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“LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE ANCIENT INDIAN EPIC OF MAHABHARATA”

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Abstract

An effective management control or strategy execution requires a good leadership. Leaders are the first ones we look up to in times of crisis. There are a few interesting lessons from ancient Indian scriptures as to how different leadership styles can inspire or demotivate employees. The victory of the Pandavas over the Kauravas in the Indian epic 'Mahabharata', despite superior numbers of the latter, provides interesting insights on what were the reasons for the massive defeat. Leadership emerges as a key factor. In this paper, the author discusses the leadership of Shri Krishna which played a critical role in ensuring the victory of Pandavas and defeat of Kauravas. As an example of poor leadership, author takes the case of King Dhritarashtra. An insight into the leadership styles of the characters in the Mahabharata offers interesting lessons on effective leadership.

Introduction:

Mahabharata, the most famous epic ever, was written a long time ago in India in the fourth century BC or earlier. (Basu, 2016). The story continues to find prominence in every form of artwork and continues to overwhelm us even today. Mahabharata as a tale has a lot to teach us in our day to day lives, and also in our professional lives as managers and leaders. There are a whole lot of lessons we can learn from Mahabharata. In this paper, the author tries to examine the philosophies, management lessons and leadership styles in the biggest and oldest epic on war in the world – the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata offers several management insights. It consists of 200,000 verse lines, across 18 chapters. Mahabharata, (Sanskrit: “Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty”) is regarded by Hindus as both a text about Dharma (Hindu moral law) and a history (itihasa, literally “that’s what happened”) (Mahabharata - Hindu Literature, 2020). The story has a “central heroic narrative that tells of the struggle for sovereignty between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas (sons of Dhritarashtra, the descendant

of Kuru) and the Pandavas (sons of Pandu)”. (Mahabharata - Hindu Literature, 2020)

Methodology

‘Hermeneutics’, which is the interpretation of scripture and classical literatures, has been used in this paper as a qualitative research methodology. The interpretation of the texts of Mahabharata is done for establishing its relevance to the idea of Leadership. The interpretation was done based on four stages- “identification, investigation, interpretation and integration” (Mantzavinos, 2020). The first stage had to do with searching text which is linked to Leadership directly or indirectly. Next, there was an investigation of the literature content wise and context wise. Third stage was about interpretation of literature’s relevance and meaning in context of Leadership. Finally, integration of various texts is done by suitably modifying management and leadership lessons from the literature.

Effective Leadership: The case of Shri Krishna

Shri Krishna is worshipped as the eighth incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu and also as a supreme god in his own right. (Krishna - Hindu Deity, 2020).

Shri Krishna was the charioteer of Arjun, played his part perfectly by responding to the crisis situation turning it in a favorable one, thus constructing an environment of confidence and determination. This kind of a landscape in any organization can foster the feeling of co-operation between the employees, thus making a team productive. Krishna was a strategy builder & achiever. The number of Pandava soldiers was much lesser than those after Kaurava soldiers (Kurukshetra War, 2020). For the Pandavas to win a war against the high number of the Kaurava soldiers an effective strategy was required. Shri Krishna served a crucial role here. Lord Krishna with the help of his powerful speech and his amazing oration skills motivated the Pandavas many times. He motivated them to serve good and only good, concurrently working towards attainment of justice. A good leader always takes the initiative to motivate his colleague & fellows through his communication and oration skills.

Krishna had the ability to lead from behind. Each member of the Pandavas possessed great powers, high expertise and self-mastery. While Krishna was not directly involved in the war as a warrior but he still managed to lead the pandavas, especially guiding Arjun from behind.

Revisiting an instance of Mahabharata where Karna, the mighty Kaurava commander, who was laying wrath on the Pandavas, challenged Arjuna to have a one-to-one fight, and at one point of time the battle between the two warriors became so grave that soldiers standing nearby became very frightened and just kept looking at the great battle. It is being said that the

fight became so severe that all the Kauravas including Duryodhana, became afraid because of the bloody mess they both were creating. And then, suddenly the wheel of chariot of Karna got stuck into a pit (Karna VS Arjuna Final War, 2014), and he got down leaving his bow and arrow to free it. It was the time to kill him but due to Kshatriya rules, Arjun was reluctant to kill him. Since, Karna was the mightiest of all and even the Pandavas, excluding Arjun, no one could have stopped him. If this would have been continued, the Pandavas may have witnessed defeat that day itself. However, playing the role of an efficient team leader, a quick but correct decision maker, Krishna ordered Arjun to kill Karna as that was the only time where he could be overpowered, otherwise the crisis that Karna would have created would be massive.

If Krishna proved his leadership skills, Pandavas displayed the skills of being true followers and executors. Yudhishtira, considered an epitome of virtue, agrees to announce the false news of Ashwatthama's death, thereby leading to Dronacharya getting vanquished. Motivated by him, Arjuna takes up his arms against his grandfather, Bhishma. An objective assessment of the situation at hand, unqualified support for the overall goal, registering dissent wherever necessary and balancing the leader's weaknesses with one's own strengths are some of the factors which result into better execution of plans.

While warriors in Kaurava army were very competent, their commitment was questionable. Bhishma did not attempt to kill the Pandavas. Bhishma Pitamah had an oath of protecting the throne of Hastinapur, he decided to fight from the Kauravas' side, but took an oath that he won't kill any of the Pandavas. Now since Bhishma was the 'Chief Commander' for the Kauravas, he was supposed to take all the structural decisions in the war, though he killed, 10,000 soldiers in one day daily for 10 days; his strategy never included killing any of the Pandavas and since he was in charge of all the resources and system processes in the war, it never focused on the killing the Pandavas (Bhishma - A Heart Full of Truth and a Mind Full of Courage, 2020). Lack of commitment was also seen from the sides of Drona and Karna.

A team leader has to take some tough calls as a leader for the betterment of organization, and moulding rules for everyone's benefit becomes a need of the hour. In such delicate situations, a team leader has to take some decisions that are correct and doesn't lead to the difference of opinions in the organization. A great team leader should also be good at crisis management of which Lord Krishna is a prime example throughout Mahabharata. Shri Krishna decided to step in like a 'true team leader' when he witnessed that Arjun was still treating his elders respectfully and not fighting with his whole valour, and decided to break his vow of not picking weapon in the great battle. Witnessing this, Arjuna realized that this will be a blot on his tough character of bravery and courage. Thus, he asked for forgiveness and fought with his whole heart then.

Shri Krishna always respected Yudhishtira and referred to him as his elder brother. He addressed the problems of the Pandavas as his own and never let them feel alone or depressed. Shri Krishna was with them like a constant companion in their every life incident, whether good or bad, favourable or unfavourable. The time to rule or the time to serve exile, Shri Krishna always showed the path of righteousness and of greater good. He considered Draupadi as his sister and protected her from the biggest humiliation of her life in the game of 'chausar' (Chapter 10 - Lord Krishna Protects Draupada, 2019). This not only enforced trust among the team but also, they started looking towards Shri Krishna as a leader, as a ray of hope in the tunnel of darkness. Whether Arjun giving up his weapons before the start of the war, taking down mighty Bhishma Pitamah in the war, killing of Karna, or in any unsuitable circumstance - Shri Krishna was their only resort.

Shri Krishna was an expert in the art of inspiration, persuasion and motivation. He was mindful of the art of acquiring productive capacity and invoking latent productivity. It was at the time of starting the war, a highly crucial time (even for team leaders at the start of a project/campaign in corporate houses) when Arjun got into the flow of feelings for his brothers and elders and denied to use his weapons against them. Seeing this condition of Arjun, Shri Krishna, using his godly powers, stopped time and gave the knowledge of 'Bhagavada Gita' to Arjun (Bhagavad Gita, 2020), in which he beautifully explains the importance and the requirement of fulfilling his roles and responsibilities as a great protector of 'Dharma'. This is the perfect explanation that if the most crucial asset of the organization decides to step back because of emotional reasons, that are totally not valid or the person is in a moral/ethical dilemma, then the leader has to step in to ensure the smooth flow of an organization.

Shri Krishna essentially fulfilled the main traits of the perfect Team Leader in the Blake Mouton Managerial Grid, i.e. strong on both results and people sides (The Blake Mouton Managerial Grid, 2020). A great mind, friend, philosopher, statesman, charioteer, and more - he was the only person who was such a dynamic leader in the entire Mahabharata. And as a result, The Pandavas ruled Hastinapur peacefully for many years.

Poor Leadership: The Case of King Dhritarashtra

Another example is that of King Dhritarashtra, who was son of Vichitravirya's first wife Ambika, and was born blind. After Pandu retired to the forest, he became the de facto king of Hastinapur. He was the Kauravas' father. We can learn a lot from the mistakes of the king of Hastinapur, Dhritarashtra, and his role in the battle of Kurukshetra. His mistakes present a wonderful example of things a leader should never do. Some of these also align in our workplace context.

One of King Dhritarashtra's wisest and most straightforward advisors was Vidura. But the King turned a blind eye to him, despite Vidura's pleas and threats, often with dire consequences. Each leader needs a wise advisor who directs him in the right direction and helps to evaluate complex problems. The wise advice of trustworthy workers/consultants and the thoughts, views and suggestions of those they lead are given great consideration by an effective leader. King Dhritarashtra failed to utilise the great wisdom of Vidura. Another example of poor leadership is that despite being aware of the wrongdoings of Duryodhana, Dhritarashtra favored his son Duryodhana, as he was emotionally blind too. His fatherly emotions overpowered his reasoning-based decision making. He did not think like a king. He refused to govern the behavior and arrogance of his son, leading to an ill-advised war that had life-like astronomical costs, quite literally. Employees must be rated by the successful leader according to their merit and ability, not dependent on their proximity to the leader. We must believe in subordination of individual interests to organisational interests (Henri Fayol's Principles of Management, 2020).

Leadership is also about character strength and the ability to make and stand by a decision. The greatest disappointment of Dhritarashtra lay there. His vulnerability is no more obvious than when Draupadi was humiliated in his court, but despite having the power to stop a wrong from being done, he preferred to stay silent. Leaders who remain quiet on the organization's pressing issues or when faced with a tough situation not only lose their subordinates' confidence, but they also find themselves as bad decision-makers. Without wavering along the road, a leader must take a stand and deal with challenging problems.

The inability of Dhritarashtra to dissolve the conflicts between Pandavas and Kauravas led to the avoidable confrontations from both sides. The kingdom was ripped apart by chaos and, inevitably, a devastating war. An organization's main strength lies in individuals who operate in coordination, rather than as fragmented groups that pull the organization in separate directions. It is natural that an organization would have many capable workers. The leader must ensure that their talents are used for the greater benefit of the company and more importantly, align with the organization's vision - to achieve a convergent objective rather than a divergent one. At the same time leaders need to be fair and balanced when carrying out their roles and taking decisions to prevent disputes between employees. King Dhritarashtra's biggest contribution to today's business leader might be to show the way - by advising them what not to do in leadership!

Conclusion:

Through the characters of Shri Krishna and King Dhritarashtra, the author has tried to bring out facets of effective leadership. A lot can be learnt from the characters of Mahabharata and adopted in modern day management practices. Shri Krishna displayed exemplary leadership skills in the war and made the Pandavas win despite a numeric disadvantage. While Kauravas suffered a massive defeat, not because of lack of competence, but due to

poor leadership. King Dhritarashtra's biggest contribution to today's business leaders is to show them what not to while leading their units. The epic of Mahabharata has some invaluable lessons for modern day managers.

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