

Leadership Lessons from the Animal Kingdom

Prof. Dr. Patrick Kim Cheng Low
and Sik-Liong Ang, MBA
University Brunei Darussalam
Gadong, Brunei

Abstract:

Here, using various examples and a number of Chinese proverbs, the authors indicate, draw parallels as well as highlight and examine the leadership lessons drawn from nature, particularly so, of the animal kingdom. Interestingly, the Chinese visor or perspective is added to these interpretations.

Key words: Leadership, eagle, tiger, horse, crane, tortoise, snake, monkey, frog, resilience, leading change.

Introduction

Leadership matters. And there is a great need for better leaders (Beam, 2004). Certainly if one wants to be successful, one should develop one's leadership skills?

Leadership skills are a skill set that can be possessed both in humans and in animals. Animals can be good examples of leaders for they lead their groups by influencing, showing examples, guiding and constantly communicating with their followers. They have the aim and goal for their followers to follow. For example, animals that travel in groups, when making migratory or movement decisions, often depends on social interactions among their own group members. This is important since they need to have good communicating skills; they transfer information and/ or show action. This is done by signaling to one another or making noises which can only be understood by their own species. Information that is transferred is crucial as in many cases, very few of them have enough information, such as knowledge about the location of a food source, or of a migration route, and therefore in a group there is always a leader that knows all the

information and thus guides its followers in the right direction. This leader is the one that takes responsibility of the safety of its followers (caring them) and in turn, the followers are dependent on their leader.

To the authors, leadership involves using the head, the heart and the hands. The leader should make full use of his or her analytical skills and social or interpersonal skills. By “using the hands”, we take it to mean that the leader should lead by the example, actions that the leader not only speaks of but perform. The leader also needs to be hands-on.

The Paper’s Purpose & Objectives

As in Aesop’s fables where lessons are learnt from stories told, here, leadership lessons are learnt from the nature and habits of animals. The purpose and objectives of this paper is to indicate and draw parallels, and highlight the leadership lessons and its applications from nature with special reference to the animal kingdom, and where necessary, such an interpretation is seen from the Chinese perspective.

The Eagle

“When there is no vision, the people perish.” (Proverbs 29, 18).

With a superior mind, the leader can come up with a vision or a dream, and that vision should be communicated to the people. And how true, creating a vision for the people, the leader’s dreams can help create a better world for the people.

One leadership lesson drawn from the eagle is that of vision. It is said that the eagle soars or flies high when it is hunting. From the way of the eagle, the leader can learn the need to have a high vantage point, giving vision to the people. The leader should have a vision and see the big picture. And vision, having it is a necessity, serves as a guide or even as a beacon and a guiding light to the people.

From the eagles, one can also learn about resilient or tough leadership. Leaders need to be tough and resort to positive thinking, changing the “I can’t” to “I can!” and the “I’ll try to do” to “I’ll do it!”

When eagles are 30 years old, they go through a process of renewal. Finding a hidden place high in the mountains, the old eagle with curved beak begins to claw at its face, and tear out the old feathers that by now become less airborne. As a result, it bleeds badly. But this is vital for the eagle in order to renew its strength. If the eagle did not do this, it would not be able to live to its normal 40 years (Ozirney, 2009). It is thus vital for the eagle to undergo the change process to gain its strength and this builds the eagle’s resilience. By the same token, mankind simply needs to accept the change process, learn and grow. It’s part of life and living.

It is apt at this point to quote a Chinese phrase: 大展鴻圖 “The eagle is soaring high, spreading its wings.” When a Chinese businessperson receives a calligraphic painting of an eagle from his or her business associates, it depicts that the well wishers wish the business person well, and in fact, they are sending him or her good intentions and wishes of business expansion. More specifically, in Chinese culture, the eagle symbolizes an individual’s, hence can be the leader’s strength, ambition and emulation since (s)he can fly as high as (s)he desires. In many Chinese brush paintings, the eagle can be depicted as catching a fish against the backdrop of a rising sun and mighty waves. The turbulence of the vast ocean is never an obstacle for the strong and determined eagle. The depiction of an eagle can normally be taken as being optimistic. The rising sun, which foresees every possibility in life, is a symbol of opportunities and bright future, greatness and magnificence an individual can achieve with all efforts and aspiration (s)he devotes. Hence, the eagle can be a good source of inspiration and encouragement.

The Tiger

A leader needs to be a risk taker too. (S)he should take some risks. And interestingly, this brings to mind a Chinese saying that goes, “if you do not enter the tiger’s den”, how can you get his cub?”

Having powerfully built shoulders and legs, the tiger, the largest of the four big cats of the *panthera* family, is also seen by the Chinese as courageous as well as upholding justice. It protects the weak. Being seen as the King of the Beasts in East Asian cultures, paintings of tiger(s) are normally put in the house to ward off evil spirits.

There is another Chinese proverb that goes, “there are times when even the tiger sleeps.” Here, it is taken that even a leader makes a mistake, yet, as a leader, it would be more big-hearted for him or her to admit rather than to deny it. One would then learn from the mistake, adopting an overall continuous improvement or *kaizen* attitude.

The Horse

In the Western tradition, there is always a wild horse in us and one in which we, as a person or leader needs to tame or put it under control. That wild horse can be our emotions and feelings. The leader should be emotionally stable, and in fact, possess high emotional quotient (EQ). Here, in the Chinese context, the leader should have “the uncontaminated heart” (清靜心) [purity of heart, care for his or her people] and the clarity of mind [to set goals and get the tasks or job done].

In fact, the Chinese phrase, “馬到功成” meaning “immediate success” is commonly used in Chinese painting and Chinese calligraphy, and most often used as gifts for Chinese businesspeople to display at their new offices or residences. To most Chinese business people, hanging a big painting of eight running, sturdy horses with an inscription of “八駿馬圖”, meaning, “eight handsome running horses” is taken as good luck. Here, it is believed that business would flourish similar to a team of strong horses, running purposefully in unison. Besides, the number eight in Chinese can also sound and mean “prosperity”, hence the number of horses in the painting.

It is worthy to note that horses also have a great sense of balance, in part due to their ability to feel their footing and in part due to the highly developed proprioceptive abilities

(that is, the unconscious sense of where the body and limbs are at all times) (Thomas, 1998). In this aspect, leaders need to be high in self-monitoring, with a good sense of balance and flexibility, mixing with all kinds of people. Having a good sense of balance and a wide area of interests, a leader would not be too rigid, lop-sided and easily stressed. Low self-monitoring, with limited options open, can often act inflexibly or be inflexible (DuBrin, 2007), and people who are flexible and skilled in networking and mixing with different groups of people usually score high on the self-monitoring factor.

The Crane

These are long-legged and long-necked birds of the family Gruidae. In several cultures such as the Chinese, the Japanese, the Koreans, and the Vietnamese, the cranes are considered as auspicious, and they are the symbols of longevity. The Chinese phrase, “松鶴長春” written in the Chinese paintings of cranes and coniferous trees in long spring time depicts the meaning of longevity. Traditionally, the Chinese also regard the cranes as messengers of wisdom. Here, it is said that legendary Taoist sages were transported between heavenly worlds on the backs of cranes. To be able to lift oneself up in the air with the sage, the crane must have maintained a slim body with a pair of powerful wings to carry the sage. In business, the leader must be powerful and confidence enough to lead a team of considerable size.

Interestingly, the cranes are opportunistic feeders that change their diet according to the season and their own nutrient requirements. They eat selectively a range of items from suitably sized rats, fish, frogs, insects and berries and plants. This, in most ways, ensures their survival; and by the same token, leaders need to be situational or agile, and with high adversity quotient, able to take the heat. Making the most of the situation, leaders direct, empower or allow followers' participation as and when necessary.

The Tortoise

The tortoise is considered as a symbol of longevity by the Chinese. The tortoise has a hard shell protecting its inner body, and this makes the tortoise resilience. Giving a hostile environment, the tortoise will strategically protecting itself inside the shell

patiently await the next opportunity to venture out and explore the surroundings. Likewise, a leader should be steadfast and preserve; the leader is often a determined and resilient person, weathering crises or effecting turnarounds of businesses.

It represents the virtue of patience in leadership. “Patience is good and in fact great, it can be taken it that patience is soft and gentle, and it can be powerful” (Low, 2009). Rome is not built in a single day; a strong brand needs to be built. Similarly, a good corporate culture also needs to be built and nurtured with a set of core values. Lasting companies with timeless core values can be said to last longer! (Collins and Porras, 2002). These lasting core values are indeed reinforced by the founders’ and leaders’ good examples and role-modeling ways.

The Snake

One of the twelve celestial animals of the Chinese Zodiac in the Chinese calendar, the snake in Christianity, the serpent has been seen as Satan’s representative. It is seen as sly plotting, as in the description in Genesis, Chapter 3 of a snake in the Garden of Eden, tempting Eve. Saint Patrick is reputed to have expelled all snakes from Ireland while Christianizing the country in the 5th century, thus explaining the absence of snakes there.

Snakes such as pythons are said to have swallowed dogs or even huge animals such as buffaloes; this is because of their flexible jaws which can open up to accommodate the size of their preys. Here, we can liken this to the confidence and ambitions of a leader. The leader is usually big-hearted and magnanimous, wanting to move the people towards the vision he or she envisages.

Snakes also shed off or change their skins often; here, leaders need to lead change by being fluid in accepting and managing change. Creating a sense of urgency, they motivate their people to accept and implement the change. Leaders celebrate successes, no matter how little; and they also get their people to see the benefits of the change (Hayes, 2007). This is to keep the change momentum going while moving towards realizing the change.

The Monkey

A prominent divine entity in Hinduism, the monkey can be said to bestow longevity. In Buddhism, the monkey is an early incarnation of Buddha but may also represent trickery and ugliness. The Chinese Buddhist, the “mind monkey” metaphor refers to the unsettled, restless state of human mind. The *Mizaru* or three wise monkeys are revered in Japanese folklore. To the Chinese, the monkey is normally seen as clever.

There’s a Chinese saying that “even monkeys at times fall from the trees”. Leaders also make mistakes, and it is good that leaders learn from these mistakes.

“Pilgrimage to the West”, one of the greatest novels in the Chinese Literature written by (吳承恩) Wu Cheng-en (1500-1582) in the Ming Dynasty, occupying an important place in World Mythology. Here, the “Monkey God” is depicted as a brave, courageous, diligent hero who is afraid of nothing not even the Jade Emperor or Yama, the underworld king. (C.C. Low & Associates, 1975) He is a radical leader who thinks differently from other people; he uses his wonder magic iron cudgel to fight demons and kings. From here, we can liken this to a leader who is brave and courageous and set a role model example to his team. Besides, to stand out and carve a competitive edge, a leader perhaps need to be different and even creative.

The Frog

Frogs are often featured prominently in folklore. In the West, fairy tales and popular culture include stories such as the frog-prince; this is a fairy tale that tells a frog who turns into a handsome prince once kissed by beautiful maidens.

Amphibian metamorphosis undergoes a single change from tadpole to an adult frog. A tadpole has gills, a tail and a circular mouth and swims in the water. During metamorphosis, the hind legs begin to develop followed by the front legs. When the lungs develop, the tadpole swims to the surface of the water to breathe. The intestine shortens to accommodate a carnivorous diet, and the eyes protrude in such a way that they are

above water when the rest of the body is immersed. The eyes have movable lids but, in addition, the whole eyeball can be withdrawn farther into the head by muscles. This can be seen to happen sometimes when the frog is swallowing. Its nostrils are situated so that air can be breathed while the frog is swimming at the surface; they can also be closed. And for the last stage of metamorphosis, the tail is absorbed by the body. (Mackean D G, 2004). By the same token, leaders need to equip with various leadership skills for them to be adaptable to any setting or environment that they are in.

In Chinese folklore, the Three-legged Money Frogs, also known as Chan Chu [which means frog or toad] are an ancient and popular Chinese symbol of prosperity. They are said to be the bearer of good fortune, which is why you always see them bringing two strings of coins tied behind their back and holding a lucky Ching Dynasty gold coin in their mouth. According to Feng Shui lore, Money Frogs are believed to drive away evil, protect wealth, and increase income. In ancient China, these mythical creatures are said to appear every full moon near homes that will receive good news of increased wealth or monetary gain. Feng Shui Masters believe that Money Frogs go out in the afternoon to collect money and return at night with lots of money sticking on their feet.

Conclusion

The authors are highlighting some of the good features and habits of the animal kingdom without denying that bad habits and behaviour among these animal do exist. However, to stress on these bad behaviours would be indulging in negative thinking, hence the emphasis on these positive attributes. Similarly, anyone can make mistakes but more critically, we need to learn from them, and in this case, more specifically, we are learning from these good features and behaviours.

Learning from the positive attributes of the animal kingdom mentioned above, the key success factors for good leaders are having vision, being strong and resilient, guiding yet flexible while being compassionate and caring. They also lead change. Using these positive attributes, the leaders can grow themselves and perform effectively; and the organization they lead also benefit and grow.

References

Beam, H.H. (2004) 'Why smart executives fail', *Academy of management*, 18(2) (2004), p. 157 - 158.

C.C. Low & Associates (1975) (translators) Pictorial Stories of Chinese Classical legend, *The Adventure of the Monkey God*, Volume 1, Canfonian Pte. Ltd, Singapore.

Collins, James C. and Porras, Jerry I. (2002) *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies* Harper Business Essentials: USA.

DuBrin, Andrew J. (2007) *The fundamentals of organizational behavior*, Thomson South-Western: Canada.

Hayes, John (2007) (2nd. edition) *The theory and practice of change management*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York.

Low Kim Cheng, Patrick and Theyagu, Daniel (2003) *Developing true leadership potential*, The Publishing Consultant: Singapore.

Low Kim Cheng, P. (2009), Lao Tzu's Three Treasures, Leadership & Organisation Growth, *Leadership & organizational management journal*, Volume 2009 Issue 3 Franklin Publishing Company, USA.

Ozirney, Linda (2009) *Eagles*, Women Ministries, Baptist General Conference of Canada. Website: http://www.bgc.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=139&Itemid=198. Accessed on 5 October 2009.

White, B. Joseph and Prywes, Yaron (2007) *The nature of leadership: Reptiles, mammals, and the challenge of becoming a great leader*, AMACOM : USA.

Websites:

"Chinese frog", http://www.azuremoonjewelry.com/product_info.php?products_id=60 Accessed on 5 November 2009.

"Tiger culture – Save China's tigers" [English.savechinastigers.org](http://english.savechinastigers.org). Web-site: <http://english.savechinastigers.org/node/316>. Accessed on 7 October 2009.

Thomas, Heather Smith. 'True Horse Sense', *Thoroughbred Times*. Thoroughbred Times Company - Posted: Saturday, October 17, 1998 Web-site: <http://www.thoroughbredtimes.com/horse-health/1998/October/17/True-horse-sense.aspx> Accessed on 6 October 2009.