

Corporate Leadership Lessons from Lord Krishna as Depicted in Mahabharata

Pratik C. Patel

Assistant Professor, B.R.C.M. College of Business Administration, Sarvajanic University, V T Choksi Law College Campus, Surat-395007, Gujarat, India; pratik.patel@brcmbba.ac.in

Abstract

Leadership is a powerful enabler that can leverage an organization to great heights. One such leader is found in the greatest Indian epic "Mahabharata". Krishna through his inspirational leadership guided Pandavas towards the victory. The lessons Krishna gave to Pandavas are equally relevant in today's highly competitive corporate world also. This paper discusses in detail, the qualities of a great leader as deliberated and exhibited by lord Krishna, in the epic Mahabharata. These traits of lord Krishna can be a source of inspiration for any corporate leader.

Keywords: Corporate Leader, Leadership Traits, Mahabharata, Lord Krishna

1. Introduction

The story of Mahabharata is the story of victory of good over evil. Krishna is the main protagonist of Hindu epic Mahabharata who guided Pandavas to the victory in the war of Kurukshetra.

The leadership trait as depicted by Krishna are the lessons for one and all. The present paper highlights few important lessons.

1.1 Optimum Utilization of Limited Resources

Kauravas were much stronger than the Pandavas, both in physical strength and skills. Pandavas had 7 divisions of army against 11 divisions of Kauravas. The Kauravas side had great warriors like Ashwattama and Bhishma who were immortal. They also had supremely talented warriors such as Dronacharya, Kripacharya, Kritavarma, Duryodhana and Karna. Still, Pandavas won the battle of Kurukshetra because of Krishna's ability to use the available resources tactfully.

Learning: A Corporate leader is expected to use all organization's resources including the Human Resource in the most efficient manner.

1.2 Strategy

Krishna was a strategist par excellence, whose strategies no one could anticipate, even remotely. The Pandavas got immensely benefited by Krishna's strategies. Bheeshma Pitamah was the biggest obstacle between the Pandavas and their victory. So, Krishna decided to bring Shikhandi (half man) before Bheeshma. Bheeshma knowing the past of Shikhandi put down his weapons. Taking advantage of this situation Arjuna killed the mighty Bheeshma.

Again, when the balance was shifting towards Kauravas, Krishna brought the mighty Ghatotkacha (Son of Bheema) to the battlefield. Ghatotkacha created havoc in the Kauravas' army using his power of illusion. Ghatotkacha was so powerful that nobody from Kauravas' army could stand against him. Ultimately Duryodhana made Karna to use its most powerful weapon "**Shakti Astra**" (Which he had saved to kill Arjuna) to kill him.

Though Ghatotkacha was killed but Arjuna was saved from Karna's deadly weapon.

Learning: It's the well-articulated strategies not the military strength that win you battles.

1.3 Long Term Planning

Krishna knew that Karna had acquired the divine 'Shakti Astra' from Indra just to kill Arjuna. So, Krishna ensured that Arjuna and Karna don't come face to face. Then he brought Ghatotkacha in the battlefield who created havoc in Kauravas' army. Ultimately on Duryodhana's insistence Karna had to use the **Shakti Astra** to kill Ghatotkacha. Thus, Krishna saved Arjuna by sacrificing Ghatotkacha.

Learning: A leader should always have a long-term vision and plan for the organization; and for that if required he must be ready to sacrifice short-term gains also.

1.4 Targeting Opponent's Weakness

It was Krishna who convinced Dharmaraj Yudhishthira to tell a lie (Half-truth) to Dronacharya about his son Ashwathama's death. Yudhishthira told him that Ashwathama was killed (Actually Bheema had killed an elephant named 'Ashwathama'). Hearing about his son's death, Dronacharya lost interest in life and dropped his weapons. Taking advantage of the situation, Dhrishtadyumna killed Dronacharya.

Learning: When to attack on opponent's weakness is an art one can learn from Krishna.

1.5 Identifying True Potential of People

The greatest warrior Arjuna lost his motivation to fight the battle on very first day after seeing his friends and family members as opponents. He dropped his weapons in despair. At this precise moment Krishna gave Arjuna the Geeta discourse which helped him realised his true strength and potential. Arjuna recovered, strengthened his mental resolve, and decided to fight the battle.

Learning: The greatest role of a corporate leader also is to identify the true potential of his subordinates and help them grow and achieve professional heights.

1.6 Quick Accessibility and Problem-Solver

Krishna's greatest positive was that he was always accessible and available to help his friends. Whether it is friend Sudama's financial problem or the shameful

incident of Draupadi's Vastraharan in Hastinapur court; Krishna was always there to help those who believed in him.

Learning: Great leaders are always accessible to their employees and help them solve problems. This will help them earn trust and loyalty.

1.7 Flexible Approach

When it became clear that Jarasandha would not allow them to settle down peacefully in their kingdom Mathura. Krishna did not hesitate to leave his comfort zone and went to Dwarika for the safety of his people. Dwarika was an island so it was away from Jarasandh's reach.

Learning: When market dynamics change, business leaders should be flexible to move out of comfort zone for the betterment of organization.

1.8 Showing the Right Direction

The battle between Bheema and Jarasandha fought for days, matching each other. Bheema killed Jarasandha multiple times and separated his body into two halves. But every time Jarasandha's body miraculously rejoined. Bheema looked up to Lord Krishna for guidance. Lord Krishna, who knew the story of Jarasandha's birth, picked up a stick, broke it in two halves and threw them in opposite directions. Bheema, then split Jarasandh's body into two halves and threw it in opposite directions, thus killing him.

Learning: A leader should always guide their employees and give them right directions to achieve their objectives.

1.9 Contingency Strategy

Krishna believed in the capabilities of Karna. So, he tried to convince Karna to join Pandavas as the eldest son of Kunti. But Karna, being man of words refused it and decided to remain loyal to his friend Duryodhana.

Knowing the fact that Karna can be a threat for Arjuna, Krishna adopted another plan. He approached lord Indra and ask him to take away body armor (Kavach and Kundal; the natural protection) from Karma, thereby taking away Karna's strength so that he can be killed easily by Arjuna.

Learning: A corporate leader must have multiple plans for every situation. So, in case plan A doesn't work, there is plan B also to respond.

1.10 Krishna Created Uniform Vision for the Pandavas and Allied

The army of Kauravas was much bigger than Pandavas army (Many were actually better also). Still Kauravas lost the battle of Kurukshetra because they lacked a common vision like the Pandavas. Most of the warriors of Kauravas were fighting their own battles.

On the other side for Pandavas the battle of Kurukshetra was everything. Krishna created a common vision among all other warriors coming from different part of the country that victory of Pandavas' was a victory of truth and Dharma.

Learning: Having a compelling vision is what will keep you going when the going gets tough. Leaders must be able to create a shared vision that shapes the way forward for the subordinates.

1.11 Being Fair and Impartial

Krishna never differentiated between people based on their upbringing, caste or stature in society. He loved them all equally.

Even though Krishna was a King; it didn't affect his friendship with a poor Brahmin Sudama. Krishna's sympathies and support were always with the Pandavas who were ill-treated by Dhritrasta, Duryodhana and Shakuni. Still Krishna allowed Duryodhana to make settlement with Pandavas for betterment of society at large. Though the settlement could not be reached out because of stubbornness and arrogance of Duryodhana. At the time of war also he gave both Arjuna and Duryodhan a fair chance to choose between him and his Naraynee sena before the commencement of war.

Learning: Your ability to see the outside world without filtration like birth place, culture, caste, faith, religion, socio economic class, education makes you a great leader.

1.12 Situational Leadership

Lord Krishna teaches us the importance of being a situational leader rather than following same leadership style rigidly.

Just when the epic battle of Kurukshetra war was about to begin; Arjuna put down his weapon and said that he cannot fight against his friends and relatives. At this time Lord Krishna used persuasive style of leadership to motivate Arjuna by giving Gita discourse and convinced him to fight the battle (Positive reinforcement).

Arjuna once again struggled to fight with confidence because he had to fight with his beloved Bheeshma Pitamah. This time Krishna didn't give any moral lesson to Arjuna but he himself took Sudarshan Chakra to kill Bheeshma. Seeing it Arjuna felt ashamed and asked for forgiveness from Krishna. After this incident Arjun fought courageously throughout the war. (Negative reinforcement).

Learning: No leadership style is perfect. Each has its pros and cons. The ability to decide which style of leadership suits in a particular situation differentiates a good leader from an average leader.

1.13 Motivator

Lord Krishna was a great motivator. He constantly enlightened Arjuna during the battle of Kurukshetra by sharing his knowledge. Arjuna breaks down in the battlefield on the first day of the war itself seeing his friend, family and relatives as opponent. At that time Krishna brought Arjuna out of his dilemma with the Gita discourse. Krishna explained Arjuna that he is just a medium the destiny is already decided.

Krishna's mentorship and guidance played a vital role in Pandavs' victory over Kauravas.

Learning: In today's morally ambiguous world, we all come across a situation where we lose hope. But having a good leader in such situation can do wonders.

1.14 Crisis Manager/Damage Control/Balancing

Bheema killed Jarasandha several times but Jarasandha's body recovers every time. The helpless Bheema looked at Krishna seeking the solution. Krishna who knew about Jarasandha's birth history explained Bheema how to kill Jarasandha. Krishna took a twig, split it into two and then threw it far apart in opposite directions. Bheema did exactly the same with Jarasandha, splitting his body into two halves and threw it far apart and Jarasandha finally died in this way. This is how Krishna helped Bheema overcome the crisis called Jarasandh.

Whether it was "Vastraharan of Draupadi" or saving Bheema from anger of Balarama for killing Duryodhana by violating rule of the game; Krishna turned out to be the real savior for Pandavas every time.

Learning: A leader should be able to foresee crisis and take precautionary measures to avoid any negative consequences.

1.15 Saarthi/Mentor

Even though Arjuna was the greatest warrior; he used to fall in to traps. So, when it was decided that war is bound to happen, he asked Krishna to become his Saarthi. Krishna like a true saarthi helped Arjuna at every roadblock.

If Duryodhana also had a mentor like Krishna instead of selfish and egoistic people like Shakuni; history could have been completely different.

Learning: Many employees also don't find a good mentor, who can help them in resolving conflicts, which affect their motivational level, thereby limiting them in realizing their true potential. A Leader can play a vital role here in channelizing energy of their employee in right direction.

1.16 Negotiator

Krishna was the ambassador of the Pandavas in Kauravas' court. He used all his skills to avoid the war. But, deep inside his heart he wanted the war to happen so that good can prevail over evil. He negotiated in a way that nobody blamed pandavas for the war.

Learning: Negotiation is a core leadership and management skill. Every company today exists in a complex web of relationships. The shape of this web is formed, one thread at a time, through negotiations.

1.17 Tolerance/Emotional Stability

Krishna showed tremendous tolerance and ability to withstand pressure. He tolerated Sisupala's misbehavior 99 times before showing his strength and killing him.

Learning: The leader must have the compassion to tolerate people with different nature at work place as far as they are contributing in organization's success.

1.18 Peace Lover

As a King with a mighty army Krishna never invaded any kingdom. Rather Krishna fled to Dwarika from Mathura to save innocent people's life from constant attack of Jarasandha.

Krishna tried his best to avoid Kurukshetra war also. He told Duryodhana that Pandavs will forget everything if he gives only five villages to them. Though Duryodhan didn't agree for that also and war of Kurukshetra happened.

Learning: Today the world needs more and more leaders who can bring peace not war.

1.19 Ability to Make Bold Decision

One of the traits which make Krishna a great leader is that he never shied away from taking difficult decisions. There are many instances where Krishna's bold decisions turned the situations in Pandavas' favour.

Krishna let Ghatotkacha die to save Arjuna from Karna's divine weapon. Krishna let Abhimanyu die in violation of all laws decided for the war so that Pandavas also can break the laws to kill Duryodhana, Karna and Drona. He let Karna die even after knowing that he was elder brother of Pandavas for the betterment of the society and for victory of good over evil.

Learning: One of the key characteristics of a great leaders is their ability to make bold decision as and when required. These decisions might feel painful momentarily but pays in long run.

1.20 Dharma/Ethics

At the time of Kurukshetra war Balarama the elder brother of Krishna decided to remain neutral; but Krishna took part in battle. He gave his Narayaneer sena to Kauravas and he joined Pandavas as the Saarthi of Arjuna.

Learning: It is very important for a leader to take right side like Krishna did. A leader cannot remain silent when there is a battle between right and wrong.

1.21 Sacrifice/Move out of comfort zone

On the way to become a great leader Krishna had to give many sacrifices. He had to stay away from his parents from his birth itself. He even had to run away from his village Mathura and settled to Dwarika to save his people from frequent attacks of Jarasandha.

Learning: The corporate leader must be willing to sacrifice his power, position and comfort for the betterment of the organization.

1.22 Taking Care of Your People

Jarasandha attacked Mathura seventeen times and killed innocent citizens every time. Realizing that Jarasandha would not let them leave peacefully in Mathura; Krishna decided to shift to Dwarika - an island so as to protect them from external attack.

Learning: A leader should always stand for his people especially in adversity. This will develop trust and respect for the leader in the eyes of his followers.

1.23 Detachment

Krishna not only preaches but also practiced detachment. For the betterment of society, he decided to leave his home and parents at very young age.

Learning: A leader should always keep organization above self.

1.24 Build Relationships

The friendship between Krishna and Arjuna is something which is an inspiration for all of us.

Learning: Let it be your customer, employee or any other stakeholder; maintaining strong relationships with them

will ensure smooth functioning of business and success in long run.

2. Conclusion

Mahabharata is a cultural and religious epic of great significance. One can learn invaluable lessons from the perspective of Leadership, Strategy and Human Behavior from this great epic.

Though the present study has depicted only few corporate lessons; one can learn many more lessons from it from different perspective.