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# Leadership in Classical Wisdom

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## ***Abstract***

*Leadership position provides opportunity to people to do better things but leaders driven by the lower self very often find the position as an opportunity to do something which is in their own self-interest and this self-interest motivates them to indulge in unethical behaviour. This paper highlights the characteristics of unethical leaders and provides insights from classical wisdom for avoiding unethical behavior in leadership position.*

## **Introduction**

Unethical, directionless, and incompetent leadership is curse for both leader and the subjects. The power inherent in the leadership position could be used or abused depending upon the leader. Misuse of leadership power has today become more common. The dramatic changes in the world structure on economic, socio-cultural, technological and political front has made the task of leadership more challenging often making the leaders succumb to the pressures rather than making them rise to the occasion. The testimony to the fact is the corporate and political scams and scandals that have happened in the last decade. In India, this phenomenon of scams and scandals involving political and corporate leaders has become a common feature in last few years. The general impression with the public is that most leaders have gone berserk completely forgetting their ethical, moral and legal obligations and they are the systematic looters.

Unethical conduct has become so pervasive that now it has become a point of debate that the problem lies with individuals who indulge themselves in the unethical conduct or it is the problem with the system in which leaders operate. In case, we assume that the problem of unethical conduct lies with the individuals occupying leadership positions then in this perspective it can be argued that unethical behaviour happens because individuals who occupy the leadership role lack morality or an inner moral core to function in an ethical way, and instead they allow opportunism and selfish motive to express in the form of their lust and greed.

On the other hand, if we look at the other perspective that the problem does not lie with individuals but it lie with the systems, then the alternative that comes out for stopping the

unethical conduct is to change the systems to make them full proof from unethical conducts. Who is responsible for unethical behavior, leader or system, is a matter of debate where classical wisdom focus on leader or the individual and modern thinkers like Adam Smith and John Locke focus on system for avoiding unethical behavior and ensuring human welfare.

Question arises that who makes the system. Individuals or someone else. Today, we find that whenever any scam comes in the limelight decision-makers start talking of stricter regulations, laws, and norms. It has become typical of corporate world and Governments to talk of ethical code of conduct, regulations, and laws. Corporations are asked by observers to adopt rigorous codes of ethics. The problem is that politicians find it an easy way out of changing laws and regulations instead of improving their morality and morality of business people. This approach of depending on the improved systems and not on the improved individuals is a modern approach completely different from the ancient approach in which the focus was on the ethics and morality of individuals. The ancient thought believed that no system can make things better unless the individuals who are at the helm of affairs have clean souls. The modern approach is reflected in the corporate governance movement which has taken momentum and is considered as the panacea to the problems of unethical conduct in organizations.

It can be said the decision makers of the modern world aims at the systems to avoid unethical leadership rather than aiming at the individual itself which was the philosophy of ancients. System is made by individuals so the focus for making the world more ethical should be on individuals especially the people who are occupying the leadership role rather than on the systems. The approach of ancients is accepted to be a better approach in this paper as compared to the modern approach.

### **Why Leaders Behave Unethically?**

Business leaders today possess tremendous social, economic, and political power. Power can be used or abused by leaders depending upon the leaders. Those leaders who fell into the trap of unethical behaviour basically abuse the power they possess for pursuing self-interest instead of using the power for pursuing higher goals. They get blinded by power and develop a hubris of themselves believing that they can get away with whatever unethical they do. Moreover in situations demanding ethical reasoning these leaders don't even see that there is a situation that demand ethical and moral reasoning and they behave in selfish ways satisfying their self-interests. If we look back at the history of leaders we find that there have been ethical leaders and also unethical leaders. Question arises that why some leaders behave ethically and some leaders behave unethically. The answer lies in understanding the human personality at two levels :the higher self and the lower self where lower necessarily implies “smallness of being”, “contraction of consciousness”, “limitation of knowledge”,

“scission of oneness”, “disharmony and failure of sympathy” etc. (Sri Aurobindo, 1988).

Those leaders who are driven by lower self seek personal gratification even at the expense of others and they are more bothered about fulfilling their self-interests. Leaders driven by lower self pursue their self-interest on primary basis and consider other things as secondary. This leads them into unethical behaviour. Whereas, ethical leaders are driven by higher self and they consciously aim at developing ability in them to see the bigger picture and connectedness with the outside world in a holistic way.

Leadership position provides opportunity to people to do better things but leaders driven by the lower self very often find the position as an opportunity to do something which is in their own self-interest and this self-interest motivates them to indulge in unethical behaviour. They feel that nothing will happen to them because of the power they possess. They get easily motivated by the opportunity provided by the leadership position to do unethical things directed towards the fulfilling of self-interest. They also assume that justification of the behaviour can be done. The three elements namely opportunity, motivation, and justification also called the fraud triangle (Aguilera and Vadera, 2008) they combine and drive the leader to indulge in fraud or unethical acts.

Leaders driven by lower self envisions myopic view of power and instead of using it for doing greater things they abuse it by involving themselves in satisfying self-needs.

But the ancient wisdom provides enough instances which illustrate that self-control which involves controlling the lures of five senses and body-centered ego is essential for avoiding unethical behaviour. Self-control comes when people consciously practice discipline controlling the desires which keep emanating in the minds of the people and this control of mind comes by controlling the pursuance of bodily pleasures emanating from the five senses. Leaders who get motivated to do unethical things seeing the opportunity are those who are unable to go beyond the sensual pleasures and desires of mind which in this paper means lower self. More specifically, leaders driven by lower self have lack of self-control or discipline, self-centered approach, egocentrism, limited concern for people, and ethical insensitivity. These leaders also have the propensity to involve in unethical acts through development of negative emotions such as vindictive anger, compulsive anxiety or represented frustration. On the other hand, leaders driven by the higher self demonstrates emotional stability, higher purpose, and prudent actions.

So, it can be argued that the leaders who behave unethically use the opportunity which comes to them through leadership to abuse the power instead of judiciously using it and they get motivated to pursue self-interests and finally they try to justify their actions by giving arguments which they feel will make their actions acceptable. And this all happens because the leader is unable to discover and demonstrate his higher personality. Such types of leaders fail to go beyond the trio of body, senses, and mind. This trio puts leaders in the vicious circle

of fulfillment of self-desires where fulfillment of one desire leads to another desire and ultimately making leaders unable to realize the real purpose for which they have become leaders. Such type of leaders provides destructive leadership doing harm to everybody.

### **Characteristics of Unethical Leaders**

The six vices constitute the characteristics of unethical people including leaders driven by lower self. Unethical leaders possess atleast one of these vices or a combination. These six vices as mentioned in Bhagavad Gita (16.4) are elaborated below:

#### ***Hypocrisy***

Hypocrisy means dual faced or pretentious. Unethical leaders pretend to be good or ethical but in reality they indulge in wrong things and in favourable situations use all their power and clout to justify or cover those unethical acts and in adverse circumstances use their false sentiments for justification. One of the best examples of this is the bribery case which happened few decades back involving Japan Airlines and Lockheed Company. To get the contract, Lockheed bribed the Japanese officials and when the case came into public prosecution started. Then the leader at the helm of affairs at Lockheed gave the justification that airline industry was in recession and to save the job of 25000 workers working at Lockheed, company had to give the bribe to get the contract and thereby saving the jobs of the workers. The classical wisdom as expressed in Ayodhyakand of Ramcharitmanas choupai 129 says:

*Jinha Ke kapata dambha nahi maya, tinha ke hridaya basahu raghuraya*

Which means that God resides in the heart of those people who don't have hypocrisy alongwith fraud and deceit.

The hypocritical leader talks about ethics but don't follow it. Hypocrisy is followed by leaders to get, preserve, or destroy something on false foundations or belief.

#### ***Proudness or Arrogance***

Proudness or arrogance often equated with 'hubris syndrome' is a vice common to unethical leaders. Success can inflate a leader's belief in his or her personal ability to manipulate or control outcomes. This is arrogance arising out of success and power. The best example that could be cited of proud and arrogant leader is Ravana in the epic Ramayana. He was the king of a powerful kingdom. Ravana chose to do something he knew was clearly wrong in the firm belief that through his power he could manage. He was fully aware that Sita is the wife of Rama who himself is powerful but presently they are living in the forest with no power

and army. Ravana's arrogance with power as the causal force led him to taking away the Sita and forcing her to marry him. Trained in attitude and technique to "get things done" and "make things happen," the unethical dimension in action took place for Ravana resulting in his downfall.

Arrogant or hubristic leaders have a grandiose sense of self, considers themselves to be above the community of humans, and they do not feel constrained by the normal rules and laws, considering them to be above rules and law (Petit and Bollaert, 2012). Saint Kabir has cautioned those who are arrogant and proud by emphasizing that life is full of uncertainty and is just like a boat in the sea and when good times will change nobody knows.

When success enters in the heart and mind of leaders they get carried away. Many Hubris leaders have already fallen and many Hubris will fall in the future. So, getting rid of this syndrome is essential for leaders

### ***Ego***

Ego or excessive pride in a leader is a vice and characteristic of unethical leaders. This vice makes a leader believe that he is endowed and others are damned. The feeling of differentiation often forces leaders to take decisions which are more in self interest of the leader and larger interest of subject goes beyond the sight of the leader. Ego in a leader is a barrier for ethical thinking, belief, and action as it generates 'me-first' syndrome in leaders. Leaders are supposed to work for the welfare of others. Ego present in the leader makes him forgetful of this fact. Egoist leaders have difference in their implicit and explicit self-representations. They have low implicit and high explicit view of themselves. This makes leaders align their energy and power towards satisfying their ego instead of aligning them for the benefit of others.

### ***Anger***

Any action taken in anger is going to result in something. History is a testimony of this fact. Anger of Hitler against a community is well known across the world. All the wars that take place are the result of anger. Leaders resort to unethical actions whenever there is anger in them against someone or something constituting the domain of their leadership role. The simple reason is that in anger state, people lose total control of their mind. Some leaders with good intentions believe that by showing anger they could make the things done. Instead of using anger as a mean to make the things happen they should practice the art of love. Sometimes, anger may result in positive outcomes overtly but it will always be accompanied with some negative effects whose manifestation may come later. Setting the objectives and achieving it perfectly does not happen all the times. Sometimes, things don't go as planned.

Leaders in such situations need to be patient as impatience further deteriorates the situation. Self introspection is more important to reach to the roots of the problem instead of showing anger. Anger is an expression of weakness instead of strength. Everything in this world is transitory so are the unfavourable situations. Anger expressed on others may result in permanent ill-feeling in others for the leader. By showing anger, many times leaders lose the company of good and capable people.

### ***Cruelty***

Cruel leaders are dictatorial type unethical leaders who try to lead others by creating fear through aggressive actions. They believe in brutality and take all measures to crush those who raise voice against them and inflict terror of bad consequences. Characteristics of cruel leaders are:

- One way communication
- Using fear for getting things done
- Might is right
- Suspicious of others
- Inhuman
- Non-believer in others freedom
- Merciless

Cruelty in a leader is an aggressive response of fear already present in him. Fearless leaders never resort to cruelty. Only fearful leaders show cruelty.

### ***Ignorance***

Ignorance means lack of factual understanding. Ignorance is the root cause which shapes the personality of unethical leader erroneous. In Aranya Kand (14<sup>th</sup> Choupai) of RamCharit Manas, Lord Rama explains to his younger brother Laxman about '*Vidya*'(knowledge) and '*Avidya*'(ignorance).

तेहि कर भेद सुनहु तुम्ह सोऊ। बिद्या अपर अबिद्या दोऊ ॥  
एक दुष्ट अतिसय दुखरूपा। जा बस जीव परा भवकूपा ॥

He states that *Avidya* is worse and simple and straight forward source of displeasure. Humans get trapped in the earthly problems basically due to *Avidya*. Unethical leader is like the one who believes that he knows the reality but actually he does not.

As said by kabirdas in one of his Doha:

*Gyaani Mool Gawaiya, Aapan Bhaye Karta  
Taathe Sansari Bhala, Man Me Rahai Darta*

A person who ponders that he has gained knowledge has lost his roots. He believes that he is better than others (ethical leaders). Whereas a person who is engaged in routine life or not showcasing himself as leader is better as he is not proposing himself as knowledgeable leader.

An unethical leader believes himself as an extraordinary person. As said by Guru Nanak Dev:

“Owing to ignorance of the rope the rope appears to be a snake; owing to ignorance of the Self the transient state arises of the individualized, limited, phenomenal aspect of the Self.”

Therefore an immoral leader misunderstands the situations and targets his individual desires without caring about others.

### **Leadership in Classical Wisdom**

Leaders who have the above mentioned characteristics are liable to do unethical things. Such leaders live in an illusionary world away from reality and instead of being driven by higher consciousness they are driven by body-senses-mind trio. Ethical leaders give importance to *shreya* (good) over *preya* (pleasure). The route to ethical leadership lies in getting internalized searching for the spirit which is there in every human being which helps in realizing the real purpose of existence of human beings. Leaders when instead of getting internalized start searching for happiness in materialistic and physical things they spoil themselves of real happiness and at the most achieve short-term illusionary success and happiness. Seeking the higher self can lead the leaders towards ethicality. In Yajur Veda (32.8) there is a verse that signifies the importance of higher self:

*Venas-tat-pasyan-nihitam guha  
Sad-yatra visvam bhavaty-eka-nidam;  
Tasminn-idam sam ca vi caiti sarvam  
Sa otah protas-ca vibhuh prajasu*

which means that the sage beholds that Being residing in the heart wherein all have found the one abode. In it all are united and from it all issue forth; all-pervading, it is the warp and woof of all.

This seeking of the higher self is basically the spiritual aspiration which means desire for the truth about oneself. It is the yearning of the soul for the supreme spirit. This aspiration is a struggle to raise one's consciousness to connect and be in communion with the spirit to reach greater heights of personal spiritual progress and evolution including the material one with material being under the control of spiritual rather than the vice versa. Seeking the higher self or spiritual aspiration is the cry of the inner soul, the *jivatman*, for the experience of the supreme spirit, *Paramatman*.

Brihadaranayaka Upanishad expresses this in following mantra:

*Asato ma sad-gamaya  
Tamsa ma jyotir-gamaya  
Mrytyor ma amrtam gamaya*

The above mantra says: Lead me, O Lord, from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, from immortality to morality.

Seeking the higher self help leaders to develop the discerning intellect called *viveka*. The term *viveka* comes from the Sanskrit root *vichir* which mean the discernment between right and wrong, the moral and the immoral, virtue and vice, the eternal and transitory, Self and non-Self. Only few leaders use this discerning capacity called *viveka* in their daily functioning. On the nature of leaders choices depends their success and failure. *Viveka* helps in making proper choices and it comes through seeking the higher self which is our own spirit. Seeking the higher self enables leaders to keep priorities in order, have clarity of vision, and lead a purposeful life. Instead of giving up one's individuality, blindly imitating people and following the different fads rampant in the society, a discerning leader can rightly apprehend the truth behind these and stick to the essentials that can lead leaders to the goal that makes life meaningful. Higher self help leaders in controlling the senses and mind. It helps leader in overcoming I-ego. This I-ego creates separateness of leader with the outside world and drives leaders to indulge in selfish deeds. Even the emotions like anger, fear, jealousy, pride, and lust are the outcomes of I-ego. When leaders seek the higher self they are able to get rid of I-ego and are able to see connectedness with the outside world. This connectedness is expressed in the following shloka of the Isha Upanishad;

*Yastu sarvani bhutanyatmanyevanupasyati  
Sarvabhutesu catmanam tato na vijuguptase*

This means He who sees all beings in the Self itself, and the Self in all beings, feel no hatred by virtue of that realization. The crux of the above shloka is that when a person is driven by the higher self he is able to realize that there is no difference between him and others i.e. I-ego is gone and that helps a person to overcome hatred. A person is able to realize that others



are also the manifestations of a spirit like him. No one is small or big, good or bad. This realization enables a person to overcome selfishness and myopic view of life and the outside world.

A leader driven by the higher self is able to get rid of undesired emotions like hatred, anger, lust, greed, envy, and pride. This helps a leader to maintain a position of serene mind. The undesired emotions mentioned here are responsible for unethical behaviour of leaders. Moreover these emotions are the symbols that a leader is not in control of himself and when a person is not able to control himself it raises a question that how such type of leader can control others and the complex situations which keep coming in leadership position. History tells that great leaders demonstrated this control over undesired emotions and this control helped them to get acceptability amongst the followers and the society. Leaders who use the leadership position for personal gratification of materialistic pleasures are driven by the lower self and they abuse the leadership position. But leaders who are driven by the higher self are purposeful, calm, strong-willed, discerning, and egoless. Their actions are in the form of *nishkama karma* where they work in a detached manner free from selfish desires. Higher Purpose Leaders driven by higher self uses the leadership position as a mean to do higher things such as the benefit of the followers, society, and the world. Whatever may be the domain of their leadership position big or small they consciously make efforts to do as much as they can for others. They have increased power of judgment about right and wrong, good or bad, ethical or unethical and emanate positive waves. It is said that people's behaviour is basically the reflection of the type of leadership that exists. Higher self driven leaders create ethical environment where people are respected for good work and unethical behaviour is not tolerated.

### **Conclusion**

This world can be a better place to live and organizations can be a better place to work if leaders are ethical. It is not that we never had ethical leaders or presently we don't have such leaders the only problem is that their number have always been very less. There can't be any solution for ethical leadership except that leaders should consciously dig deep into themselves finding that Spirit or the higher self and making this higher self controlling their lower self instead of the other way round. This has been the emphasis of ancient Indian wisdom, Aristotle, Plato and many other ancient philosophers. No system can help in becoming this world ethical it is only the internal conscience, the spirit, the higher self of leaders which can make this world ethical.

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