

Leadership Dilemmas

“Leadership is Practiced not so Much in Words as in Attitude and in Actions” Harold S. Geneen

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Abstract

India is not a country known for good leadership. Leaders are not born they are made. Even the best of leaders have weaknesses. A leader must have courage to take decisions. Taking risk is inherent part of leadership.

A yes man is a dangerous man. Success is yours, failure is mine, this is what makes a leader stand out.

Keyword: Leadership, Leader, Dilemmas, Decision, Risk, Delegation, Manage, Success Failure

Introduction

We are a country known for poor leadership. There is lack of leadership in every walk of life, whether it is political, administrative, educational institutions, or sports organisations. It is also an established fact that leaders are not born, they are made. Unfortunately we are not making leaders. Somewhere at some level the need to train or make leaders is not felt and it is leaving a vacuum.

If we were to successfully make leaders it will be imperative to deal with dilemmas that leaders come across. No one is perfect, not even the best of leaders. Napoleon, Caesar, Montgomery – all were terrific leaders but all had their weaknesses. The ability of leader is not as much as not to have weaknesses but his ability to not show the weakness and instead move ahead inspite of them. That is where a good leaders stands out from others.

During the course of my research I have come across some dilemmas that a leader will go through. How these dilemmas are dealt with will perhaps distinguish between

a good leader and not so good one. The most common dilemmas are dealt within this paper.

Decision Making

One of the most differentiating qualities in leaders is the ability to take decision. In an interview with Wharton University, former President of India, Abdul Kalam Azad says, “A leader must have the courage to take decisions”. Surely decision making requires courage because decision making is fraught with risks. No decision can ever be 100 percent risk proof. Every decision, for that matter, will have its positives and negatives. But the leader has to take the decision and accept all the risks associated with it. It is the risks which prevent many from taking decisions. Some even go the extent of believing that “Not taking a decision is also a decision.” It is perhaps not for an effective leader.

Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw in one of his talks said, “If you do not take a decision, you are doing something wrong. An act of omission is much worse than an act of commission. An act of commission can be put right. An act of omission cannot.” Take the example of the time when the Babri Masjid was about to be destroyed. If the Prime Minister, at that stage, had taken a decision to stop it, a whole community – 180 million would not have been harmed. But, because he did not take a decision, you have at least 180 million people in this country alone who do not like us.

I remember a colleague once narrating this small incidence. Early morning the servant woke him up and after customary Good Morning asked him, what he would like to have, tea or coffee. Pat came his reply, “Please do not ask me for a decision to start the day with.” So decision making can be as challenging as that.

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Ability to Take Risks

History is full of examples of opportunities with some risks coming in way of many people, some take the risk and move on to become very successful, some take risk and perish and some maintain status quo by not taking the risk. Whether it is business or your job or the defence forces, it is seen that people who dared to take the risk and succeeded made quantum jump in their line of pursuit. As we have seen in the previous point, risk is inherent in almost every decision that we take. So we will not dwell upon the risk associated with decision making but concentrate more on the risk that is required to be taken to exploit an opportunity which just presents itself.

In today's competitive world many are tending towards perfectionism and what is commonly called Zero Error Syndrome. Take no risk, commit no mistake. In leadership positions such an attitude will have limited utility. Whereas an odd individual may progress overall the business or the organisation will tend to stagnate.

Stock markets are an example of opportunities which present themselves with high risk. Those who take it make lot of money and those who do not lag behind. In 2010 when the Satyam scam broke out the shares of Satyam touched as low as Rs 9. Those who took the risk are enjoying the wealth because in about 4 years time the scrip is quoting at Rs 300, it has multiplied nearly 30 times. An amount of Rs 10000 invested in 2010 would today fetch Rs 3.0 lakhs.

Jim McCormick, the former Chief Operating Officer of an international design firm says, "Our inability to take risks and the fear of failure is killing innovation and initiative. Those leaders who take calculated risks move on and become more successful than those who are always looking for ideal environment to perform."

Delegation

Many a times a leader thinks that he knows the best and he knows all. He tries to do everything himself leaving very little for his subordinates. The talked about Zero Error Syndrome is adding to the problem because the leader wants to succeed at all costs and therefore he feels the best solution is he does everything himself. In such a situation the output gets restricted because the synergy of the team has not been used at all. It's a single hand effort

which has not fully utilized the effort of 10 others. The output is therefore bound to fall short of optimum. Such a situation occurs because we do not trust our subordinates and have inherent fear of failure. The overall efficiency in a system where there is no delegation will be below par.

"As soon as a man climbs up to a high position, he must train his subordinates and trust them.

They must relieve him of all small matters. He must be set free to think, to travel, to plan, to see important customers, to make improvements, to do all the big jobs of leadership.", says Herbert N Casson.

Herbert Casson has all but summed up the delegation and the inefficiency that will creep into the system if there is no delegation.

Learn to Say No

As a leader it is important to stand up and say NO. A 'yes man' is a dangerous man. As a leader yes man, you do disservice to both your seniors as well as to your subordinates. To your superiors because you fail in your duty to render correct advise and to your subordinates because you fail to highlight their plight losing much of moral right as a leader. Nothing can be explained better than the three examples illustrated below. These are about how the army leadership reacted during the crisis in 1962, 1971, and the Sri Lanka crisis.

In 1962 when the Chinese occupied the Thang La ridge in Dec 1962, the Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru called the army chief and asked him to throw out the Chinese. At this critical juncture the chief did not say 'No', knowing fully well that his army was neither prepared at this time nor it had the necessary equipment and armament to take on the Chinese. He followed the instructions as a yes man and the army as well as the nation suffered huge humiliation. The military leader failed in his duty to advise his superior the political boss correctly and his subordinates had to pay a huge price for his yes man ship.

In April 1971 there was an influx of refugees from Bangladesh into West Bengal, Assam and some other North Eastern states. The then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi was under tremendous pressure from the state Chief Ministers to act. She called the Army Chief General Sam Manekshaw and asked him for military intervention. The General stood up to say that he required minimum

6 months to prepare and mobilise the army. As also he will prefer a Nov-Dec time as that time the Chinese front would be sealed by snowfall. If at that time the military leader had acted as the yes man perhaps the history of 1971 war may have been different.

In 1987 post the signing of India Sri Lanka accord the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi called the army chief General K Sunderji and asked him to send the army as peacekeeping force to take on disarming of LTTE and to be prepared to fight if some elements of LTTE were not falling in line. The General in his wisdom said yes without being clear of the mission and without asking for adequate time for preparations. The army went in without clear instructions and had to pay a heavy price in terms of casualties in the initial phases.

Success is Yours, Failure is Mine

How often do you see a leader passing on the credit for success to his team and standing up to take responsibility for failure? May be not very often. In this competitive world people jump to take credit even when their contribution has been minimal and hide behind their subordinates when things go wrong. But this is exactly what is required from a true leader. Let us see the happenings in ISRO where the players are Satish Dhawan, the Chairman and Abdul Kalam Azad the Project Leader.

In August 1979 with Abdul Kalam as the mission leader the SLV 3 was launched. The mission ended up in a failure. Mr Satish Dhawan the Chairman took charge at the Press Conference and took the entire responsibility for the failure assuring the nation that they shall work harder and will soon succeed. Next year in July 1980 when the next attempt was made, the mission succeeded. When the time came for Press Conference Mr Satish Dhawan asked Abdul Kalam to go and address the press. This is a near perfect example of a leader Mr Satish Dhawan who took responsibility for the failure and when it came to success he passed the baton on to his team. This should serve as the example to leaders at all levels.

Managing Failures

It is very important for the leader to manage failure. More often than not we are able manage the success well but crumble when it comes to managing the failure. Should that happen we and the team shall not recover and regain lost ground. In the example above, if Mr Satish Dhawan had not managed the failure of 1979 well, then perhaps the team under Abdul Kalam would never have recovered to register a successful launch in 1980.

Conclusion

Leadership is all about instinct and attitude. Some of the dilemmas a leader is faced with can make or mar a leader. The true worth a leader is in fact known when the going gets tough. And the ability to overcome these dilemmas can be developed. It can be developed by training and guidance. Remember the team always looks at the leader to come out with solutions when such ambiguous situations come. It is for the leader to stand up for the team and take them through thick and thin.

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