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And Act With Courage

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Confucius' Big Ideas

With sincere apologies to Chinese philosophers for any oversimplifications, here are some big Confucian ideas that I've found useful in my life as an American mom and businesswoman.

- 1. Leadership is about wisdom and compassion.** Approximately 100 years before Socrates and 500 years before Jesus of Nazareth, Confucius uttered what we know today as the Golden Rule – treating others the way that you would want to be treated. Most often, this teaching was aimed at leaders, who at the time were warlords who often had little regard for their subjects. To Confucius, leaders had a great responsibility to treat their people with respect and care, and a moral imperative to promote the common good.
- 2. Nobility is achieved through education and moral behavior.** In an age when leaders were considered to be embodiments of gods, and when nobility was considered to be a birthright, Confucius shook up the old order. He said that nobility was achieved through education and moral behavior, that leadership could be learned, and that even a peasant could be a noble man.
- 3. Do your job, and do it well.** If you conclude that Confucius was tough on leaders (he was), you also should know that he was tough on *everyone*. He did not coddle whiners or underachievers. He expected you to perform your role to the best of your ability. Having a low-level or boring job did not absolve you of this requirement, because he was convinced that every job or role has value in a well-functioning society.

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Confucius in My Cubicle

By Cathy Perme

A few years ago, to honor my adopted daughter's Chinese heritage, I decided to learn about Confucius' life and teachings. After some reading and research, I've come to think of him as *the original consultant!* Why? He traveled from kingdom to kingdom (business to business), advised their courts (leadership teams), facilitated group discussions (about values and change), and coached people (through questioning them) to be better leaders.

Confucius lived at a time of great social and political upheaval, with kingdoms fighting kingdoms. A primary focus of his was to reduce chaos, because he believed that if leaders could help reduce chaos, it would create a "virtuous circle," with people becoming more likely to invest in their families and livelihoods, thereby bringing about greater calm and prosperity.

Confucius' big ideas are summarized in the sidebar at left. What I find most amazing is that advice given *2,500 years ago* is still so relevant, even with the ever-increasing speed and complexity of our lives. His challenge for leaders to be humane and focus on the common good, for education to lift up society, and for everyone to perform their roles well seems to provide a common-sense approach to our problems today as well.

Confucius' teachings were recently brought to life for me while consulting for the Custodial Services Department of St. Paul (MN) Public Schools. Routinely called "janitors," they clean schools and keep them in good working order. They are often hampered by outdated equipment, time constraints and a challenging customer base. (Imagine the stress of constantly cleaning up after your kids, but for 300 to 2,000 of them at a time!) The work is not pretty and it is hard. They are on the low end of the pecking order for attention, respect and funding.

And yet... and yet... the people that I worked with have an incredible sense of pride and ownership in the work that they do, and they see themselves as an integral part of their school teams. In my work with them, a team of volunteers from the group took on the challenging work of redesigning outdated processes to improve productivity, teamwork and results. It has not been – nor is yet – easy or popular work. I doubt that any of the custodians who joined this effort set out to be leaders, but that is what they are, having stepped up to co-create important changes for the common good.

I have been honored to work with such a thoughtful and courageous group. And I think that Confucius would have been proud.