'First, get the names right' or 'Why Confucius would have been a PMO Manager'

By Adam Skinner

When asked by a student what he would do if given a position of political influence, Confucius immediately answered 'It would be, of course, to assure that ming [names] were being applied zheng [correctly]'. This, unsurprisingly, required a bit more explanation:

"If names are not correct, speech will not be in accordance with actuality; when speech is not in accordance with actuality, things will not be successfully accomplished. When things are not successfully accomplished, ritual practice and music will fail to flourish; when ritual practice and music fail to flourish, penalties and payments will miss the mark. And when penalties and payments miss the mark, the people will be at a loss as to what to do with themselves" (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2001: 34F).

As a PMO Manager I felt a definite tingle of synergy when I read this quote by Kongzi (Confucius is the latinisation of his name), who lived some 2500 years ago and is unarguably the most influential eastern philosopher of antiquity – you'd need to combine Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to achieve a Western equivalent.

Kongzi is making two critical points – one about language and one about governance.

Substitute the term 'roles' for 'names' you'll see what I mean. If roles are not correct the language will not be in accordance with actuality. If John is the Project Manager in just name then asking him to project manage will achieve little, if Sue is called the Planner but does not have a plan then language will not be aligned to reality and things will not be successfully accomplished.

But he goes further – if things are not successfully accomplished then ritual practice and music will fail to flourish. The importance of 'rites' to Kongzi's philosophy cannot be overstated. He was of the opinion that he lived in degenerate times where people had forgotten the ways and wisdoms of the past (2500 years ago…. Plus ca change meme ca change). These ways and wisdoms were codified in rites and rituals that weren't being properly followed: 'rites codified the life of human excellence and by following them exactly one could come to live a perfected life'. Am I reaching too far to think of these rites as similar to the policies and standards that should be operating in the programme? When those rites, those policies and standards fail to be implemented penalties and payments miss the mark – if the project manager feels no urge to follow the governance process, how can he be rewarded? It is meaningless to punish the planner for not follow the planning standards when they don't even have a plan. If that is the case then people will simply be at a loss as to what to do with themselves… Chaos will reign.

Kongzi the PMO Manager is telling us to obsess about roles and responsibilities, about language, and to focus on the governance structure - because without that the programme's perception of itself cannot be aligned to the reality on the ground. And without that alignment, the programme standards cannot be applied, rewards and rectifications won't have meaning: ultimately the programme both won't and can't deliver.

The Dao of Project Management

The part of me that revels in structure and control feels this comes awfully close to defining my personal PMO philosophy. And indeed if you look at wider Confucianism there are other interesting alignments. His philosophy was primarily moral and ethical – focused on what a good society looked like and what being a member of that society entailed. This draws lots of parallels with the programme society and what being a member of this means. Most of Kongzi's philosophy centred around 'Dao' or 'The Way' and how to live a life aligned to Dao. As he says in Analects 7.6: 'Set your heart upon the way, rely upon virtue, lean upon ren [goodness], and explore widely in your cultivation of the arts'.

Virtue: Virtue, for Kongzi, does not mean doing virtuous things, or more precisely it does not mean just doing virtuous things. Virtue, to Kongzi, meant behaving in an appropriate fashion based on one's relational position to others.

Specifically:

Relationship	Virtue
Father/Son	Filial Piety
Older/Younger Brother	Filial Respect
Ruler/Subject	Loyalty
Friend/Friend	Sincerity
Husband/Wife	Submission

One cannot live a virtuous life in isolation – the root of virtue is behaving appropriately within the family and wider society. To follow the way requires one to develop and practice whichever virtues are relevant to one's situation - one's family provides the necessary context for doing this.

Again you can see clear parallels with the role of the PMO Manager: to be the owner of the Programme's Virtue. To understand the relationships between the different roles within the programme and how they should interact to be virtuous. Could a programmatic equivalent be:

Relationship	Virtue
Programme Manager/Programme Member	Filial Piety
Team Lead/Team Member	Filial Respect
SRO/Programme	Loyalty
Team Mate/Team Mate	Sincerity
Husband/Wife	….One can stretch an analogy too far….

And of course, without proper names/language how could one understand where one fits into the relational structure and therefore what 'virtuous' behaviour is.

Ren: Again, to Kongzi, the concept of 'Ren' or 'Goodness' has a very specific meaning. Ren is 'restraining yourself and turning to the rites'. It is about understanding what the relationship and rituals of society are and applying them diligently and rigorously. And the correct application of rites was fundamentally tied to the correct application of

language. Language is the tool by which we codify and define reality – we capture it so all can access it and we manipulate it in order to manipulate reality. To the Confucian PMO Manager the RAID log matters, the Action log matters – these are all tools for capturing states of reality and the rites (the Risk meeting, the Governance Escalation) are tools for manipulating information in order to manipulate reality. If these things are not correct they cannot reflect reality, if these things are not in order then reality is not in order – and the people will be at a loss with what to do with themselves.

Self-Cultivation: Finally, self-cultivation, how to become a Junzi or 'gentleman'. Being Junzi was something to continuously strive towards by pursuing ren, practicing the rites and generally pursuing a cultured and cultivated life. These men (and it was always men – Kongzi had a 'traditionalist' view of the woman's role to say the least….) held the primary role of practising the rites, ensuring language is used correctly and therefore that society does not fall into chaos. The very act of striving to apply the rites was considered a virtuous act and therefore of value in becoming Junzi and following the way. As a PMO Manager the attempt to establish good governance and standards in and of itself would be considered Dao.

The Warrior-Philosopher

This kind of obsessive approach to control, governance and roles may have been all well and good in the early noughties, I hear you say, but we live in a post-agile world – surely you can't think it's still relevant. Well you aren't alone in your thinking. Although the influence of Khongzi on eastern philosophy can't be overstated he had a number of notable critics after his lifespan. Most interestingly was Mo-Tzu (c480-390 BC) – a charismatic leader who led an army of idealistic warrior-philosophers roaming the Chinese countryside and coming to the aid of small states being threatened by their larger neighbours (and if that isn't the plot of a frankly awesome Netflix series I don't know what is).

As we've seen Kongzi felt virtue, and how one should behave towards others, was entirely driven by one's relational position. Mo-Tzu rejected this and argued that the concept of universal benevolence should be the primary moral concept – basically one should do the most good one is able to. He felt the followers of Kongzi were uncritically defending tradition for tradition's sake rather than actively enquiring what is the best way to live life.

Mo-tzu didn't reject all tradition but suggested that traditions and rites (indeed all claims) should be subject to 3 'gauges':

- Precedent: have the sages or wise men said anything about this issue that could be of use in supporting the claim
- Evidence: Have we or people seen or heard something that might support the claim
- Application: If the claim is accepted and put into practice does it do more benefit than harm?

And it's this final point that challenges Kongzi's assertion that following the rites in and of themselves will fundamentally lead to positive outcomes - intelligence needs to be applied as to the outcome of one's behaviour. Again I'm reminded of the role of the PMO manager in applying standards –

- Precedent: what do the methodologies say
- Evidence: what have I seen of or heard that works in this situation
- Application: what does common sense tell me is the right thing to do

Again it might be a stretch but I immediately thought of the Agile Principles:

"Through this work we have come to value:

Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
Working software over comprehensive documentation
Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
Responding to change over following a plan
That is, while there is value in the items on
the right, we value the items on the left more."

The Mo-Tzu PMO Manager leads his troops to where the most value can be delivered: standards, processes and rites are the means to that end – not the end in itself. We value rites and structure, but we value doing the most good more.

Unlocking the Ivory Tower

So are you a Khongzi or a Mo-Tzu: or a little of both. Or are you of the opinion that all this philosophising is all well and good in ivory towers but of little help in the white heat of delivery? For those of the latter persuasion you might like to know that far from living in an ivory tower Khongzi once did hold a minor official position in state government: he left shortly after taking on that role in frustration over not having his advice heeded and acted upon. A PMO Manager indeed….

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