



ISSN :2347 4726 (online)

ISSN :2347-4076 (print)



Vichaara

An International Journal of Management

Volume:5

April 2019

Number:2

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For Indian authors:	For foreign authors:
Single author: Rs.1500 Two or more authors: Rs. 1000 per author	Single author: USD 75 Two or more authors: USD 50 per author

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LEADERSHIP : NATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Dr.V.Kulandaiswamy, Secretary, VIMS, Coimbatore

REVISITING NATIVE WISDOM

Leadership is the most influential and ubiquitous factor in any social system. Leadership is perceived as the possession of certain desirable qualities by an individual, which will influence the action of others. Ability to command, direct and take the group or the organization forward towards achieving the desired goals is the crux of the leadership function.

Herald Koontz and Heinz Wehrich in their book *“Essentials of Management – an international perspective”* (11th Edition) state that leader must instill values, whether they be concern for quality, honesty and calculated risk taking or concern for employees and customers.

Leadership wields a decisive influence on the group. *Thiruvalluvar* emphasizes the indispensability of leadership with reference to the army. ”Though an army may contain a large number of permanent soldiers, it is of no consequence if it does not have an able leader”.

நிலைமக்கள் சால உடைத்தெனினும் தானை தலைமக்கள்
இல்வழி இல் குறள்-770

The oriental concept of leadership is grounded on values which goes beyond the material plane, and looks to the inner side of the leadership. Human values and qualities of leadership are inseparable.

Thiruvalluvar explains categorically the qualities of leadership, value based as well as value neutral, which are quite relevant to the modern organizational and corporate context.

According to him, leadership falls upon a person who possesses four basic qualities : love, knowledge, clarity of thought and absence of greed (*Kural* : 513).

அன்பறிவு தேற்றம் அவாவின்மை இந்நான்கும்
நன்றுடையான் கட்டே உலகு - குறள் 513

Perseverance and untiring effort is another essential quality of a leader. *Thiruvalluvar* states that : Perseverance is all the more required for those tasks which are challenging and difficult to achieve Perseverance is the key to glory. No task is impossible to achieve for those who pursue it vigorously (*Kural* : 611).

அருமை உடைத் தென்று அசாவாமை வேண்டும்
பெருமை முயற்சி தரும் - குறள் - 611
அசாவாமை - தளர்ச்சியின்மை
அருமை - உடைத்து, கடினமானது

The same point is reinforced in another couplet as follows :

A leader should be capable of undertaking relentless effort in pursuit of the goal. Sustained effort is bound to bring prosperity. Lack of effort with result in poverty (*Kural* – 616).

முயற்சி திருவினை யாக்கும் முயற்றின்மை
இன்மை புகுத்தி விடும் - குறள் 616

A leader should have the **capacity** to manage even in adverse situations. *Thiruvalluvar* emphasizes this as the single most important leadership quality. The strength of leadership is revealed only at the time of misfortune.

Thiruvalluvar says : Misfortune is not the disgrace to anyone; the real disgrace is the lack of awareness of the context and capacity to manage (*Kural* : 628).

பொறியின்மை யார்க்கும் பழியன்று, அவையறிந்து
ஆள்வினை யின்மை பழி - குறள் - 628
பொறியின்மை - விதியின் பயன்

A leader should have concern for people. He should be **empathetic, just** and **fair**, in all his dispensations towards the subordinates or followers. According to *Thiruvalluvar*, a good leader will create an impression that he is a tough task-master, but at the same time, gentle in dealing with people. Such an approach will bring long term benefit (*Kural* : 562). In short he should be a people man.

கடிதோச்சி மெல்ல எறிக நெடிதாக்கம்
நீங்காமை வேண்டு பவர் - குறள் 562

It is again emphasized in one more couplet that the human quality of concern for others should not be misconstrued as a weakness; it should not be at the cost of efficiency and detrimental to the performance of the task assigned (*Kural* : 578). A successful leader has to balance the above two seemingly conflicting positions.

கருமஞ் சிதையாமல் கண்ணோட வல்லார்க்கு
உரிமை உடைத்திவ் வுலகு - குறள் 78

Another quality that a leader should possess is **simplicity** in demeanour easy of access and avoiding harsh words in dealing with people. According to *Thiruvalluvar* such a leader will be held in high esteem.

காட்சிக் கெளரியன் கடுஞ்சொல்லன் அல்லனேல்
மீக்கூறும் மன்ன நிலம் - குறள் 386
மீக்கூறும் - புகழ்ந்து பேசும்

A leader should have *pragmatic approach* and possess worldly wisdom. Fred E. Fielder and his associates at the University of Illinois have propounded a theory called contingency theory of leadership, which suggests that people become leaders, not only because of the attributes of their personalities but also because of various contextual factors, and the interaction between the leaders and the members of a group.

Similar view is reflected in *Thirukkural*. Even though, one knows the right method of performing a job, he will have to keep in mind the prevailing practices or adopt pragmatic approach (*Kural* 64).

செயற்கை அறிந்த கடைத்தும் உலகத்து
இயற்கை அறிந்து செயல் - குறள் 64

The paramount factor that makes the leader great is the *selflessness* and non-attachment to the fruits of labour.

“In the most of the western world at least the conventional justification for great action lies in the consequences of action. You act because good things happen as a result. The consequential logic runs through all our teachings, all our speeches” (James March, ‘Leadership and Life’, quoted in Lan Liu, ibid, p.161).

In the Indian value system, work without attachment to the fruits of labour is held in high esteem. In *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Sri Krishna preaches *Karma Yoga* to *Arjuna*, the essence of which is *nishkamakarma*, i.e., work without attachment. This implies great action *per se* will bestow greatness on a person, irrespective of the consequences of action.

Thiruvalluvar holds a strikingly similar view. According to him, those who are capable of doing impossible acts or rare deeds will be regarded as great persons and those who cannot are persons of small stature.

செயற்கரிய செய்வார் பெரியர், சிறியர்
செயற்கரிய செய்கலா தார் - குறள் 26

Absolute Monarchy and Autocracy were the leadership styles prevalent in those days in consonance with the socio-political system in India. The modern theories of participative leadership and motivational methods have no relevance in such an environment. Yet there are suggestions that autocratic and oppressive methods are not desirable. The leader should *share his knowledge* and experience with others and allow enough freedom to the followers or subordinates and help them grow. *Pazhamozhi Naanooru* (251) portrays such a kind of situation as follows :

Nothing will grow under the shadow of a big banyan tree. Likewise, no one will dare to act at free will and in one's own way under the dominance of an autocratic leader (ruler).

மன்னவ னாணைக்கீழ் மற்றையார் மீக்கூற்றம்
என்ன வகையால் செயப்பெறுப ? புன்னைப்
பரப்புநீர் தாவும் படுகடல்தண் சேர்ப்ப !
மரத்தின் கீழாகா மரம். - பழமொழி 251
மீக்கூற்றம் - ஒங்கிப் பேசுதல்

A leader should not be self-centred, and egoistic. He should realize that any success is the result of *collective effort*.

It is not his individual achievement but it is the achievement of the group as a whole. Due credit should be given to all the members of the group, who are his followers or supporters. This view has been expressed by '*Avvaiyar*' in her chronicle on wisdom '*Moothurai*', by means of a striking illustration.

The paddy which has potential for sprouting will lose its capacity to germinate when the husk is removed. Likewise, whatever be his individual strength, a leader cannot achieve anything great without the support of others.

பண்டு முளைப்ப தரிசியே யானாலும்
விண்டுமி போனால் முளையாதாம் - கொண்டபேர்
ஆற்றல் உடையார்க்கும் ஆகா தளவின்றி
ஏற்ற கருமம் செயல் - ஓளவையார், மூதுரை
விண்டுமி - உமிவிண்டு போதல்

Leader follower Relationship

The relationship between leader and follower is delicate .It is to be nurtured carefully.

அகலாது அணுகாது தீய்க்காய்வார் போல்க
இகல்வேந்தர் சேர்ந்தொழு குவார் (குறள்-691)

One should keep a safe distance with the leader, neither too close not too far.

Leadership Ethics

In the Indian tradition, leadership qualities are inseparable from ethics. *Thirikadugam* an ethical treatise which lays down three ingredients of every aspect of personal and social life of an individual, also has laid down negative qualities and positive qualities of leadership from ethical point of view.

Negative Qualities:

- Endless fear that appears like waves of ocean
 - Boundless desire that enslaves one,
 - Anger that ignores the established truth, annihilates one like the flesh fried by its own fat.
- An ideal leader should disown theses three negative qualities.

அச்சம் அலை கடலில் தோன்றலும் ஆர்வுற்ற
விட்டகலக் கில்லாத வேட்கையும் -கட்டிய
மெய்ந்நிலை காணா வெகுளியும் இம்முன்றும்
தன்னெய்யில் தான் பொரியு மாறு. திரிகடுகம்-7

Positive qualities:

A leader should possess the following three qualities:

-Never elated by the words of praise

-Forbearance of the adverse criticisms

-Behavolence in ethical deeds like monsoon clouds are the essential qualities of leadership

பிறர் தன்னைப் பேணுங்கால் நாணலும் பேணார்
திறன்வேறு கூறிற் பொரையும்-அறவினையைக்
காராண்மை போல் ஒழுகலும் இம்முன்றும்
ஊராண்மை என்னும் செருக்கு. திரிகடுகம்-6

References:

- The *Tirukkural* (Tamil: திருக்குறள்), or shortly **the Kural**, is a classic Tamil text consisting of 1,330 couplets or **Kurals**, dealing with the everyday virtues of an individual. It is one of the two oldest works now extant in Tamil literature in their entirety, the other being the *Tolkappiyam*. Considered one of the greatest works ever written on ethics and morality, chiefly secular ethics, it is known for its universality and non-denominational nature. It was authored by Valluvar, also known in full as Thiruvalluvar. The text has been dated variously from 300 BCE to 5th century CE. The traditional accounts describe it as the last work of the third Sangam, but linguistic analysis suggests a later date of 450 to 500 CE.
- *Thirikatukam* (Tamil: திரிகடுகம்) is a Tamil poetic work of didactic nature belonging to the *Pathinenkilkanakku* anthology of Tamil literature. This belongs to the 'post Sangam period' corresponding to between 100 – 500 CE. *Thirikatukam* contains 100 poems written by the poet Nallathanaar. The poems of *Thirikatukam* are written in the Venpa meter.
- References from various Ancient Tamil Literatures