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Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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How Do Leaders Know What People Need? Lessons from the *Essentials*

Good morning! Before we start, imagine your class is planning a field trip. The class president—let’s call him Tim—is super excited. He’s planned a luxury bus, a fancy restaurant, and amusement park tickets. But half the class can’t afford it. Some students quietly hope it gets cancelled—too embarrassed to say they have no money. Tim? He has no idea. He’s so excited about his perfect plan that he never asks: “Is everyone okay?”

This is exactly what happened to ancient Chinese rulers. Many were so indulged in their own material enjoyment that they neglected the people’s needs. How can leaders step out of their own material perspective and see what people need? That’s our question today. Whether you’re an emperor, a class president, or just someone who wants to be more aware of others, this presentation will give you the answer. Let’s begin.

What is the *Essentials*?

First, let us grasp some historical background. Are you ready to travel back in time? Good! Let’s set our time machine to... 1,400 years ago. The period of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the early Middle Ages. In China, there was the Tang Dynasty. Quick question: When I say “superpower,” what country comes to mind today? Right. Well, back then, Tang China was the superpower of East Asia, and it was bigger than any Chinese dynasty before it.

Now, let’s zoom in on a specific time: the Zhenguan period (626–649). This was ruled by Emperor Taizong (r. 626–649), the second ruler of the Tang dynasty. His period was renowned for prosperity in Chinese history. His capital, Chang’an, was the world’s largest city, with over one million people.

But how do you govern so many people well? How do you know what they need? Taizong asked his ministers: “What is the core of good governance?” They compiled the advice from 68 ancient books into the *Essentials for Bringing about Order from Assembled Texts* —a user manual for the emperor. (In a nutshell, the *Essentials* can be understood as the governing principle used by one prosperous era in Chinese history, which will offer some insights to today’s question.)

However, it is impossible to go through every guidance in the *Essentials* within fifteen minutes, so we will focus on a particular section in the *Essentials*, which is the Master section. You can understand it as the thoughts of different philosophers. We focus on not principles, which may feel boring, but five narratives in the master section.

The five narratives will be categorised by the way ministers help leaders to see people's needs, and will be in a gradual sequence:

First: See the gap between —helping leaders see the material gap and feel empathy

Second: Evaluate the purpose —helping leaders rethink why they do things

Third: Learn from exemplar(s) —giving leaders a model to emulate

Let's begin with the first method. See the gap between. Swansea has just passed the freezing winter. The weather in this section is far colder than the winter in Swansea. There are two characters in the first story, a leader and a minister.

It's winter. Snow has been falling for three days straight. The ground is frozen. The wind is biting. The duke? He's sitting in his palace, wearing a white fox-fur coat—so soft, so warm. In walks the minister. The Duke looks up and says something ridiculous—but to him, it's honest: "How strange! Three days of snow... and I'm not cold at all!" He's so comfortable in his own world that he literally cannot feel what his people feel. The minister doesn't get angry. He just asks: "Is the weather... not cold?" The Duke laughs—thinks it's a joke. Then the minister says: "The wise rulers of antiquity—when full, they knew others were hungry. When warm, they knew others were cold. When resting, they knew others were toiling. But you, my lord... you don't know."

By his remonstrance, the duke suddenly awoke. He realised the material gap between him and his people. He felt empathy toward them. So, he accepts the advice of his minister. He just says: "Good. Tell me what to do." And he does it. He gives out clothes and grain to the hungry and cold.

Let us turn to the second narrative, which demonstrates the first method further. The main character here is also a leader and a minister. Same winter. Same fox fur. But this time, people's situation gets worse.

A Duke decides to build a pond. In freezing weather. He orders people to dig—outside, in the cold, with their bare hands. His minister comes to him and says: “My lord, starting this work in such cold weather—I fear it will harm the people.” The Duke looks up, genuinely confused: “Is the weather... really that cold?” (much like the first duke) His minister doesn't argue. He simply points out the gap: “My lord, you wear fox fur. You sit on a bearskin. Of course, you don't feel cold. But the people? Their clothes are torn and unmended. Their shoes have holes. You may not be cold—but the people are freezing.”

The Duke looks at his warm coat. Looks at his soft seat. He realised that people don't have the warmers that he has, and they are actually working for him in such extreme cold weather. He feels empathy for people and does not bear to have them continue excavating the pool. He says, “Well argued.” And he stops the work.

Summary:

Leader's perspective: akin to Duke Jing's, but what he did more was the order of a pond. Blinded by material comfort.

People's feelings: And people feel cooler as they need to work outside, in torn clothes.

Minister's remonstrance: The minister in this story, like the previous one, points out the unequal clothing of the leader and people, making the leader feel empathy toward his people.

Leader's response: So in response, the leader stopped the work as he also did not bear to make people work in the extreme weather.

In these two stories, the minister's remonstrance makes the dukes realise the material gap, arouses their empathy for people, and prompts them to respond to the people.

So we've seen two rulers who learned to feel their people's pain. But feeling is just the first step. The next step is to know the purpose of doing a certain thing. (e.g. Should not order

people to excavate a pond during winter, but what is the genuine aim of excavating such a pool?)

This brings us to the second method: evaluate the purpose. Two stories in this section.

Now we meet another duke, and now he faces a different test.

This duke loves travelling. He tells his minister, “I want to follow the coastline and travel to a distant place. How can I make my travel like the previous dukes?” Sounds reasonable, right? Kings travel. What’s wrong with that? His minister’s answer changes everything: “The ancient kings did travel—but not for fun. In spring, they inspected the fields. If farmers lacked food, they gave. In autumn, they checked the harvest. If crops failed, they helped. That’s what ‘travel’ really means.” The minister continues: “But your travels? Your army marches through the land, eating the people’s food. The poor get nothing. The weary get no rest. That’s not ‘travel’—that’s just taking. This is not what the ancient sage kings did.”

The duke gets it. Know the real meaning of travel. He doesn’t defend himself. He opens the granaries and gives a huge amount of grain to the poor. Then he personally visits seventy elders, listening to their needs.

By understanding the purpose of travel, the leader steps out from his perspective and sees the needs of his people and responds to them.

One more story about the same duke.

This time, the duke is sick. He feels his energy is fading. So he turns to the gods: “I want to prepare the finest jade and the best sacrifices. I’ll pray to God and my ancestors. Surely this will bring me blessings, right?” Makes sense to us, doesn’t it? When we need help, we turn to something greater.

But his minister’s answer shocks him: “The ancient kings also sought blessings. But do you know how? Their government served the people. Their actions honoured the gods. They built modest palaces—so they didn’t destroy the forests. They ate simply, so they didn’t empty the rivers. They didn’t demand blessings. They just lived rightly. And because of that, the gods were pleased, and the people were happy.”

Then he drops the truth: “But you? You build huge palaces, so you cut down forests. You feast excessively, so emptying the rivers. The gods are angry, and the people resent you. And yet you pray for blessings? Your actions contradict your wishes.”

The duke is stunned. He understands blessings aren’t something you demand from gods, they’re something you earn treats your people. He changes everything: stops construction, limits hunting and fishing, simplifies his life. He stops demanding blessings and starts living right.

Summary:

Leader’s perspective: uses the labour force extensively to construct the palace and to fish

People’s feelings: angry and exhausted from extensive labour works

Minister’s remonstrance: true blessings come from people’s satisfaction, instead of exhausting them

Leader’s response: began life frugally and reflects his former wrongdoings

In both stories, the master redefined the purpose of the duke’s actions, whether travel or blessing. This revelation made the duke realise his actions contradicted his goals, opening his eyes to the people’s needs. He then acted to respond to them.

This is the second method: to evaluate the purpose. So now the ruler first sees the material gap, and two, they rethink the purpose of doing a certain thing, but there’s still a question: “Okay, I see the problem. I understand I’m doing something wrong. But... what does ‘right’ actually look like? What should I be aiming for?”

This is where the third method comes in: Learn from an exemplar. Because sometimes, the best way to learn is not to be told what you’re doing wrong, but to be shown someone who’s doing it right.

The main characters of this story are a King from the Chu state and an envoy from a foreign state. The King of Chu loves his nine-story tower. He brings the envoy to the top and proudly asks, “Does your state have anything like this?” The envoy quietly replies: “My king’s hall

has three earthen steps, untrimmed thatch, unpolished wood. And still he worries—the builders worked too hard, he lives too comfortably.” The King of Chu falls silent.

Leader’s perspective: arrogant about the high tower

People’s feelings: (hinted) overworked by the construction project

Minister’s remonstrance: the foreign envoy provides the example of his leader to make the Chu king reflect on his conducts

Leader’s response: ashamed and loss of words (not directly respond to people’s needs as the dukes in previous stories, but to reflect and know previous wrongdoings is the first step of physically responding)

In this story, the foreign envoys don’t lecture or criticise, but show the Chu king a contemporary exemplar. And looking into that exemplar, the Chu king reflect himself and feels ashamed.

Here’s what we’ve seen today. Through five stories, dukes learned to step outside their own world—to see how people live, understand their needs, and respond. You might think these stories are simple and naïve: a duke does wrong, a loyal minister speaks up, the duke listens, and all ends well. But these stories appear again and again in the *Essentials* for a reason. These stories aren’t for entertainment. They have a political purpose. The compilers wanted their ruler to learn something. They wish their ruler could see the people’s needs and responses to them, and as the dukes in these narratives, follow good advice and change.

Moreover, this isn’t just ancient history. It’s a lesson for today. How do you know what your classmates or teammates feel? You can use the method of SELF. What is SELF?

S — See the gap

E — Evaluate your purpose

L — Learn from exemplar(s)

F — Follow advice

I think we've pretty much gone through the first three methods, and the reason I added a fourth method here is that, as effectively demonstrated in all five narratives, advice from ministers can help the dukes reflect and reconsider their current actions. So, it is also an effective way to step outside one's own perspective and understand others' needs. Why did I name these methods SELF? It is because it is important for every leader to step out of SELF to understand their subordinates' needs. When you want to step out of yourself, you can use the method of SELF.

The first method, see the gap between your world and theirs. Not necessarily need to feel empathy toward them, but to put yourself in others' shoes. Like in the example of the class field trip, Tim, the class president, should realise that his excitement doesn't mean everyone else is excited; your material abundance doesn't mean that everyone in class can afford it.

The second method, evaluate the purpose of what you're doing. Really benefit people? A field trip should help everyone enjoy, not feel anxious or left out.

The third method, learn from an exemplar. Find someone who does it right. Tim can find another leader, another class president who successfully organised a field trip before, and learn from them.

One more method is to listen to others' advice. Tim can try to listen to the teacher's or classmates' advice if they offer any.

These SELF methods can be used either individually or together. They are tools for anyone who wants to lead effectively, whether you're an emperor or a class president, whether you lived 2,000 years ago or are sitting here today. Step out of your own world. See what others feel. Let that change what you do.

Thank you.

How Do Leaders Know What People Need? Lessons from the *Essentials*

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Class field trip



How can the leaders step out of their own material perspective and see the needs of people?

Tang dynasty (618–907)

- Superpower of East Asia
- Greater in size than all earlier dynasties

Zhenguan period (626–649)

- Ruled by Emperor Taizong (r. 626–649), the second ruler of the Tang dynasty
- Famous for good government with peace and prosperity
- Capital Chang'an is the world's largest city



The *Essentials for Bringing about Order from Assembled Texts*

“What is the core of governance?”

- Selected passages from 68 pre-existing texts
- Master section (thoughts of philosophers)

羣書治要序

秘書監鉅鹿男臣魏徵等奉勅撰

竊惟載籍之興其來尚矣左史右史記事記

言皆所以昭德塞違勸善懲惡故作而可紀

薰風揚乎百代動而不法炯戒垂乎千祀是

以歷觀前聖撫運膺期莫不懷乎御朽自強

不息乾乾夕惕義在茲乎近古皇王時有撰

述並皆包括天地牢籠羣有競採浮豔之詞

淺草文庫

**The methods the minister used
to open the leader's eyes:**

1. See the gap between
2. Evaluate the purpose
3. Learn from exemplar(s)





1. See the gap between



- Snow has been falling for three days straight.
- The duke was wearing a white fox fur coat and sitting in the palace.



“How odd! It has been
snowing for three days, and
yet the weather is not cold
at all.”



(Laughed.)

“Is the weather not cold?”



"Good! Let me hear
your commands."

"I have heard it said that
The wise rulers of antiquity...
Now your lordship is not aware
of this at all."



The Duke handed out clothes and food
to those in hunger and cold.





- During winter. Snow falling.
- The duke was wearing a white fox fur coat and sitting in the palace.
- Excavation of a pond.

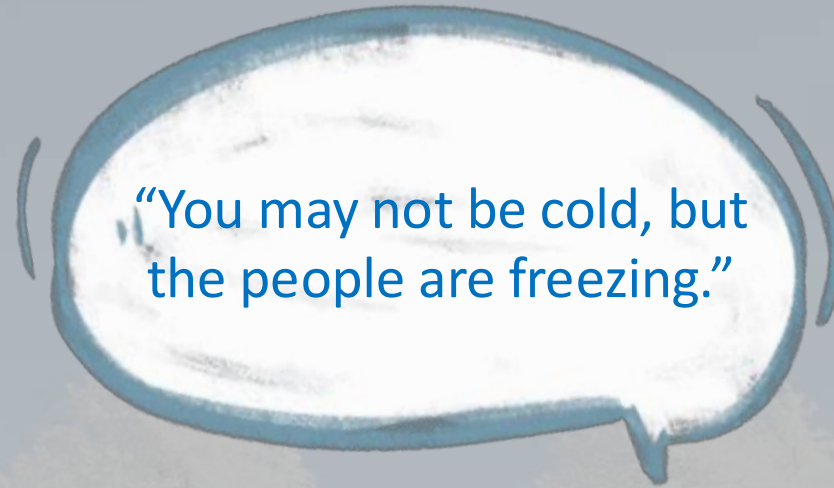


“Is the weather...
really that cold?”



“To start work when it is
cold will, I fear, harm the
people.”





The Duke ordered the construction work to be stopped.





Leader's perspective: blinded by material comfort



People's feelings: cold in freezing winter



Minister's remonstrance: pointing out the inequality in physical circumstances



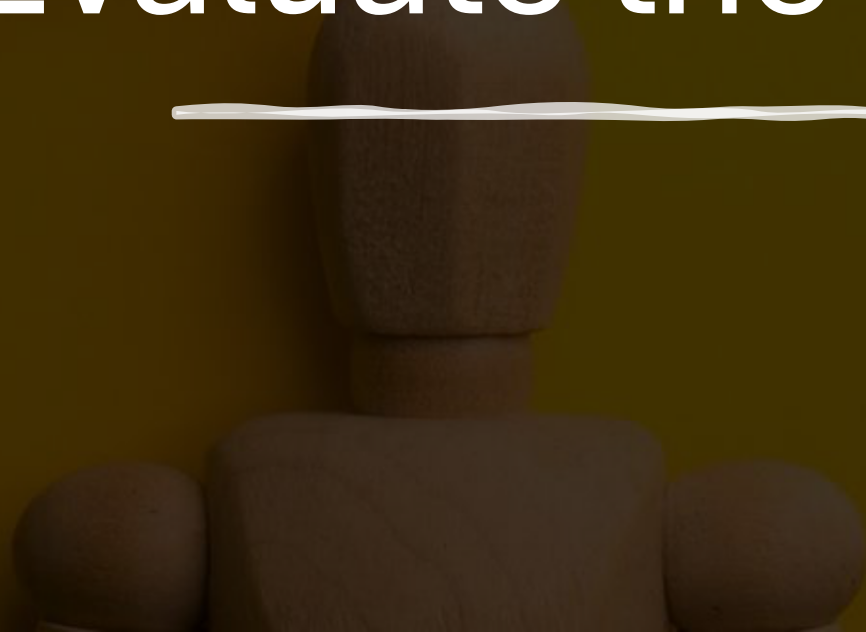
Leader's response: respond to people's needs (handed out supplies/ stopped the construction work)



1. See the gap between



2. Evaluate the purpose



"I want to travel to
a distant place."



"The ancient kings
did travel, but
not for fun."





“Excellent!”



The Duke opened the granary to help the poor and listen to the elders' needs.



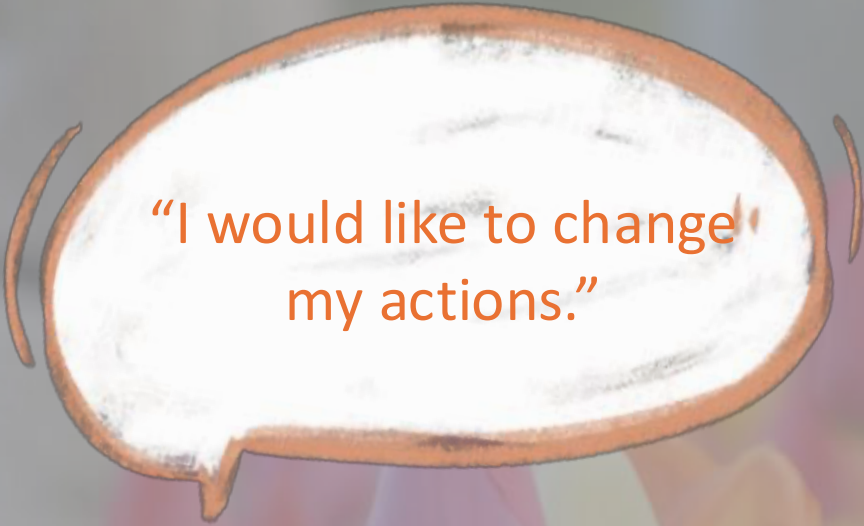
“That's not ‘travel’, that’s just taking. This is not what the ancient sage kings did.”

“I want to pray to
God and my ancestors.
Surely this will bring
me blessings, right?”

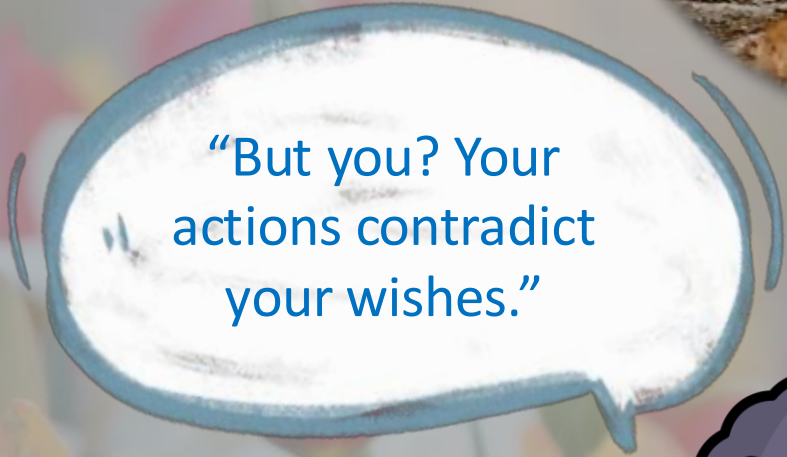


“The ancient kings also
sought blessings.”

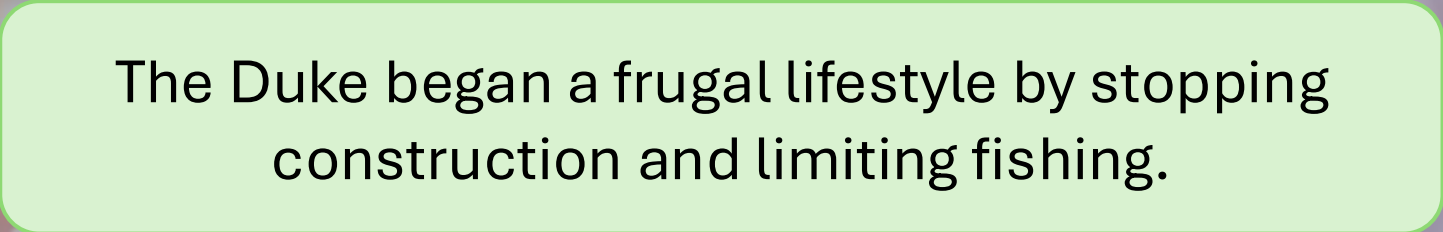




"I would like to change
my actions."



"But you? Your
actions contradict
your wishes."



The Duke began a frugal lifestyle by stopping
construction and limiting fishing.





Leader's perspective: extensively using the labour force



People's feelings: overburdened by the duke's demand, poor, angry, and exhausted



Minister's remonstration: redefine "travel" and "blessings"



Leader's response: respond to people's needs (reflected and changed his former wrongdoings)



2. Evaluate the purpose



A woman with red hair styled in buns is smiling and holding two orange slices over her eyes. She is wearing a white top with a red cherry pattern. The background is a solid dark red color.

3. Learn from exemplar(s)

"Does your state
have anything like
this?"



(Falls silent)

"My king's hall
is humble."





Leader's perspective: arrogant about the high tower



People's feelings: (hinted) overworked by the construction project



Minister's remonstration: provide a contemporary exemplar



Leader's response: (respond to people's needs?) ashamed and loss of words

Simple narratives?
The hidden intention.





Takeaways:

How to know how your employees, teammates, and classmates feel?

The method of **SELF**

1. **S**ee the gap between
2. **E**valuate the purpose
3. **L**earn from exemplar(s)
4. **F**ollow the advice



Thanks for listening

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Appendix: The original narratives in the *Essentials*

See the gap between: narrative one

In the time of Duke Jing [of Qi], it snowed for three days, and the skies still did not clear. The duke was wearing a white fox fur coat and sitting in a side room to the main hall of the palace. Master Yan arrived to have an audience and stood next to him. The duke said, “How odd! It has been snowing for three days, and yet the weather is not cold at all.” Master Yan replied: “Is the weather not cold?” The duke laughed.

景公之時，雨雪三日而不霽。公被狐白之裘，坐於堂側階。晏子入見，立有間。公曰：「怪哉，雨雪三日而天不寒。」晏子對曰：「天不寒乎？」公笑。

Master Yan said, “I have heard it said that the wise rulers of antiquity were able to eat their fill and still know that other people were going hungry; they were warm and yet knew that other people were cold; they relaxed and yet understood that other people were working hard. Now your lordship is not aware of this at all.” The duke said, “Good! Let me hear your commands.” Then he ordered that clothes should be given away and grain should be issued, to be handed out to the hungry and cold.

晏子曰：「嬰聞古之賢君，飽而知人之飢，溫而知人之寒，逸而知人之勞，今君不知也。」公曰：「善，寡人聞命矣。」乃命出裘發粟以與飢寒。

“Master Yan” 晏子, *Essentials*, trans. Milburn (with modifications)

See the gap between: narrative two

Duke Ling of Wei excavated ground for a pool when the weather was cold. Wan Chun remonstrated, saying, “To start work when it is cold will, I fear, harm the people.” “Is the weather really too cold?” asked the duke.

Wan Chun replied, “Because you are wearing fox furs and are sitting on a bearskin rug, you are unaware of the cold. The common people wear tattered clothes that go unmended, and their shoes have holes that go unstitched. Your lordship may not be cold, but the people are.”

“Well argued,” said the duke. He then ordered that the work be stopped.

衛靈公天寒鑿池。宛春諫曰：「天寒起役，恐傷民。」公曰：「天寒乎哉？」宛春曰：「公衣狐裘坐熊席，是以不寒。今民衣弊不補，履決不組，君則不寒，民則寒矣。」公曰：「善。」令罷役。

“*Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals*” 呂氏春秋, *Essentials*, trans. by Knoblock and Riegel (with modifications)

Evaluate the purpose: narrative one

Duke Jing went out travelling, and he asked Master Yan: “I would like to voyage southwards across the sea and to journey as far as Langya. What should I do, that [my travels] should be like those of our former kings?” Master Yan said, “I have heard it said that...to investigate the ploughing in spring, with a view to making up for any inadequacies, is called ‘a journey’; to check the harvest in the autumn so as to help those who did not get enough is called ‘an inspection.’ As the proverb handed down from the Xia dynasty says: ‘If my lord does not go on a journey, how can I get **rest**? If my lord does not go on an inspection, how can I get the help I **need**? Journeys and inspections form the backbone of the feudal lords’ administration.’

景公出游。問於晏子曰：「吾欲循海而南，至於琅邪，寡人何修以則夫先王之游也。」晏子曰：「嬰聞之……春省耕而補不足者謂之游，秋省實而助不給者謂之豫。夏語曰：『吾君不游，我曷以休，吾君不豫，我曷以助，壹游壹豫，為諸侯度。』

However, when your lordship goes travelling today it is not like this. Your army advances, eating the food [of the people]. The poor receive no assistance, nor are the weary given rest. ... The Sage-Kings of antiquity did not engage in pointless wandering or try and drag things out, nor did they behave in a reckless or ruinous fashion.” Duke Jing said, “Good!” He ordered the officials to open the granaries, giving three thousand *zhong* of food to the poor. His lordship personally gave an audience to seventy persons who were old. After that, he went home.

今君之游不然，師行而糧食，貧苦不補，勞者不息。……古者聖王無流連之游，無荒亡之行。」公曰：「善。」令吏出粟以與貧者三千鐘，公所身見老者七十人，然後歸。

“Master Yan” 晏子, *Essentials*, trans. Milburn (with modification)

Evaluate the purpose: narrative two

Duke Jing asked Master Yan: “My energies are declining, and my ill-health is getting more severe. It is now my intention to collect jade, discs, and sacrificial animals, and order the Court Astrologer to present them to God on High and the ancestral shrines. Do you think that by praying, I can receive blessings?”

Master Yan replied: “I have heard it said that in antiquity, when our former rulers received blessings, their government was in harmony with the people and their actions accorded with the gods. They were frugal in their expenditure on palaces and other residences, and they did not dare to fell many trees, to prevent the mountain forests from becoming denuded. They economised upon their food and drink and did not over-hunt or over-fish, to prevent damage to the rivers and marshes.

景公問晏子曰：「寡人意氣衰，身甚病。今吾欲具珪璧犧牲，令祝宗薦之乎上帝宗廟。意者，禮可以干福乎。」

晏子對曰：「嬰聞之，古者先君之干福也，政必合乎民，行必順乎神。節宮室，不敢大斬伐，以無逼山林；節飲食，無多田漁，以毋逼川浦。」

Evaluate the purpose: narrative two

They prayed to their ancestors when undertaking any important matter, apologising for their crimes and not daring to demand anything [from the gods]. For this reason, they were in accord with both the deities and the people, while the mountains and rivers received the benefits [of their good government]. Today, my lord, your government goes against the wishes of the people, and your actions offend the gods. To build your vast palaces, many [trees] have been cut down and the mountain forests have suffered severe damage. You are greedy for food and drink and have hunted and fished excessively, bringing great destruction upon the rivers and marshes. For these reasons, the gods and people are both angry, while the mountains and rivers have suffered depletion.

祝宗用事，辭罪而不敢有祈求也。是以神民俱順，而山川納祿。今君政反於民，而行悖乎神。大宮室，多斬伐，以逼山林；羨飯食，多田漁，以逼川浦；是以神民俱怨，而山川收祿。

The Court Historian records your crimes while the Court Astrologer prays for blessings [for you]. Are [your actions] not in contradiction with your intentions?” His lordship said, “Other than you, nobody tells me these things. I would like to reform my heart and change my actions.” He then called off his trip to Gongfu and stopped presentations of seafood; woodcutters were given strict time-limits for their work, while hunters and fishermen were allocated catch numbers. His lordship’s food, drink, and housing were subject to great economies, and he was not greedy for better; he prayed to his ancestors when undertaking important matters, while apologising for his crimes and not daring to ask for any [blessing].

司過薦至，而祝宗祈福，意者逆乎。」公曰：「寡人非夫子無所聞此，請革心易行。」於是廢公阜之游，止海食之獻，斬伐者以時，田漁者有數，居處飲食，節之勿羨，祝宗用事，辭罪而不敢有祈求焉。

“Master Yan” 晏子, *Essentials*, trans. Milburn (with modification)

Learn from exemplar(s): narrative one

The king of Zhai sent an envoy to the state of Chu. To parade Chu's state power, the king of Chu held a banquet for him in Zhanghua Palace. The stairs were so long that it took three breaks to reach the top. The king of Chu asked, "Does the state of Zhai also have a palace like this?" "No, we do not," replied the envoy. "Zhai is a poor state. How can we ever build a palace like this? The king of Zhai lives in a chamber three *chi* above the ground. The roof is made of untrimmed thatch, and the rafters are made of low-quality wood with the bark untouched. Even so, the king of Zhai still considers the workers who built the chamber toilsome and those who live inside too comfortable. Hence, one can never find a palace like this one in Zhai." The king of Chu felt utterly ashamed.

翟王使者之楚，王欲夸之，故饗客於章華之臺，上者三休乃至其上。楚王曰：翟國亦有此臺乎。使者對曰：不，翟窶國也，惡見此臺。翟王之自為室也，堂高三尺，葺葺弗剪，采椽不刮。然且翟王猶以為作之者大苦，居之者大逸。翟國惡見此臺也。楚王媿焉。

“Master Jia” 賈子, *Essentials*, trans. Liu (with modifications)