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Applying the Taoist Way of Thinking in Dialogic Consulting

Following the Client's Way with Three Maxims

By Jane Feng

Abstract
This article explores an Eastern approach to practicing dialogic OD consulting in China. As a native Chinese educated in the Western OD tradition, the author makes her argument building on examining the Taoist way of thinking and her experiences from consulting engagements with China-based multinational clients. She frames her practice as *following the client's way with Three Maxims*, illustrated with examples and a mini-case.
Keywords: Following the Way, Dialogic Process Consulting, OD consulting in China

Since the universe is a dichotomy between the West and the East, it makes sense to argue that there might be an Eastern way of practicing OD in addition to its Western OD tradition. As a native Chinese who learned OD mainly from NTL/Fielding, I have been practicing OD consulting in China with an Eastern orientation, inspired by Marshak's early work on the Confucian/Taoist way of thinking (1993, 1994). This orientation helps my efficacy when engaging China-based multinational corporations (MNCs) in change interventions (Feng, 2022; 2021).

In writing this article, I aim to provide a Taoist model working with Dialogic OD, derived from my experiences when practicing dialogic process consulting in China. The discussion will briefly explain the Taoist orientation and my perspective on its connotation to dialogic consulting. I will then elaborate on my approach: *following the client's way with Three Maxims*. What I mean by this will be illustrated with examples and a mini-case. In closing, I offer some thoughts about the application.

Tao: Following the Watercourse Way with Wu-wei

In traditional Chinese cosmology, the universe is one entity made up of yin-yang polarity in constant motion and alteration, such as the natural succession of the four seasons and the twelve months. Change is inherent in the Chinese way of thinking. Regarded as one of the oldest Chinese texts about change, the *I Ching* (易经, *Book of Changes*, c. 1143 BCE) describes an ancient cosmology system encompassing all the universe's changes, with philosophical commentaries for human beings to act in accordance with the universal principle.

Change is inevitable: emergent and constant, cyclical and processional. However, the universal principle of all things is unchanged, called the *Tao* (道) or Way, abiding by the ebb and flow of the cosmic forces. It is the source, pattern, and essence behind the natural world that keeps the universe balanced and ordered. Dong Zhongshu (c. 179–104 BCE), an eminent politician and a distinguished scholar in the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE),

stated, "The origin of great Tao comes from Heaven. Heaven is unchanged; thus Tao remains unchanged." (See *https://ctext.org/han-shu/dong-zhong-shu-zhuan/zhs*, Chapter 35, in traditional Chinese.)

The Chinese way of thinking is greatly influenced by Taoism, one of the ancient Chinese philosophies emphasizing living in harmony with the Tao. The *I Ching* plays a significant role in shaping Taoism in its early years. Later, the main concepts and ideas are defined by *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu (老子, c. 571–471 BCE) and *Zhuangzi* of Chuang-tzu (庄子, c. 369–286 BCE). In the *Tao Te Ching* (道德经), Lao Tzu presented his thinking about Tao in 81 chapters speaking to the most abstruse reality and the highest mysteries of the universe in seemly paradoxical axioms that reveal his eminent wisdom. He asserted that the universe is already in perfect order. *Following the Way*, the natural order of the universe, shall lead to evolution and transformation that eventually result in harmony and equilibrium in all things.

Tao advocates *following the way with wu-wei*, a critical concept discussed shortly. The book *Zhuangzi* exemplifies this idea with its extensive collection of anecdotes, allegories, parables, and fables. Despite the controversy about the book's authorship, whereby only the first seven chapters are regarded as the actual work of Chuang-tzu, it is generally acknowledged that the remaining writings bear the stamp of the brilliant and original mind of Chuang-tzu.

Tao embodies a wide range of connotations. For example, it is humble. "The great Way is all-pervading. It reaches to the left and to the right. All things depend on it with their existence. Still, it demands no obedience" (Chapter 34, *Tao Te Ching*, see Watts 1975, p. 41). Watts (1975) equated Tao with water, "Tao is the flowing course of nature and the universe... and water is its eloquent metaphor" (p. 49). Lakoff (1980, 2006) claimed that metaphor is used to understand and interpret one kind of thing or experience (usually more abstract) in terms of another (more concrete). It entails a coherent system of metaphorical expressions for the related concepts. Watts (1975) expounded on the Tao as the Watercourse Way, "Thus the Tao is the course, the flow, the drift, or the process of nature, and I call it the Watercourse Way because both Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu use the flow of water as its principal metaphor." (p. 41)

Water is the essence of life, thereby Lao Tzu's favorite image of the Tao. It resembles many aspects of the Tao, as metaphorically expressed in Chapters 8, 32, 43, 66, & 78 of the *Tao Te Ching* (Watts, 1975, p. 47). Lao-tzu wrote, "The highest good is like water, for the good of water is that it nourishes everything without striving. It occupies the place which all men think bad [i.e., the lowest level]" (Chapter 8). Water is a river. "It is thus that Tao in the world is like a river going down the valley to the ocean" (Chapter 32). Water is flexible and adaptable by staying low. "Because they are good at keeping low, that is how they are kings of the hundred rivers" (Chapter 66). Although water is soft and weak, in the Tao's law of reversal, "The most gentle thing in the world overrides the most hard" (Chapter 43). Again, in Chapter 78, "Nothing in the world is weaker than water, but it has no better in overcoming the hard."

In a nutshell, water flows naturally downriver, coming from (or going to) multiple directions, taking various forms (such as stream, river, or ocean), representing the Tao that allows everything to go its own way.

Wu-wei is also a conceptual metaphor for the Tao (Slingerland, 2003). Literally, wu-wei means nonaction; symbolically, it signifies non-forced or effortless action. This concept states the fundamental Taoist belief that the universe is already working with its own principle; imposing the human way onto the natural order would disrupt the balance and equilibrium. Slingerland (2003) interpreted wu-wei with a systematic schema covering the essential aspects of the Tao, such as spontaneity, at ease, lack of exertion, and unself-consciousness. Wu-wei is normally associated with water, because water is submissive and spontaneous, acting effortlessly without motive. It acts with *wu-wei*. Chuang-tzu wrote, "The fluidity of water is not the result of any effort on the part of the water, but is its natural property." Watts (1975, p. 47)

Wu-wei by no means indicates that we cannot change or affect things. Instead, as pointed out in Chapter 78, we should be like water, submissive and weak, yet cannot be surpassed for attacking hard and strong. Water might be blocked by an object (branch or stone), but it would work around the obstacles by naturally running through a new outlet. By acting with no imposed actions, we might evoke the change in a non-disturbing way.

In the Tao's law of reversal, wu-wei implies a paradox. "The Tao does nothing, and yet nothing is left undone" (*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 37, see Watts 1975, p. 41). Wu-wei by no means indicates that we cannot change or affect things. Instead, as pointed out in Chapter 78, we should be like water, submissive and weak, yet cannot be surpassed for attacking hard and strong. Water might be blocked by an object (branch or stone), but it would work around the obstacles by naturally running through a new outlet. By acting with no imposed actions, we might evoke the change in a non-disturbing way.

In brief, Tao acknowledges that everything operates harmoniously according to its own way. *Following the watercourse way with wu-wei* is the Taoist way to achieve a state of harmony between humans and the universe.

Applying the Taoist Way of Thinking in Dialogic Consulting

Dialogic consulting in my practice refers to dialogic process consulting, intended to address what is framing the situation versus the content of the discussion. It "involves interactions with individuals or teams where potentially limiting mindsets are discerned and confronted through narratives, stories, metaphors, images, slogans, and the like, in order to generate new thinking and possibilities" (Marshak, 2020, p. 13).

The following discussion builds on my literature review of Marshak's work (see Marshak, 2004; 2013; 2015; 2019; 2020). Central to dialogic process consulting is to address mindsets for new possibilities to emerge by leveraging language for change. This way of working assumes that mindsets govern thoughts and actions. The change intervention is carried out through in-the-moment generative conversations, including deep listening and transforming talk. A consultant working in this approach starts with deep listening to discern the possible mindsets by listening for the explicit/implicit metaphors and storylines that may reveal how people are experiencing their situations at the moment. Then apply transforming talk, usually in small talk with a few words, to address the current mindsets informed by deep listening. Once the clients become aware of their limiting mindsets, a consultant then provides new phrases trying to alter their mindsets, hopefully leading to more options and choices for the clients.

In-the-moment dialogic consulting through generative conversation reminds me of *following the watercourse way*. The conversation provides a water channel allowing free interactions between the consultant and the client, with neither a structured course of action nor a prescribed outcome. The interventions follow the client's way "in the service of the client's stated concerns, needs, and objectives" (Marshak, 2013, p. 50). It requires a consultant to listen from the client's frame of reference, then respond to the client's mindsets by getting "in sync" drawing upon their language (e.g., word images, metaphors, storylines, etc.). In the words of Marshak, "try using their responses as further information about what is going on for them. Adjust what you say accordingly." (2013, p. 52)

Furthermore, generative conversations, in my perspective, resemble *wu-wei*. A consultant shall follow the client's way with effortless actions. "A critical error of some beginning *deep listeners* is to unintentionally impose their own metaphors or framings on the situation, as if they were guessing what the client was thinking or experiencing by assuming it must be what they would think or experience in the same situation" (Marshak, 2004, p. 27). As discussed earlier, wu-wei does not mean inaction. Instead, it requires acting in sync with the client's way. "Don't force your insights," Marshak reminded (2013, p. 52).

Based on the above insights, I started to apply the Taoist way of thinking when engaging my China-based multinational clients. I frame this way of working as *following the client's way with Three Maxims*. *The client's way* is a term used to capture the essence of my approach. It refers to how clients think and act, governed by their mindsets operating in their contexts. For example, I once had a coaching client who considered quitting her job whenever she was upset in the workplace. During my coaching session, I heard repeated phrases of "walk away" when she told me about her difficult interactions with her U.S. counterpart. This word image revealed her avoiding/escaping mindset, signifying her way as *"walk away" in case of difficulties*.

Following the client's way is an intervention for the change to happen naturally. Once the client's way is validated via a few inquiries, a consultant uses small talk to provoke the client's awareness of his/her limiting mindsets by showing the resulting consequences. If successful, the client may consider thinking differently. When acting with wu-wei, a consultant indeed follows the client's way, in sync with the language in use, without imposing his/her own framing and/or suggesting actions. Then change would happen in the client's choice.

In the above example, after deep listening the conversation was unfolded as follows:

Jane: Well, you walk away for...
The Client: I need to feel happy at work. Why bother?
Jane: So, you walk away for happiness?
The Client: Probably yes.
Jane: What will you do after walking away from this company because the difficulties might exist wherever you go, sooner or later?
The Client: Well, I can do whatever I want at home.
Jane: Rely on your husband as a housewife?
The Client: Oh no way, I don't like housework.
Jane: What would your family think if you quit your job?
The Client: I haven't thought about it. Now they listen to me because I make good money.
Jane: Still the same afterward? Will you be happy by then?

At that moment, the client began to be aware of her limiting mindset and the resulting consequences. I followed her way by reflecting on her words (i.e., walk away), and invited her to rethink what might happen to her. The small talk made her realize that her "walk away" probably would not bring her happiness. By then, she was open to new ideas. After further exploration, she decided to talk directly with her boss about her situation. Fortunately, she stayed with the company with success.

To summarize, *following the client's way with Three Maxims* involves:

- discerning the client's way through deep listening
- provoking the client's awareness with small talk
- inducing the change in the client's choice.

Let me offer a mini-case example to further illustrate this approach.

Team Off-Site Retreat: Stakeholder Engagement

The client was a legal team of a U.S. headquartered multinational company based in Shanghai, consisting of ten people with two leaders. The senior one was a male, a veteran of over ten years in the legal function with various leadership roles; the other was a female who joined the team less than one year earlier. The team members encountered challenges when interacting with business leaders on compliance-related projects. I was invited to facilitate an off-site retreat, with one agenda to address this issue. In my planning meeting with the team leaders, after listening to their narratives about stakeholder engagement, I proposed a role-play to simulate the real-life scenario for issues to emerge. Both nodded in agreement.

The role-play was a half-day session. The scene unfolded with several team members meeting with a challenging business leader, trying to convince him to support a compliance project. The female leader acted as the business leader since she still vividly recalled that experience shortly after joining the company. The first meeting disappointed both parties. The team members kept telling the business leader how important the project was, and the business leader challenged them for wasting his time on their agenda. Noting the repeated phrases, *"This is an important project; We need your support,"* I developed a hunch that it might indicate the limiting mindset.

When the team members were debriefing after the first round, I asked the team leaders if they would like to offer some advice then try a second round. Both liked the idea. Unfortunately, the second round did not work out either. The business leader was annoyed and became even more challenging, despite the team members showing nice gestures, such as apologizing for taking his time, preparing the café, etc. The meeting became stuck after two rounds.

At that time, I was sure about the client's way, i.e., *making every effort to convince the business leader to support the legal agenda*, manifested by the *"we–you"* mindset. Although during the second short break, I reminded them subtly to think about how the business leader reacted to their phrases of *"we–you,"* no one paid attention to my alert since they were busy "playing back" the scenario of the meeting.

To raise their awareness of the potential limiting mindset, I proposed to the senior leader a third round for him to demonstrate a meeting with the business leader. He agreed. The third meeting went very well. He talked to the business leader by being assertive yet empathetic and convincing: *"This is the company's agenda, the project matters to all of us. Let's support each other. Please let us know what we should do better."* By altering the mindset from *"we–you"* to *"company–us,"* he successfully changed the meeting dynamics. At the end of the meeting, the business leader committed to supporting this project and began to discuss the execution plan. The team members were amazed by the outcome. In the final debriefing, after the senior leader elaborated on why he did it that way, I called out the phases of "*we–you*" versus "*company–us*," and inquired how the business leader reacted to each. Fortunately, they realized that their limiting mindset got them stuck. After a few chitchats releasing their emotions, they brainstormed what to do differently. The role-play session was closed to everyone's satisfaction.

This mini-case example demonstrates how I *followed the client's way with Three Maxims*. First, I *discerned the client's way through deep listening*. Then I *provoked the client's awareness with small talk*. I did very little throughout the session, because I was mindful not to enforce my thinking in the client's way. In fact, the client did not even notice my "wu-wei" as they were very involved in their flow of activities. As a result, *I induced the change in the client's choice*.

Closing Comments

Although this way of working is at its early stage, based on the previous examples, I find some conditions necessary for success. First, the generative conversation needs to happen in a context embracing the Taoist cultural influence. My clients work in the MNC context with both Chinese and Western cultural influences, and I am a native Chinese. Following their way is natural for both parties. Second, the clients do not expect me to be an expert. Instead, they regarded me as a sparring partner to facilitate new ideas and possibilities. Third, trust between the client and the consultant is essential working this way because everything is emergent, neither party knows the possible outcome. Our multi-year relationship helps build trust leading to a non-planned yet fruitful result.

OD practitioners familiar with the Taoist way of thinking may have different perspectives and practices, depending on the cultural orientation, the change context, and the dynamics between the consultant and the client. For Western OD practitioners, knowing the Taoist model of working with Dialogic OD might still be helpful because the world is more global with the intertwined Eastern/Western orientations manifested, explicitly or implicitly, in various OD practices. Of course, further research shall be needed for evidence of whether/how this model may work for Dialogic OD in different cultural contexts with diverse client populations. I hope this article serves as a starting point for the interested scholar-practitioners to explore further if this way of working may have the possibility to amplify the successful practice of Dialogic OD.

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