

Service Oriented Leadership in a Digital Age

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Abstract:

We are living in a world that is becoming digitally native with a wide range of digital divisions. There are increasing concerns on the trust, transparency and tolerance in the surrounding, extended, and digital ecosystem we live in. This article provides a window view of leadership traits in the digital era; how to revisit, review and re-evaluate the intrinsic relationship of emotion and empathy with the leadership traits; and a set of suggestive action points to groom and mentor leaders for a better tomorrow with near digital equality.

Introduction:

The new wave of technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, blockchain technology, Internet-of-Things, machine learning, and digital social media are transforming the way we work and live. In the digital age, a new generation of people who are competent with technologies emerge. These bring new expectations to the workplace and transverse across generations. They are differentiated not by their age, but by their digital competencies. They are tech-savvy with an inherent understanding of digital technologies. They include both digital natives and digital immigrants – those who readily adopt digital technologies. They incorporate analytics and insights into their thought process more so than others. In the digital age, we need qualities such as curiosity, adaptability, agility, anticipative, and empathy from the people – leaders, managers, collaborators, and team members. The widespread use of technologies and the focus on character building while not neglecting cognitive skills, represent a paradigm shift in the way businesses and organisations are managed towards sustainable development and sustainability.

Sustainability:

It is increasingly recognised that many of the practices and lifestyles of contemporary society cannot be sustained indefinitely. Sustainable development is the process of moving human activities to a pattern that can be maintained in perpetuity. The approach is to identify issues related to environment, development and service that seek to reconcile human needs with the capacity of the planet to cope with the consequences of human activities. The sustainability focus areas can be broadly categorised as *techno-economic, eco-centric, and socio-centric*:

- **Techno-economic:** It encompasses techno-economic systems, represents human skills and ingenuity – the skills that we must continue to deploy, and the economic system within which we deploy them.
- **Eco-centric:** It represents the ability of the planet to sustain us - both by providing material and energy resources, and by accommodating us, and our emissions and wastes.
- **Socio-centric:** It represents human expectations and aspirations – the needs of a ‘Human Being’ to become ‘Being Human’ (to live worthwhile lives) – a better quality of life for everyone, now and in the future (One World – One Family – One Future).

Sustainability can be thought of as the key direction where all three sets of focus areas are satisfied, while sustainable development is the process of addressing the needs in each of the focus areas to enable them to move in the direction of sustainability. To achieve sustainability goals with resilience, speed, and consistency, we need to take advantage of technology knowhow in accelerating the conduct of activities, build rational and emotional intelligence to be uniquely responsive to users with a service-oriented mindset, and manage changes with effectiveness, context driven analysis, and empathy.

Leadership:

Success depends upon preparation before starting any activity and practicing the activity with righteous and context-driven principles. Leaders should value righteousness and ethical principles above profits. Their behaviours should be governed by high moral and ethical principles. Organisations have to be sufficiently prepared to face the challenges in the global environment. Leaders have to constantly conduct scenario planning exercises to ensure that they are adequately prepared for any possible challenges that may come on the way. The sustainability of success comes when there is proactive and systematic investment on learning and grooming of the people associated with an organisation. The rate of success gets further accelerated when the leadership style is ‘participative’, organisation’s openness and practices in implementing actions based on 360-degree feedback, and the members of the organisation experiencing autonomy with a balanced governance.

Leaders have to earn the support and respect of their team if they wish to achieve greater goals. This can be achieved if the teams see the following three characters with their leaders:

- Servant-leadership (commitment to the organisational activities, nurturing of the associated ecosystem, knowledgeable on the topics of the discussion, and loyal to organisation’s vision and goals)

- Being human (spiritual in belief, ethical in action, and empathy for ecosystem).
- Being benevolent (known for practicing integrity, caring attitude at work, a Role Model for the team)

We call a leader as '**service-oriented leader**' if the person possesses and practices the above three characteristics. **Service-oriented leaders** are able to nurture the talents of their team and the ecosystem participants. They act as change agents for their organisations. They balance the spiritual (SQ), emotional (EQ), and rational (IQ) intelligence to successfully navigate through the complexities of contextual scenarios. These leaders act with wisdom and compassion while maintaining both inner and outer peace. They collaborate with ecosystem in delivering organisational goals and to cope with the disruptive changes in the surroundings. They lead the organisations systematically and with speed towards the ideal situation – a culture of high ethics, teams that are highly engaged and committed, a work place (either physical, virtual, or hybrid) that respects diversity and inclusivity. They build empathy and loyalty with stakeholders and are perceived by others as being aware of their own values and moral perspectives. They acknowledge their mistakes and are willing to commit to doing things right. They are able to inspire their team and followers to offer their full commitment and create a cycle of ever-improving morale within the organisation. The golden rule is to treat others the way we want others to treat us.

Diversity and Inclusion:

Diversity and inclusion are important as it improves the morale and performance of the organisation. The diverse skills and experiences among the team members enables them to learn from each other. Effective leaders create and maintain a positive work environment where diversity is valued so that the team members can maximise their potential and contribute to the organisation's goals. This approach is an important philosophy as it recognizes the importance of social needs of the individual and motivates the team beyond tangible and economic output. It places the dignity and credibility of the individual over profit to make the business of the organisation more sustainable.

The **service-oriented leaders** drive the organisation culture towards diversity, inclusion and ethical practices. They take the human perspective with technology intervention as a force-multiplier to drive effective customer experience and team motivation. The deciding factor for an organisation's success in the digital age will be its ability to adapt and evolve its culture to not

only take advantage of emerging technologies but also to embrace the principle of humanism in the workplace.

Learning from Indian Scriptures:

The Bhagavad Gita is a Sanskrit scripture in Hinduism and forms part of the larger scriptural epic known as Mahabharata. It details Lord Krishna's advice to the warrior, Arjuna. It is a quintessential manual of Self-awareness and Self-knowledge. The significance of Bhagavad Gita is reflected in its status as a *Shruti* (revealed) text of divine provenance. It teaches *karma yoga* (path of selfless action), *bhakti yoga* (path of devotion) and *jnana yoga* (path of self-knowledge). Many leadership lessons are embedded within Bhagavad Gita such as:

- Leaders must be aware of self and the environment
- Leaders should embrace challenges rather than avoiding them
- Leaders who exercise compassion and selfless service will earn the respect of followers
- Good character is essential for effective leadership

Bhagavad Gita recommends meditation to understand our true self. *Jivanmukti* (realising our true self) is essential for maintaining balance of the self, mind and body through the three *gunas* (virtues, attributes) – *sattva* (goodness, harmonious), *rajas* (passion, active), and *tamas* (darkness, destruction). The three *gunas* are present in every human being but in different proportions and practiced with a varied degree in different contexts. The balance of *gunas* can change in response to changes in internal and external influences. A **service-oriented leader** is able to control his mind effectively, and not let the mind be controlled by the senses. In addition, the Bhagavad Gita noted that three specific disciplines are required for effective leadership: discipline of learning, discipline of proper communication, and discipline of equanimity. The discipline of equanimity calls for composure and not lose balance of the mind in times of crisis. A **service-oriented leader** neither rejoices upon achieving something pleasant or laments upon something unpleasant.

The eighteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita covers leadership renunciation. A **service-oriented leader** renounces selfish desire, arrogance, and inequality. The concept of leadership of *vairagya* (renunciation) is similar to 'servant leadership'. Leaders who act without selfish interest will be able to rally his followers. Those who expound the values and virtues of Bhagavad Gita will have a greater chance of motivating their followers spiritually instead of controlling them. **Service-oriented leaders** are expected to maintain *dharma* in accordance with the order of nature that makes life and universe possible. They value and practice integrity in both articulation and action.

Leaders with high moral character can influence team's innovative and disciplined work behaviour and delivery performance.

Centuries before Six Sigma, Vedanta prescribed a six points path to success in Gita, 3:30. It consists of two aspects – creating energy and plugging dissipation of energy.

Energy is generated by three methods. The intellects direct all thoughts to chosen goal. All energies – light, wind, and water – gain power when unidirectional. Thoughts meandering in different directions lose power. The mind surrenders to the goal, is devoted to the ideal. And the body acts dynamically. The more you act, the more energy you generate.

This energy gets dissipated in three ways – worry over the past, anxiety for the future, and frenzy in the present. The intellect focuses the mind on the present action and does not allow the mind to meander into wasteful avenues of the past and future.

Gautam Buddha on his discourse to Sigala (Sigalovada Sutta) enumerates five ways an employer should treat his employees:

- Assigning work according to their strengths – The work assigned should be according to their mental and physical strengths. Bosses should not take advantage of their employees.
- Giving them food and wages – Pay them accordingly to their efforts
- Supporting them in sickness – Grant them medical leave when they are unwell
- Sharing with them unusual delicacies – Reward them with material means
- Granting leave at suitable times – Grant them time off for their personal matters

Teamwork is an important concept in Buddhism. Personal sacrifice for the benefit of the team helps the organization to pull through the challenging times.

Model based Approach to Develop Service-oriented Leaders in an Organisation:

Every organisation must develop a perpetual program to develop **service-oriented leaders**. Based on the narratives of a **service-oriented leader**, the organisation must plan regular assessment, perpetual learning, and on-the-job experience for its people to build a strong and sustainable pipeline of **service-oriented leaders**. The assessment of the people should be based on the four themes either with a generic market view at a given level or specific to an organisational role:

1. Listening, Understanding, and Acting upon Criticism and Feedback

2. Staying Calm and Focused under Pressure and Persuading Others the Same
3. Staying Positive and Helping Others to Stay Positive
4. Nurturing Ecosystem

The interventions in terms of learning and providing appropriate on-the-job opportunity gradually influence on how a person is responding to the following questionnaire at a granular level and its impact on the intrinsic relationship structure of these questions.

Theme & Questionnaire: Listening, Understanding, and Acting upon Criticism and Feedback

- I attentively listen or read criticism and feedback on me
- I understand the criticism and feedback on me and proactively take appropriate steps
- I am quite open in accepting my mistakes
- My openness to accept criticism and feedback helps me in maturing as a person
- I attentively listen or read criticism and feedback on my team
- I understand the criticism and feedback on my team and proactively communicate the same to the team to the best of my ability based on my role and responsibility within the team
- My team is quite open in accepting the mistake as a team

Theme & Questionnaire: Staying Calm and Focused under Pressure and Persuading Others the Same

- I can stay calm under pressure and keep focusing on my work
- I usually do much better in a pressure situation
- I can successfully persuade others to stay calm under pressure and keep focusing on work
- I set audacious and aspiring goals for me
- I put best efforts to achieve my goals
- I enjoy to work with a team that has audacious and aspiring goals
- I focus on right path to achieve the goal rather than achieving the goal by any mean

Theme & Questionnaire: Staying Positive and Helping Others to Stay Positive

- I remain positive in challenging scenarios
- I manage anxiety, stress, anger, frustration, and fear reasonably well
- I handle setbacks effectively and put best efforts to recover
- I maintain a sense of belongingness in what I do
- I support others to stay positive while facing challenging scenarios
- I put best effort to build a sense of belongingness in my team
- I believe in putting and practicing right processes to achieve the goal

Theme & Questionnaire: Nurturing Ecosystem

- I look at things from others' perspective
- I analyse my behaviour and actions in what way they affect others
- I communicate my concerns to others keeping a view of the collective sentiment
- I am proactive in supporting others in resolving their challenges
- My effectiveness in working with a team is mostly same whether the team is together or remotely distributed
- My effectiveness in addressing team level challenges is mostly same whether the team is together or remotely distributed
- The quality of my interaction with my supervisor remains same irrespective of whether we are co-located or we are virtually connected

Hypothesis and Rules

The basic premises of this framework is based on the hypothesis that the self-assessment of a person having a relatively stable and consistent emotion will have a potential minimum and maximum value to each of the theme-based attribute. The subjective description of at least one recently occurred scenario based on one of the themes provides an associative conjugal relationship. In addition, there exists relationship among different attributes where the assigned value to an attribute may be delimited by the assigned value of a related attribute. Each attribute is associated with one or more 'Emotional Subjective Characteristics' with a unique 'Primary Association'. The Subjective Characteristics are Self-Belief, Self-Practices, Community Belief, Community Practices, and Leadership Character.

Assessment and Rationalization as per the hypothesis and Rules:

A person has to perform the self-assessment by choosing one of the following options for each question based on person's characteristic and practicing frequency against that question?

- I do not possess this character
- I practice this characteristic a few times
- I practice this characteristic quite often
- I practice this characteristic most of the times
- I consistently demonstrated this characteristic

As a part of self-assessment, the person is also expected to write a subjective expression on one of the themes citing a recently occurred scenario.

The model performs the first level rationalisation through re-balancing the objective assessment with the min-max value at theme level, allocating the graded bonus score based on the closeness

to the 'naturally balanced score range' as per the hypothesis, and assessment of the subjective description. Further the treatment of the second level rationalisation is performed by mapping to the expected partial order of some of the attributes within and across the themes, de-allocating the graded debt based on the number of deviations. Finally, the Subjective Characteristics Self-Belief, Self-Practices, Community Belief, Community Practices, and Leadership Character are computed based on certain relationship principles. These scores, the attributes, and the theme level rationalised scores provide insights to spiritual, emotional and rational intelligence of the person. These insights provide guidance for interventions at learning and practice level for the person towards perpetual improvements and **service-oriented leadership**.

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