PERSPECTIVE

The Leadership Conundrum and the Critical Dimension

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Abstract: The Leadership debate is perhaps one issue that still remains inconclusive even after ages of discussion. There have been diverse views between the American and British schools of thought on the issue of leadership and management. However, the Indian text Manusmriti mentions that effective leadership is not always about winning but about rightful conduct. It is the quality of decisions rather than the outcome that makes the crucial difference in leadership. Furthermore, a true leader should be compassionate because the fact is that it works in all societies and at all times. A leader has to know his people and not get carried away by others’ opinions without careful analysis. Hence it is equally important to understand that leaders should also know when to break the rules and for whom.

Key words: Leadership, Management, Effectivity, Dharma, Attribute

Introduction

The Leadership debate is perhaps one issue that still remains inconclusive even after ages of discussion. Though it is believed that Leadership gives the cutting edge to management practice and makes it work, the critical determinant is still not clear. Management theorists, researchers and practitioners have failed to come to a definitive answer as to the one best formula to lead. The earlier Classical Management thinkers initially suggested that Management and Leadership are two different things and there is a subtle yet important distinction between them. The American and the British schools of thought had their own views. While the American view held that Leadership is a broader concept that encompasses management, the British approach suggested that Management was the umbrella term that included leadership (Panda, 2022)

The Present Scenario

Over the years, Management and Leadership as concepts have come closer and for all practical purposes are now used rather interchangeably. It is the American approach that now prevails. In the contemporary literature it is being emphasized that effective management is all about leadership. To put it more succinctly effective management is a result of effective leadership. (Drucker, 1967) The leadership management issue thus has been resolved to a great extent. However, there is another confusion related to the matter. It is about an old issue that was raised more than six centuries ago by the British statesman and thinker Sir Thomas More. His question was why did enterprises fail? And he gave a probable answer too, that it was
because of poor management. But we still don’t have a clear idea as to what this poor management means? Despite the fact that business schools have grown exponentially and there is a plethora of management theories. To quote Harold Koontz, this has resulted in a management theory jungle. And if we add to this the large number of management gurus who loudly proclaim to provide answers to all management problems, the confusion gets confounded.

The Issues Involved

Understanding what is poor management and why leaders fail are questions that need deeper probing and far more elaborate analysis. (Pathak, 2019) The modern management literature of the Western school of thought tries to address these issues by linking outcomes with efforts, that is, to establish a cause and effect relationship between the two. If leadership effort gives desired results then it is effective. In other words, it sees everything from the perspective of win-lose dichotomy. Success in achieving the desired results is thus the touchstone, thereby making leadership essentially a two dimensional approach. It has to be understood that we are not talking about the two basic styles that early leadership studies suggested in Ohio and Michigan studies. It is about the basic issue of what leadership success and failure is and should not be confused with the two dimensional and three dimensional theories of leadership focused on styles.

The Critical Dimension

In stark difference to the Western approaches, the ancient Indian thought suggests the essence of effective or successful leadership, which is irrespective of the outcome. It is not about the win-lose dichotomy. It is about something much higher than such mundane concerns. It is about righteousness as the essential leadership attribute. An essentially values based concept. The idea of Dharma is the core of this approach. In the ancient Indian text Manusmriti this concept is mentioned as the Raj Dharma, that is, the duty of the king. It is all about virtuous leadership. It was this leadership that Lord Ram epitomised in Ramayana. The story of Lord Ram is about values, conduct and character. Interestingly, modern management literature now accepts the idea of Raj Dharma as ethical leadership, based on the principles and practices that cut across the boundary of time and space. Effective leadership is not always about winning but about the rightful conduct. Legitimacy of actions is what is basic to the idea. For an example the Ramayana story may be recalled. When Lord Ram was in exile, his younger brother Bharat along with citizens and ministers from Ayodhya went to him with a sincere request to accept the throne. But he firmly, yet humbly, declines asking Bharat to continue. Interestingly, Bharat also exhibits a similar ethical behaviour. Technically both of them were legitimate claimants to the throne, but they realised that there would be a dilution of ethics. Thus it is not about getting the throne but about discriminating between right and wrong, even if it means not getting the kingship. Lord Ram represented all that was good -right action, right conduct, right decisions. These qualities make leadership respectable, acceptable and sustainable. It is the quality of decisions rather than the outcome that makes the crucial difference.

The Fact of the Matter

The quality of decisions are what distinguish between an ordinary and an exemplary leader. Though leadership qualities have been presented in many frames and forms yet, the most significant mental activity that determines leader effectiveness is the nature of decisions. Reams have been written on leadership qualities, both inborn and acquired, that go into the making of a leader. But there is still a lot of confusion as to the right stuff that leaders need to possess. When people tend to mix outcomes with success the only concern is getting the desired results and is mark of effective leadership. So for them winning, and only winning, becomes the desideratum. But leadership is something different.
Even the modern management theories have drawn a thin but crucial line between successful and effective leaders. (Hersey, 1969) Winning can only be a by-product. The one attribute that is critical is the means.

Mahatma Gandhi, arguably the greatest leader of modern times, believed that means and ends are interchangeable. The results can be achieved in many ways, fair and foul. Sometimes even by fluke. Outcome, therefore, though important, cannot be the sole criterion. How it was achieved is equally important. The critical factor is the process, the path that must always be guided by righteousness. (Sethia, 2013). The difficulty is that righteousness has never been easy to define. But that does not mean that the concept of righteousness is hazy. It is not. Yes, one needs to develop that ability to look at an act or outcome from a different perspective, equipped with a lens that is enriched with conscience. Only then can righteousness be understood in its entirety. A classic example is that of the character of Vibhishan in the Ramayana. Many think his decision to go with Ram was right and many think it was wrong. But his act has to be seen from the standpoint of ethics that determines righteousness. Loyalty can both be a virtue and a vice. The important thing to understand is that the concept of righteousness is neither alien nor ancient. Examples from modern times can also be found.

The aim of the present deliberation is to showcase decisions that reflect righteousness. Such decisions are results of not just intelligence alone, but a combination of two more additional attributes, that is, empathy and morality. It is the unique blend of the three attributes that gives a person that special faculty, the ability to discriminate, which is called Viveka. It is difficult to find an English equivalent of the word Viveka.

Noted management thinker and writer Peter Drucker had said that Management is doing Right Things. But the question is how to decide what those right things are. We need to understand that right things are not always rule based. What is right and what is wrong depends on a number of considerations. They are judgement based on deeper reasoning. Hence it is equally important to understand that leaders should also know when to break the rules and for whom.

The anecdotes and tales that follow throw light on how to understand what those right things are so that the reader may get an insight. They can help the reader gain valuable understanding of the process of quality decision making so that they learn the fine art of leadership.

**Compassion is the Essence**

The story of Siddhartha (later known as Buddha) and his cousin Devdutt dates back to the 5th century and is widely quoted in ancient Indian literature. Siddhartha by Nature was compassionate while his brother was arrogant and aggressive. (Landaw, 2011). One day, as the two brothers were playing in the garden, Devdutt saw a swan flying above and shot at the bird with his bow and arrow. Hit by the arrow the bird fell down in front of Siddhartha. He picked the bird in his arms and nursed its injury. Devdutt seeing this came to him claiming that the bird belonged to him. Siddhartha vehemently denied saying that the bird did not belong to Devdutt who wanted to kill it. The controversy went to the court of king Suddodhan. The king was perplexed. Finally he gave a verdict that the bird be kept in the middle of the court and the two brothers standing on different sides would call the bird. Whosoever the bird went to Syddhartha. He picked the bird in his arms and nursed its injury. Devdutt seeing this came to him claiming that the bird belonged to him. Siddhartha vehemently denied saying that the bird did not belong to Devdutt who wanted to kill it. The controversy went to the court of king Suddodhan. The king was perplexed. Finally he gave a verdict that the bird be kept in the middle of the court and the two brothers standing on different sides would call the bird. Whosoever the bird would go will get it. The bird went to Siddhartha. That was a story from the 5th century. Compare it with a 19th century quote of Abraham Lincoln - I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice. Call it compassion or consideration, the fact is that it works in all societies and at all times.

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Judgement Matters

There is an interesting story from the life of US President Abraham Lincoln which is worth understanding. The story goes that during the civil war one of the most trusted aides of Lincoln was General Grant. The President would always listen to him. This made other senior officials envious of Grant. One day they ganged up and went to the President complaining that listening to Grant was dangerous as he was a drunkard. After thinking for a moment the President retorted- is it? Tell me the brand that he drinks. I will send the same brand to all of you. Grant wins wars also. The message is clear. A leader has to know his people and not get carried away by others opinions without careful analysis.

Leaders need to Empathize

The story of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is worth reading. Once the Maharaja was travelling through a village of his state on a warm summer afternoon. In order to take rest the king camped in the village fields surrounded by a large number of mango trees. As the king was resting a stone hit him on his right eye causing severe bleeding. Seeing this his men rushed to nurse him. Some of the soldiers ran to find out where the stone had come from. After sometime the soldiers came back holding a young boy who was responsible for the injury to the king. They wanted the boy to be severely punished. The king looked at the boy who was trembling with fear. He asked his men to leave the boy. He then softly questioned the boy why he was throwing the stones. The visibly shaken boy said that he was trying to get some mangoes by hitting them with stones. The king asked his men to arrange a basket full of mangoes for the boy saying that when a tree hit by a stone can give fruits how can Ranjit Singh, the Maharaja, give punishment for the same act. Leaders have to be lion-hearted and empathetic.

The anecdotes and parables are just suggestive and not exhaustive, the idea being to drive home the point that leadership is much more, and sometimes much else than what present day business schools teach through their curriculum. (Tripathi, 2006) It is a matter of head, heart and soul.

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