses or places where there are pockets, large or small, of Chinese communities in such countries as in Malaysia, Indonesia or even in the USA.

Conclusion

The research thus highlights that leaders should possess “paternal authoritative-ness”. To exercise the positive influence of the individual on the people, practising father leadership requires that leaders ensure legitimacy, institutional or organisational strengths and efficiency. They should be expert, knowledgeable and credible; they should ensure political stability (“keeping a nation intact is best” Sun Tzu, Chapter 3) and offer help to the people. The leaders, tapping on their seniors' or their own experiences, also supply good advice and coach their followers. Trust must exist, and if there are mutual benefits for both leaders and followers, then industrial peace, stability and harmony within the organisation (nation) will ensue.

If the “fatherly” theory is comparable to applying Sun Tzu's art of warfare theory; it can, in a way, trigger interest internationally and receive worldwide applications. Besides, the “fatherly” theory can also be researched into in terms of its applications to ensure a nation's development and economic growth.

Note

1. The Remaking Singapore Committee was set up in February 2002 to complement the Economic Review Committee's work in reviewing strategies for twenty first century Singapore. Chaired by Minister of State for National Development Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, the Committee comprised members ranging from Ministers of State and Members of Parliament to members of the public from the private sector, voluntary organisations and tertiary institutions. Five Subject Committees – Beyond Careers, Beyond Condo, Beyond Club, Beyond Credit Card and Beyond Cars – were also formed to review specific areas. The Committee's report was submitted to the Government in July 2003. Its recommendations focus on the political, social and cultural aspects of our survival as a nation.

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Further reading

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