

Confucius, *Li* and Decency at Work

The challenge for many in their life at work is simply this: how to be a business person and a human being at the same time compete yet cooperate, be hard-nosed yet be ethical, keep ones nose to the grindstone yet take time to see and acknowledge others, be professional yet personal, make a profit yet not be greedy. You get the picture.

We don't have to look far to discover folks whose life at work takes the low road. Business magazines, journals, and news shows are replete with instances of individuals whose workplace demeanor is described as rude, insensitive, disrespectful, unethical, uncivil, egomaniacal and self-serving, greedy and dishonest. You might rub elbows with one or more such folks on a daily basis. And, all this despite the plethora of books, courses, seminars, workshops, policy and procedure manuals and treatises focusing on ethics and codes of conduct.

On the other hand, there are those whose lives at work are driven by their internal moral compass, a life at work guided by principles that support one to behave decently, truthfully and in integrity who take the high road even when they face major challenges, problems and difficult choices.

What supports one to change lanes and move from the low road to the high road is *Li*, and Confucius expounded greatly on the nature and practice of *Li*.

***Li*, what is it?**

Around 500 BCE, Confucius discussed the notion of *Li* a spectrum of rites and rituals, i.e., a code of conduct, that focused on such things as learning, tea drinking, how to dress, mourning, governance, and interaction with humans. The underlying notion of *Li* was how to be respectful of nature, and one another. The term *Li* has several meanings some of which are: propriety, reverence, courtesy, ritual or the ideal standard of conduct.

Li is what the sage uses to find that which is appropriate; it is both the means which sets the example for others, and the end which maximizes understanding, pleasure, and the greater good. In this way, the words and behaviors one uses to show respect for another are contained within the framework of *Li*.

As the practice of *Li* was continued through centuries, one central theme began to stand out the natural tendency to be decent and kind towards ones fellow human beings.

Confucius believed that *Li* was the source of right action in all behavior that living life from a place of respect for all others was at the heart of living a harmonious and worthwhile life.

Li, however, does not come to ones consciousness naturally. *Li* has to be cultivated. One must first learn and then practice the art of being in integrity, respecting the dignity of every human being and then become committed to, and disciplined in, the practice of *Li*.

***Li* in the workplace**

The practice of *Li* runs the gamut from smiling at a co-worker, to holding a door open for another, to serving others, to being self-responsible, to questioning practices that are unethical, corrupt, and disrespectful or demeaning of others each behavior having a conscious focus and intentionality on working toward and supporting the well-being of the workplace, and those who work there.

The challenge in todays workplace is that the practice of *Li* is a practice that is, for many, one of fakeness, phoniness, and convenience where more often than not, rudeness and selfishness become the guiding principles where one is ego-driven and not cognizant of others around him or her interrupting others at

meetings, speaking over others, one-upping others, hijacking others experiences, needing to be the first one on and off the elevator, not holding a door for another, not saying please and thank you, and speaking ill of, or gossiping about, others. In fact, the opposite of *Li* is me i.e., rudeness, insensitivity, verbal abuse such as bullying, gossiping, and being disrespectful, and treating others as irrelevant.

Cultivating *Li*

The way to cultivate and practice *Li* at work begins with becoming conscious asking ones self, How am I behaving right here, right now? Am I taking an opportunity to allow my natural tendency to be decent, good and kind to arise? How am I showing up? "Am I being authentic"?

Li is not surpy stuff. It's not fluff. Its not being effusive. Its not being fake or phony. Its not being patronizing. *Li* is being natural, honest, sincere, self-responsible and relaxed when we interact with another, any other.

Practicing *Li* does not mean we stop being firm and assertive, stop holding others accountable, stop telling the truth, stop telling the bad news, etc. Practicing *Li* allows us to come from a place of internal truth and integrity that supports us to be forthright, confident, courageous, and trusting that we will show up in a way that is respectful, decent and just be who we are right here and right now without the edge that we might heretofore have used to shore ourselves up.

Confucius believed that in order to truly achieve the principles of *Li*, the character of the true person, one must look within oneself. Confucius tells us to go inside in a sense, when he says, We know what is proper (*li*), especially in difficult situations, from the wisdom arising out of contemplation. regularly going into self-reflection, inner listening, and sensing our gut, to access our inner wisdom that leads us to right knowing, right understanding and right action.

Cultivating the practice of *Li* supports us to live our life at work from a place of self-responsibility, honesty, decency, integrity, strength, courage, and humaneness even when we feel it might be inconvenient. Each of us is born with *Li*. Over time, however, we have lost our sense of *Li* as we allowed (often unconsciously) life get in the way of being our True and Real self. Over time, our *Li* morphed into fake personalities, fake personas, and masks. So, many of us became poseurs. In the process, we learned to navigate life, even life at work, with our eyes wide closed — reactive, fearful, and resistant losing our humanity and decency.

Li supports us to live life, even life at work, with our eyes wide open.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Do resentment or greed drive your interactions with others?
- How might you experience fear in your workplace? How do you act when you feel fearful?
- Do you ever lie or stretch the truth?
- Do you feel white lies are OK? Do you ever lie, cheat, or steal simply because its convenient...because you can?
- Are there others you admire because of their integrity, sincerity and authenticity?
- Does you organization have a code of ethical conduct. Do you follow it? Do others?
- What one or two things can you do to cultivate and practice *Li* at work?
- Do you keep agreements?
- Do you admit when you are wrong? Do you apologize for mis-deeds?
- Do you have a personal code of conduct? Do you follow it?
- Do you recognize the dignity in all others?
- Would folks at work (and at home and play) characterize you as a decent human being? Would you characterize yourself as a decent human being?

- Do you ever react to others in a way that communicates to them they are "irrelevant" or "irritants"?

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