

The Participation-Direction Debate in Leadership: Insights from Ramayana

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The participation versus direction debate has been an enduring one in the leadership literature. Contemporary theoretical frameworks are used to analyze an episode from the Indian epic Ramayana to get insights into this issue. The analysis points out that participation and direction may be effective leader choices rather than styles of effective leaders as such. Further, it highlights the need to examine the role of psychological ownership and informational justice respectively for the participation and direction choices to be effective.

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Introduction

“Leadership should be more participative than directive, more enabling than performing”

Mary D. Poole

Leadership theorists tend to prefer participation over direction as an attribute of effective leadership. Participation and direction refer respectively to high or low follower involvement in decision making (Northouse, 2010; Yukl, 1999). Some of the theories restrict this general trend with contingencies. For example, the path-goal theory suggests that followers with low technical know-how may prefer directive leaders, whereas those with high technical know-how may prefer participative leaders (House, 1996). Nevertheless, the underlying belief is that leaders preferring participation or direction are different in kind. Yukl (1999) challenged this belief with the assertion that participation and direction are attributes of leader choices rather than leaders themselves. Leaders may not be effective if they opt for participation or direction as a matter of habit rather than a need-based choice.

There is a lack of strong and consistent empirical evidence for the effectiveness of participative leadership (Yukl, 1999; 2009). This may mean that participation weakly or moderately influences leader effectiveness; however, this may also mean that conceptualizing it as a leader attribute is itself a mistake. The problem may not be resolved by simply conceptualizing participation and direction in terms of leader choices. It may still not be possible to empirically show that these choices significantly influence leader effectiveness because that may be a function of their effective use rather than the choices as such. Ramayana, the celebrated epic of India, portrays many decision situations that can be analyzed to gain some insights into this matter; however, for the purpose of this article, we will focus on one particular episode portrayed in the 17th and 18th chapters of the Book 6 (Yuddha Kanda) of the Valmiki Ramayana (VR).

The Story in Nutshell

Prince Rama accepted the 14 year exile to honor his father's words. While in exile, the demon emperor Ravana abducted his wife Sita. Rama resolved to protect righteousness. He made friendship with the monkey emperor Sugriva and attacked Lanka, the kingdom of Ravana. In the meanwhile, Vibhishana, the youngest of Ravana's brothers advised him to return Sita to save the country from an impending war; however, Ravana preferred to exile him instead. Vibhishana came to join Rama's side and conveyed his prayers. When Rama came to know about it, he asked his advisors for their opinion in this regard. Demons

had earned an unblemished reputation for chicanery and Vibhishana was the younger brother of Ravana himself. Therefore, the question of whether to accept him as a friend assumed particular significance.

The advisors were generally skeptical about Vibhishana's intentions and suggested either to treat him as an enemy or to examine his true intent by various means. Hanuman, the most learned and intelligent of them all, opined that such suggestions may be wrong. He suggested that Vibhishana may be desirous of gaining the kingdom after Ravana. In that case, it would be perfectly right for him to approach Rama given that Rama has already helped Sugriva to gain kingdom. However, Sugriva remained vehemently against accepting Vibhishana. It was clear that a resolution was not in sight. Finally, Rama gave his firm decision to accept Vibhishana and explained his reasons.

Participation-Direction Debate

This particular episode in Ramayana proves to be a turning point in the Rama-Ravana war. Lanka was said to be impregnable even by gods; however, it became vulnerable with insider information provided by Vibhishana. The advisors were well aware that the decision was potentially a high-impact one – positive or negative. Rama himself acknowledged this by describing it as a difficult decision while asking for their advice (VR.VI.17.33).

There are a number of questions that the reader of this episode may confront.

A key argument for participation is that people tend to own the decisions they help make (Vroom, 2000). What was the need for participation in this case? This question assumes importance given the fact that Rama held his ground independent of the opinions of his advisors. He articulated his principle of accepting someone as a friend who comes with the offer (VR.VI.18.3). Given this solemn principle, he could have gone ahead with his decision without actually asking anyone.

The need for participation was there for two reasons. First, Sugriva became suspicious of Vibhishana by observing that he came battle-ready with all his weapons (VR.VI.17.4). His doubt intensified when Vibhishana introduced himself as the younger brother of Ravana. Sugriva carried the message of Vibhishana to Rama and conveyed his deep suspicions as well. His suspicions were entirely legitimate. Therefore, it was important to examine the issue at length. Second, Sugriva was Rama's friend and the revered emperor of the monkeys. His concerns might be representative of what others in the army think. He aired his concerns in front of all advisors present. His action, though well meaning, had the potential to prime negative attitude toward Vibhishana in their minds as well. Therefore, it was important to address his concerns publicly so that Vibhishana gains wholehearted acceptance from all and sundry.

Does that mean that the participation was for mere namesake? In other words, did Rama want to merely thrust his views on others through this exercise? A careful reading of the chapters 17 and 18 of

the Book 6 would clarify that it is not so. It was clear to Rama that all advisors had his well being in mind (VR.VI.17.33). He had two-fold task before him: a) to understand the reasons behind negative attitude toward the offer made by Vibhishana and b) to turn such negative attitudes into positive given his principled stance. None of these two purposes could have been possibly served by thrusting upon his views. However, the second purpose required sensegiving on his part. Sensegiving is a symbolic exercise for developing desired meaning context and leaders often need to engage in it (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). The leader communicates his or her perspective in such a manner that highlights the desired aspects of the issue at hand. It helps to develop a meaning-making framework for the target audience so that they can see things in a favorable light. It works on the basis of trust and legitimacy rather than power and authority.

What was the need to understand others views given the principled stance of Rama? The social identity literature suggests people construct their identity in social interactions (Abrams & Hogg, 2004; Hogg, Abrams, Otten & Hinkle, 2004). Moreover, significant relationships as well as significant collectives such as families and social groups constitute parts of their identity (Spears, 2002; Turner & Onorato, 1999). Social identity processes work in such manner that people tend to have in-group bias whereby, they view their own collective category in a positive light and a referent other collective category in a negative light (Boninger, Krosnick & Berent,

1995; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Pittinsky, 2010). At the time, monkeys and demons were the most important referent categories for each other given the impending war. The natural tendency to view the out-group with suspicion must be significantly strengthened due to animosity. Therefore, suspicion as such could not be a good reason for a leader to decide regarding such an important issue. Once people are allowed to articulate their views, it can be easier to understand whether their concerns are general i.e. an expression of in-group bias or particular i.e. other issues of significance. Particular issues might have been important to know to make an informed decision. The chapter 17 stands testimony to the fact that the advisors aired concerns out of the general tendency to view the other category with suspicion. Thus it offered a good ground for sensegiving efforts of Rama.

Was Rama naïve in taking a principled stance toward an enemy? The 18th chapter shows that it was not so. First, it was uncertain whether Vibhishana was an enemy though he belonged to that category. Rama indicated at this possibility while saying to Sugriva that it was common among the kings to have hostile relatives (VR.VI.18.10-11). Rama also mentioned that not all brothers are without any lust for power (VR.VI.18.15). Second, Rama was fully aware of his great prowess. His prowess was established beyond doubt on numerous previous occasions. He asserted that Vibhishana was incapable of causing any harm to him even if he attempts to harm him (VR.VI.18.22). Sugriva had no reason to doubt this because he had been a

witness to Rama's incomparable prowess on previous occasions.

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Why was it needed for Rama to engage in sensegiving? The attitude literature suggests that favorable and unfavorable attitudes are two different dimensions where people can be simultaneously low, high or high in one and low in the other (cf:Pittinsky, 2010) . It was possible for the monkeys to accept Vibhishana because Rama asked them to; however, that might not have alleviated their negative attitude toward him. Thus Vibhishana might have felt unwelcome sooner or later. Therefore, Rama engaged in storytelling to emphasize the moral aspect of his decision and its sanction by tradition. Storytelling allows meaning-making at different levels, whereas, an appeal to tradition bestows much needed legitimacy on the decision. Thus it was possible for different advisors to appreciate Rama's position from their own stand point.

Rama understood that all the suspicions were directed toward the category rather than the person. There was no evidence to affirm the categorical suspicion. Besides, Hanuman had already articulated the shortcomings of advices offered by the advisors. However, no argument was able to convince Sugriva. Therefore, Rama had to resort to the directive way to settle the matter.

It is important to note that Rama had only moral authority over Sugriva, if at all given their friendship. He was famous for consistency in thoughts, words, and deeds. Rama indicated that he would not forsake virtue due to any reason. He had already practiced that when accepting his 14 year exile. Therefore, his assertion of the moral principle of protecting those seeking refuge (VR.VI.18.33) had credibility. He went on to say that he would not turn away Ravana himself if he were to come seeking refuge (VR.VI.18.34). This showed that the impending war was indeed to uphold virtue rather than to take personal revenge. Priming a higher cause expanded the cognitive boundaries of the categories of friends and enemies. Now those supporting virtue were friends irrespective of whether they were monkeys or demons. Therefore, the general bias gave way to acceptance and bolstered every one's faith in Rama's moral integrity and generosity. Thus Rama was able to take all his advisors along with him in this decision.

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Conclusion

Tales from Ramayana and other epics can be not only an interesting way to study philosophy and religion but also important frameworks for understanding issues of contemporary concern. Their depth and richness of description allows for multi-level meaning-making. These tales can also be analyzed using modern social science theories.

The episode discussed above offers three important insights regarding the participation-direction debate in leadership. First, it shows that Rama chose participation and direction as per the need. The effectiveness wasn't inherent in these choices but in their timing and manner of exercise. Thus rethinking participation in terms of leader choice and articulating the contingencies for effectiveness may be needed.

Rama chose participation and direction as per the need.

Second, it shows that psychological ownership may be more important than participation as such. Psychological ownership refers to the feelings of possession – that something is “Mine” (Alok & Israel, 2012; Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). Sugriva challenged Rama out of a deep sense of ownership of the cause and a concern for Rama's wellbeing. All the advisors had mentioned these aspects before saying what they had to (e.g. VR.VI.17.34-37). It was not so much a desire to participate in the decision making but to care for what they considered as their own. The interplay of psychological ownership and participation needs to be empirically examined.

Third, informational justice may be an important criterion for effective direction. It refers to the leaders offering proper explanation of the decisions concerning followers (Colquitt, 2001). Rama offered considerate explanation of his decision with reference to the arguments

offered by Sugriva and others. He allowed them to talk in order to understand the basis of their concerns. Once it was clear that the concerns were grounded in mere categorical feelings, he targeted the category boundaries with his tools of sensegiving. It helped the advisors change their attitude and accept Vibhishana wholeheartedly.

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