

Me-Leader versus We-Leader: Bhagavad Gita Perspectives on Transformational Leadership

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Abstract

The Bhagavad Gita is one of the world's oldest known holy scriptures, dating back over 5,000 years. The scripture, which Hindus believe was inspired by God, contains unique perspectives and prescriptions for today's leaders. The Gita advises managers to seek a higher level of consciousness. It makes them influence people and lead compassionately and inclusively. The Bhagavad Gita advocates a consciousness approach to transformational leadership based on eternal values and moral principles. Many researchers and practitioners in business leaders identify the Bhagavad Gita as one of the most famous and quoted works in Indian literature. The paper attempts to assist business leaders with insights into Indian scriptures and how they can benefit from the ancient writings of spiritual gurus. Therefore, the authors pursue extracting and elaborating the Bhagavad Gita's concepts into business leadership. Specifically, the study indicates how lessons from Gita can help transform a transactional leader, 'me-leader', into a transformational 'we-leader'.

Keywords: Leadership; Spirituality; Bhagavad Gita; Duty; Ignorance; Ego

Introduction

Many countries and communities are now attempting to identify and investigate their native management and leadership systems (Satpathy & Muniapan, 2016). This situation is not limited only to businesses but to the political, social, and economic systems. Sharma (2001) explains that a leadership system must be entrenched in the cultural soil of the country in which it has evolved to be more effective. Western leadership ideas and conceptions have dominated academia and practitioners for more than two centuries. This dominance stems from colonisation, the extensive use of English in many countries, and the abundance of English-language leadership literature. However, a close examination reveals that many of the increasingly popularised western leadership theories and principles have long been used in the east. Most of these practices were for state government and political systems and not business organisations.

Further, with the growth in the world economy in

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the past decade, organisations are looking for newer ways to improve their leadership and management practices (Rarick, 2007). India is among the fastest-growing economies globally. It has strong international relationships and robust democracy. India is considered one of the leading economic power countries in the coming years (IBEF, 2021). There has also been a rise in interest in India's economic growth, commercial potential, and Indian culture. As Westerners seek to understand Indian culture better, India's ancient scriptures provide insights into cultural norms and values and potentially valuable lessons for modern managerial practice. One of India's most treasured Hindu scriptures is the Bhagavad Gita, or Song of God or simply Gita. According to Indian philosopher Adi

Sankaracharya, the Gita is a compilation of all Vedic literature. In seven hundred verses, this Indian text divides five primary fields of knowledge into 18 chapters: Isvara (the Supreme God), Jiva (the spirit soul/living being), Prakriti (the material universe), Kala (the time), and Karma (the activities).

The authors believe that several characteristics of an effective leader emerge from Gita's numerous chapters. The Gita reflects modern-day leaders' work-related dilemmas and their responsibilities toward multiple stakeholders. While the Bhagavad Gita has many references to God and other metaphysical concerns, it also contains sound moral guidance and leadership skills. According to Hee (2007), Gita's advice can be applied to five modern business sectors, including guidance on core values and mission, new competencies, building business connections and communication, and managers' need to retain a purpose-centric approach.

The present paper aims to extract and elaborate on the chapters and verses of the Gita. It assesses the leadership lessons precisely. Modern-day leaders can move from a 'me' style of leadership to a 'we' style. In the present study, the authors have coined the 'me-leadership' style as transactional leadership and the 'we-leadership' style as 'transformational' leadership. The Gita offers leadership guidance on various topics, including the significance of sticking to one's proper job and responsibilities, being proactive and acting wisely, striving for the larger good, and self-sacrifice. The paper contributes to the limited body of knowledge in extracting leadership lessons from ancient scriptures. The paper discusses the managerial implications and benefits of adopting a transformational leadership style to overcome leadership struggles.

The study is further divided into three sections. The first section, the Introduction, is followed by a

discussion on 'me' versus 'we-leaders'. The third section talks about Bhagavad Gita and leadership. The paper is concluded in the fourth section.

2. Transactional (me-leader) and Transformational (we-leader) leadership

For decades, leadership has been one of the most sought-after topics in the social sciences. Recently, there has been a resurgence in leadership because of the growing interest in follower-based leadership styles to achieve business results (Northouse, 2007). Servant leadership, inclusive leadership, democratic leadership, and transformational leadership are leadership styles that focus on developing the people around the leader. The paper examines transformational leadership in-depth and relates the lessons of Gita to it. Quinn (1988) contrasts transactional and transformational leadership with other leadership distinctions. Fiedler (1967) defined task-relationship-oriented leader, initiating-consideration structure (Korman, 1966) and autocratic-democratic leadership (Heller & Yukl, 1969).

By contrasting transformational leadership with transactional leadership, we can better understand the two leadership styles. According to Burns (1978), transactional leadership comprises a dialogue between the leader and the followers. When followers follow their leader's wishes, they earn specific valuable outcomes (e.g., salary, prestige). Hater & Bass (1988, p.695) define a transformational leader as: 'The dynamics of transformational leadership involve strong personal identification with the leader, joining in a shared vision of the future, or going beyond the self-interest exchange of rewards for compliance'. The authors believe that a transformational 'we' leader is more critical to an organisation as they believe in developing the organisation through the development of its people. Because they provide a compelling meaning for their followers' work, transformational leaders contribute to employee

intrinsic motivation (Avolio & Yammarino, 2002). Furthermore, transformative leaders encourage followers to prioritise the group's interests before their own (Breevaart et al., 2013). Previous research has shown that transformative leadership impacts employees' work performance (Mangkunegara & Miftahuddin, 2016; Eliyana & Ma'arif, 2019). The theory of transformational leadership has also been criticised, and certain flaws have been identified, like elitist and anti-democratic (Northouse, 2007). Other researchers, such as Bass and Riggio (2006), have disputed this claim, claiming that transformational leaders can be directive or participative, authoritarian or democratic. We believe that transformational leadership is essential for handling environmental and organisational transformations. By incorporating all stakeholders in the organisation, a transformational leadership attitude can drive organisations to innovate. Hence, it is crucial to transform 'me' leaders into 'we' leaders. One of the ways the authors propose to adopt this is by extracting leadership lessons from Gita and facilitating business leaders to sail through the dynamic corporate world.

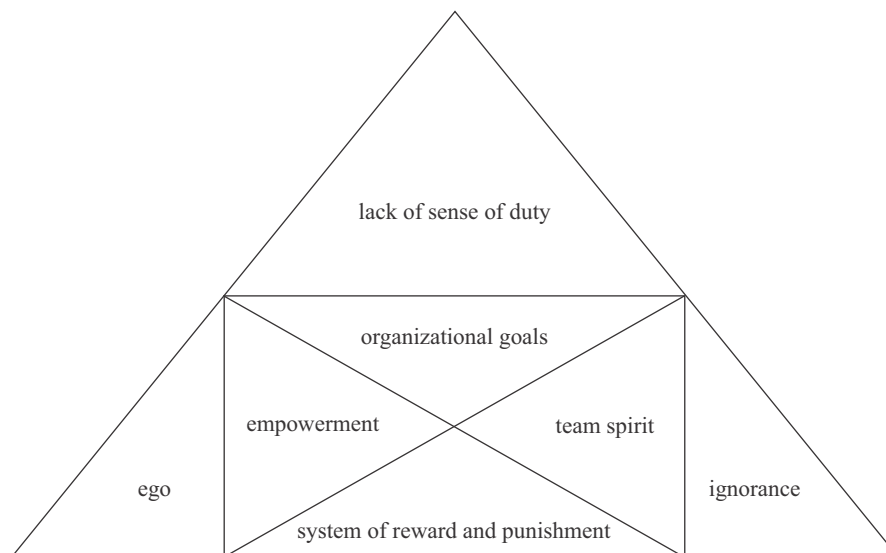
3. Me-leader, we-leader and Bhagavad Gita

The issue of who is a good leader is not the focus of

the current study. Neither does this study address what the best style of leadership is. This study is also not on generic leadership lessons from Bhagavad Gita (BG) like many other studies (Muniapan, 2015; Simpson and Pina e Cunha, 2021). Instead, this study is on an in-depth discussion between me-leaders versus we-leader. This study transcends gross interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita on leadership. We go a little deeper and focus on subtle aspects of BG. We explore the leader's intent rather than what he delivers on the gross level in terms of results. We use 'he' as a putative gender-neutral term for a leader as the gender of the leader is unspecified.

Further elaborating BG, it is a conversation between four people. Lord Krishna, Arjuna, Dhritrashtra and Sanjay. Two people are actively involved, and the other two are passively present. Out of the four people, we get the characters of our 'me-leaders' and 'we-leaders'. Dhritrashtra represents the me-leader, and Lord Krishna represents the we-leader. It would be appropriate to describe that both 'me' and 'we-leaders' are performers at the outset. However, 'me-leaders' are ignorant like Dhritrashtra, and we-leader is full of opulence and knowledge like Lord Krishna.

Figure 1. Expectations versus constraints of an effective leadership: a spiritual perspective



It would be germane to ask a few questions before we delve deeper into 'me-leader' and 'we-leaders'. Firstly, what do we mean by a leader? Secondly, what is expected from him? The discussion on these lines will help define both kinds of leaders better. A good leader would be able to achieve the following quadruple : 1) getting the goals assigned to him in time and within budget; 2) should have the ability to take the whole team along with him; 3) developing the team members and their empowerment and delegation; and 4) there should be a fair system of reward and punishment concerning those who are working with him (Srivastava and Rastogi, 2008) (Figure 1). However, the list is not exhaustive. It is sufficient to bring the connection between leadership, its goals and how both can be attained more effectively through Bhagavad Gita.

Firstly, a leader who cannot achieve his goals within the constraints of time and money limits his influence on team and goal achievement orientation (Zhao et al., 2021). Achieving goals is the quintessential attribute of a leader. Secondly, a leader who does not know how to take everyone along in his team also fails. Team members are either hired by the leader or given to him in any organisation. His job is to use them to get to the goal. A leader who does not know how to place the right people at the right job so that he can contribute at the most optimum level is equally failed. Thirdly, a leader is supposed to prepare a future leader. There should not be any vacuum in the career progression of one and all in the organization especially at the top levels. This situation can only be accomplished if the leader identifies and helps build the future leader. Fourthly, unless a leader sends a clear signal of a fair system of reward and punishment, he can never get the most from his team.

In addition, we take three critical inputs from BG to describe and explain the problem and solutions of 'me-leader' to transform into 'we-leader'. BG insists

that knowledge (opposite of ignorance) can dispel all doubts of duality. Knowledge also gives clarity to one's duty. In a way, we believe ignorance is the root cause of the problem of the me-leader and removing it by knowledge can help in getting me-leader transformed into our-leader. In addition, the ego does not let one accept ignorance.

Therefore, we propose three hindrances that stop a leader from attaining his full potential and not letting his teammates attain their full potential: 1) ego; 2) ignorance; and 3) lack of true sense of duty. Again, the list is not exhaustive but serves the purpose of the current study. We find that all the three limitations of leadership that are detrimental to him and his teammates can be successfully resolved through focused learning of BG.

3.1 Achieving the goals, leadership and BG

A significant portion of corporate governance issues hovers around agency problems (Dalton et al., 2007). One of the critical reasons for the agency problem is that leaders prefer their entitlements to shareholders or stakeholders (Lewellen et al., 1987). BG provides a sense of trusteeship. Everything belongs to the Lord Almighty, and human beings are their representatives. People are entitled to be His trustee to execute His desires, and that too for His satisfaction. This understanding helps in reducing the ego and facilitates reduction in the agency problem, especially agent-principal conflicts (Sannikov, 2008). We believe that reducing agency problems may significantly reduce conflicts and help leaders to focus more on attaining the goals. Conflicts are always internal (within), which manifests in the conflict with the others. The knowledge of BG soothes the internal self and gives the right direction to the leaders to take correct decisions to attain their goals.

BG is misconstrued as a religious document by a few. BG is a source of knowledge that is for a household. It displays the internal conflict of the

household using arjuna as a representative of the household. The internal conflicts of arjuna were given a direction by Lord Krishna so that he could discharge his duty as a householder fully well. Nowhere in the BG does the Lord says to stop working. He says work with the right mindset. Therefore, BG's principles help the leaders achieve their goals better and more effectively. A leader can easily think of himself as a representative of the Lord, doing the work assigned by him to his satisfaction. This sense calms the nerves and helps focus on the organisation's goals.

Me-leaders are ignorant of this fact. They are lost in pursuing their personal goals over the organisation's goals. Even if me-leaders are successful, they can never make their team feel happy and satisfied with them. Most of the people in his teams never feel satisfied and feel like part of the more considerable achievement for the organisation.

3.2 Taking the team along, leadership and BG

As highlighted by early studies, me-leaders can be categorised as narcissists (De Vries et al, 1985; Resick et al, 2009). They are in self-love and do not have the sense of others. A me-leader may attain the organisations' goals but fails miserably on the other three counts of the quadruple of leadership expectations built in the current study. It is appropriate to say that achieving the organisations' goals can never be the sole goal of any organisation. Me-leaders are like having profit-maximisation as the goal of a business organisation. However, 'we-leaders' take care of the other three leadership goals equally seriously and ensure shareholder wealth maximisation. It is an apt analogy to compare 'me-leaders' meant for profit maximisation. Furthermore, 'we-leader' is meant for shareholders' wealth maximisation.

3.3 Development of people, leadership and BG

Developing future leaders is also an essential

expectation from a leader. This aspect has a few limitations, especially from the me-leadership style. A me-leader is self-centric. He firmly believes that he is the one who is running the show. It is he who is the only capable person in the organisation. He feeds this false belief out of ego and ignorance. He ensures that no one equally or more capable than him can grow in the organisation. The knowledge of BG helps the me-leader to understand his actual position. Despite his efforts and mala fide intentions in this regard, whatever is due to happen, happens. The me-leader only creates resentment among his teammates, which ultimately harms the organisation in the long run. BG helps in realise his actual duty in this regard. A me-leader needs to realise this and ensure that he should let the right people grow in the organisation. He (a me-leader) needs to move away from his narrow-mindedness and me-first approach to the we-first approach where he factually knows what is to be done and what is not to be done.

An ignorant person may think that BG is meant to make one a saint. These realisations help an ordinary householder, who may hold a leadership position, discharge his duty more efficiently and effectively. BG 4.12 very explicitly puts forth this point. A me-leader wrongly thinks that despite getting indulged in devious means, he will get away with it. Only ignorance does not let a me-leader realise his actual and factually dreadful situation (Dhiman 2015).

3.4 Fair system of reward and punishment, leadership and BG

Satisfaction is a big word and may not be sought by everyone. However, from within, all of us know whether we are getting what we deserve. Having a fair system of reward and punishment in the workplace is the elementary responsibility of the leaders. Nevertheless, the workplace may or may not have such an ecosystem. 'Me-leaders' are fully engrossed in their self-development and do not even realise this as their primary duty. 'Me-leaders'

set goals of the organisation and self-goals as their prime targets. Rest is immaterial to them. However, this is incomplete leadership. It is failed leadership. Such workplaces may be successful but failed institutions in terms of leadership. Leadership is the human aspect of working together and achieving common organisational goals. It is also mandatory that the organisational goals are met whether the leader shows me-leadership or we-leadership. However, incomplete leadership, like me-leadership, is an unhealthy approach for long-term organisational development and growth. An organisation can be successful through me-leadership but can never go beyond a point and attain its full potential. Because me-leadership is not designed for that. It is suitable for moderate success, but great success can never be accomplished through it. Me-leadership is limited; however, we-leadership is limitless.

Organisations need to realise such fundamental principles. Even HRM is lost in people management, talent management, and retaining employees. HR should start with leadership. Everything percolates from the top. Spiritual training is required for the top management or

people holding leadership positions. The myopic vision of having a commercially successful organisation makes them lose sight of the larger picture of having healthy and progressive work culture. A leader gets trapped in ego and ignorance when he feels insecure and does not let the second line of deference survive. He wants his position to be peerless, and he does not want to be challenged. A me-leader is a spiritually penurious person and lost in his world. However, because he is attaining the organisations' goals, he survives and moves up in the hierarchy. The ability to deliver results is a non-negotiable trait of a successful leader. However, this ability to deliver results should not be an acceptable excuse to be a 'me-leader' at the expense of the organisation's people, especially those in his team.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Lord Krishna is particular when he proclaims that He is the beginning and the end of everything, and without his sanction, nothing happens in the world (BG 9.10). In chapters 7 to 10, Lord describes Himself, and in Chapter 11 (BG11.1-10), he shows Arjuna His true self by giving him the divine eye.

काङ्क्षन्तः कर्मणां सिद्धिं यजन्त इह देवताः ।
क्षिप्रं हि मानुषे लोके सिद्धिर्भवति कर्मजा ॥ १२ ॥

(BG 4.12)

These instances in BG can be construed that whatever happens is not in the hands of the human being, but the divine power ensures to let things happen. The ignorance is well explained by the Lord in BG (4.12) when the Lord says that desiring so-called success, a man does all the things and resorts to all the devious means, leads to nought because He does everything and no one else.

This realisation would contain the ego of being a doer. It is the Lord's mercy that a man is an instrument in the hands of the Lord to let something happens. This knowledge that a man is not the doer, but the instrument changes the perception. Having a sense of trusteeship dispels all the problems at

one go. BG is one of the leading documents to enlighten human beings about their actual situations. Knowing this, a leader gets the feel of trusteeship, and he loses his ego and ignorance at the same time.

A leader can get more clarity on what he is supposed to do by BG 2.31-33, especially BG2.33. The Lord openly suggests to arjuna that not doing his duty is always a wrong decision. BG very explicitly says that one needs to do his duty. Lord Krishna says doing one's duty is better than doing somebody else's duty imperfectly. Although this wisdom should be preceded by understanding the leader's duties.

अथ चेत्त्वमिमं धर्म्यं सङ्गमं न करिष्यसि ।
ततः स्वधर्मं कीर्तिं च हित्वा पापमवाप्स्यसि ॥ ३३ ॥

BG 2.33

The quadruple of duties raised in the current study may not be acceptable to every leader in letter and spirit. The ego that one knows despite the fact he does not know is a big problem in human development. The bigger problem is that a 'me-leader' may think that he is beyond learning such things, which further exacerbates the situation of his ignorance. Above all, leaders (me-leader) may also cherish an illusion that BG is for hoi-polloi and not for privileged people like him.

Here comes the HR's job while hiring the people for the leadership positions. This learning is even relevant to HR people to understand what it takes to be a leader. Mere ability to deliver results and forcing people to toe the line is not leadership (me-leader). The discussion of the current paper is

beneficial for the HR people equally. The discussions of the current study have equally significant implications for hiring and firing in organisations.

Some organisations and leaders feel proud of hiring and firing people. We find this inclination linked to ignorance and ego. A person should be hired when he fits the bill. Hiring a person is a decision. He, the very same person, maybe asked later to leave. It means, more than this person, the hiring process also has issues, and HR managers should also face the music in failing their duty. In addition, as the BG says, all human beings are his part, hence perfect but differ in quantity. People are contaminated due to three modes of material nature (BG 14.4-5).

सत्त्वं रजस्तम इति गुणाः प्रकृतिसम्भवाः ।
निबध्नन्ति महाबाहो देहे देहिनमव्ययम् ॥ ५ ॥

BG 14.5

We refer to the idea of three modes of material nature to prove the point of oneness and being egalitarian. As per their previous karma, they have different virtues, and accordingly, they act. Once anyone is part of the organisation through the strict process of fulfilling the conditions well laid down by the organisation, it is the job of the leaders to ensure that people get equal opportunities according to their skill set and abilities. 'Me-leaders', due to their ego, ignorance and lack of sense of duty as a leader, fail in ensuring this. On the contrary, they try to prove that the person is not good. As a matter of fact, by the time a leader says that somebody is not good, he is also equally culprit, if not guiltier than the person in question. Me-leaders never realise their utter failure in not being able to get optimum output from their team members. If somebody is not performing, it is the equal failure of the leader. The we-leaders have this subtle understanding, resulting in limited instances

of inordinate hiring and firing through them.

We want to conclude that the quadruple of duties raised by us for leaders are significantly important ones. Leader fails (at times miserably) in this endeavour. As discussed in the study, the reasons are three-pronged (ego, ignorance and lack of sense of duty). The learnings of BG can surely dispel the lack of clarity of the leadership role and its expectation. This whole exercise can be beneficial not only for the leaders but the organisations as well.

End Note:

The reference of a verse in BG is given by BG MN, where M stands for chapter number and N stands for verse number.

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