

# THE PERPLEXITY OF MENTALITY: Three Findings about Leadership

by Zhang Zhaolin



## Leadership and Mentality

It never occurs to me until recently that “mentality” is an independent problem that requires management attention. During most of my work hours, I work as a CEO or a coach to the top management of various companies, providing them with feedback and advice. However, the change programme which I was involved in recently offered me a chance to contact the middle

management, from whom I began to understand that mentality is more a well-defined cultural logic than a mere attitude or emotional phenomenon.

To exercise effective leadership in an organization, a leader often takes advantage of such thinking tools as “mission” and “values” to reduce the potential complexity caused by different ideologies of individuals, allowing a for-profit organization to focus on the

improvement of its effectiveness and efficiency. He tries to associate corporate behaviors with a noble objective and give value and moral significance to daily routines to inspire human potential. A master leader might even intentionally dim the strategic significance of these moves and take their consequent benefits to the long-term development of a business as a natural outcome. This is a transition of leadership from self-improvement to benefiting all the people under heaven.

However, actual realization of leadership is not as simple as that. If “providing the direction”, “motivating others”, and “enabling subordinates” are stopped at the behavior level, then these behaviors can only fall into the category of management. It is too mechanical and naive to equate behaviors and thinking tools to leadership. The essence of leadership lies in its intangible charisma that can permeate into subordinates’ innermost and induce expected changes in their behaviors. Therefore, a leader should focus his attention or values of leadership on the subordinates’ mentality.



The so-called “pulling force” and “driving force” are western descriptions of the effective management behaviors of first-line managers. Leadership and management are different concepts with no clear-cut line in between. Some factors in leadership, whose artistic flavor can hardly be appreciated by ordinary managers, may result from the leader’s understanding of his rich experience, or innate sensitivity, or freely trained sympathy. From of old, the degree of benevolence has determined whether an ancient king was practicing “dictatorship” or “benevolent governance”.

The innermost of each subordinate is an individual world. The hierarchy of needs theory alone cannot provide a full explanation of the complex interpersonal relationship in reality and

the turbulent internal conflicts under the seemingly calm surface. In terms of social nature, man is an ensemble of social relations and their relative significance in each dimension is more fundamental than absolute quantity. While making efforts to create benefits for the organization and the group in an absolute sense, individuals carefully protect their independence, self-esteem and value in their mutual relationship. Equilibrium between the two forces is not only the existing form of culture, but also a yardstick to measure maturity of one’s self-consciousness.

It is constrained by an individual’s own feelings about his environment and status, the significance of the organization, others’ attitude, and the cognition and judgment of his relationship with others.

Mentality is the dynamic value and behavior orientation reflected when an individual copes with the aforesaid relations. The champion of culture pulls the group members towards noble objectives with the values, mission and vision of the organization, creating a relationship between daily routines and greatness. However, a leader should also master the art of leadership and play an exemplary role to shape, maintain and safeguard the subordinates’ inner experiences. In this light, caring for subordinates is a critical competency of the leader, which is

more than oral expression.

Highly-empowered individuals (individuals with positive mentality) requires a sense of security and belonging in the organizational relationship, and such a sense of belonging is based on recognition of the organization’s values and mission, and more importantly, on the first-hand experiences and events around them.

In a broad sense, corporate culture equals to an organization’s mentality. Inconsistency between reality and ideals, disparity between one’s experience and “expected needs”, and conflicts between the desire to control and the feeling of being controlled may result in agitated emotions and strategic responses of the members. The mechanism of motivation behind is typically driven by mentality. However, it is also recognized that an individual’s inborn personalities play an important role in shaping his mentality. When the response model is repeated and reinforced through “three-dimensional experience” (different aspects of life and work), a stereotyped mentality and behavior pattern is shaped, blurring the boundary between culture and mentality. As a result, some individuals tend to be extraordinarily sensitive and emotional, some tend to be worldly-wise and cynical, and some tend to be very vindictive and excessively conscious of self-protection, while others are locked into “victim mentality”.

The effects of negative mentality are astonishing. Given the “responsive” and “emotional” nature of mentality, the consequent cognitive and behavior models will invariably be subjective. Out of the need for self-protection and psychological compensation, an indi-

vidual will make various subjective assumptions on the surroundings, the world and interpersonal relationship. When these assumptions are challenged, an individual with negative mentality tends to be conservative and capricious. At this moment, his thinking is deviating further from reality.

## Mentality and Leadership

It is a great challenge for a leader to get subordinates with negative mentality to support a change programme.

Evidence for the existence of leadership can be found in the observation that subordinates accept willingly the influence of the leader and act enthusiastically upon his guidance. In other words, they are the objects of actions with initiatives and creativity. However, some weak leaders may fall into a trap: they play games with their subordinates to reach a superficial or shallow agreement. The temptation for doing so is that they can win the subordinates' support, involvement and commitment more easily while reducing the risk of potential conflicts. However, this kind of strategic transaction may involve the company in the whirl of political games and the support the leaders can win is fragmented and erratic since negative mentality is after all based on a high degree of individualism.

Principles, fairness and truth are often the victims of emotion and interests games within a company. The process may undermine the most precious value inside the organization-trust. The two parties involved in the games acquiesce to the rationality of mutual suspicion when they reach an agreement of cooperation. More importantly, the whole process of the trade is seen by all the members of the organization.

In the absence of principles, the organization soon falls into different fortresses that safeguard the interests of different individuals or factions. In this case, normal communication is more like a formidable negotiation given that controversy, imputation and rumor can be tools to gain benefits.

My research findings show that a powerful leader copes with subordinates' complex mentality with three major skills: never trading principles for anything, capable of winning popular support and political wisdom.

The primary characteristic of a great leader is that he can rebuild people's worship of and belief in principles in the organization. Principles are simple, transparent, and unassailable truth that cannot be traded for anything else because right and wrong should go before interests. Negative mentality often takes the form of distorting principles, challenging the management's capability and fairness, forming factions of interests, shunning responsibilities or finding excuse to avoid taking actions, but nobody openly defies the principles. A wise leader is unbeatable if he can serve as a role model and strictly observe the principles. A great leader will invest his whole life spreading, building and safeguarding the values cherished by the organization and human beings. An organization should be the place where a perpetual commitment exists and an individual's soul is tranquilized.

A great leader is capable of winning popular support. A man with leadership does not argue. He can find clues of mentality through an individual's response and change of emotions. He realizes leadership by eliminating the factors for negative response or by

identifying a topic of common interest. A great leader uses vision and mission to eliminate perplexities arising from petty gains, and show his care and protection for subordinates by effectively communicating expectations and respect. The key to winning popular support is to eliminate others' dissatisfaction with tolerance. The benevolent is invincible as he tolerates and loves the people around him.

Political wisdom is another important element of a great leader. People with negative mentality should be removed from the organization if they are unwilling to change. It is always true that some members do not share basic values of the organization while others are psychologically distorted and pollute the organization. These people should be kicked out. This is not a punishment, but helping them to settle down where they should belong to and restoring fairness to those who choose to stay. Political wisdom is different from tricks, traps or cheating; it is the wisdom to "drive the benefit-seeking with benefits".

A great leader can not only free the organization from the perplexity arising from its members' complex mentality, but also shapes the organization's positive mentality through his behaviors. Just like sunlight can prevent mildew, role models can foster a positive mentality in an organization.

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