

Bhagavad Gita for Minimizing Dark Side of Leadership

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Abstract

The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) leadership theory emphasizes the dynamic relationship between leaders and followers. Further, LMX differentiation proposes that leaders divide their teams into in-groups and out-groups based on the quality of the relationship. In this process, the criteria for selecting in-group members are majorly based on personal preferences rather than objectivity. Further, the in-group members build confidence in the leader to minimize leader insecurity in the workplace. The out-group members bear the brunt of such an understanding between the leader and in-group members. This situation can be referred to as the Dark side of leadership, where followers are given differential treatment. This study takes insights from ancient scriptures of the Bhagavad Gita (BG), where the leader is seen as a trustee, to reduce this differentiation and increase leader security. The paper attempts to explore and extract the concepts from BG and apply them to leadership theory and practice. It is found that the BG provides solutions to reduce leadership deficit (LD) and have a conducive work environment (CWE), and it does not ask for any financial investments. The paper's findings facilitate business leaders in reducing in-group and out-group categorizing and leader insecurity leading to effective leadership for better business results.

Keywords: Leader-Member Exchange; LMX; Leadership; Spirituality; Bhagavad Gita; Leadership Deficit

Introduction

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) leadership theory has evolved over the last four decades. Leaders, members, and their social interactions are the three elements of LMX (Estel et al., 2019). The high social exchange between the leader and their followers would lead to success in teams and is well-researched and established (Sonntag & Pundt, 2016). However, because of resource limitations such as infrastructure, time, and energy, it might be challenging for leaders to build a strong rapport with every team member (Anand et al., 2015). Hobfoll (1989) emphasized that leaders attempt to conserve their resources to lessen scarcity and stress per the conservation of resources theory. Due to this phenomenon, LMX differentiation occurs where different LMX relationships typically arise within the workgroup (Chen et al., 2015). Studies indicate that LMX differentiation positively correlates with team performance (Naidoo et al., 2011).

On the other hand, it (differential LMX) has been

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How to cite this article: Rastogi, S.; Kuknor, S.; Singh, S.P., (2023). Bhagavad Gita for Minimizing Dark Side of Leadership. Purushartha, 16(1), 1-10.

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None

linked to lower employee engagement and satisfaction with co-worker interactions (Erdogan & Bauer, 2014). Additionally, it has been related to team conflicts, an increase in attrition and lower job satisfaction (Nishii & Mayer, 2009). This study addresses the concern of the 'dark side of leadership, that is, the negative impact of LMX differentiation through in-group and out-group. The present study draws insights from ancient Indian scripture called the Bhagavad Gita (BG) and highlights the role of the leader as a "Trustee" and not as an "Owner" of the followers or team members. The authors propose that leaders must serve their followers and help them transform into better organizational contributors leading to harmony in the business environment.

Furthermore, it is vital to consider the attitude and behaviour of the followers depending on their social categorization as in-group and out-group members. Employees from the in-group and the out-group have different perspectives and behaviour toward one another. The out-group members have attitudes toward the in-group members stating they are more responsible, competent, experienced, and hardworking, or their categorization may be because they are good at nepotism. While in-group members typically feel that out-group members are introverted and incompetent (Singh, 2018). These opposing views impact the culture, making it toxic and encouraging unhealthy comparisons. Hence, the role of the leader becomes important as a trustee promoting selfless service to the followers and not diffusing a culture of differentiation. The present study is one of the few exploring the dark side of leadership in terms of LMX differentiation and provides insights and suggestions from BG to lighten this dark side. Lessons from BG will guide the leader in increasing self-security and meritocracy while dealing with followers and minimizing the insecurity and bias leading to differentiation.

Literature Review

The leader-member exchange theory examines the social interactions between leaders and their members. Depending on the intensity of social exchange, high and low-quality LMX is developed (Dansereau et al., 1975). Members with high-quality LMX fall in the in-group of the leader. And those with a low level of LMX fall in the out-group of the leader. This phenomenon emerged as LMX differentiation. The in-group members enjoy high-quality LMX and tend to receive favourable treatment and more information leading to higher job satisfaction (Breevaart et al., 2015). The out-group individuals are excluded from the in-group

because they exhibit less favourable personalities. They reflect unfavourable traits like extraversion and conscientiousness (Lapierre & Hackett, 2007). Some researchers think that out-group members may be on the dark side because they have a “dark” view of their organizations. When LMX differentiation is evident, team members become perceptive of differences in social interactions and the allocation of leader resources, which is likely the situation in most teams (Henderson et al., 2009). As a result, team members who believe they are receiving comparably fewer resources may withhold work-related inputs leading to lower job performance. Hence, the present study proposes, drawing insights from BG, how leaders can improve their social exchanges between team members and portray the role of trustee with equal treatment to all team members.

Bhagavad Gita (BG) has received growing attention in management and leadership (Simpson & Cunha, 2021; Kuknor et al., 2021). With global changes in the workforce and community, reviewing the traditional wisdom that helped civilizations live in peace with nature over thousands of years might be beneficial. The Bhagavad Gita's wisdom offers conventional wisdom to leaders and businesses for spiritual and virtuous conduct. Self-leadership, Inspirational leadership, and Transformational leadership are a few of the past leadership research styles linked to BG (Simpson & Cunha, 2021). Whether accessing the wisdom of BG out of curiosity, as a divine seeker, or maybe as a devoted devotee, it respectfully offers a choice as Lord Krishna states, “I have thus explained to you this most confidential knowledge. Reflecting on this fully, do as you wish” (18.63). Hence, the present study helps to explore BG knowledge to reduce LMX differentiation and increase leader trusteeship leading to a harmonious work environment.

इति ते ज्ञानमाख्यातं गुह्याद्गुह्यतरं मया ।
विमृश्यैतदशेषेण यथेच्छसि तथा कुरु ॥ ६३ ॥

- BG 18.63

Furthermore, the contemporary field of leadership development has focused more on the positive features of leadership (Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016), overshadowing the downside of leadership. The dark side of leadership has been explored in the past with research on abusive behaviour, toxic relationships, and power-based abuse (Woestman & Wasonga, 2015; Neves & Schyns, 2018). However, associating it with LMX differentiation and providing leadership lessons from BG is the unique contribution of the present study to the growing field of spirituality and leadership. A deeper investigation into the “black box” of destructive or punitive leadership is necessary to capture people's viewpoints on the receiving end of particular leadership behaviours and practices.

Expectations from a leader

A leader is first among equals in an organization or a corporate set-up. He is entrusted with the expectations to deliver value to all the firm's stakeholders, mainly fund providers (shareholders

and debtholders). The value should be in the tangibles form of achieving returns of investment of more than the cost of the capital (Jones & Felps, 2013). In addition, it is also his responsibility (or expectation) to take care of the people working for him in the organization to achieve the same organizational goal of providing value to the stakeholders—(Wood et al., 2020). There might be umpteen such expectations from a leader in a firm. We call them a conducive work environment (CWE). A toxic work culture may serve the goal of providing good returns to the stakeholders. This situation does not mean that a leader is a success. It may be a myopic view to gauge the leader's success only in financial terms. A leader's success should be measured economically and by creating and sustaining CWE. We believe this (the clubbing of the two) is the only sustainable proposition that can provide limitless outcomes in an organization. We define CWE succinctly as a three-pronged approach: 1) a win-win proposition; 2) people should be provided opportunities to grow and have a clear-cut career advancement path; 3) well-defined and articulated systems of rewards and punishments.



Figure 1. Features of Conducive Work Environment (CWE)

Source: Authors' own analysis

There is always a gap between expectations and deliverables regarding leadership, which is also realistic. Here is the problem. The gap between the two may be moderate, hence tolerable. However, the real trouble starts when the gap threshold is broken, which might often be evident. The dissatisfaction among the subordinate towards a leader may lose its relevance if the leader attains organizational goals measured only in financial terms. Achieving the organization's goals is tangible and explicit (financial excellence) and far outweighs anything else. The simmering but deafening dissatisfaction among the subordinate is lost somewhere. The private sector always provides an easy way out to such an aggrieved lot who are talented simultaneously. They are the first to move out of such ships despite the tremendous financial performance of the organization. This study is not on why talent leaves the organization. This study is centered around building a conducive work environment (CWE) so that more such talented people are not only retained but harnessed to a level that may be beyond the potential of the individuals. These are achievable goals provided the HR community and key decision makers move out of the myopia of financial goals and realize the importance of the sustainable long-term goal of building CWE for long-term success.

However, a caveat is desired at this point in this exposition. The goal of building CWE has to be coupled with financial success. CWE in isolation will be harakiri. This CWE has to be clubbed with financial goals. Unless CWE is attached to financial goals in letter and spirit, the long-term sustainable success of the organizations cannot be achieved. The lack of this (not having both a financial goal and CWE as the aim) is why organizations reach their plateau and cannot move on from wherever they are. Above all, they are unable to recognize what's wrong with them.

Now, the real question starts with how this can be achieved. Achieving a financial goal is one of the easiest things for any technically efficient person as a leader. It is a challenge to build CWE in its letter and spirit. This

goal needs real grit, not seen in individuals unless they have a spiritual quotient beyond a certain level. The rest of the paper is focused on this aspect. The authors describe how to reduce the negative aspects of LMX and attain CWE with the help of spirituality in general and the BhagavadGita in particular. Authors believe that one of the main reasons for the lack of CWE is the negative aspects of the LMX.

Leadership Deficit (LD): An impediment in achieving the CWE

It is a big misnomer that the most competent become the leaders. Leadership is a political position given to those who fit the bill. This situation is the same across the private sector or the government sector. It is almost a rarity to have fate and merit present simultaneously, and the person who possesses them both becomes a leader. Hence, there is almost always a deficit, aptly called leadership deficit (LD).

Undoubtedly, except for the Lord, no one is complete or perfect. The lack of completeness is one of the characteristics of the Lord which differentiates Him from others (other living beings). Hence, any individual cannot be ideal by design. However, we may correlate the LD (the imperfection is a leader) with leaders' inability to create CWE due to differentiation in LMX.

“Power Corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. Leaders do wield power, which is defined in several ways. The powerfulness of the leaders is aggravated due to the financial success of the organizations (maybe repetitive achievements). The economic success and admiration further culminate in giving him a sense (a false sense) of being a demigod. In addition, a leader may feel insecure about losing their position. LD can also be witnessed due to a lack of expertise or talent to handle and motivate people. The issues raised in the above discussion regarding LD can be summarized in the following pictorial representation of LD (Figure 2).

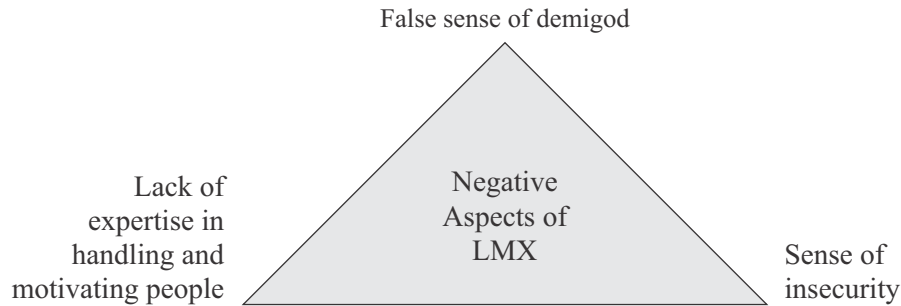


Figure 2. The triangle of leadership deficit (LD)

Source: Authors' own analysis

5. Overcoming LD using spiritual orientation through Bhagavad Gita

5.1 Leaders as Trustees

The literature on leadership styles presents many styles of leadership (Igbaekemen, 2014, Taleghani et al., 2010). However, none of them talks about the spiritual orientation of leadership. We do not find literature that goes subtly and looks at the leadership's intent. A spiritual perspective in which a man thinks of himself as the medium, not the does per se, could be defined as a trusteeship perspective. In the trusteeship perspective, the person believes that the power (may be due to position or ownership of the assets and wealth) is of somebody else's (the Lord's), and his role is only to deliver as per the wishes of the actual owner of the things. This perspective is called the trusteeship perspective, and such a leadership approach can be defined as leaders as trustees (LT). We do not observe any other literature that talks about LT.

There are a few studies that do touch on the topic of the periphery. There are studies that discuss spirituality and leadership. Dhiman (2017) advocates clarity on religion and spirituality to bring the best performance using spirituality in the corporate world. Burke (2006) draws on the relevance of spirituality for leadership. However, objectivity in this endeavor is missing. Murray and Evers (2011) highlight the role of self-awareness in organizational effectiveness, especially for leadership. However, a mutual association of LMX, LD, and LT as the solution to CWE is not

found. Servant leadership is the closest alternative to LT (Van Dierendonck, 2011). The servant-leadership style dwells into the intent of the leaders to serve and empower the people for organizational effectiveness. However, the central theme of LT is not fully comprehended in the servant-leadership style.

This situation is ironic in that we do talk about spirituality and leadership but confine ourselves to a limit so that we do not venture into unknown territory. LT is an objective approach to bringing spirituality to the forefront to address the real-life problem of organizations. LT does not expect a leader to behave like a saint. We may refer to BG that the Lord imparted the knowledge to a householder, the arjuna. He is not a saint, nor is he expected of him to be. BG is for a householder to live worldly lives and do their assigned jobs. BG never proclaims to ask people to renounce the work. It is a misinterpretation of so-called people who claim to know and pretend to be messengers of the Lord to abandon the work. At least, BG never claims that in any way. Therefore, BG can efficiently be utilized to address the concerns faced by leaders while discharging their duties. We argue that BG equips leaders to discharge the irresponsibilities more effectively. LT is the objective solution with this sole purpose. We do not expect, nor do we present in the current study, that leaders should be saints and start doing charity. BG is practical wisdom meant for hoi polloi to discharge their duties in worldly life more

effectively, and LT is one such solution for corporate leaders.

LT can ensure that besides financial excellence, CWE is also achieved (we have previously made it clear that we are proposing this study assuming that economic excellence is in tow with CWE; the economic superiority is not competing with LT but rather complementing each other). LT can reduce LD and maximize leaders' influence on the organization, eventually enhancing organizational effectiveness. LT can bring the balance between economic excellence and CWE, which we miss more than anything else in the organizations. In a way, LT can be one of the best leadership styles. Moreover, we condemn the capitalist way of making people happy, where to be satisfied, we need money. CWE is more of an environment that can easily be maintained under any phase of organizational development, during recession and prosperity.

5.2 Bhagavad Gita discourse to counter LMX and leadership deficit (LD) to attain a conducive working environment (CWE)

Spiritual orientation undoubtedly extenuates anxiety and soothes the mind, which helps people, including leaders, to take the right decisions.

Bhagavad Gita (BG) is a spiritual document comprised of eighteen chapters with 700 verses (Prabhupada and Swami, 1972). BG is dialoguing between four people, two active and two inactive. The two active characters are Lord Krishna and Arjuna. The two inactive characters are Dhitarashtra and Sanjay.

5.2.1 Head on with a false sense of demigod regarding leadership:

The position and power bewilder a leader. He starts thinking that he decides everything and gradually feels like a demigod. However, a leader is nothing but a trustee representing the Lord. He (the leader) does not own anything. All belong to the Lord, and he merely means them. People (the leaders) forget this reality and start acting as if they are a demigod.

In Bhagavad Gita chapter 3, verse 27 (BG 3.27)¹, the Lord explicitly explains that no one should think of himself as he does due to the false ego. In reality, the three modes of material nature, which are energies fully controlled by the Lord, compel the person to act. This result means the Lord is instrumental in letting something happen or does not happen, and no one should get the false sense of being a doer.

प्रकृतेः क्रियमाणानि गुणैः कर्माणि सर्वशः ।
अहङ्कारविमूढात्मा कर्ताहमिति मन्यते ॥ २७ ॥

- BG 3.27

In addition to the idea of three modes of material nature for inducement of the actions, the Lord explains in BG 13-16 five causes of

accomplishment of any action. Unless all these five causes are present, no action in the world can be completed and accomplished.

पञ्चैतानि महाबाहो कारणानि निबोध मे ।
सांख्ये कृतान्ते प्रोक्तानि सिद्धये सर्वकर्मणाम् ॥ १३ ॥

- BG 18.13

The Lord explains in BG 18.14 that the five causes include the supreme will of the Lord. Leaving everything apart, unless the lord sanctions, nothing

happens in this world. Furthermore, in BG 18.15, He says the action may be good or bad. The sanctions of the Lord govern all.

अधिष्ठानं तथा कर्ता करणं च पृथग्विधम् ।
विविधाश्च पृथक्चेष्टा दैवं चैवात्र पञ्चमम् ॥ १४ ॥

- BG 18.14

शरीरवाङ्मनोभिर्यत्कर्म प्रारभते नरः ।
न्याय्यं वा विपरीतं वा पञ्चैते तस्य हेतवः ॥ १५ ॥

- BG 18.15

In addition, the Lord further presents in BG 18.16 that anyone who thinks of himself as the doer and ignores the reality of the five causes causing a job is ignorant. The pearls of wisdom of BG candidly and

categorically categorize anyone, including a leader, an innocent man, if he thinks of himself as a doer or a demigod.

तत्रैवं सति कर्तारमात्मानं केवलं तु यः ।
पश्यत्यकृतबुद्धित्वात् स पश्यति दुर्मतिः ॥ १६ ॥

- BG 18.16

Facilitating leaders to overcome their expertise in handling people:

what not to do, including how to behave. This verse's context is clear: if someone does not know how to handle people, they should overcome their limitations instead of avoiding or hiding them.

Lord makes it abundantly clear in BG 16.7 that people not pleasing may not know what to do and

प्रवृत्तिं च निवृत्तिं च जना न विदुरासुराः ।
न शौचं नापि चाचारो न सत्यं तेषु विद्यते ॥ ७ ॥

- BG 16.7

Furthermore, in BG 18.47 and 48, the Lord suggests doing your prescribed duties more imperfectly than somebody's duties perfectly. Hence, if one is given a leadership role, he should discharge his duties with all the efforts, skills, and

energies he has at his disposal. The leaders forget to do so. They should learn the necessary skills and execute if they are inept in handling and motivating people. Getting indulged in something against the spirit of CWE may strongly be avoided.

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् ।
स्वभावनियतं कर्म कुर्वन्नाप्नोति कित्त्विषम् ॥ ४७ ॥

- BG 18.47

सहजं कर्म कौन्तेय सदोषमपि न त्यजेत् ।
सर्वारम्भा हि दोषेण धूमेनाग्निरिवावृताः ॥ ४८ ॥

- BG 18.48

Countering sense of insecurity among leaders:

BG 2.47 is a legendary verse and, in more than one way, represents the gist of part of BG. As human beings, we are entitled to work the way we should. However, results cannot be commanded by how

much effort one puts in. This result is a brutal reality and truth simultaneously in worldly life. Negating this truth's existence may give people solace or justification for their ignorance. However, there is no escape from this rule. Hence, a leader is supposed to believe in this.

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ ४७ ॥

- BG 2.47

This verse does not proclaim not to do the prescribed duty given to an individual under any circumstances. This situation means that exemplary efforts should always be made to do

what one is expected to do. In BG 3.20, the Lord reiterates the goodness of doing the prescribed duty. He says this is one the surest ways to attain perfection, similar to King Janaka.

कर्मणैव हि संसिद्धिमास्थिता जनकादयः ।
लोकसङ्ग्रहमेवापि सम्पश्यन्कर्तुमर्हसि ॥ २० ॥

- BG 3.20

Furthermore, Lord makes it abundantly clear to decimate any sense of insecurity in BG 18.6 and 18.9 that one should not have an attachment to the results. Instead, one should try hard or the hardest to do what one is expected to do. Once a person attains that wisdom, his sense of insecurity

disappears automatically. However, an ignorant leader may try to play God and would like to dictate the outcomes, which is a mirage. Hence, a leader should do what one expects to do in the best possible way. He should avoid playing God and try not to do what God does.

एतान्यपि तु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा फलानि च ।
कर्तव्यानीति मे पार्थ निश्चितं मतमुत्तमम् ॥ ६ ॥

- BG 18.6

कार्यमित्येव यत्कर्म नियतं क्रियतेऽर्जुन ।
सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा फलं चैव स त्यागः सात्त्विको मतः ॥ ९ ॥

- BG 18.9

Conclusion

The study aims to solve the problem of differential LMX through the Bhagavad Gita. The discussion and exposition reveal that the negative aspect of LMX exacerbates the leadership deficit in organizations. As a result of the negative side of LMX and leadership deficit, the expectation from a leader to build and maintain a conducive working environment is hampered. Although the study assumes a conducive working environment is required to achieve the financial goals. However, financial excellence cannot be taken for granted as an excuse for not having a conducive working environment. Leaders should not be exonerated in their failure of not having CWE due to their financial excellence, which is the case seen quite often. The limitation of leaders for not having CWE is defined as a leadership deficit. The study uses the

Bhagavad Gita discourse to explain how leadership deficit can be controlled, and CWE is ensured for the betterment of the leaders and, eventually, for the organizations.

The current study is important and has major significance for the corporate world. The Bhagavad Gita provides solutions to reduce LD and have CWE, and it does not ask for any financial investments. It only expects leaders to change their perception. This study also does not leave the financial excellence behind CWE. Instead, pragmatically, this study presents that CWE and financial excellence should complement each other. It is not expected that CWE or financial excellence may exist at the cost of each other.

This study makes a significant and novel contribution to the leadership literature because

very few studies find evidence of leadership and financial excellence from the holy epic Bhagavad Gita. This study presents the existence of a spiritual viewpoint on leadership in practicality. The current study's findings bring notable practical implications for managers to realize the importance of our existing epics and implement it to enhance their leadership quality. The findings also imply that managers should recognize various determinants to improve leadership traits to enhance the overall performance of the organizations.

The lack of empirical scrutiny of the idea is the major limitation of the paper. This situation also provides a path for future research to establish the empirical sanctity of the findings discussed in the study. The findings of the study have the potential to significantly change the working environment of the organization and provide better options for the retention and development of the people in the organization. Such changes eventually would result in the overall performance of the organizations.

End Note: ¹The reference of a verse of Bhagavad Gita is given as BG m.n where m is the chapter number and n is the verse number of that chapter.

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