

# Leadership lesson from Mahabharata

**THE INDIAN VALUE SYSTEM** Inherited and influenced by our ancient civilisation, which is rich and vibrant can be successfully applied in the modern days

V Pradeep Kumar

The evolution of mankind thousands of years ago led to organising them into a disciplined force capable of achieving anything. The complexities of leadership has its genesis in men being different from each other in terms of skills, characteristics, attitudes and behaviour representing different needs, ambitions and value systems. The concept of leadership therefore evolved from time immemorial.

In the Indian context, we have inherited a value system influenced by our ancient civilisation and an extremely rich and vibrant culture and applied those value systems successfully in the modern world. Today, as new breeds of Indian MNCs evolve and dominate the global economy from as diverse industries as IT and Steel, the Indian leadership styles and business acumen is envied worldwide.

Mahabharata is an epic of historic, cultural and religious importance.

A careful study of this great epic teaches us important lessons from the perspective of leadership too. Lord Krishna is an avatar (reincarnation) of Lord Vishnu and is a highly popular and respected deity synonymous with great intelligence, communication skills and love and affection capable of resolving any crisis faced by his devotees.

Speaking in modern parlance, Lord Krishna can be best described as 'The greatest crisis Manager' the world has ever seen.

In the entire Mahabharata which has epical magnitude, there are many diverse characters impressing us with their responses in the midst of great challenges. However, Lord Krishna as a central character time and again comes across as a master strategist and tactful leader adopting different lead-

ership styles according to situation and people he had to deal with. Let us look at some well known anecdotes to illustrate this point.

1. The story is about the fight between Bheema and Jarasandha in the presence of Lord Krishna and Arjuna. Jarasandha picks Bheema as one worthy to fight. Bheema and Jarasandha fight for days, matching each other. Every time Bheema kills Jarasandha, miraculously, Jarasandha's body rejoins. Bheema realising that Jarasandha was more than an equal match, looks up to Lord Krishna for direction. Lord Krishna, who knew the story of Jarasandha's birth, picks up a stick, breaking it in two halves and throws the two halves far away from each other and in opposite directions.

Bheema understands and throws Jarasandha to the ground, and splits his body in two. He then throws the two halves of Jarasandha's body far away from each other in opposite directions killing him. While Bheema is credited with superhuman strength unmatched by any of his brothers, he is known to be sensitive, short tempered with a huge appetite. Lord Krishna appropriately uses authoritative style of leadership in this instance.

2. Similarly, in the Kurukshetra war with Kauravas, Lord Krishna takes the reins as Arjuna's charioteer.

On seeing a reluctant Arjuna unwilling to fight and destroy his own relatives in the war, Lord Krishna advises Arjuna in the nature of a discourse called Bhagavad-Gita about the responsibilities of a soldier and the finer and broader aspects of human life.

Arjuna was a sensitive but extremely thoughtful, righteous person with a great sense of duty. Here the tactful Krishna understanding Arjuna's personality uses directive style of leadership effectively persuading



Arjuna to begin the Great War.

3. Lord Krishna being a great supporter of Pandavas does not spare even Bhishma and manages to find a way to tackle the veteran general of the Kauravas who had led the war for the first nine days causing extensive damage to the army of the Pandavas.

Bhishma had a towering personality befitting the kings - a true soldier and a great warrior, as strong as steel in character, symbolic of truth and duty and extremely human. He was invincible and blessed to choose the manner and time of his death.

Lord Krishna takes Yudhishthira to Bhishma seeking the

secret of becoming victorious in the war. Bhishma, knowing that Pandavas truly deserved to win the battle, tells Yudhishthira the secret of overcoming him as a prelude to winning the war. Bhishma thus confronted by Shikandi on the tenth day of the war refuses to consider him as a man and throws down his bow and arrows choosing not to fight.

Lord Krishna thus uses an influencing style of leadership and tackles Bhishma by making him the general of the enemy front as an ally by a tacit understanding using subtle diplomacy.

4. Yudhishthira, the eldest of the Pandavas, was the very em-

bodiment of Satya (truth) and Dharma (righteousness). When Kaurava's guru and general Drona was leading the battle, tactful Lord Krishna uses Yudhishthira cleverly. Drona was unconquerable and was devastating the army of the Pandavas.

Lord Krishna realises that the only way to rid Drona was by exploiting his weakness for his son-Ashwatthaama. In the midst of all the think-tank of the Pandavas, Lord Krishna says that the only way to kill Drona is to convey to him that his son Ashwatthaama is dead. Understanding that Drona can only believe this story, if Yudhishthira says it, everyone look at Yudhishthira to take up the responsi-

bility. Yudhishthira accepts the responsibility finally and says 'Ashwatthaama hathaha' (Ashwatthaama dead...) but his personality remains somewhat unblemished by clever manipulation of Lord Krishna by getting an elephant called Ashwatthaama killed and the word elephant getting lost and unheard in the din of the battle.

A disheartened Drona gives up the weapons and dies soon in the battle. Lord Krishna thus achieves the objective of eliminating Drona by using a participative leadership style to prepare Yudhishthira to accept the responsibility of telling a half truth.

5. At another decisive point in

the same war, Karna is fighting against Arjuna and the chariot of Karna sinks in the sludge of the battle field. When Karna reminds Arjuna that it's not Dharma to take advantage of the situation, Lord Krishna taunts Karna by asking where his Dharma was when

Draupadi was dragged into an open court and humiliated or when Yudhishthira was deceived in a foul play of dices or when Pandavas weren't handed over the kingdom even after the exile was duly completed? He thus influences the mind of Arjuna and then literally orders Arjuna not to waste time, take out his arrow and kill the evil enemy. In this scenario, Lord Krishna uses authoritative leadership style, literally ordering a wavering and shaky Arjuna to act.

6. As a true leader, Lord Krishna similarly manages Duryodhana. Lord Krishna learns that Gandhaari planned to use the magical powers of her eyes blindfolded for long and energise Duryodhana's body making him invincible from any attack.

He meets a completely nude Duryodhana on way to meet his mother and mocks at him to at least cover his groin. Lord Krishna thus cleverly prompts Duryodhana to cover his groin and when Gandhaari opens her eyes; his body is energised and made invincible everywhere except his thighs and groin. Lord Krishna thus influences (Leadership by attraction) Duryodhana and makes him vulnerable.

Later in the fight, Lord Krishna reminds Bheema of his oath to split Duryodhana's thighs and thus ordering (authoritative leadership) him to strike. Bheema hits Duryodhana with a mace in the thighs and kills him eventually.

Lord Krishna changed his leadership style according to the situation recognising the people and their potential. He

clearly knew what appealed to whom and how to get work done. He was the one who identified Ashwatthaama as Drona's weakness as well as the fact that Bhishma always wanted to be on the side of 'dharma' and was caught between 'dharma' and 'duty'.

Equally outstanding are the ways in which he handled men like Duryodhana and Karna at very crucial points in Mahabharata. He effectively used different leadership styles such as authoritative, directive, participative or even attractive styles of leadership, changing sometimes as a chameleon but always safeguarding 'dharma' and always working towards what is 'right'.

Most importantly, being the people oriented leader that he was, he guided and facilitated people to perform or achieve their goals. Imagine Mahabharata for a while without Lord Krishna and then we realise the vacuum in the absence of leaders.

Lord Krishna was thus a great pragmatic and clever leader, using the resources of men and material most efficiently and proactively. A leader in corporate world attempts to do exactly the same, as increasingly, businesses are getting more people oriented. Therefore there is great potential and opportunity to gain wisdom by drawing examples from our great epics and use them as our guiding philosophy in the corporate world as well as in our day to day life

While facing short term and long term challenges, a leader is continuously working towards influencing people, making powerful allies and neutralising competitors. A corporate leader is a visionary working towards the well being of all stakeholders while being on a righteous path (the dharma)

The author can be reached at E-mail: [info@vpradeepkumar.com](mailto:info@vpradeepkumar.com)