

Management Lessons from the Bhagavad Gita

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Introduction

Modern management practices and theories were developed during the last 150 years, ever since the industrial organisations of the West began to get established. It is a popular belief that globally renowned corporations adopt best practices and manage their organisations very well. Against this backdrop consider the following statistics about how organisations are managed according to a study made in 1997. In his book, *The Living Company*,¹ Geus mentioned that most large and apparently successful corporations are profoundly unhealthy. According to the study, the average life expectancy of Fortune 500 companies was 40-50 years. One-third of companies listed in *Fortune 500* in 1970 vanished by 1983 and 40% of all newly created companies last less than 10 years. Such a high rate of infant mortality of organisations point to primitive stages of management that we are in today.

If we conduct a survey of managers of modern corporations we may infer that managers in these organisations experience stress, struggle for power and control, cynicism and a work environment that stifles rather than releases human imagination, energy and commitment. Many senior executives in companies today will agree to the fact that even after several years of management

training, we have hardly made significant progress in addressing some of the vexing issues. These include, among others, dealing with people around us, understanding what motivates oneself, doing one's work in the most efficient manner, making leaders for 'high performance' organisation and creating organisations that can live long. On the other hand, we often notice that there is a disconnect between quality of life at large and work life. We also have serious issues about sustenance of firms and the environment in the long run.

Given this state of affairs, it indeed impels one to look for alternative paradigms for better management practices. The goal of this article is to stimulate thinking in the minds of management researchers and practitioners the enormous potential that ancient Indian literature has in suggesting better alternatives for management. We will explore some aspects of these from one of the sacred spiritual texts of ancient times, viz., *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*—a text for spiritual progress and self realization. Through this article we do not hazard to undermine the primary objective of this holy text nor do we advocate a self-study mode leading to some of the management lessons that one can derive. The sacred texts are to be studied first under the guidance of a competent and spiritually evolved guru. We may later contemplate on multitude of ideas that the



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texts offer after this initial training. We merely point to the endless list of benefits that the text offers to a management practitioner and illustrate it by culling out some ideas that one may find very useful to apply.

A Compendium of Management Lessons

In simple terms, management is a body of knowledge that enables entities to deal with a multitude of situations involving people, process and the environment, to ensure work is done efficiently to deliver goods and services useful to the society. Good management must result in greater satisfaction for all stakeholders. If we carefully study the Gita, we infer that the central issue is all about doing work (*karma yoga*), in the most efficient manner.

The cardinal principles of कर्मण्येव अधिकारः [‘right to work’] and logical explanations leading to the proclamation that योगः कर्मसु कौशलम् [‘yoga is skill in action’] laid out in chapter 2 of the Gita and the concept of यज्ञः [‘sacrifice’] laid out in chapter 3 of the Gita amply demonstrate that the fundamental requirements of good management are contained in the Gita.

Gita offers a framework for stimulating high levels of motivation. Otherwise how can one explain the magic transformation that Arjuna has gone through from a state of fear, mental agony and hair raising experience (सीदन्ति मम गात्राणि, रोमहर्षश्च जायते) to one of waging a war against a battery of most credible and competent leaders in the society and eventually winning the war. A careful study of Gita from this perspective will lead us to important principles that managers must inherit to create rightful and long living organizations. Such a study will help us discover certain aspects of high performing organizations and may provide vital clues for alternative paradigms of management.

Alternative Paradigms from Gita

Notion of time

One of the pressing problems that modern organizations face arise out of their notion of time. Modern organizations suffer from extreme levels of ‘short termism.’ Software companies in India provide what is known as quarter-on-quarter guidance. In simple terms what it means is that they inform the market players and their stakeholders what can be expected of them in the next quarter. Invariably they project a positive outcome quarter after quarter and in order to meet these guidelines they engage in a variety of activities that create stress, and a short term oriented approach to managing business. This invariably brings negative results in the long run. For instance, to cut costs and show impressive results, it is customary in several organizations to slash training budgets and expenditure on Research and Development (R & D). Clearly, this will make the organisation less equipped for the future. Unfortunately, a series of short terms never makes a long term for any organization. While some have understood this aspect they have not been able to change the way they work and take decisions that are consistent with this requirement.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna’s first lesson to Arjuna is to train his mind to the notion of time that is essentially long term (Chapter 2, Slokas 11-13). A good understanding of this helps managers to feel less pressurized of performance targets in the short run and instead develop some conviction to engage in activities and decisions that seek to create a balance between short term and long term. Change management becomes easier as they develop comfort in the fact that people come and go and good principles and ideas must remain and drive choices in organisations. They will also begin to realise (as it

happened to Arjuna) that whenever they face complicated and apparently insurmountable problems, one way to broad-base the problem and search for acceptable solutions is to revisit the notion of time.

Performance Metrics and Assessment

The biggest constraint for modern management is the mindset towards performance metrics and assessment. Modern management practices approach this issue in the context of a world of duality. It works at two stages. In the first stage, the dual perspectives are first established. For example, all actions and outcomes are first classified using a framework of duality; good Vs bad, desirable Vs undesirable, performer Vs non-performer, belongs to my camp Vs opposite camp, positive Vs negative and so on. Based on these, expectations are set that pertain only to the positive aspects of this world of duality. At the second stage, the managers begin to develop a false notion that only good things are going to happen. In modern management practice, it is a bad thing to expect negative outcomes in this scheme of duality. Consequently, they develop no skills to expect negative outcomes, to understand why these happen and evolve no methods to face these. This is clearly unrealistic. In the absence of these, managers develop needless tension, experience stress in their work place, deal with their sub-ordinates in non-managerial and at times unprofessional ways and even carry these negative emotions and stress back home and spoil their family life as well.

One of the greatest contributions of the Bhagavad Gita is to develop a good understanding of the risks of living in this contrived world of duality and equipping the managers to rise above the plane of duality. Shri Krishna had devoted much time on this

critical aspect of managing the world of duality. In chapter 2 verse 14 he urges Arjuna to learn to tolerate the ups and downs that characterizes the world of duality (तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत). Later in chapter 2 verse 48 he proclaims that developing a sense of equanimity begets a composed and a complete personality (समत्वं योग उच्यते), which is a quintessential attribute for a leader/manager. In several chapters he revisits the notion of sense of equanimity and reminds Arjuna of the virtues of it². Slokas 24 and 25 in chapter 14 provide in a nutshell all the important attributes pertaining to the world of duality that a leader/manager must possess to be successful in his/her work place. If managers can develop a sense of equanimity as indicated in the Gita, the quality of leadership will dramatically improve and so will the quality of management.

Work and Efficiency

Perhaps the most profound insight that the Bhagavad Gita offers to managers in modern corporations is the definition of work and efficiency. The definition of work presents itself as a paradoxical and often an unacceptable idea to an uninformed and casual reader of the Gita. It is important to note here that many verses in Chapter 2 and the following chapters of the Gita build² on this central idea and therefore it requires a good understanding in its totality. It requires deep contemplation and guidance of a guru to understand the concept. There are four aspects to the definition of work that Shri Krishna articulates:

- (a) The doer has the right to work (कर्मण्येव अधिकारः)
- (b) The doer has no control on outcomes/ fruits of action (मा फलेषु कदाचन)
- (c) The doer has no control on the root causes of the fruits of action (मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूः)

(d) There is no choice to revel in inaction
(मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि)

Explaining the fourth component of this definition is easier. On seeing the first three components, one may come to the conclusion that one may rather choose not to engage in work. Krishna has ruled out this option. In chapter 3 he also explains why the so called state of inaction does not exist in reality.

Managers will revolt at the idea of doing work but having no desire and/or control on outcomes. However, we do not realize that during our life time there have been several occasions when we indeed practiced this virtue. Is it not common for us that when we do good work, we tend to say 'I was lost in the work'? What do we mean by getting lost in the work? It merely means we ceased to look for outcomes and fruits of action during those moments of time. Simply extending this logic, we can easily conclude that मा फलेषु कदाचन concept simply enables us to get lost in the work for ever and enjoy doing it.

There are other important reasons for managers to actively consider practicing this idea. Some of them are as follows:

Too much of result orientation breeds a sense of fear and discomfort as several of us are wary of failures. Moreover, a desire to have control on fruits of action will invariably force us to focus on ends instead of means. Because of this, process orientation will give way for result orientation. Getting results somehow will dominate individual's behaviour. As we see

nowadays, such behavioural patterns have the potential not only to destroy individuals but also institutions. Results and outcomes are a matter of future and work is a matter of present. Therefore with excessive result orientation one tends to escape the dynamics of 'present' and go after 'future'.

The Take Away

Based on these illustrations from the Gita, managers can take away some simple yet powerful lessons. Developing a good sense of neutrality is an important pre-requisite for discharging one's work very effectively. This may appear like a simple idea. However it requires deep contemplation of this idea and a conviction of its usefulness. Only out of such a conviction can one generate new behavioural patterns consistent with this idea. The current dominant paradigm 'I must enjoy fruits of action—else no work' will generate enormous amount of wasteful effort.

Embracing the overarching principle of karma yoga will have to be the alternative paradigm for improving the quality of management in organizations. If managers can take these two important lessons from the Gita, we can not only build an alternative paradigm of management but also succeed reasonably in the practice of management. That can be the greatest tribute we can offer to the sacred text of Bhagavad Gita. May Lord Krishna bestow his divine blessings on us to achieve this goal. □

References

1. Geus, A. (1997), *The Living Company*, Harvard Business School Press

2. cf., *Gita*, 5.18-19, 6.7-9, 29, 32, 12.4, 13, 13.10, 39, 14.24-25

Some people do the best work when led. Not every one is born to lead. The best leader, however, is one who 'leads like the baby'. The baby, though apparently depending on everyone, is the king of the household. At least, to my thinking, that is the secret. . .

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 8:428