



Core human values and the Chinese elements

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The core human values can be better understood through the qualities of the five elements in Chinese philosophy – earth, water, metal, fire and wood.

The key to the philosophy of TouchWood Ethics is that valuing conduct as right or wrong, good or bad, is an inherent part of being human. Even if issues are complicated, as humans we are always guided by the idea that we can and should discriminate between different kinds of conduct. We each possess a mental model for the spectrum of conduct, ranging from what is repugnant to what is highly admirable.

Our task as an individual is to assess actions and decide how we will value them. Our task as a group of people, or an organisation, is to reach agreement about these things. Through dialogue and consideration of different points of view we can strive for wisdom about ethical issues and commit to working consistently on an ethical basis.

In societies today there is a great deal of pressure to push the ethical viewpoint to one side. However, when corporate crises occur, such as the collapse of a major corporation, we are immediately keen to assess whether bad conduct played a part. We are sharply reminded of the integral role of ethics in business, and aware too of its importance to our collective welfare.

The meaning of the logo

The logo of TouchWood Ethics represents the various dimensions we experience as a person and that we need to take into account when working or managing in organisations. The logo depicts five lines, to indicate that there are five dimensions to consider:

- **Cognition** – dealing with objective facts about situations and reasoning logically
- **Emotions** – dealing with the psychological aspects of people, their feelings and well-being
- **Valuing** – the function of evaluating actions in terms of right/wrong, good/bad (ethics)
- **Energy or spirit** – the energy that is generated within and among people when cognition, emotions and ethics are functioning healthily
- **Identity or psyche** – the deeper sense of insight into personal and collective purpose that comes from the positive experience of the other dimensions functioning well.

The lines are shown as they are for a reason. We start at the bottom of the figure. The two sloping lines represent cognition and the emotions. To align with left brain/right brain theory we can say that cognition is the line on the left and emotions are the line on the right.

The horizontal line that completes the triangle is the function of valuing. To this point, the figure is saying that cognition and emotions are incomplete; valuing is needed in order to discuss workers' and managers' actions adequately.

The history of management theory offers some parallels here. In, say, the 1960s the focus of management was on logical skills – the science of management. The 1970s saw an emphasis on people issues – communication, morale, teamwork – emotions. This movement was revived in the 1990s with the emergence of the concept of emotional intelligence. The current decade has seen some recognition that management theory has tended to ignore values and ethics. But values

underpin strategy, and clarity about common values characterises high-performance organisations. In the current marketplace, competitive advantage no longer lies in physical or financial capital, or even the cleverness of work processes.

The three dimensions form a foundation (the triangle) because we believe that a focus on each of these dimensions will provide a sound basis for organisational performance and conduct. When these elements are in place, then an organisation can begin to experience the benefits of the last two dimensions, shown as the top two lines in the figure. Energy is generated when an organisation or a group of people is clear about its ethics and values, people relate to each other with care and respect, and it has established intelligent, effective systems and processes to achieve business success.

Further, as this energy fuels achievement, confidence and growth, the organisation becomes clearer about its identity and purpose, and it can even extend its vision and goals. The organisation can reach the fullness of its possibilities – success, and self-assurance as a worthwhile member of society. This model, which we call the **Core Human Values Model (CHV Model)**, applies to both organisations and individuals.

The CHV Model gives us a way of structuring human values. We have all seen different sets of “basic” values. They might include such things as courage, loyalty, respect, honesty, fairness. Sometimes these lists are very lengthy. In the CHV Model, we associate each dimension with a core human value. These core values can then be expanded out to form clusters of values that explain ethics in much more detail. The five core human values are shown in the table below, along with a few of their associated values.

Dimension	Core value	Associated values
Cognition	Truth	Honesty, integrity, reasoning, trustworthiness
Emotions	Peace	Caring, dignity, harmony, cheerfulness
Valuing	Right action	Respect, fairness, justice, responsibility, courage
Energy/spirit	Love	Compassion, tolerance, enthusiasm, sense of community
Identity/psyche	Insight	Awareness, purpose, meaning, appreciation, forgiveness, wisdom

Core human values and the five elements

The five core human values can be associated readily with the five elements of Chinese philosophy – earth, water, metal, fire and wood.

Dimension	Core value	Element
Cognition	Truth	Earth
Emotions	Peace	Water
Valuing	Right action	Metal
Energy/spirit	Love	Fire
Identity/psyche	Insight	Wood

Cognition/Earth – Cognition deals with “concrete” facts about situations and concerns logic and reasoning. It links to earth, representing the raw material with which we work in life. We assign to it the colour brown.

Emotions/Water – Emotions deal with people’s feelings and attitudes. They link to water, evoking the flow of emotions in our experience and the quality of both water and emotions to adapt in response to the context in which they find themselves. We assign to it the colour blue.

Valuing/Metal – Valuing concerns the exercise of judgement about what is right and wrong, and following through with right action. It links to metal because the qualities of metal are similar – metal artifacts need to be made with care, they are strong, and they evoke both clarity and discernment. Also, metal has a strong association with earth, but it is distinguished from earth, reminding us that valuing can be an emotional activity but it concerns more than feelings. We assign to it the colour grey, which reminds us that acting ethically is often not a matter of simply choosing black or white.

Energy/Fire – Energy is about the power that is released when people are in harmony with the human values of truth, peace and right action, a power that is an expression of love. Likewise, fire is released when the right conditions are in place, bringing warmth and light and joy. We assign to it the colour yellow.

Identity/Wood – Identity is about the awareness of one’s self and purpose, and feeling in tune with one’s purpose. This insight evokes the image of wood, which represents the tree, the only one of the five elements which has life. The tree exists and thrives in the presence of the other elements. It is expansive, nurturing and versatile. We assign to it the colour green.

Working with the five elements

The perspective of the five elements tells us that to understand ourselves and our situations, we need to consider all of the elements, and obtain harmony between them.

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