

# Vision and Leadership in Organizations: An Insight with Indian Perspective

Sarvesh Satija, Department of Management,  
Birla Institute of Technology & Science (BITS) Pilani Campus

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## **Abstract**

*Leadership and Management principles are imperative in all organizations where a group of people assemble for a common purpose, adopt common policies and practices, plan, organize, manage the resources and work in a team towards organizational goals. Most of the organizations work on the western management concepts of vision, leadership, motivation, decision making and planning, which explicitly find their basis in Indian Vedanta like the Bhagavad Gita. Written thousands of years ago, the Bhagavad Gita is not simply a fountain of wisdom for philosophers. It reveals several secrets of vision, leadership and the path to managerial success. It enlightens us on aspects of self-management and self-development by providing guidance to resolve 'conflict', 'poor productivity', 'absence of motivation' and so on which are in fact common plagues in enterprises across the globe. The Indian Vedanta is equal, if not superior, to management texts which heavily advocate western management concepts. There is, however, one major difference in the approach followed. While western management thought deals with problems at an extrinsic and peripheral level, the Bhagavad Gita tackles the same issues from the subliminal level of human psyche. It helps us to understand ourselves and the world. It advocates that once the basic thought process of man is improved, it will automatically enhance the quality of his actions, and consequently, their results. Through this study, we aim to gain deep understanding and insights into management concepts of vision and leadership with broader Indian perspective.*

## **Introduction**

With a population of over one billion, India, the world's largest democracy, is positioned to be a leading economic force well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is gaining attention of the world not only towards economic growth and market potential but also towards its culture. As Westerners seek to understand Indian culture, they 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. Their growing interest could be assessed here as 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 management skills. Indians need to feel pride in the richness of the scriptures

and explore them for their development. Leadership and Management principles are imperative in all organizations where a group of people assemble for a common purpose, adopt common policies and practices, plan, organize, manage the resources and work in a team towards organizational goals. Most of the organizations work on the western management concepts of vision, leadership, motivation, decision making and planning, which explicitly find their basis in Indian Vedanta like the *Bhagavad Gita*. Bhagavad Gita is perhaps one of the most popular and useful of the ancient Indian texts. Using contextual analysis this paper is an attempt to explore the leadership implications and the guidance on vision found in this classic text, and to offer 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 spiritual texts. Many scholars believe that it was written in as early as 3000 BC. Basically it presents the counselling of Arjuna by Lord Krishna, two prominent leaders of the epic of Mahabharata. Mahabharata is the epic of the feud between two warring clans - the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Before the battle of Kurukshetra, Krishna, a friend and the charioteer of Arjuna, drives the chariot to the middle of the battle field, so that Arjuna can observe his army and his enemies. Seeing his own kinsmen lined up against to fight him, Arjuna feels trembled at the thought of killing them. Here, Krishna cajoles Arjuna, "Nothing is higher than a war against evil. A warrior such as you should be pleased with such a war, as it leads to heaven." At the end of his discourses, Krishna successfully convinces Arjuna to fight the battle of Kurukshetra. Krishna's discourses are described in the eighteen chapters of the Bhagavad Gita, 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). It has been predominantly studied in the contexts of philosophy, theology and literature. Scholars throughout the ages have studied it with great interest. Scholars like Albert Einstein, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau have quoted the Bhagavad Gita in their writings. Senge (1990), one of the most prominent management thinkers of our time, has quoted the Gita is his "Fifth Discipline" and "Presence."

Written thousands of years ago, the *Bhagavad Gita* is not simply a fountain of wisdom for philosophers. If we look closely, this ancient text reveals several secrets of vision, leadership and the path to managerial success. It enlightens us on aspects of self-management and self-development by providing guidance to resolve 'conflict', 'poor productivity', 'absence of motivation', and so on which are in fact common plagues in enterprises across the globe. That is, the wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita contains many leadership lessons that are similar to contemporary leadership theories and practices. 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 Bhagavad Gita in a larger managerial context, focusing on issues facing organizational leaders.

### **Leadership Lessons from Bhagavad Gita**

Although much of the Bhagavad Gita is filled with references to God and other spiritual matters, if we look closely, the wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita contains many leadership lessons that are similar to contemporary leadership theories and practices. Many contemporary leadership topics such as emotional intelligence, situational leadership, character and integrity were already discussed in the Bhagavad Gita thousands of years ago. These topics were discussed in a philosophical context, as management science as we know today did not exist then. It is also intriguing to find other management concepts embedded in the Gita. Thousands of years before Frederick W. Taylor defined work and worker, and Peter F. Drucker defined knowledge and knowledge worker, the topics of work and knowledge were already in the Bhagavad Gita. 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 lessons found in the Bhagavad Gita (by Chinmayananda, 1993). The passages are referenced by chapter and verse. Some of these lessons on leadership embedded within the Bhagavad Gita are discussed here.

#### *Leadership Challenges*

The opening chapter not only begins a dialogue between the despairing warrior Arjuna and Lord Krishna, but also sets the stage for a leadership call for Arjuna. Krishna's discourses are aimed at enlightening Arjuna to accept his 'new role of a leader' in the battle of Kurukshetra. Thousands of years later, we can correlate this with situational leadership- a leader's ability to read each situation and to adapt accordingly. In the first chapter, challenges to leadership are highlighted as: (i) leaders should embrace rather than avoid formidable challenges because they bring out the leaders' greatest strengths, (ii) conflicts and adversities are leaders' best opportunities for learning and growth. Great leaders generally perform well in times of great conflict and adversity. (iii) It is crucial for leaders to distinguish between the positive and negative aspects of organizational culture to enhance the positive and eliminate the negative.

### *Maintaining one's Proper Role & Duties*

When Arjuna questions his actions as a soldier, Krishna explains to him that each position or trade, 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 required by their position or trade. As stated in the Gita,

*Devoted, each to his own duty, man attains Perfection.  
How, engaged in his own duty, he attains Perfection, listen (18: 45).*

That is, *Perfection is attained when each attends diligently to his duty.* 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.

*“As a lamp placed in a windless place does not flicker” – is a simile used to describe the YOGI of controlled- mind, practicing YOGA of the Self(6:19).*

That is, *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.* 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.

*Whatever a great man does, that other men also do (imitate);  
whatever he sets up as the standard, that the world (people) follows (3:21).*

That is, 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*

Bhagavad Gita clearly highlights that reactionary behavior is inferior to proactive behavior. The following verse illustrates this:

*Not by non- performance of actions does man reach 'actionlessness';  
nor by mere renunciation does he attain 'Perfection'(3:4).*

*That is, no man can attain freedom from activity by refraining from action; nor can he reach perfection by merely refusing to act.* Arjuna is faced with a disturbing task before him, one not of his making. Lord Krishna insists that he fulfills his responsibilities by taking aggressive action. Inaction is not an option that would lead to good results. A leader must be

aware of initiatives that deserve the highest priority and be motivated to take action. Being proactive requires a degree of wisdom, otherwise the action will lead to failure.

*Children, not the wise, speak of SANKHYA (Knowledge) and YOGA (YOGA- of- action) as distinct; he who is truly established even in one, obtains the fruits of both (5:4).*

*That is, only the unenlightened speak of wisdom and right action as separate, not the wise.* 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. Lacking 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*

Lord Krishna in this divine song makes several references to the importance of self-sacrifice and working for greater good. In this context, he cites:

*From food come forth beings; from rain food is produced;  
from sacrifice arises rain, and sacrifice is born of action (3:14).*

This verse highlights that 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, consistent 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.

In Bhagavad Gita, the qualities of a superior person are mentioned which a good leader possesses. That is,

*He who hates no creature, who is friendly and compassionate to all,  
who is free from attachment and egoism, balanced in pleasure and pain, and 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.

### *Divine and Diabolic Qualities for Leaders*

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. The qualities which a leader should possess are extensively talked by Lord Krishna in Chapter 16. In this chapter, Krishna talks about divine and diabolic qualities. The divine qualities (16: 1-4) talked by him are fearlessness; purity of heart; righteousness; charity; self-control; selfless service; trust in scriptures or divine; renunciation; absence of anger, malice, and pride; compassion; and perseverance. The leader should possess these divine qualities and act in a manner which at all times benefits the followers and organization.

However, Krishna cautions against some of the diabolical qualities (16: 4-24) like hypocrisy and dishonesty; pride and ego; anger and cruelty; ignorance; and ruled by senses. The Gita also warns against the pursuit of material gain and greed.

*When a man thinks of objects, "attachment" for them arises;  
from attachment "desire" is born; from desire arises "anger" ...  
From anger comes "delusion"; from delusion "loss of memory";  
from loss of memory the "destruction of discrimination";  
from destruction of discrimination, he "perishes" (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.

### *Focus on Action: Commitment to Work*

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन  
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भुर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि

2: 47

This popular verse of the Gita advises non-attachment to the fruits or results of actions performed in the course of one's duty. Dedicated work has to mean 'work for the sake of work'. If a leader or manager always keeps calculating the date of promotion for putting in our efforts, then such work cannot be commitment-oriented causing excellence in the results but it will be promotion-oriented resulting in inevitable disappointments. Actually by tilting the performance towards the anticipated benefits, the quality of performance of the present duty suffers on account of the mental agitations caused by the anxieties of the future. Another reason behind the non-attachment to results is the fact that workings of the world are not designed to positively respond to 'our calculations' and hence expected fruits may not always be forthcoming. Here, the Gita tells us not to mortgage the present commitment to an uncertain future. This verse is a brilliant manual to the operating Manager for psychological

energy conservation and a preventive method against stress and burn-outs in the work situations. Learning managerial stress prevention methods is quite costly now days and if only we understand the Gita we get the required cure free of cost. Thus for the leader the best means for effective work performance is to become the work itself. Attaining this state of *nishkama* karma i.e. the right attitude to work prevents the ego, the mind from dissipation through speculation on future gains or losses.

### **Introduction of Vision**

In the book of proverbs it is said, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." This is as true in business as it is in life. Organizations whose leaders lack vision are doomed to work under the burden of mere tradition. They cannot prosper and grow as they are reduced to keeping things the way they have always been. For leaders, a vision is not just a dream; it is a reality that has yet to come into existence. Vision is palpable to leaders; their confidence in and dedication to vision are so strong they can devote long hours over many years to bring it into being. In this way, a vision acts as a force within, compelling a leader to action. It gives purpose to a leader. Sensing purpose and commitment creates the power of vision and inspire the leaders to respond and work. Warren Bennis, having spent many years working with leaders, concluded "while leaders come in every size, shape, and disposition--short, tall, neat, sloppy, young, old, male, and female---every leader I talked with shared at least one characteristic: a concern with a guiding purpose, an overarching vision. They were more than goal-directed" (Bennis, 1990). Peter Kreeft, a professor of philosophy at Boston College, says that "to be a leader you have to lead people to a goal worth having--something that's really good and really there" (Stewart, 1991). That essential "something" is the vision. According to Robins and Sanghi (2008), the vision provides a sense of continuity for followers by linking the present with a better future for the organization.

Vision is a tremendously powerful force in any walk of life, but in business it is essential. A vision is a target toward which a leader aims her energy and resources. The constant presence of the vision keeps a leader moving despite various forces of resistance: fear of failure; emotional hardships, such as negative responses from superiors, peers, or employees; or 'real' hardships, such as practical difficulties or problems in the industry. Equally important, a vision, when shared by employees, can keep an entire company moving forward in the face of difficulties, enabling and inspiring leaders and employees alike. Moving toward the same goal, individuals work together rather than as disconnected people brought together because of having been hired coincidentally by the same organization. It can turn the stereotypical corporate hierarchy into a well-organized and harmonious matrix working together toward a common goal.



## Vision

As the vision is such a critical component of leadership, we need to clarify its meaning and identify its specific role in organizations. What is vision? Because it operates on many levels, vision is difficult to define simply. When we say that a leader has vision, we refer to the ability to see the present as it is and formulate a future that grows out of and improves upon the present. A leader with vision is able to see into the future without being far-sighted and remain rooted in the present without being near-sighted. We also speak of having a vision for an organization, which looks at it from a slightly different perspective. A vision is an idea of the future; it is an image, a strongly felt wish. According to Robins and Sanghi (2008), a vision is a long-term strategy for how to attain a goal or goals.

A review of various definitions finds that a vision differs from other forms of direction setting in several ways: “A vision has clear and compelling imagery that offers an innovative way to improve, which recognizes and draws on traditions, and connects to actions that people can take to realize change. Vision taps people's emotions and energy. Properly articulated, a vision creates the enthusiasm that people have for sporting events and other leisure-time activities, bringing this energy and commitment to the workplace” (Nutt & Backoff, 1997).

Vision refers to the force within a leader that spreads like wildfire when properly communicated to others. Vision refers to an image of the future that can be discussed and perfected by those who have invested in it. Vision is also the glue that binds individuals into a group with a common goal. This multiplicity of meanings does not weaken or obscure the concept; rather, it demonstrates how essential vision is to the success of a leader and to an organization (Snyder & Graves, 1994). The western management concept of vision on which most of the organizations work, finds its explicit basis in Indian Vedanta like the Bhagavad Gita.

### Lessons on 'vision' from Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita gives a 'vision of total life' which is deeper and broader than the western concept of vision. Here, Lord Krishna counsels Arjuna on developing a broader 'vision of life' for attaining success and happiness. “The quality of our actions and reactions depend upon our 'vision of life' as envisaged in the Bhagavad Gita. A narrow vision is divisive, a broad vision is expansive, and the supreme vision is all inclusive” (Tejomayananda, 2001). 'The Vision of Life' are extensively explained by Lord in 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Bhagavad Gita.

As explained in chapter 18<sup>th</sup>, the three temperaments (gunas)- Satva, Rajas and Tamas fluctuate and mix in different proportions in our bosom to create differences among



individuals in term of knowledge, karma or works, buddhi or understanding, dhriti or fortitude, and happiness. Here, Bhagavad Gita helps us in discovering various unhealthy proportions of gunas in various aspects cited above, and reeducating mind to be continuously vigilant and alert to live in a healthy, intelligent spirit of detachment (Tyaga). With this false ego and endless desire- promptings withers away (Sanyasa).

### *Vision about Knowledge*

In Krishna's words, true knowledge is sattvic knowledge. "Sattvic knowledge promotes unity and equality of all" (18:20). Sattvic knowledge teaches us the correlations between objects and beings in this world. It is about seeing the whole instead of the smaller parts that make up the whole. While sattvic knowledge should be promoted, there are different types of knowledge that should be renounced. "Rajasic knowledge sees segregation of things, and tamasic knowledge misunderstands one small thing and assumes it as a whole" (18: 21-22). Assuming that each object or being exists in its entirety without depending on another object or being is purely an error. Such an assumption gives rise to isolation and division.

### *Vision about Karma or Works*

In Krishna's words, "A sattvic action is one that is undertaken without selfish desires and without the fear of it being pleasant or unpleasant" (18:23). Basically when we know that something is right and worth pursuing, we often don't fear the complexities of the actions. "A rajasic action is an action undertaken with selfish desires and too much stress. A tamasic action is one undertaken without thinking of the consequences, or causing injuries to others" (18: 24-25).

### *Vision about Karta or Doers*

Krishna defines a sattvic worker as "someone who is free from ego and selfish desires. He has true conviction, so he is full of enthusiasm. He practices equanimity in adversity and prosperity" (18: 26). "A rajasic worker is full of selfish desires. He is overtly joyous in prosperity and overtly depressed in adversity" (18: 27). Much worse is a worker who is deceitful and unaware of his responsibilities: "A tamasic worker is undisciplined, dishonest, lazy, and procrastinating" (18: 28).

### *Vision about Buddhi or Intellect (Understanding)*

Krishna explains three types of intellect. "The 'understanding' that can -readily judge things that are to be done (pravrtti), and things that are to be renounced or avoided (nivrtili); correctly discern what ought to be done (karyam) and what ought not to be done (akaryam); and differentiate between fear and fearlessness is considered as the sattvic

buddhi or an 'understanding' of purity” (18:30). “ The 'understanding' that -erroneously conceives both the right and the wrong, falsely judges what should be done and what should not be done (due to its false egoistic preconception) is considered as the rajasic buddhi or an 'understanding' of energy” (18:31). “The totally perverted 'understanding' which recognises adharma as dharma, the right as wrong i.e. the faculty of coming to wrong judgements is tamasic buddhi” (18:32). This tamasic buddhi is amply seen in the dull because their entire reasoning capacity is enveloped by complete darkness and egoistic drunkenness.

#### *Vision about Dhriti or Fortitude*

Dhriti is that power within ourselves by which we constantly see the goal we want to achieve; and while striving towards it, Dhriti discovers for us the necessary constancy of purpose to pursue the path, in spite of all the mounting obstacles that rise on the way. It stands for “the constancy of purpose” or “steadiness” with which every individual pursues his field of endeavour chosen for him, with his own “understanding” (Buddhi). “The constancy with which one steadily controls one's mind and sense-organs and their activities, through single- pointed attention and faithful concentration upon a given point of contemplation is the Dhriti of the Sattvic type” (18:33). “The constancy with which a person holds fast to duty (Dharma), wealth (artha) and pleasure (kama), encouraged by his growing desire to enjoy the fruit of each of them, is the steadiness or 'fortitude' of the Rajasic type” (18:34). “The steadiness of purpose with which one does not give up one's dreams and imaginations, fears and agitations, griefs and sorrows, depressions and arrogance, is the Dhriti of the Tamasic type” (18: 35).

#### *Vision about Happiness*

Lord enlightens Arjuna with the three types of happiness (good, passionate and dull i.e. sattvic, rajasic and tamasic) in verses (18: 37-39). The 'sattvic happiness' is arising out of the inner self- control and consequent self- perfections which, though painful and arduous in the beginning, is enduring in the long run, in contrast with the fleeting joys provided by sense-ticklings. The results of inner discipline and contemplation bring about tranquility (prasad) in intellect, and from this tranquility of the intellect gurgles out the 'happiness', which is called 'sattvic happiness'. The 'rajasic happiness' arises only when the sense organs are directly in contact with the sense- objects. In the beginning it is quite nectarine and alluring, but it creates in the enjoyer a sense of exhaustion and dissipation in the long run. This temporary happiness provided by the sense- objects is termed as the 'rajasic happiness'. In 'tamasic happiness', the permanent ever existing goal of life recedes to the background on account of the non- apprehension of reality (nidra) and this results in simple sense-gratifications at the flesh level. These kinds of pursuits incapacitate the intellect to think out correctly the problems (alasya) that face it and to arrive at a right judgement. When the

intellect is weak, the mind seeks to compromise with the temptations, heedless of the voice of the higher in us (pramada). Such a 'happiness', which deludes the soul, both at the beginning and the end is termed as 'tamasic happiness'.

In nutshell, the guidance on vision embedded within the Bhagavad Gita can be understood by a simple sloka,

“You raise yourself to great heights by your own efforts. Do not degrade yourself or look down upon yourself. You are your best friend and you are your worst enemy” (6:5).

### 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 guidance to modern day leaders regarding important leadership qualities and vision of life which facilitates healthy organizational behaviour and success. In this way, the *Indian Vedanta* is equal, if not superior, to management texts which heavily advocate western management concepts. There is, however, one major difference in the approach followed. While western management thought deals with problems at an extrinsic and peripheral level, the *Bhagavad Gita* tackles the same issues from the subliminal level of human psyche. It helps us to understand ourselves and the world. It advocates that once the basic thought process of man is improved, it will automatically enhance the quality of his actions, and consequently, their results.

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