

Leadership Lessons from Bhagavad Gita¹

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Leadership is a powerful enabler that can leverage an organization to great heights, fame and a credible position among the stakeholders. On the other hand, if the quality of leadership is bad, the same organization will experience a downward slide leading to its eventual destruction. Therefore, one of the major issues of great interest as well as concern in Business Organizations, Government and the Society is the issue of leadership. There is continuous interest in organizations to understand how great leaders are identified, created and nurtured. Modern research has focused on this issue and several theories have been proposed.

Current Styles of Leadership

Currently, the research and practice in the area of leadership provides two alternative perspectives. One way to understand leadership is from a perspective of responsibility and ownership. In such a perspective leaders believe that they have the freedom to take decisions the way they think is right and have the authority to execute things accordingly. Such a view point is taken because often leaders feel that it is “their” responsibility to get the right performance for the organization. They further feel that it is very important to get the tasks done by monitoring the sub-ordinates in the organization. This model of leadership presents a picture of leaders having position, power and endowment of resources at their disposal. With the power that the leader enjoys in the system, and the endowment of resources at his/her command, the leader feels he/she can deliver the intended results. Unfortunately, such a leadership style creates a climate of what is known as “*market contract*” for others working in the system. In a market contract people work for the pay and no more. They feel that additional work is not worth unless they are compensated more. This model of leadership is not very promising in bringing the best performance in an organization.

There is a second approach to leadership practiced by many today. In this approach, leaders believe that the unique position that they have obtained and the endowment of resources at their command provides them a great opportunity to enable others do their best. Such leaders believe strongly in nourishing leadership talent around by creating space and agenda for others. They derive their joy by becoming irrelevant in many day-to-day matters pertaining to running the institution. This approach will help create a climate of “*psychological contract*” for others working in the system. In a psychological contract people respond to the call of duty and work beyond the norms if situations demand such a response. They own their place of work much more and feel more involved in many things in their work place.

It is not too difficult to come to a conclusion that the second approach appears much better than the first and has a greater chance of not only delivering well but also creating a sustainable leadership pipeline for an organization. However, if we look at ancient scriptures such as Bhagavad Gita, Mahabharata and Ramayana, we get different perspectives of what leadership is and what it can do to an organization.

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Leadership Lessons from Gita

One of the issues that Lord Krishna emphasizes to Arjuna is the issue of leadership. In several chapters in the Gita there are interesting references to the quality of leadership. If we carefully analyze them three interesting ideas emerge. These include:

- Strong need to lead by example
- Importance of developing a high degree of equanimity
- Understanding the principle of mutual dependence

Leading by example

Leaders derive their credibility, respect and power from their unwavering commitment to walking the talk. This is because, if the leaders say something and do something else, the followers will not take the leader very seriously. Rather, they will do a similar thing as their leader and nothing else.

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठः तत्तदेवेतरो जनः ।

स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥ 3.21.

Therefore Krishna warns Arjuna that he needs to lead by example. Viewed from the perspective, leaders hands are tied, they lose the degrees of freedom and the whole world will keenly watch the leaders' action and blindly follow the leaders (मम वर्त्मानुवर्तन्ते मनुष्याः पार्थ सर्वशः ॥ 3.23.). One of the biggest problems today is that leaders do not practice this value. They think they are above board and in several cases this ideas stretches to such a level that they being to think that they are "above law".

Every individual inevitably plays a leadership role. A child looks upon the parents, elders and the teachers very closely and derives its value systems very early in life. These value systems are set at that stage itself and very little change is possible later. Every one of us as responsible parents, head of a family, member of a social or political group need to understand this issue very seriously.

Developing a sense of equanimity

One of the biggest problems that leaders face is their inability to take bad outcomes as it unfolds at times. When everything goes well the leadership is fine. However the moment some unexpected things happen (such as losing something significant, defeat of one kind or the other etc.) they just lose their balance. This is a problem that requires solution of managing the world "within" the leader and not the "world outside". Modern leadership theories have not even recognized this issue.

No great leadership is possible without developing a sense of equanimity. Lord Krishna drives this point in Gita in several places. The first instruction that Arjuna receives from Krishna is on this issue, thereby signaling the importance of this aspect. According to Lord Krishna, the world is full of dualities, it will blow hot and cold and we will experience joy and happiness as well as some unpleasant moments (मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः ।). These are the realities of life and they

will come and go. If we do not learn to endure them and go through this life as a roller coaster ride, we will never be able to exhibit leadership traits (आगमापायिनोऽनित्याः तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥ 2.14.).

If you analyse today's problems, the genesis of them lies in our inability to understand and live through this profound truth. Individuals, young children and the so called leaders are not able to accept the fact that life has both aspects. They are told that only good things will happen to them and in this manner huge expectations are built. When some bad things happen, they are unable to take it, they get into mental depressions, feel that they are worthless, get into health problems, go to psychological counselling and in some extreme cases commit suicide also. The quality of leadership critically depends on this aspect. Realizing this Lord Krishna has touched on this aspect in several chapters of Gita from Chapter 2 to Chapter 14.

The issue of developing equanimity is very critical to be a great leader. This is simply because great things are not achieved through excitement. Developing a sense of equanimity enables an individual to master the art of handling the world around us by managing the world within very well. In a way through this Lord Krishna teaches us how we need to handle ourselves while engaging in the thick of activities.

Principle of Mutual Dependence

Today's era is characterized by dominance of individuality as a value of life. Joint families have given way for nuclear families. Children are constantly taught the virtue of one's own hard work leading to excellence in their studies and other pursuits in life. People with originality (often taken as a good measure for their individuality) are looked at with awe and inspiration. The society also views individual rights as an important element of growth and progress. Asserting individuals right and space in all matters of civil society seems to be the way forward to make a great country. The spirit of questioning everything (as opposed to the spirit of inquiry) and seeking one's own understanding of the issue is another aspect promoted today. In all these matters the common thread is to promote individuality either directly or indirectly. The idea that begins as individuality will soon transform into selfishness as people become very sensitive to their possessions, wants and needs and begin to demand or bargain for these things in life. This will take away the culture of sharing as give and take is simply not easier to practice. Moreover, the way we approach life will be dominated by "what is in it for me?"

If we observe nature carefully we will understand one aspect very clearly. The whole universe is inter-connected. The physical systems such as mountains, rivers, glaciers in the polar regions and mountains have profound effect on us. The plant kingdom and the animal kingdom too exert a considerable influence on us. Lord Krishna brings this aspect by advising Arjuna that in order to achieve ultimate prosperity and success in whatever we do we need to honour the principle of mutual dependence. The spirit of sharing and unconditional giving (the virtue of *Yajna*) is the basis on which everything in the world sustains. The Gods bless the living beings with this virtue and in turn the living beings give back to the Gods using this principle. *Paraspara Bhava*, Lord Krishna says, is the one that guarantees us ultimate prosperity (*Param Shreyas*).

देवान्भावयतानेन ते देवा भावयन्तु वः ।

परस्परं भावयन्तः श्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ ॥ 3.11

By virtue of the position and the endowment of resources that a leader can command, it blindfolds them to the need to understand importance of mutual dependence. However, the first lesson a leader in an organization need to learn to be successful is the value of mutual dependence. People working with the leader are as important as the leader. A happy and successful married life revolves around the husband and the wife understanding the value of mutual dependence. Particle physicists today have found out that both at the sub-atomic level (*Pinda*) and at the cosmos (*Anda*) everything works in perfect harmony because of the universal principle of mutual dependence. Government and society have to honour the principle of mutual dependence. If the elected representatives of the government and the parliament do not honour this principle, some forces will act and remind them of the need for this. We recently witnessed this in the case of Lokpal bill related movement by Anna Hazare.

Inspirational Leadership

If one reads Gita from the perspective of leadership he/she will get a different understanding of what it means than what we know today from modern research and practice. Leadership is at its best only when it becomes inspirational. Inspirational leadership has several attributes which we are unable to see clearly in current day leadership theories. These include:

- Outgrow their own vision from the narrow perspective of “what is in it for me?” to an opportunity to make a difference to the people and the place that they associate with
- Not afraid of anyone and not generating any sense of fear in others (यस्मात् न उद्विजेत लोकाः लोकात् न उद्विजेत च यः (Gita chapter 12)
- An ability to dramatically transform people and entities that comes to their contact in a sustained fashion. How many entities and people in this country and elsewhere have been significantly influenced by a person like Mahatma Gandhi till date? It will not be surprising to find that this phenomenon will continue for a long time to come.
- Leave behind an impact that guides a large number of people and organizations for a long time to come. Is it not strange that Buddha, Rama, Krishna, and Christ, are able to influence people and society for a very long time? Such is the power of inspirational leadership.

In order to achieve such a level of leadership, a strong current of spirituality must run in an individual. Spirituality will broaden the vision of an individual, melt their heart, embolden them to take great steps without fear of failures and significantly increase their leadership competence. People endowed with modern education, scientific knowledge and wherewithal to perform need to imbibe spirituality to make a winning combination of an inspirational leader. This seems to be the underlying message in Gita on matters pertaining to leadership.