

Expanding Managerial Consciousness: Leadership Advice from the Bhagavad Gita

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ABSTRACT

Believed by some to be over 5,000 years ago, the Bhagavad Gita is one of the world's oldest known texts. The manuscript, believed by Hindus to have been inspired by God provides unique perceptions and prescriptions for modern day leaders. The Gita offers advice on humanistic and inclusive leadership, and tells managers to seek a higher level of consciousness when seeking to influence others. The manuscript is useful for Hindus, and non-Hindus alike, and represents an early form of the Western theory of servant leadership.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, India Mysticism, Indian Management, Indian Leadership, Religion and Management



*Thou look at thy duty. Nothing can be more welcome to a soldier than a righteous war.
Therefore to waver in this resolve is unworthy, O Arjuna.
Bhagavad Gita (2:3)*

Introduction

As its economy continues to grow, there is increased interest in India, and its culture. With a population of over one billion, and a growing economy, the world's largest democracy has captured the attention of the world. India is positioned to be a leading economic force well into the 21st Century. Not only is there increased interest in India's economic growth and market potential, but also an increased interest in Indian culture. As Westerners attempt to better understand Indian culture, they might find that India's ancient scriptures offer some insight into cultural norms and values, and perhaps meaningful lessons for the modern day practice of management. It has been reported that many of the top business schools in the United States have introduced "self-mastery classes" (Engardio and McGregor 2006) using Indian philosophy to help students improve their leadership skills. One of the more popular and useful of the ancient texts is the Bhagavad Gita. Using contextual analysis this paper explores the leadership implications found in this classic text, and offers present day managers useful advice, regardless of their cultural orientation.

Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita, or *Song of God*, is one of the most revered of Hindu manuscripts. While many believers date the text to over 5,000 years ago, some debate exists concerning its actual age. Originally written in Sanskrit, the earliest English translation was written in 1785, with the oral version of the manuscript believed by some to have been composed around 3100 B.C.E. (Hee 2007). The Western view is that the manuscript is much newer, nevertheless, it is considered by all to be an ancient text, and one with a powerful influence on Hindus and others. The Bhagavad Gita is part of a larger text, the Mahabharata, but is the most popular component of that larger text. Essentially the book provides an account of a discussion between a prince named Arjuna and his charioteer, Lord Krishna, who is the Hindu God Vishnu, taking human form. The battle which is imminent has been caused by a dispute among two related kingdoms, the Pandav's and the Kaurava's. Prince Arjuna is a member of the Pandava kingdom and must fight to regain land stolen by the Kauravas years earlier. Arjuna asks Lord Krishna to raise him up above the battlefield so that he can see the forces on both sides. When he sees relatives, teachers, and friends on the opposing side and reflects on the death of these people, he is hesitant to engage in battle, even though he knows he will win the battle since he has Lord Krishna on his side. Arjuna questions Lord Krishna on the value of war, even when the outcome is known to be victorious, when the death of relatives will result. Lord Krishna explains to Prince Arjuna why he must fight and how his actions must be considered in the larger context of his role.

The Bhagavad Gita, or simply, the Gita, contains eighteen chapters which can be divided up into three parts: karma yoga or selfless action, jnana yoga or self-knowledge, and bhakti yoga or ways of loving (Hee 2007). The Bhagavad Gita represents the many struggles, or battles, modern day leaders face and their responsibilities to multiple stakeholders. Some have even

proposed that the Bhagavad Gita is useful for a better understanding of specific managerial issues such as quality management (Sharma and Talwar 2004), however, this paper explores the value of the Gita in a larger managerial context, focusing on issues facing organizational leaders.

Hindu belief is sometimes seen as a polytheistic religion in that Hindus are seen worshipping many gods. Hinduism involves many deities and other manifestations of God, and in general is viewed as a more holistic and complex approach to understanding individuals, organizations, the universe, and the interconnections (Ashok and Thimmappa 2006). In reality, Hinduism believes in one God with three parts, similar to the Christian belief of the Holy Trinity. In a simplified view of Hindu belief, God consists of three manifestations, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Brahma is the God of creation, Vishnu is the God of preservation, and Shiva is the God of destruction. Vishnu can manifest Himself in many forms and return to earth when needed to maintain order. In some ways he acts as a manager, leader, or consultant, in providing advice and direction in order to maintaining operation of the worldly system. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna is the manifestation of Vishnu, and provides moral guidance and systemic understanding to Prince Arjuna.

Leadership Lessons

While much of the Bhagavad Gita is filled with references to God and other spiritual matters, strong moral advice and leadership lessons can be drawn from the text. Hee (2007) proposes that the Gita's advice can be useful in five areas of modern business. He suggests that the Gita provides advice on mission and core values, the development of new capabilities, the importance of developing business connections and communication, and the duty of managers to maintain a purpose-centric perspective. This paper explores the leadership applications found in the manuscript. All the passages used in this paper from the Bhagavad Gita come from the translation by Shri Purohit Swami (Purohit 1935). The passages are referenced by chapter and verse. The Gita provides leadership advice in a number of general areas including the importance of maintaining one's proper role and duties, being proactive and acting with wisdom, working for the greater good, and engaging in self-sacrifice.

Maintaining Proper Role

When Arjuna questions his actions as a soldier, Krishna explains to him that each position, including soldier has a role to play in the cosmos. Leaders must be aware of that role and be prepared to respond to the responsibilities imposed by their position. As stated in the Gita, *Perfection is attained when each attends diligently to his duty* (18:45). Leaders have a duty to effectively influence others, and this duty can manifest itself in a number of different approaches, however, the leader must maintain his/her values and not waver from those duties and values. *The wise man who has conquered his mind and is absorbed in the Self is a lamp which does not flicker, since it stands sheltered from every will* (6:19). Being true to oneself and one's values is an essentially aspect of leadership according to the Gita. Equally important is acting in a manner that one wishes to have emulated throughout the organization. *For whatever a great man does, others imitate. People conform to the standard which he has set* (3:21). The leader must be a good role model and express the values of the organization through his/her behavior. Leaders who profess one set of values and act according to another set of values are not acting in accordance with the Bhagavad Gita.

Being Proactive and With Wisdom

One of the major lessons from the Gita is that reactionary behavior is inferior to proactive behavior. *No man can attain freedom from activity by refraining from action; nor can he reach perfection by merely refusing to act.* (3:4). Arjuna was faced with a disturbing task before him, one not of his making. Lord Krishna insisted that he fulfill his responsibilities by taking aggressive action. Inaction was not an option that would lead to good results. Being proactive requires a degree of wisdom, otherwise the action will lead to failure. *Only the unenlightened speak of wisdom and right action as separate, not the wise* (5:4). Lord Krishna advises Arjuna to combine his inner wisdom with the right action. Wisdom, combined with right action is essential for good leadership according to the Gita. To lack either one produces poor results. If a leader is unwise, and acts, harmful events may occur. If the leader is wise but fails to act, harmful events may occur. The Gita tells leaders that they will be forced from time to time to make difficult decisions, and that they must use their inner wisdom to guide them in making the correct decision. The Gita also implies that wisdom is a necessary precondition for the selection of good leaders. While training and development are important to organizational success, leadership qualities are viewed as being more innate and developed through introspection and meditation.

Self-Sacrifice and the Greater Good

The advice given in the Gita makes several references to the importance of self-sacrifice and working for the benefit of the greater good. *All creatures are the product of food, food is the product of rain, rain comes by sacrifice, and sacrifice is the noblest form of action* (3:14). In many cases leaders must sacrifice their own interests in order to promote the well-being of the group they are leading. In the Bhagavad Gita, leaders act in the role of servant, not inconsistent with the servant leadership model (Greenleaf 2002) popular in the West. By sacrificing their own interests over the interests of the group, managers are able to better achieve their purposes. Speaking on the qualities of a superior person, we find in the Gita that a good leader is one ... *who is incapable of hatred towards any human being, who is kind and compassionate, free from selfishness, without pride, equable in pleasure and in pain, and is forgiving* (12:13). The leader in the Gita tradition is a humanistic leader, a person who acts without self-gain, and who has great personal concerns for followers. Good leaders are filled with a positive force and seek to do good by treating others with compassion and kindness. Likewise in the Gita we find ... *harmlessness, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, freedom from hate and vanity; these are his who possesses the Godly qualities. Hypocrisy, pride, insolence, cruelty, ignorance belong to him who is born of the godless qualities* (16:2). The leader should act in a manner which at all times benefits the followers. The Gita also warns against the pursuit of material gain and greed. *When a man dwells on the objects of sense, he creates an attraction for them; attraction develops into desire, and desire breeds anger. Anger induces delusion; delusion, loss of memory; through loss of memory, reason is shattered; and loss of reason leads to destruction* (2:62-63). Krishna warns Arjuna not to focus on the outcomes of his actions but to be mindful of the actions themselves. To dwell on material gain in a leadership role is not mindful behavior and does not lead to a greater sense of consciousness. Likewise we find in the Gita, *The gates of hell are three; lust, wrath, and avarice (greed). They destroy the Self. Avoid them* (16:21). Leaders must be aware of their motives and mindful of the effects of harmful motives on themselves and their

followers. The purpose of the leader is to serve his/her followers in helping them to attain a higher level of performance. Certain qualities are needed in order to be effective in achieving this purpose.

Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita, the ancient spiritual text contains recommendations for the modern practice of management. While a casual reading of the manuscript would leave one feeling that the book is about the personal struggles involved in engaging in warfare, the Gita represents much more. The Gita represents the struggles encountered by all humans in everyday activities Harvey (2007), including the struggles of leadership. The Bhagavad Gita provides advice to modern day leaders and suggests important leadership qualities. The basic qualities of a good leader found in the Gita are summarized in the figure seen above. While many Westerners are familiar with some Chinese classics such as the *Tao te Ching*, *Art of War*, or the *Analects*, few have been exposed to the Indian classics, and Indian philosophy on consciousness. The Gita can be a starting point for greater understanding. In the Gita we have seen the importance of proper role and being proactive, and the need for self-sacrifice and concern for the greater good. Those interested in furthering their understanding of good leadership are advised to look to the past for answers to the future.

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