

# Modern Management Lessons from Ramayana

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## Abstract

*Although management education has emerged as an independent discipline in the recent past the practice of management has been there since ages. Our ancient Indian scriptures have been repositories of knowledge and references of modern management theories and practices can be found in them. Ramayana, one of the most popular scriptural texts of India has many lessons on management wisdom that can well be a part of modern management literature. The entire epic, if read and followed carefully, can give many modern-day management texts a run for their money. The present paper is an attempt to draw insights from Ramayana to enrich modern management practice.*

## Introduction

Management education is supposed to be a discipline of a comparatively recent origin and the advent of MBA Program is traced back to the year 1900 when Amos Tuck University of United States of America gave the first degree. However, management as a practice is as old as the civilization as the need for managing the affairs was always there and human beings were adopting practices that management books talk about today. Of course the modern day jargons were not in vogue and the practices were more out of necessity to carry out day to day business effectively rather than due to any theory or an advice given by a management guru. References to many of those practices can be found in our ancient scriptural texts. As such drawing insights into management practice from scriptures can throw light on how to manage day to day affairs effectively in organizations. Though all such texts have significantly contributed to development of management literature and practices the present article has focused on managerial insights given in the *Ramayana*.

*Ramayana* narrates the saga of life and times of

*Lord Rama* one of the most sung about deities in the Indian pantheon of Gods. There are many versions of *Ramayana* which has been translated in many languages but two most popular versions are those of sage *Valmiki*, and *Goswami Tulsi Das* who have written the *Ramayana* and *Ram Charit Manas* respectively known in common parlance as *Ramayana*. It is one of the greatest of the Indian epics offering lessons on statecraft and management that has transcended time and space. With India in search of its own management theories and *Rama Rajya* as the model of good governance, we may draw many lessons from this epic, particularly when we find that all is not well with the way the state is being run. Rather than looking westwards, let us look inwards for solutions. While the Harvards, the Whartons and the Stanfords may still hold their sway over management theory and practice, the Indian epic can also serve as a veritable treatise on management as it is needed.

## The search for an Ideal Management Paradigm

Despite all the advances in management theories, research and practices and the coming up of Management education institutions in large numbers there is still a need to arrive at the

conclusion as to what are the best management practices. And this has remained elusive though search for a model administrative paradigm is as ancient as civilization. From Greek scholars like Plato and Aristotle to the French intellectual Voltaire have all given their ideas on how a state should be managed. While their ideas may provide the occidental view of an ideal administrative set up, the orient also has made significant contribution to the idea of Governance. Our scriptures particularly the *Ramayana* is considered to be a storehouse of wisdom as far as management, governance and state craft are concerned. However, even after more than a decade and a half into the 21st century we are still groping about what is the prescription for an ideal paradigm for management practice.

The same can be said of good governance. We all talk about good governance and look for options arising from ideology to technology to create a good government but are still struggling to find out the ideal governance model. From Capitalism to Socialism and Communism all forms have been tried and are existing in some place or other around the globe. But the one conclusion about all three forms is that they have not been able to achieve an ideal State. However, in popular lingo in India this ideal state is often referred to as *Ram Rajya*. Why it is called *Rama Rajya* may be open to speculation but there is wide agreement about *Ram Rajya* being an epitome of good governance.

Defining Good Governance may not be easy but we must admit that it is more about governance and less about government. A very popular quote related to this is of Thoreau (1964) according to whom "Government is best that governs the least". Similarly in management theory also, the recommended style is to avoid close supervision. McGregor's famous Theory Y is about this very approach that is men are basically good and they need to be trusted. Eminent thinkers like Jefferson or Emerson have proclaimed less government as good governance and the essence of this philosophy is given by eminent author Harper Lee (1989) in her Classic, 'To Kill a Mocking Bird'

wherein, one of its leading characters Jean Atticus Finch while explaining democracy says – "Equal rights to all, special privileges to none." Though not easy to attain good governance, nevertheless, is what the populace desires. It is the touch stone on which performance of governments are tested-the benchmark for best practices.

Be it the question of ideal state or ideal management practice Ramayana can serve as a useful guide to both.

### Why Ramayana?

The question that needs to be answered is why Ramayana has been chosen as the text that can offer clues to effective management practices for both state as well as organization. The first and foremost reason is the fact that in the Indian ethos Lord Rama is held as *Maryada Purushotam* that is the ideal human being or the model leader. Rama's personality has to be assessed in this light. His leadership style, his approach to managing his people, his way of dealing with difficulties was all based on the premise of values and ethics. Dharma or righteousness was the touch stone on which he based his decisions. There may be questions as to the universality of righteousness given the popularly held view that right and wrong may depend on situations and sometimes are culturally or socially determined. However, one must agree that there are some cardinal values that have withstood test of times. They have transcended eras, civilizations and geographical boundaries to prove that they are held in the same vein everywhere always. Thus lying and treachery, greed and deceit, vanity and egotism have always been treated as undesirable human qualities whereas truthfulness and loyalty, contentment and integrity, humility and mildness have always been treated as desirable. Rama symbolized these desirable attributes. This was the reason why Rama has been the role model, his leadership the ideal style and his governance the model approach.

The Ramayana very succinctly talks about *Ram Rajya* or ideal governance and offers essentials of

the crucial art of leadership. A reader of Ramayana has to figure out why *Ravana*, the mightiest of the demon kings having huge wealth and large team of heavily armed warriors and strategists could be humbled by Rama, the Prince of *Ayodhya* who was assisted only by an army of monkeys and had no armour or other protective gear. This is in itself a great learning experience that teaches that it is only integrity and honesty that triumph in the end. The golden lesson from ancient Indian wisdom as enshrined in *Mundaka Upanishad* that said *Satyamev Jayate* needs to be remembered. The English meaning of *Satyamev Jayate* is that Truth alone triumphs.

The reason why *Ravana* lost is not far to seek. He lost primarily because of *adharma*, non-righteousness. His intentions were not noble and this proved to be his undoing. It was, his haughtiness — the *ahamkara* that clouded his power of reasoning. He was ego centric and ignored sage counsel. The driving forces behind his decisions was negative emotions — lust, greed, envy and pride. He was the antithesis of all that *Rama* stood for.

*Rama* was motivated by the right cause, was humble and listened to his people, respecting their views and seeking their advice on sensitive issues. He was everything that *Ravana* was not — honest, righteous, respectful, warm and loving.

Leadership essentially involves taking critical decisions and at times there are some very close calls. One has to take decisions requiring immense moral strength and courage. Leaders have to develop the art of tightrope walking. It is about striking a balance despite the frequent temptations and opportunities that can throw you off balance. One slip and down you go. Rama was supposed to be a role model in this matter.

In the *Ramayana* we can see how *Rama* could retain his composure in even toughest of the situations and rarely do we find him reacting despite strong provocations. That is what management is all about- Leading dispassionately

yet for the cause.

### Quintessential Management Lessons from Ramayana

Let us now try to take a look at the Management lessons that Ramayana has to offer. Though the entire text of the *Ramayana* contains lessons on strategic management, statecraft, good governance and values based leadership, the focus is on righteousness or *Dharma* that is the rightful conduct which should be bulwark of all leadership actions. Nevertheless in some of the chapters we can find specific lessons on critical aspects of management practice that appear to be highly contemporary. For instance the second chapter, the *Ayodhya Kanda*. It is a real treatise on the issues related to good governance. If one goes through the dialogue between Lord Ram and his younger brother Bharat, the kind of advise that the Lord has given to his brother on how to manage the kingdom it will appear to be a great lesson on effective management practices.

While giving tips on good governance to Bharat, Rama dwells upon several subtle aspects of administration. The critical factor in good governance, Lord *Rama* says, is the quality of ministers. According to Lord Rama the king must ensure that he appoints courageous, knowledgeable and strong-willed men with high emotional quotient because the quality of advice is a critical determinant of quality of governance. The king must appoint right men and not yes men. This is the bane of today's CEOs who prefer approvers rather than critiques. Interestingly these Yes men are guided by self-interest rather than organizational interest. Most problems of governance and management arise when we start replacing right men with yes men. Looking at today's corporates one would find that such yes men are legion.

While *Ayodhya Kanda* is about governance the *Sundar Kanda* is a classic account on strategic management. In fact, one would find even the lessons as given in the now famous Sun Tzu's 'Art

of War' rather pedestrian. This is particularly evident when the Lord is visibly displeased with the conduct of the Ocean God who refuses to listen to reasonable requests to give way to cross the ocean. The Lord had been requesting the Ocean God for a good three days to no effect. It is then that *Rama* asks his brother *Lakshmana* to get him his bow and arrow so that he can forcefully dry up the ocean by his fire power. The Lord tells *Lakshmana* that an unreasonable person only understands the language of fear. And how right he was. The arrow was not shot as the mere sight of it made the Ocean God tremble and surrender. There are many more such lessons on how to handle such people who are unreasonable.

On the other hand the crux of effective Human Resource Management is given in the *Uttar Kanda*, wherein, the conduct of a CEO is epitomized by Lord *Rama* who always 'walks the talk'. Humility in power and keeping the cool in adversities are the hallmarks of his character and management theorists advocate these as the most sought after qualities for a modern-day CEO. One would find Lord *Rama* advising his younger brother *Shatrughan* when the latter is going to fight with the powerful demon king *Lavnasur*. The essence of the advice is look after your army well, treat them with respect and love, and pay them reasonably. These actions go a long way in winning the loyalty of the army people and keeping them motivated. Is the contemporary day Drucker doctrine any different?

Lessons on decision-making are also there. Lord *Rama* advises his brother *Bharat* on how to take effective decisions. It should neither be taken unilaterally nor is consultation with too many people. There should be a core group of right people with right intentions to advice.

*Rama* has counseled *Bharata* on all facets of governance. From quality of ministers and the importance of strategy sessions, to temperance in administration to justice, *Rama* expounds on all the subtleties of statecraft in a lucid manner. While inquiring *Bharata* of his well-being, *Rama* offers

lessons on effective governance in a powerful manner. Though the dialogue between the two brothers runs into several pages and a thorough reading is required to understand the intricacies, some important lessons are obvious. A critical factor in good governance is the quality of ministers. *Rama* asks *Bharata* whether he has appointed courageous, knowledgeable, strong-willed men with a high emotional quotient as his ministers, because quality advice is the key to effective governance. The emphasis is on competence and confidentiality.

*Rama* tells *Bharata* to prefer one wise man to a thousand fools as it is the wise who can ensure prosperity during an economic crisis. Even if there is one minister who is really effective, the king will gain immensely. Appointing tested men of noble lineage and integrity for strategic positions is the key to successful government. Moderate taxes should be levied on the people, lest they revolt. *Rama* wants *Bharata* to treat his soldiers well and pay their legitimate wages on time. Delays in payment of wages and other allowances can lead to dangerous consequences. The modern day Human Resource Management advocates all these.

## Conclusion

Modern management literature talks about effective management practices through many theories and principles which at time seem to be at cross purposes to one another often confusing the scholars and practitioners of management. *Ramayana* on the other hand succinctly offers lessons on Management which are clear and easy to understand and the beauty lies in their universality. It is a commonly believed proposition that managers need to act differently in different ethos underscoring the need for a culture specific management practice. However, there is a need to find out whether there are management practices that can work across cultures, beyond countries and even ages. Or in other words is there a management practice that would transcend time and space and be effective at all places and all times- a truly cross cultural and time tested management paradigm.

*Ramayana* is one such text that offers quintessential management lessons, lessons that are universally applicable and have withstood the test of time. It can well serve as a valuable management reference book.

#### References

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*Note: The authors have comprehensively referred to Ramcharitmanas of Goswami Tulsidas and Valmiki Ramayana published by Gita Press Gorakhpur*