

Traits of Inspirational Leaders¹

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The moment we think of a leader we assume that the person is powerful. A leader has greater freedom to exercise his/her choices. Leaders can command people and resources at their disposal to achieve the targets. The leader does not require approval from someone to plan and execute things that he/she wants to. Today's political leaders fit into this description. They call the shots and the masses (the so called party men & followers) seem to respond. Business leaders also set the path for the managers and other employees to follow in the organization. A leader is also expected to deliver results for the organization that he/she is leading.

Motivating Leaders to deliver the expectations

In order to ensure that leaders "deliver the goods" despite emerging challenges certain mechanisms have been developed by today's organizations. The implicit assumption in today's thinking is that the financial and other non-monetary rewards that a leader gets must be linked to achieving specific goals. If we do not inextricably link these two the leader may not get adequately inspired to put in the hard work and achieve the intended outcomes. In other words, a leader requires motivation in materialistic terms to bring the best of his/her efforts for achieving the desired objectives. In short, a leader is coaxed into "what is it in for me" mentality even before the action starts.

The reality does not seem to prove this model right. Meeting the targeted outcomes is not that straightforward in reality as there are several factors outside the control of the leader and the organization. Leaders get mentally stressed too much as the reality unfolds a little differently. Since meeting targets becomes so important, leaders become vary of this deviation and at some stage they tend to lose their power of discrimination as the pressure builds on them. Eventually they begin to indulge in other means of fixing this anomaly. Recent events in the global financial markets, software and consulting firms where the top management engaged in unethical practices is a case in point. It points to the tip of the iceberg of the problem arising out of this method.

How do we address this issue? In *Bhagavad Gitā* Lord Krishna comes with a different set of assumptions as to what makes leaders to excel. In some sense, Krishna advocates a different model of leadership, which could be termed as "inspirational leadership". Let us look at some of the traits of this model of leadership and its contrast to current realities.

Two new dimensions of Leadership

In the *Gitā*, Lord Krishna provides two different perspectives of leadership, which are counter-intuitive to our current understanding. Krishna tells Arjuna that he has nothing to

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really achieve (*na me asti kartavyam*) in the three worlds (*triṣu lokeṣu*). He further clarifies that this is because his list of things not yet achieved (*anavāptam*) is empty. Moreover, his wish list for the future (*avāptavyam*) is also empty. Still, Krishna said, “I will engage in work” (*varta eva karmaṇi*).

न मे पार्थास्ति कर्तव्यं त्रिषु लोकेषु किञ्चन ।
नानवाप्तमवाप्तव्यं वर्त एव च कर्मणि ॥ 3.22

*na me pāarthāsti kartavyam triṣu lokeṣu kiñcana
nānavāptam avāptavyam varta eva ca karmaṇi*

As per our fundamental understanding the context for leadership is that something has to be achieved. If this is the situation, we will immediately come to the conclusion that there is no meaningful reason or purpose to really engage in any serious work. This possibility is especially very real for a leader, since he/she has the freedom to do things. It is a big mystery for us to understand the mindset of a leader when he/she has nothing to achieve immediately as well as in the future. This creates confusion in our minds. We may begin to wonder why a leader would, at all, engage in any action with seriousness, dedication and concentration in such a situation.

In order to clarify this Krishna introduces the second quality of a leader. He suggests to Arjuna that such a possibility indeed does not exist for a leader. Krishna says, “if I choose not to engage in any work (*yadi karmaṇi na varteyam*), then all other people (*manuṣyāḥ*) who look upon me will follow my footsteps (*mama vartmānuvartante*) in every way (*sarvaśaḥ*)”.

यदि ह्यहं न वर्तेयं जातु कर्मण्यतन्द्रितः ।
मम वर्तमानुवर्तन्ते मनुष्याः पार्थ सर्वशः ॥ 3.23

*yadi hyaham na varteyam jātu karmaṇyatandritaḥ
mama vartmānuvartante manuṣyāḥ pārtha sarvaśaḥ*

Seeds of Inspirational Leadership

Through these two *ślokas*, Lord Krishna emphasizes two requirements for good leadership. He unambiguously suggests that a leader should not operate with a mind-set of “what is in it for me”. As we have seen earlier, the current thinking runs contrary to this belief. The current idea of linking rewards and benefits that a leader receives to his/her ability to show outcomes (in excess of what was promised before) may work for average people. On the other hand, it will be perceived as a low-level treatment by a truly inspired person. Would a mother attending to her child with pure love like to agree to this method of assessing if she has done the work well? Think of great leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Baba Amte or Dr. Govindasamy of Aravind Eye Hospital fame. Will such people engaging in deep work with pure devotion, great passion and a desire to transform the society would like to be subjected to such methods of motivating their work? Therefore, Lord Krishna through these *ślokas* indeed points to the traits of true inspirational leaders.

A person who is able to step out of the domain of “what is in it for me?” will unlock enormous energy as they have less tendency to suffer from mental stress. Therefore such a person will be able to focus on the work in an unencumbered manner without any fear of outcomes. In fact engaging in work with such a frame of mind may increase the propensity to achieve the desired results than the other model since the leader is not subjected to too many mental distractions. The immediate material gains that such leaders may get will be incidental and they will be guided by a bigger picture.

The second perspective from these *ślokas* is that a leader has very few degrees of freedom with respect to his/her choice of actions. The moment a leader ceases to work (for whatever reason) others take clue from it and adjust their responses accordingly. It appears as though the leader is sitting in a glass house and is in a 360^o view for all the followers. Therefore, a truly inspirational leader will ceaselessly work even when there is really no personal benefit that will accrue to him/her on account of his/her work.

This aspect is again contrary to today’s thinking. A vast number of leaders think that their job is to “preach” and it is the duty of the followers to “practice” what the leader preaches. Political and business leaders talk about the need for cost cutting and austerity measures but will hardly make any personal efforts to live through this idea. Their expenditure patterns and living style will never be compromised. Where is the hope for cost cutting and austerity when everybody in the organization knows the hollowness of this idea that emanates from the leaders? It is not merely about cost cutting. Even other ideas such as approaching work with devotion, passion and commitment, developing a high sense of time, inculcating good personal values, endearing to attain mental purity etc. will all suffer from this problem. In all these matters truly inspirational leaders are always aware of the 360^o view that they present to their followers and modify their behavioural practices accordingly.

Organizations and the society need several average leaders to meet short term goals. They may struggle to meet or exceed the yardsticks set to earn their monetary and non-monetary rewards. But they cannot lead the organization and the society to a new path, another level of thinking and higher order of existence. This is an exclusive domain for inspirational leaders. Lord Krishna points to some of the traits such leaders must possess. We will be better off understanding these aspects and identifying such leaders in our society from time to time.