Chapter 1

Ancient Wisdom for Transformational Leadership and Its Insights from the Bhagavad-Gita

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ABSTRACT

During the past one decade we have witnessed an increase in number of literatures on ancient wisdom in leadership. Among the Indian (Asian) literatures, the Bhagavad-Gita is often cited by many scholars. Therefore, in this chapter, the authors attempt to draw a parallel between the transformational leadership and the Bhagavad-Gita. The significance of transformational leadership has received great attention and good amount of study has been done in this area. For this chapter, the authors have employed hermeneutics, which is a methodology used for the interpretation of ancient literatures. The Bhagavad-Gita advocates a consciousness and a spirit-centered approach to transformational leadership based on eternal values and moral principles. This chapter is likely to provide insights into Indian (Asian) leadership (and management) strategies for Western business leaders, enabling them to work more effectively with Indian business leaders in India, and in regions where there are significant Indian population.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is one of the most researched subjects and an interesting topic of discussions around the world. Researchers have examined leadership skills from a variety of perspectives. Leadership research itself is a multidisciplinary field and has origins in the social sciences such as psychology, sociology, social psychology, anthropology, political science and economics. Besides it also has origins in humanities such as history, philosophy, religion and spirituality. Leadership is generally defined as the process DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9758-4.ch001
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of influencing the activities of an individual or a group in efforts towards achieving certain goals. The word “influencing” can be substituted with other words such as transforming, empowering, driving, motivating and inspiring. In leadership the leader is the key in transforming the followers. The leader is the most important element in leadership. The personality, behavior and character of the leader are an important determinant for success of any organization, society and country.

In academia, leadership theories and concepts from the West have dominated the world for over two centuries. This dominance is due to colonization and the widespread use of English in many countries and the readily available leadership literatures in English language. However, a careful analysis reveals that many of the recently popularized Western leadership theories and concepts have been in practice in the East for centuries. These practices however were not in the context business organization but in the state or political governance. Sharma (2001) for example, argues that for a leadership system, to be effective, it has to be rooted in the cultural soil of the country, where it is practiced. Many communities and countries in the world are now trying to discover and explore their own indigenous system of leadership and management, which includes financial management, human resource management, customer relationship management, corporate social responsibility and also corporate governance.


THE TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The great debate within the field of management and leadership has always been to distinguish between the roles of a manager and a leader. Earlier the foremost objective of a manager was believed to be maintaining the balance of operations, while that of a leader was to create new approaches and imagine new areas to explore. Researchers in the field came up with the revolutionary view that managers and leaders are basically different types of people, and that their orientations towards their goals, their work, their human relations, and their selves are almost diametrically opposite. This distinction between manager and leader, in due course of time, led to the two styles, transactional leadership and transformational leadership both coming under the set of leadership styles available today (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978).

Burns (1978) introduced the concept of transformational leadership, describing it as not a set of specific behaviors but rather a process by which leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation. He stated that transformational leaders are individuals that appeal to higher ideals and moral values such as justice and equality and can be found at various levels of an organization. Transformational leadership style harps upon change, innovation and entrepreneurship. It is imaginative enough to change our corporate life-styles to suit the changing and competitive