

Leaders Who Care, the Confucian Perspective

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Abstract

In this article, the practitioners/academicians examine leaders who care from the Confucian perspective in South East Asia, more so, in the Singapore and Brunei Darussalam context. Using Chinese sayings and proverbs, the authors present and interpret Confucian values derived from the sagely wisdom of Confucius. From Confucius comes the emphasis on caring leadership which is linked to positive, harmonious relationships as well as to the values of benevolence, integrity and reciprocity that bring many benefits to business prosperity. The practices of Confucian teachings can bring much peace, learning, and growth for business sustainability.

Key words: Leaders, Care/caring, Confucian, *rén* (仁), Benevolence, kindness, humaneness.

1. Introduction

Leadership is “about creating the climate or culture where people are inspired from the inside out” (Wilson, 2008: 9). A caring leader acts in a kind, empathetic way towards his or her people and environment. (S)he tries to do them as little harm as possible and also enable them to attain happiness and live well in the conducive environment. Love or compassion has to start from the top for society, the people at the top setting the example and the followers would feel its positive effects (Low, 2010). Hence, a leader who shows care and concern to his or her fellow employees or followers can really motivate them. If employees are positively motivated or fired up, if not inspired, then this becomes the Company’s edge. A caring leader should indeed be selfless. This basically means that such a leader should look after the well beings of all members of the organisation / society/nation. Obviously, it takes a leader more effort and energy to care for the weaker ones. If a leader has no love and patience for the weak followers, (s)he is not a good leader and to the authors, (s)he is not a caring leader when one looks from the Confucian angle.

2. Paper’s Aim & Objectives

The aim and objectives of the paper are to examine the various ways in which leaders show care, and these are seen from the Confucian perspective and it is intended to examine or highlight several key concepts of Confucian leadership such as benevolence, encouraging continuous learning, listening (being humble), being of high integrity and applying reciprocity to promote positive and good relationships among each other in a society. The academicians/ researchers examine ‘leaders who care’ looking from the Confucian angle in South East Asia, more so, in the Singapore and Brunei Darussalam context.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Being Human Orientated, Practicing *rén* (仁)

The Chinese writing *rén* (仁) is made up of two radicals (人) and (二). The radical (人) means people and the radical (二) means the close relationship of each other exhibiting humaneness, loving-kindness and benevolence. (<http://zh.wikipedia.org/zh/仁>). Low (2010; 2010a: 4) highlights the critical importance of “practicing the language of the heart” or in essence, humaneness in leadership. According to Confucius, *rén* (仁) is the highest virtue for which a human being would constantly strive for. Even his disciple *zēng zǐ* (曾子) felt that a scholar must uphold the virtue of benevolence until the very day (s)he left this world. He said, “A scholar must be resolute and steadfast, for one’s burden is heavy and one’s road is long. To practise the virtue of benevolence in the world is one’s burden. Is that not heavy? Only with death does one’s journey come to an end. Is that not long?” (*Analects of Confucius*, VIII: 7). It means that every scholar has the duty to strive for the virtue of benevolence in one’s life in order to enable the society at large to live in a peaceful manner. It is very difficult to assess if a person really upholds and practices benevolence just by looking at what (s)he is doing on a superficial level. One has to really understand his/her personal values if one wants to know that the person is really benevolent. In the *Analects of Confucius* IV: 6, Confucius expressed, “I have never met a person who really loves benevolence, nor do I ever meet a person who really hates people who is not benevolent. A person who really loves benevolence has the personal value of the highest virtue, and a person who really hates non-benevolence may only be considered benevolent in the sense that (s)he would not allow a non-benevolent person to influence him/her. Is there anyone who is willing to devote all one’s energy to perform benevolence for a whole day? Though I could find no one who does not possess the energy, yet I have never seen such a person who has devoted oneself to it. Or perhaps there is such a person, but I have not yet come across one.” (*Analects of Confucius* IV: 6). However, one can actually attain the value of benevolence for Confucius once remarked, “Is benevolence really far away from us? You only have to really want it and it will come.” (*Analects of Confucius*, VII: 30). He further added, “Who can go out of a room except through its door? So why is no one following my way of benevolence?” (*Analects of Confucius*, VI: 17). Confucius considered the value of benevolence as the highest virtue over and above the other values (such as filial piety, rites, loyalty and trust). He said, “A benevolent person possess the virtue of loving-kindness; one who loves people and nature; one who leads life peacefully and attain longevity.” (*Analects of Confucius*, VI: 23). As one can see, he constantly stressed the important role of benevolence in our living. In his teaching, Confucius transmitted the idea of benevolence to his disciples in promoting a benevolent government run by socially responsible leaders towards a society where everybody can live in a peaceful environment and enjoy happiness.

3.2 Encouraging Continuous Learning

There is a Chinese saying that goes, “learning is like rowing upstream; not to advance is to drop back.” Another Chinese proverb has it that, “A bachelor of arts discusses books, a pork butcher talks of pigs.” In essence, what is stressed here is the fact that a successful leader must not only continue to learn, but needs to widen his or her visions and horizons. Indeed, a leader should not shackle or chain up him(her)self to any single idea. There is a need to always try to see things with fresh eyes. If one can do this, one will be able to achieve progress and growth. To widen knowledge and open new horizons, there is also a need to learn from others (Low, 2010: 682). To a Confucian, for one to be capable, one should study; to be intelligent and smart, one must learn from others. (Zhou, 2005). As what Confucius said, “When walking in the company of other people, there must be one I can learn something from. I shall pick out his or her merits to follow and his or her shortcomings for reference to overcome my own.” (*Analects of Confucius*, VII: 22, cited in Zhou, 2005 :32). The Confucian leader, even in the modern day, stresses on learning, education and high integrity. His or her investments on schools and education are high (Low, 2002; 2009b; Low and Ang, 2011).

3.3 Listening (Being Humble)

To learn well from others, one should especially listen; and listen well. Confucius said, “One who thinks him(herself)self wise cannot hear any good advice” and “(S)he who talks too much is prone to failure”(Zhou, 2005: 64 and 69 respectively). This is because (s)he who does not listen, does not learn. Furthermore, Confucius remarked, “To speak when it is not necessary for him or her to do so is considered to be rash; not to speak when it is vital for him or her to answer would seemed to be evasive; and to speak without taking consideration of other people’s feeling (or not observing one’s facial expression) is to be blind.” (*Analects of Confucius*, XVI: 6). This means that the mannerism of a leader is very important in social relationships, more so, when the followers/subordinates may perceive and judge him or her in a negative way if (s)he is not aware of his or her manner.

Humility is the state of being humble. A humble leader is generally thought to be unpretentious and modest: someone who does not think that he or she is better or more important than others. Humility is not to be confused with humiliation, which is the act of making someone else feel ashamed, and is seen as something completely different. It is a virtue, the quality of being humble or having a lowly opinion of oneself, meekness, lowliness and humbleness, the opposite of pride or haughtiness. In this respect, *Zheng Shen*, a disciple of Confucius, praised of his deceased classmate, *Yan Hui* of being humble and he said, “Though being capable and well learned, he asked those less capable or learned for advice. Though being erudite and intelligent, he presented himself with modesty.” An effective leader must have a modest personality and must be a good listener. However, Confucius further remarked, “Is it possible not to listen to correct opinions? But they are only of value if you correct your mistakes after listening. Is it possible not to be pleased when you hear amenable words? But they are only of value if you can analyse them correctly.” (*Analects of Confucius*, IX:24). Agreeably, upon listening to good advice, one must correct oneself for further improvement in the future and if one is praised for doing good thing one should also understand and, if not, find out what is it all about that one has done good to deserve that admiration. The benefit of continuous learning is that a leader can proactively investigates new perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors, and takes steps to evaluate and improve his or her performance. Very truly, learning prevents a leader from being narrow-minded.

3.4 Being Of High Integrity (廉, hanyu pinyin lián)

Integrity is really a heart issue. Confucius said, “Man’s existence lies in his integrity. A man without integrity can exist merely through his luck.” (*Confucius of Analects* VI: 19).

A person’s integrity of being truthful and sincere to oneself and society is of great importance and it appears that many often overlooked that the essence of Confucianism is the “idea of being true to oneself in this world” (interestingly, there is an intrinsic or inside-out approach) when fulfilling obligations to family and others in society (Wang, 2004: 51). When one is truthful to oneself, one would then be able to fulfil one’s obligation to look after one’s family in a caring and sincere way. When an individual can achieve this, then for one to care and contribute to one’s society would come in a natural way. Furthermore, by practicing the value of integrity, a leader would be upright and transparent to his or her followers at large. It is about an individual who act as a role model, a teacher and being transparent, honest, faithful and committed as a leader. It also means doing what one say one would do, and with this, earning the trust of others. A leader must act in the best interest of the followers/subordinates, not for personal gain; that is to lead the followers and to prepare them to be good citizens for the nation. It means doing the right thing even if it is difficult or unpopular. (Low and Ang, 2011a). A leader must also have the right character and motivation deep inside with the purpose of what he is leading, passing down good experience and knowledge to the future generation. Integrity is really tested when difficulties and hardships come into one’s leadership. Take, for example, when majority of the followers do not understand or find it difficult to understand what the leader is trying to convey or lead. The leader needs to pause, reflect and review how (s)he can

make his or her followers understand his or her purpose of doing/leading. True integrity does not take the easy way out for not making one's leadership transparent and accountable.

3.5 Applying Reciprocity (恕, *Hanyu Pinyin: shù*)

One leads through two-way communications. Much of it is non-verbal. Take for instance, when one sets the example to his or her people and communicates to them that (s)he would not ask them to perform anything that (s)he would not be willing to do. This obviously means that what and how an individual does or communicates may either build or harm the relationship between the leader and his (her) employees. In this respect, *Zi Gong*, a disciple, once asked Confucius, "Is there a single word that a man can follow and practice as his principle of conduct for life?" Confucius replied, "It is, perhaps, the word, *Shu* (恕) or reciprocity. That is 'not to do unto others what one does not want others to do unto oneself.'" (*Analects of Confucius*, XV: 24; Lin, 1994, pp. 186). The authors are inclined to favour the Confucian's overall anchor, the Golden Rule, that is, in a positive way, as a gentleman, "One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself".

4. Research Study

4.1 Research Model

Adopting a humanist approach, Confucians are human-orientated; they are concerned with their people. We develop the following research model on Confucian leaders and their being caring.

Figure-1 shows the research model developed in this study.

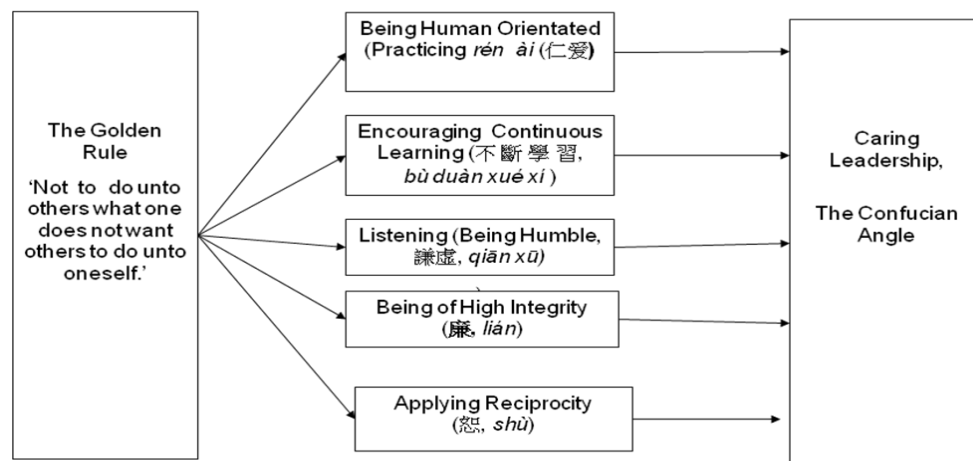


Figure 1: Research Model

4.2 Research Methodology

The research study was carried out with a total of forty-three (43) leaders and managers in Singapore and Brunei. These interviews were done during the period from 16 November 2010 to 31 December 2011. According to business researchers, sample sizes larger than 30 and smaller than 500 are appropriate for most research. Qualitative studies typically use small sample sizes because of the intensive nature of such studies (Cavana et al, 2001: 279; Sekaran, 2000: 296 – 7 and Roscoe, 1975). The sample size of forty-three was decided because of various aspects including costs, time accessibility and limited personal resources. This research is based on a series of interviews – each time approximately 45 minutes though some interviews might stretch to more than an hour at times. The study relies on the qualitative research method. It is worthy to note that similar to Low's (2006, 2006a) studies, being assured of confidentiality and anonymity, the interviewees expressed themselves freely. This interview method is helpful since it enables much qualitative data to be

collected from the interviewees. To get more information and data from the various interviewees, open questions were deployed (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2001); they were crafted as follows:

1. What are your views on being a caring leader, the Confucian way?
2. Do you think 'being caring' helps you to lead well in your line of business?
3. Why do you need to take care of your followers/ subordinates /employees /workers?
4. What are the ways in which you are motivated by a caring leader?
5. What do you like about being cared for, the Confucian 'style'?
6. What attracts you to such a (caring) leader?

Pilot-testing was felt necessary, as it was not easy to predict how respondents would interpret and react to the questions (Gill and Johnson, 1997). Checking was also done during the pilot testing to ensure that all the questions were understandable (Haworth (ed.), 1996: 47). They were also asked to suggest additional questions and to identify any highly relevant questions. To increase comprehension and improve clarity, this list of questions was then modified based on several respondents' feedback; for example, the above Question 5 was modified from "What do you like about being cared for?" Interestingly, these questions also allowed the researchers to gather more information on the various sources of motivation from the interviewees. In this way, the authors attempt to find out and understand the interviewees' perceived values of being "cared for" and what makes the caring (Confucian) leader attractive.

To clarify further, it is interesting to note that the researchers conducted this 45 minute-long (at least and at times stretched to an hour plus) in-depth interviews with each of them. The researchers attempted to formalize-regularize the process as much as they could. However, they knew before they started that the more they would attempt to control the process, the less real wisdom they would get from the discussions. So the tension between doing "legitimate" (formal) qualitative research and getting the deepest possible responses from their interviewees became one of the most interesting challenges that they confronted. Admittedly, the researchers at times strayed from the format; they then asked probing questions in the interviews where formal methods for generating data collection could easily be sacrificed in response to the richness and spontaneity of the intimate, unhurried conversational inquiry that permitted probes for additional clarification, examples, and so on. An example of a probing question asked is that of: "For what reasons do you think your followers are motivated when you show care to them (him or her)?", after the interviewees were answering this question: "What do you like about being cared for?"

4.3 Findings

Forty-one interviewees or 95.3 percent of the total number of interviewees agreed that one of the dimensions of leaders who care is "being human orientated" and some said that "in this business, my father taught me to be fair and not to ill-treat my workers; I learn to understand and take care of them"; "They have been working for me since I started my business, I really care for them because they are like my family."; "One of my long service workers was found to have cancer recently, I settle the operating expenses for him because he cannot afford to pay for such an expensive bill"; "I cannot retire and close-shop because I have so many workers' livelihood to worry about" and "My children want me to stop working but I cannot because my workers have been with me for a long time and they know I always care for them."

Thirty-nine interviewees or 90.7 percent of the total number of interviewees voted that a caring leader, the Confucian way "encourages continuous learning" and "self-growth". They also give remarks such as "the computing business is changing very fast every day, I send my technicians for training in order to catch up and upgrade themselves with new technology"; "young people should learn more so that they are up to date with new technology and new way of business"; "I encourage my employees to learn so that they can handle new jobs easily"; " even though I am good in this

business, I am still learning because I follow the Chinese saying, ‘活到老,學到老 (Hanyu Pinyin: *huó dào lǎo xué dào lǎo* meaning as one matures one continues to learn without stopping.’). And “although I have sold so many reprocessed cars but I am still learning from the customers because they all have different reasons of buying a car.”

Thirty-seven interviewees or 86.0 percent of the total number of interviewees expressed that “a caring leader is normally humble”, “(s)he listens”. “They are not egotistic” and remarked “I always listen to my employees because they are at the frontline of the business and they know better”; “I am successful today is not because I am clever in this line business. Honestly speaking, my success is because of my family, my relatives and my good friends who constantly support me and giving me advice when I am down.”; “I must say it is the customers’ feedback and the improvement that we work on it that make my product selling like hot cake” and “I believe that we always inspire and motivate our employees by talking and listening to them; It must be a two-way communication.”

Thirty-four interviewees or 79.1 percent of the total number of interviewees indicated that caring leaders, the Confucian way “are of high integrity”. “They set good example.” and said “I cannot accept empty promises and my employees knows me best”; “If I find out that something is fishy with the business dealing, I will retreat”; “I only deal with people of high integrity”; “I give full support and trust to honest people and I know that it takes time to trust a person”; “I am very careful about my attitude and behaviour. I know that if I don’t act properly my company’s reputation would be at stake” and “I like to make friends with people of high integrity because I feel safe when I do business dealings with them”

Thirty-three interviewees or 76.7 percent of the total number of interviewees highlighted the importance of reciprocity (*shù*) as a way of caring leaders. They pointed out that “there are usually mutual exchanges”; “it’s a win-win situation”; “the leader takes care of the people and the people are committed or are loyal”; “when I do business I cannot just think of myself and make money out of what I sell, I should think of the customers’ satisfaction too”. “If the customers are happy with my service, I am also happy because I know that my business is sustainable”; “I always want to make customers happy. If I don’t they would not come to me anymore”; “I like the Chinese saying, ‘customers are jade; merchandise is grass.’ That’s why my customers are always right” and “when you are good to customers, they would look come back and look for you”.

Table 1 shows some key responses verbalized by the interviewees.

Responses	Number of Interviewees	Percentage (%) of Interviewees
Being human-orientated (Practicing <i>rén</i> , 仁)	41	95.3
Encouraging continuous learning (不斷學習, <i>bù duàn xué xí</i>)	39	90.7
Listening (Being humble, 謙虛, <i>qiān xū</i>)	37	86.0
Being of high integrity (廉, <i>lián</i>)	34	79.1
Applying reciprocity (恕, <i>shù</i>)	33	76.7

4.4 Analysis And Discussions

4.4.1 Being Human-orientated (Practicing *rén*, 仁)

A leader who cares must focus much on human beings and values (such as benevolence) as they do on systems and processes. In this respect, self-discipline can build or cultivate leaders to be benevolent and also be lovingly-kind (Low, 2012). However, leaders can be unkind perhaps unwittingly when they are not empathetic and pushing their care and concern to the extreme that the followers may find them irritating and un-welcome. In this study, one comes to learn that a leader can motivate and keep employees spirit high and sustainable by showing them that (s)he cares for them. Forty-one interviewees or 95.3 percent of the total number of interviewees agreed that one of the dimensions of leaders who care is “being human orientated” and during the interviews, some gave remarks such as “in this business, my father taught me to be fair and not to ill-treat my workers; I learn to understand and take care of them”. “They have been working for me since I started my business, I really care for them because they are like my family”; “one of my long service workers was found to have cancer recently, I settle the operating expenses for him because he cannot afford to pay for such an expensive bill”; “I cannot retire and close-shop because I have so many workers’ livelihood to worry about” and “my children want me to stop working but I cannot because my workers have been with me for a long time and they know I always care for them.”

4.4.2 Encouraging Continuous Learning (不斷學習, *bù duàn xué xí*)

To ensure that people continue to live in a peaceful and harmonious society, our young generations are of key importance because they can continue to make this world a better place to do business and live in. In this respect, as leaders, we have a serious responsibility to ensure that we lead them and give them the foundations necessary to build a world of business where they and future generations can flourish. We, as leaders, have a unique opportunity and obligation in our homes, our community, our businesses and our schools to influence the kind of world that they want to have. And for this reason, even if we study to old age we shall not finish learning and leading. All in all, coaching/teaching through various strategies and ways enables the leader to improve his or her teaching ways while learning through various strategies causes both the leaders and the followers/subordinates/employees to learn and work in smarter and better ways. And good leaders should realize that variety is really the spice of life and that includes learning and working. And the followers indeed enjoy a mixture and combinations of learning/working styles. In this study, thirty-nine interviewees or 90.7 percent of the total number of interviewees voted that a caring leader, the Confucian way “encourages continuous learning” and “self-growth”. They also gave remarks such as “the computing business is changing very fast every day, I send my technicians for training in order to catch up and upgrade themselves with new technology”; “young people should learn more so that they are up to date with new technology and new way of business”; “I encourage my employees to learn so that they can handle new jobs easily”; “even though I am good in this business, I am still learning because I follow the Chinese saying, ‘活到老, 學到老’ (Hanyu Pinyin *huó dào lǎo xué dào lǎo* meaning as one matures one continues to learn without stopping)” and “although I have sold so many reprocessed cars but I am still learning from the customers because they all have different reasons of buying a car.”

4.4.3 Listening (Being humble 謙虛, *qiān xū*)

In a big organization where there are different levels of management such as board of director level, management function level, management team level, department head levels, section head level, project team level, office staff level and worksite staff level, it is very important that genuine, accurate and unfiltered information are related upward and downward through the hierarchical levels of organisation. In this respect, leaders should listen; and listen well. If not, it is very common that the information would get filtered, distorted and quite often, leaders make wrong decisions. On the other hand, when all levels of the organisation know the true bigger-picture through reliable information, as happens in a transparent culture, they can make better-informed decisions for the organisations and

for themselves (Baldoni, 2003, p. 94, 124, cited in Low and Ang, 2011b). In this study, thirty-seven interviewees or 86.0 percent of the total number of interviewees expressed that “a caring leader is normally humble”, “(S)he listens”. “They are not egotistic” and some remarked that “I always listen to my employees because they are at the frontline of the business and they know better”; “I am successful today is not because I am clever in this line business. Honestly speaking, my success is because of my family, my relatives and my good friends who constantly support me and giving me advice when I am down”; “I must say it is the customers’ feedback and the improvement that we work on it that make my product selling like hot cake” and “I believe that we always inspire and motivate our employees by talking and listening to them; It must be a two-way communication.”

4.4.4 Being of High Integrity (廉, lián)

Integrity embraces honesty and trustworthiness; others or the followers can depend on or trust us. Integrity refers to behaviour that is honest and ethical, making a person trustworthy. Honesty refers to trustworthiness rather than deception. Integrity is the most important asset that one can possess. (Lussier and Achua, 2007. pp.34). As Confucius said, “Without integrity and good examples, a leader becomes “a person who lacks gravity (*and*) does not inspire respect” (Confucius cited in Chew, 2000: 2, *italics ours*). A leader gains moral grounds and attracts his followers as a role model of good examples. His actions are louder than words. As highlighted by Low (2006), role models should be assessed in the light of honesty and integrity. When comes with the time that the followers have doubt and question their leaders’ honesty and integrity, leaders cannot be role models. In business, a caring leader is courageous, honest and has a real sense of commitment to transparency. One has the mental and moral strengths to venture, persevere and withstand difficulties. In this study, thirty-four interviewees or 79.1 percent of the total number of interviewees indicated that caring leaders, the Confucian way “are of high integrity”. “They set good example”, and some respondents said that “I cannot accept empty promises and my employees knows me best”; “if I find out that something is fishy with the business dealing, I will retreat”; “I only deal with people of high integrity”; “I give full support and trust to honest people and I know that it takes time to trust a person”; “I am very careful about my attitude and behaviour. I know that if I don’t act properly my company’s reputation would be at stake” and “I like to make friends with people of high integrity because I feel safe when I do business dealings with them”

4.4.5 Applying Reciprocity (恕, shù)

Applying the principle of reciprocity into the human relationships means that one moves away from oneself and becomes less self-centred, more thinking of others, and in fact, more altruistic. The caring leaders should recognize their responsibilities to the employees and to the public at large and make decisions that reflect these responsibilities in clear and transparent ways. Here, leaders can then engage the people moving from inactive to reactive to proactive and to interactive. The basic point is that one can argue that leadership cannot avoid communication but has to enter into dialogue, do something, and engage with the people— government or non-government in an ongoing responsive relationship. In this research survey, thirty-three interviewees or 76.7 percent of the total number of interviewees highlighted the importance of reciprocity (*shù*) as two way communication of the caring leaders. They pointed out that “there are usually mutual exchanges”; “it’s a win-win situation”; “The leader takes care of the people and the people are committed or are loyal.” And some interviewees remarked that, “When I do business I cannot just think of myself and make money out of what I sell, I should think of the customers’ satisfaction also”; “If the customers are happy with my service, I am also happy because I know that my business is sustainable”; “I always want to make customers happy. If I don’t they would not come to me anymore”; “I like the Chinese saying, ‘customers are jade; merchandise is grass.’ That’s why my customers are always right.” and “When you are good to customers they would look come back and look for you”.

Figure 2 shows the core values of a caring leader, the Confucian perspective.



Figure-2 Core Values Of A Caring Leader

5. Limitations And Benefits of the Study

One of the key limitations of the study is that it focuses on only selected respondents' interview outcome only. Nonetheless, based on the study's findings, it can be taken or viewed that being human-orientated (practicing *ren*, 仁), encouraging continuous learning (不斷學習, *bù duàn xué xí*), listening (being humble 謙虛, *qiān xū*); being of high integrity (廉, *lián*) and applying reciprocity (恕, *shù*) are important leadership behaviours; and they can make the Confucian leader attractive, if not charismatic. These behaviours are also very motivating to the employees.

6. Conclusion

As leaders, when we positively treat our followers or subordinates more justly and with love and compassion, it would definitely affect our subordinates' moods; and they would all become positive like us. Over time, people below and above us would respond to our positivism. As a result, we all become positive and kind; and we all become positive and caring in our society. (Low and Ang, 2011C). Leaders with high integrity and applying reciprocity set good examples for subordinates to follow. By encouraging continuous learning, leaders also develop and groom future leaders. It is true to say that one of the key aspects of Confucian leadership is to create good relationships (loving-kindness, respect and tolerance) among each other in a society. This would then critically help the community to attain a peaceful and harmonious platform or environment for business sustainability.

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