The Eightfold Path of Buddhism for an Effective & Credible Leadership

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Abstract

The critical role of a leader in has become more crucial than ever before in the era of fierce competition and the challenge to compete ethically. The first step towards being an effective leader is winning trust of the followers which can easily be done by building credibility at the personal level. Skills, capabilities, strategies and practices will be void without an understanding of the essential human hopes and aspirations that connect leaders to the followers. It is in this light that this paper explores the possibility of following the Eightfold path of Buddhism for a balanced leadership through wisdom, ethical conduct and mental discipline.

Introduction

"We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know that place for the first time."

- T.S. Eliot in 'Gerontian'

Buddhism is profound. It is in its philosophical depths that a lot can be explored as relevant to the twenty first century management professionals. The teachings of Buddha are divided into the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Buddhism is about the understanding that mankind suffers and that excessive desire is the cause of suffering. The positive aspect about it is that desires can be controlled through practice of the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths can be considered to be on the side of doctrine that is meant to be understood whereas the Eightfold Path is the discipline that has to be internalized through practice. In the context of a world characterized by trials and tribulations and for sustainable growth, it is essential that the doctrine be implicit and the path be followed for unfolding the reality and tackling the problems which the competitive world brings with it in the form of either troubles or opportunities.

It is no coincidence that all the success stories about top organizations globally have been written in the ink of the right visionary leadership, the presence or lack of which either make or mar the prospects of organizational success. Most effective leaders, as suggested by

scholars of leadership, have a base which is values-driven (Kets de Vries, 2009; Greenleaf and Spears, 1998). The basis of this argument is that the difference between dysfunctional and effective leadership lies in authenticity which refers to traits such as being real, transparent, truthful, and open. Further, authenticity is the quality that is attached to those leaders who do not feel any necessity to please or impress others, who feel "good in their skin", and whose effectiveness comes from being authentic and open with themselves and with others. Furthermore, such leaders not only inspire those around them, they also know how to bring people together around a shared purpose and a common set of values, and motivate them to create value for everyone involved. Moreover, they work hard at developing self-awareness through persistent and often courageous self-exploration (Kets de Vries et al., 2007; Kets de Vries et al., 2010).

The dependence of organizations upon capable leadership is crucial to guide them through unprecedented changes. Clearly, in the context of organizational success, leadership has always been the key ingredient. It is in this light that this paper examines the qualities which must be present in a leader for personal as well as professional credibility and effectiveness. It is in the Eightfold Path of Buddhism that the authors find an echo of the qualities a leader must possess in order to lead and steer the organizational ship through the most troubled waters of a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world!

The Eightfold Path of Buddhism

The Eightfold Path, or path as it's called, is a guide for areas to explore and practice. (Nourie, 2013).

The Eight fold Path of Buddhism can be divided into three groups. These three groups represent three stages of training: the training in the higher moral discipline, the training in the higher consciousness, and the training in the higher wisdom. (Bodhi, 1994).

(i)   the wisdom group (paññakkhandha), made up of right view and right intention

(ii)   the concentration group (samadhikkhandha), made up of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration;

(iii)   the moral discipline group (silakkhandha), made up of right speech, right action, and right livelihood.
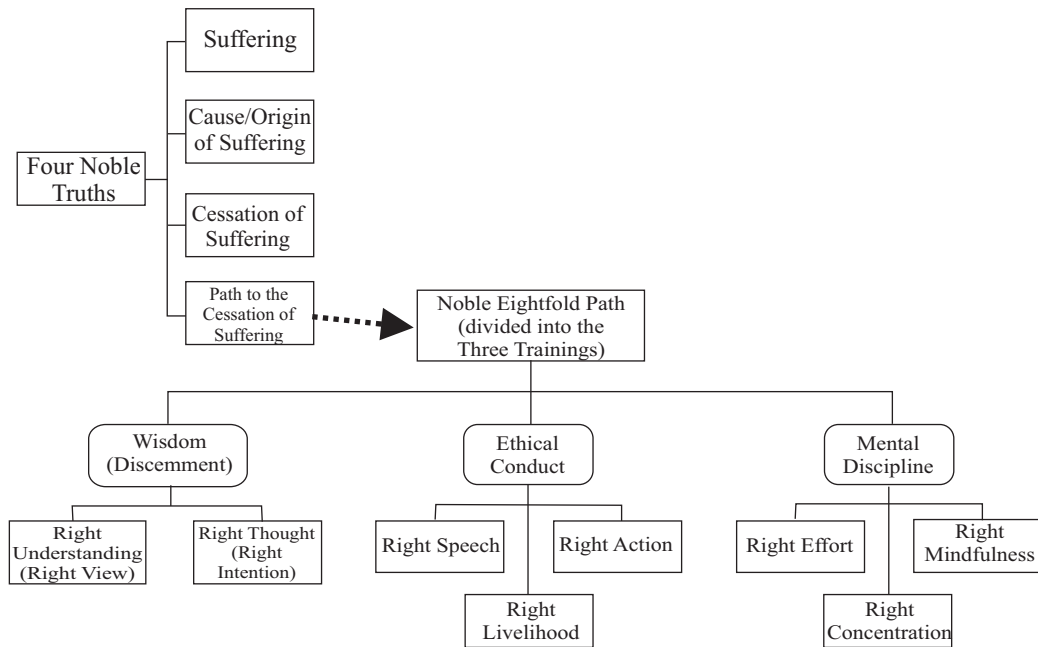
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Right View

The concept of Right View is about the awareness of what is true and right. In the context of leadership, it amounts to having the right vision of seeing and analyzing the internal and external environmental factors in the organization. Leaders have vision which differentiates them from the mass. Vision is the beacon light for an organization as it serves as "a signpost pointing the way for all who need to understand what the organization is and where it intends to go" (Nanus, 1992). It has a future orientation, hence, only a leader in true sense of the term can visualize the prospects of new policies or practices and also "how whole new sets of expectations, relationships, accountability structures, etc., would fit together into a coherent whole" (Seeley, 1992). Leaders with the right view have the power to actually represent the vision amongst members of the organization in a dramatic manner which renders the vision a form. Steve Jobs, for instance, had the vision to call Macintosh as an 'insanely great' product, which will 'make a difference' and he described his co-workers as 'the people who would have been poets in the sixties and they're looking at computers as their medium of expression rather than language.' (Jobs, 1984: 18).The quality of a leader is characterized by the fact that he has a shared vision in which all members of the organization have a stake. It is this sharing of personal vision with the members of the organization that acts as the differentiating factor between a leader and a manager (Manasse, 1986). "Vision comes alive only when it is shared" (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989).

Right Intention

In the era of cut throat competition, all business entities are facing, fighting or declaring a war- sometimes in the form of war for talent, sometimes, for resources, and the like. A leader cannot escape the fact that he has to lead from the front in such circumstances. For waging and winning this war, the leader must have right intention which can only be possible through managing of his emotions. He must have the right balance of rational and emotive feelings when initiating an action. Awareness of one's intentions and managing them positively is crucial. It takes practice! Researchers generally describe emotional intelligence as the sum total of a person's mind capabilities that enable him/her to understand one's own and others' emotions correctly, in real time, and to manage these emotions rationally so as to produce personally and socially desirable transactional outcomes (Goleman et al., 2001; Kunnanatt, 2004; Salovey and Grewal, 2005; Zeidner et al., 2008)**.**

Right Speech

Literature on leadership research has shown that leaders can significantly influence individual, group, and organizational performance (Gerstner and Day, 1997; Judge et al., 2004; Lowe et al., 1996). As per a Harvard Business School study on factors it takes to achieve success and be promoted in an organization, the individual who gets ahead in business is the person who "is able to communicate, to make sound decisions, and to get things done with and through people" (Bowman et al., 1964). It is evident that Right Speech or communication has immense power to influence. Leadership communication consists of three primary rings (1) core, (2) managerial, and (3) corporate Communication strategies are included in the core, and managers need to use it effectively for leadership communication. (Arsovski.and Nikezić, 2012). Speech must be clear, accurate and concise to avoid ambiguity. It must have the power to motivate even the dead. The relationship between leader's verbal skills and outcomes is clearly embodied within the motivating language model (Sullivan, 1988). The role of language goes beyond being a mechanism for leadership control. Language can be a means of motivating and conveying strategic vision to subordinates (Conger, 1991). In addition, oral communication has been modeled as both a form of managerial influence and mitigation (Drake and Moberg, 1986). Sullivan (1988) theorized motivating language as a model of effective leadership speech. A strategic and well delivered speech of a leader at regular intervals can act as a tactical strategy to bridge the distance between leader's resolve and intent and employee understanding to favorably influence employee outcomes and in the long run, organizational strategic outcomes as well.Right Speech is also about talking, and includes communication through email or through messaging, and taking care that it is done in a manner that does not hurt feelings, that does not involve lying, gossiping or making people angry intentionally with one's speech else it would lead to negative repercussions. Leaders should express their opinions by

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learning to pay attention on the intention behind what is being said, and deciding if the utterance would lead to positive or negative results.

Right Livelihood

It is concerned with ensuring that one earns one's living in a righteous way. The Buddha teaches that wealth should be gained in accordance with certain standards like it should be acquired only by legal means, it should be acquired peacefully; without coercion or violence; one should acquire it honestly, not by trickery or deceit; and one should acquire it in ways which do not entail harm and suffering for others. A leader should be ethical and should not harm or exploit others. Yukl (2006) stated that effective leadership means mobilizing and influencing followers in the required direction. It also suggests that ethical leaders guide employees towards responsible goals and objectives which benefit the organization and its members. A Leader's integrity plays a major role in the ethical choices the followers make. They observe the Leader and imitate the behavior of the leader. Lewicki et al. (2001) found that ethical behavior of supervisors wither positively or negatively affect the ethical climate for workers. Robertson & Anderson (1993) too found in their study that leaders create a climate that influences the ethical decisions of the followers. The followers trust a Leader who exhibits ethical and honest behaviour. Integrity that a leader exhibits leads to a positive working relationships and positive business outcomes (Becker 2003). A leader following right livelihood should not only be ethical, but needs to treat people fairly, should also demonstrate respect for other's values, appreciates the individuals contributions and engages in reflective practice. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) noted that transformational leadership is only authentic when it is grounded on the leader's moral character, concern for others, and congruence of ethical values with action.

Right Action

This part of the path is about being mindful of one's action or behavior around so that it leads to helping the cause and does not result in suffering or harmfulness. Right intentions lead to right *actions*. A leader must have the right understanding of whether his actions will affect him or the others positively or negatively. The following table summarizes seven types of action logic with strengths and weaknesses of each (Rooke.and Torbert, 2005)

A leader's credibility and trustworthiness are critical, and increasing numbers make the case that character—as defined by qualities and the accompanying right action like one's striving for fairness, respecting others, humility, and concern for the greater good which together represent the most critical quality of leadership (e.g., Sankar, 2003).

Table 1. Seven Transformations of Leadership

Type	Characteristics	Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunist	Wins any way possible. Self-oriented; manipulative; "might makes right."	Good in emergencies and in pursuing sales.	Few people want to follow them for the long term.
Diplomat	Avoids conflict. Wants to belong; obeys group norms; doesn't rock the boat.	Supportive glue on teams.	Can't provide painful feedback or make the hard decisions needed to improve performance.
Expert	Rules by logic andexpertise. Uses hard data to gain consensus and buy-in.	Good individual contributor.	Lacks emotional intelligence; lacks respect for those with less expertise.
Achiever	Meets strategic goals. Promotes teamwork; juggles managerial duties and responds to market demands to achieve goals.	Well suited to managerial work.	Inhibits thinking outside the box.
Individualist	Operates in unconventional ways. Ignores rules he/she regards as irrelevant.	Effective in venture and consulting roles.	Irritates colleagues and bosses by ignoring key organizational processes and people.
Strategist	Generates organizational and personal change. Highly collaborative; weaves visions with pragmatic, timely initiatives; challenges existing assumptions.	Generates transformations over the short and long term.	None
Alchemist	Generates social transformations (e.g., Nelson Mandela). Reinvents organizations in historically significant ways.	Leads society wide change.	None

Source: David Rooke and William R. Torbert, 2005

Right Effort

Right effort consists of persisting efforts to abandon wrong and harmful thoughts, deeds and words through self-schooling. The Buddha says that right effort helps the way one can transform the whole structure of their lives. The right effort can be divided into four aspects – The effort to prevent an unrisen unwholesome states from arising, the effort to abandon the arisen unwholesome states, develop the undeveloped wholesome states, Strengthen and

cultivate the existing wholesome states. It means that the right effort should be directed to prevent bad conduct from arising at all in the life and also to prevent bad conduct which has not arisen but which is liable to arise in the future. It should also be directed towards wholesome states, where in one puts effort not only to attain the higher purities like love, kindness and compassion and also to sustain, grow and develop them.

Leadership Member Exchange Theory also highlights that leaders develop different types of exchange relationship with the followers (Gerstner and Day, 1997; Liden et al., 1997; Sparrowe and Liden, 1997). A relationship based domain of Leadership is highly important for effective management. It takes into consideration the Right Effort. It is characterized by high levels of trust, interaction, support and formal and informal rewards (Dienesch and Liden, 1986). In order to have effective leadership, the focus is not only on the task but also to exhibit right conduct and attaining purities of kindness, compassion and love for the followers.

Right Mindfulness

Right mindfulness is focused on having control over the mind. It means to be aware of one's thoughts, feeling, and actions so that one is not controlled by them. It also focuses on the awareness an individual must have to know the world around him and its operations. Effective Leadership focuses on self-awareness as the key element for Right mindfulness. Self – awareness is the ability to detect and feelings, in real time, as they occur within us. Self-aware individuals are able to read and "link" their feelings with what they think and act (Mayer and Salovey, 1993; McGarvey, 1997). A leader who is self –aware has a control over his mind, thoughts and actions. The leader will be effective in setting goals and ensuring that the goals aim at organizational effectiveness. Self-leadership (Manz, 1986; Manz and Neck, 2004) is a process through which individuals control their own behavior, influencing and leading themselves through the use of specific sets of behavioral and cognitive strategies. Research also suggests that self- managing work teams are those that engage in behaviors that facilitate self-leadership strategies such as self-observation, self-goal setting and self-reward (Manz and Sims, 1987). Hence leaders need to focus on the Right mindfulness in order to achieve the desiredresults in the organization.

Right Concentration

The Buddha focuses on Right concentration as an important aspect in Leadership. It is a way of avoiding distractions and disruptive emotions and directing the mind toward productive action. The Buddha taught specific practices to cultivate right concentration, forms of meditation that encouraged either tranquility or insight. A Leader has multiple roles to play and they are multitaskers hence need to focuson the Right Concentration. A leader has to be

focused on the task and mediation helps a leader to focus on the goals and achieve desired results through the team member. Research shows that the Japanese leaders have theadvantageon focusing on the tasks because of the Buddhist philosophy and training in concentration and achievement. (Genestre et al. 1995). An excellent method for leaders to cope with the stressful situation and tasks is through meditation (Foo, 2012). Arias (2008) demonstrated a relationship between meditation practice and stress reduction, change assimilation, conflict management and leadership performance. His research highlighted a positive relation between meditation and executive stress levels and the executives' capabilities to managing conflicts within business organization environment. Organisationstoday are focusing on mindful leadership and use of mindful practices like meditation, introspection and journaling thereby ensuring effective leadership at workplace. Right concentration is becoming an extremely important element for effective Leadership in the present business environment.

Conclusion & Future Research

An article in CEO Magazine (Martin, 2003) observed that "the age of the imperial CEO is waning. In its place, a crop of new CEOs – humble, team building, highly communicative – are rising" (p.25). On similar lines, one of the interesting findings in the book Good to Great (Collins, 2001) was of the universally modest and self-effacing nature of CEOs in the good-to-great companies. This paper assumes that the interest in the characters of leaders will not wane in near future and more studies are required in the years ahead for gaining a greater clarity of concept about these subtle notions if they are to play a prominent role in leadership development practices in organizations. Effective leadership is required to achieve business excellence. It is in this light that the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism can show the way in highlighting the qualities for improving the leader's performance, credibility, and his ability to lead others. It highlights the most integral characteristics like self-reflection, compassion for one's staff, peers and managers, integrity required for effective leadership. The Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism can be used as a model and be further tested to provide inputs to organizations to identify and train managers in the eight paths for being effective leaders, thereby developing a positive and rewarding work relationship in the organization.

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