

Walking the Talk¹

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In almost all the casual conversations amongst us in informal social gatherings we often bring forth certain topics. One is about mounting corruptions and increased indifference to citizen welfare by politicians, public servants and administrators. The other topic is about our inability to align our children's interests to cherished family values, customs and practices. Sometimes we also talk about a general degradation of educational, religious and business institutions. All these problems have a common thread. It all revolves around leadership or the lack of it.

Leadership is an important ingredient in doing right things and rightly. For any entity that involves several people and common purpose and goals to achieve, leadership is inevitable. Viewed from this perspective a family requires leadership and managing the affairs of a temple through a committee involving a set of people also requires leadership. Needless to say, business organizations, public and government institutions and social service organization and religious bodies will all require leadership. Therefore, it is not surprising that there has been a constant interest in understanding the elements of good leadership.

Leadership is a powerful enabler that can lead 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 is the issue of leadership. Organizations continuously make efforts to understand how great leaders are identified, created and nurtured. The unfolding business crises and scams have exposed the leadership crunch in organizations. The current practice of leadership seems unable to resolve the major issues facing businesses. Not surprisingly, every organization wants to develop good leaders. Newer ideas and leadership theories emerge from time to time.

Leadership: Freedom Vs Burden

A dominant perspective many of us have about leadership is one of responsibility and ownership. This model of leadership presents a picture of leaders having position, power, freedom and endowment of resources at their disposal. 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. 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. Because this appears to be a powerful and an impressive position that one can enjoy, from the individual's perspective everybody wants to become a leader.

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Is there more to understand the issue of leadership? Are there certain expectations on the part of the leaders? How does a leader influence the followers? These are certain questions for which we have some answers in the *Gitā*. Lord Krishna provides additional perspectives on leadership through ślokas 21 to 24 in chapter 3 of *Bhagavad Gitā*. Lord Krishna provides three perspectives to leadership:

- Leadership is not a position endowed with complete freedom as one normally thinks
- It is in some sense a great source of burden and the entitlements and endowments that a leader seem to enjoy can, in reality, pale in comparison with the burden of responsibility
- It is a unique situation in which even if one does not have a desire to attain any benefits, there is a still a grave need to ceaselessly work in a unselfish manner

We shall look at one śloka in chapter 3 to understand an aspect of leadership

Leading by example

Lord Krishna emphasizes the need for walking the talk by pointing out that whatever a leader does or the manner in which the leader behaves (यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठः) the others will follow that alone (तत्तदेवेतरो जनः). Further Krishna says whatever the leader does is understood to be the appropriate way to do things (स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते) by the followers and they will diligently follow the same path (लोकस्तदनुवर्तते).

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठः तत्तदेवेतरो जनः ।

स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥ 3.21

*yadyadācarati śreṣṭhaḥ tattadevetaro janāḥ
sa yatpramāṇam kurute lokastadanuvartate*

For example, if the leader of an organization says that it is extremely important to cut unnecessary costs and yet goes about spending lavishly when it comes to certain actions that he/she engages in, then it is almost certain that the objectives will not be met. Similarly parents can never succeed in inculcating the reading habit among their children by themselves choosing to watch the TV than reading. Educating one's children requires that the parents have the discipline of practicing it on a day to day basis. In other words, what Lord Krishna is pointing to is that the moment we create preach – practice gap, the credibility of our leadership will be affected. In modern parlance this is exactly called leading by example.

There are two major implications of this śloka. The first is that a leader (whether he/she likes it or not) is unwittingly put on a pedestal and others have a 360° view to the leader's behavior. This allows them to watch the leader's actions and responses to various situations very keenly. The second implication is that this puts serious constraints on the leader's behavior and his/her responses to the emerging situations. This is because once a leader

deviates from acceptable norms and behaviours others immediately infer that it is alright for them also to do so. In other words by his/her behavior, a leader has a great propensity to unwittingly change the acceptable norms. Therefore in reality, a leader is put to great restraint as far as his/her behaviour is concerned.

This is contradictory to our simple understanding that a leader has greater degrees of freedom to act. This may appear to be simplistic. However, in reality those who understood this and lived by this cardinal principle have greatly succeeded in truly inspiring others. Let us consider one example to illustrate this aspect of leadership and its profound impact on our personal lives.

Leadership impact on our personal life

In several families we notice that as the child grows it employs almost the exact methodology of dealing with life situations as the parents do. For instance, we notice that at times when the grown up child gets angry it uses similar bad words as that of the parents, the child treats (or rather ill-treats) another person in a strikingly similar manner as the parents do. In the same way, some of the niceties of dealing with certain situations that a grown up child adopts also seem to have its roots in its parents' behaviour. The above *śloka* provides the explanatory power for us to understand why it is happening.

Every parent (both the father and the mother) is the first inspirational leader and the role model for a growing child. Therefore, every one of us is expected to exhibit leadership traits at this stage of our personal life. The growing child very keenly watches both the parents more than listening to what they say. Therefore our hopes of rearing a child into a great person to a large extent depend on the behavioural norms that we have as the child is growing. Parents having children in the age group of 2 – 12 can greatly inspire them by demonstrating various life skills in a text book precision. This calls for a huge change in the parents' behavioural pattern.

Through this *śloka*, Lord Krishna has reminded us that developing a great society and responsible citizens is a work that gets executed at home and very early. Modern psychological studies seem to point to the fact that most of the learnings, especially pertaining to developing lifelong values in a child happen even before the child socializes in a big way (by way of attending the school, say at the age of 5). Therefore, it is only parents who can walk the talk and thereby invest in the future of their children. Against this backdrop, we do not even know what we are getting into by leaving the child in the hands of a day care attendant at the first available opportunity.

Let Lord Krishna endow us with great wisdom and help us succeed in one aspect of life, viz., having children who we can be proud of, surpassing our own standards in leading a meaningful and a successful life.