

# ENHANCING LEADERSHIP SKILLS THROUGH TEACHING FROM MAHABHARATA AND OTHER EPICS

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*Abstract: This paper aims to revisit the leadership skills depicted in the epic period, particularly from the Mahabharata and to link them with the Management and Leadership of a Tertiary Education Institution namely the Mahatma Gandhi Institute for sustainable enhancement of Leadership Skills and improved productivity. It also intends to enlighten all the leaders in the tertiary education sector and help them to explore new ways and means so as to be successful in leading higher education institutions more effectively and efficiently. The objectives of the study are as follows: 1. To enhance leadership skills at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute; 2. To develop the right attributes and leadership skills based on Mahabharata and other related epic in order to be successful in leading a tertiary education institution.*

## I. Historical Background

The education system in Mauritius is mainly based on the British system. When Mauritius became independent in 1968, education became one of the main preoccupations of the Mauritian Government to meet the new challenges awaiting the country. Considerable investment of resources, both human and material have been put into the education sector and impressive progress has been achieved in terms of free, universal, compulsory primary education, free text Books, free secondary education and a fairly wide range of higher education courses at the tertiary level. The Tertiary Education Commission (Tertiary Education Commission, 2001) is the governing body related to issues of higher education in Mauritius. It is mainly responsible for fostering the development of postsecondary education and training facilities, providing guidelines for tertiary educational institutions in Mauritius, making recommendations to the Minister on development of higher education in Mauritius, promoting co-ordination among the tertiary education bodies and advising the minister on award of scholarships.

The Mahatma Gandhi Institute is one of the Tertiary Education Institutions in Mauritius falling under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources and Tertiary Education and Scientific Research. The Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI) was set up by an act of parliament as a joint venture between the Government of India and Mauritius in 1970 as a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi. The act was amended in 1982 and 2002 respectively. The objects of the Institute as per the act are: 1) To establish, as

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a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, centre of studies of Indian and traditions; 2) To promote education and culture generally.

The following five tertiary schools were set up at the MGI (MGI Annual Reports 2012 – 2015) so as to attain its main objectives: The School of Indian Studies; The School of Performing Arts; The School of Indological Studies; The School of Mauritian and Area Studies; and The School of Fine Arts.

The School of Indian Studies was set up in 1982 with a view to promote Indian Studies and culture in Mauritius. Diploma, degree and post graduate degree programs of studies are run by the departments of the school in the fields of Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu and Marathi. Those languages are propagated through teaching and learning activities, through cultural activities, exchange programs and collaboration with institutions. There is also a department of Creative Writing and Publications which is actively involved in promoting and disseminating the creative writing in Hindi to the general public. It presents a perspective through competitive schemes in collaboration with local and foreign writers. It also contributes towards the maintaining of the dynamism of both writing and reading Hindi and the other Indian languages. The Language Resource Centre (LRC) which also forms an integral part of the School of Indian Studies was set up following the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding between the MGI and the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, India in April 2005. The LRC offers the online introductory courses in all the Asian languages. The LRC is also involved in the production of Multimedia/Sankoré materials for Grades IV and VI in all languages and has undertaken the project of Digitalization of Dissertations.

The School of Performing Arts was set up in 1975 with the main objective of promoting Indian Music and Dance together with Indian Culture in Mauritius. The school has a long history in teaching, and it has been the pioneer in the promotion of performing arts in Mauritius. The School runs certificates, advanced certificates, diploma, degree and postgraduate degree programs in the fields of Sitar, Tabla, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Bharata Natyam, Vocal Hindustani, Vocal Carnatic, Violin and Mridangam.

The School of Indological Studies was set up in 2008, with a view to promote education and ensure cultural survival. It has however existed since 1991 as the department of Hindu Theology and its mission was to preserve and promote Indian Culture and Indian Philosophy in Mauritius at various levels to prepare in the first instance, teachers to teach these subjects at secondary schooling level. In this endeavor, the School of Indological Studies is doing its level best to promote philosophy and Sanskrit through formal and informal ways in the form of programs of studies, talks, seminars, publications, research activities, outreach programs and cultural activities. The School offers courses at various levels ranging from Certificate, Diploma, Degree and Post Graduate courses in Sanskrit, Indian Philosophy and Ayurveda & Yoga. In its attempt to provide quality education and internationalize its courses, the School borrows the services of highly qualified Professors and also has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. The School marks three events annually, the Unesco World Philosophy Day (UNESCO, 2005) at the Sanskrit Day and the International Yoga Day. Since the celebration of the “World Philosophy

Day at Unesco” in 2002, and particularly since its institutionalization of 10 November 2005, the phenomenon of Philosophy has caught the attention of people of all walks of life, with the organization every year of a variety of activities both academic and cultural by students, teachers, government authorities, private organizations and members of the public, offering to everyone new opportunities and space for philosophical reflection, critical thinking and debate. Every year a theme is selected that is not only relevant to the Mauritian context given our multicultural identity, but is very much of great significance for the whole world with the emergence of the concept of the world as a global village and with more and more people migrating to foreign countries and mixing up with alien cultures. The School also aims to promote the importance of Sanskrit as a millennium language and as a vehicle of noble thoughts, spiritual ideologies, aesthetic values and moral development. Indian Philosophy and Sanskrit are intrinsically related to each other to the extent that one cannot exist without the other. This is why at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, the two disciplines fall under the unique umbrella of Indological Studies.

The School of Mauritian & Area Studies was created in 1976 and it fosters a multidisciplinary approach in the analysis of Mauritian society and carries out teaching and research and is involved in promoting cultural activities. It offers electives and general modules to diploma and degrees to other schools of the MGI. It also offers degree program in Mauritian Studies, Chinese Studies and Modern Chinese. One of the recent developments in the school is the introduction of “Bhojpuri” as a subject in the primary school curriculum. A policy decision was taken by the government, where MGI had played a crucial role in this aspect given that the MGI was assigned the responsibility of introducing Bhojpuri at primary school level.

The School of Fine Arts was set up in November 2006. Originally it was a department created in 1978. It offers a wide range of academic programs starting from diploma, degree and post graduate degree courses in the fields of Fine Arts, Digital Arts, Advertising and Visual Communications. Together with the academic programs there are a number of related activities organized by the school such as art exhibitions, competitions and fairs which have all contributed towards the promotion of arts and culture in Mauritius.

## II. Literature Review

In order to undertake the above study, search on existing literature on leadership was carried out. First and foremost, it was felt essential to find out and highlight the different aspects of leadership and transformational leadership as proposed by different researchers. According to Dubrin (1988) leadership is the ability to inspire confidence and support among the people who are needed to achieve organizational goals. Other definitions of leadership by Dubrin (1988) have been stated as follows: 1) Interpersonal influence directed through connection, towards goal attained; 2) The influential increment over and above mechanical compliance with directions and orders; 3) An act that causes others to act or respond in a shared vision; 4) The act of influencing people by persuasion; and 5) The principal dynamic force that motivates and consolidate the organization in the accomplishment of its objectives.

Peter F. Drucker has defined leadership as the lifting of a man's vision to higher sights, the raising of a man's performance to a higher standard, the building of a man's personality beyond its normal limitations. (Drucker, 1995, 157) According to Satya Sai Baba, Leadership refers to one aspiring to be a leader who possesses three things; first is self-knowledge that is knowledge of his strengths and weaknesses. (Sri Satya Sai Baba 2001). Second, he must possess what may be called individual character and third he needs to have national character. Stephen Covey has defined a leader as one who climbs the tallest trees, surveys the entire situation and yells "wrong jungle". (Covey 1989: 101-102) As per Fisher, leadership is mostly about yourself and maintaining yourself and maintaining your personal authenticity rather than about learning some formula from a text Book. Aspiring leaders need to be always true to themselves, not slavishly following other's ideas. (<http://EzinaArticles.Com/Expert>)

Uma Das Gupta and Gitastee Bandyopadya (1988), have indicated that Rabindranath Tagore founded a small school called Shantineketan. Twenty years later, he added an international university to it called Vishwa-Bharati. Given that Tagore has put a lot of emphasis on universalism, culture, poem, music, drama, art and craft, values such as love, patriotism, self-respect, independence, cooperation, humanism, truthfulness, creativity and discipline, reverence, sociability, toleration with honesty, his leadership style has also reflected these values. Tagore ideas imparted in his institution were mainly promotion of Indian culture, spirituality and real education had to go beyond the confines of the classroom. The world of Vishwa Bharati had created a way of life which was singularly its own. According to K.S. Bharati Gandhi (1990), Gandhi was a great soul, simple, filled with humility and saintliness. He was like a beam of light that precede the darkness. His attributes as a great leader were alertness, watchfulness, courage, bravery, a great freedom fighter, sense of tactics, listening to his own conscience, performing selfless humanitarian service and inspiring others.

### III. Transformational Leadership

As per Dubrin (1988), the focus of transformational leadership is on what the leader accomplishes, rather than on the leader's personal characteristics and her or his relationship with group members. There are three aspects of transformational leadership; how transformation take place, the key quality of transformational leadership, and the impact of transformational (and charismatic) leadership on performance. Leaders often encounter the need to transform organizations from low performance, or from acceptable performance. At other times, a leader is expected to move a firm from a crisis mode to high ground. To accomplish these lofty purposes, the transformational leader attempts to overhaul the organizational culture or subculture. His or her task can thus be as immense as the process of role.

**Raising people's awareness.** The transformational leader makes group members aware of the importance and values of certain rewards and how to achieve them. He or she might point to the pride workers would experience should the firm become number one in its field. At the same time, the leader should point out the financial rewards accompanying such success. Helping people look beyond self-interest. The

transformation leader helps group members look to “the big picture” for the sake of the team and the organization.

**Transformational Leadership in Mahabharata.** According to Bhishma in the *Mahabharata* epic, as per Sri Satya Sai Baba (1992), the art of being a leader to rule a kingdom has been summarized as follows: Ruling is not an easy task and the leader has to rule well, given that it is action which shapes destiny and not the other way around. The leader has the highest duty towards God and then towards truth. The leader’s conduct has to be exemplary, able to self-restraint, full of humility, righteousness and straight forwardness. His passion should be under control. The leader should not be too mild if not he will not be respected. He must be compassionate, alert, caring but should not place confidence in anyone. He has to know when to seek protection in the fort when his position is weak and when he should be ready to make peace with a foe who is stronger than himself. He should be pleasant in speech and be among people of similar nature and those who have noble qualities. His people should live in freedom and happiness as they do in their father’s house. The main role of the leader is to protect the people and their happiness. One has to be careful on the environment of the surroundings. Renovation is a pre-requisite for excellence. One has to know how to use the powers of punishment and has to use them as and when required. He has to keep in mind that everyone has self-interest, and it is the most powerful feature that one has to care of. A leader has to supervise the work of all his officers himself and try to do things in secret specially from one’s enemies. He needs assistance to complete an assignment. No one can be trusted completely, the policy is to trust but to verify as well. A leader should not harbor any malice in his heart. Right conduct is essential for the leader wishing success. Procrastination has to be avoided.

In other words, great leaders are transformational in nature. Forsaking conventional morality in order to rise up to the level of higher morality is one of the qualities of a transformational leader. Speaking of transformational leadership, leadership that transforms the leader and his followers from the inside out and raises them into higher moral plans, develops a sense of collective identity in them produces superior motivation and commitment to goals and creates greater levels of performance and yields more intense performance satisfaction, an expert says: \u201c Transformational leaders deal with issues from a higher moral plane\u201d.

The character of Krishna comes across to us as an outstanding transformational leader in situation after situation. Again, and again, throughout his life, he takes the risk of rejecting conventional morality and rises to levels of higher morality for a cause he espouses throughout his life. In doing so, he calls upon himself possible censure of his own generation and generations to come. But to him his cause was larger than himself, larger than his personal ego, larger than his name and fame, which could all be sacrificed for the larger good, the welfare of mankind, *lokasangraha*. If we accept the tradition that says Krishna was God incarnated in flesh, then that goal was what he states in the Gita as:

*Yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bhārata,  
Abhyutthanam adharmasya tadatmanam sṛjamyaham.*

*Paritrānaya sadhōnam, vinashaya cha dushkr̥tam  
Dharmasānsthapanārthaya sambhavami yuge yuge.*”  
(Bhagavad-Gita 4.7-8, 1993)

*“Whenever dharma declines and adharma prospers, then I create myself. For protecting the good and destroying the evil, for establishing dharma, I am born again and again in age after age.”*

And if we look at him not as an incarnation but as another human being like us, then again, we find this is what he did all his life: protecting the good, destroying the evil, establishing dharma where adharma reigned. And this mission was so sacred to him that at its altar he could unhesitatingly sacrifice his personal glory. Krishna burnt – so that others might get light and warmth.

Looking at *Mahabharata*'s Krishna who is very different from the Krishna of the *Bhagavata*, and in popular lore, we find that several of his actions are of questionable morality from a conventional standpoint. During the *Mahabharata* war, he encourages unrighteous acts repeatedly – and many of these acts that the Pandavas perform throughout the war are first conceived in his brain. Thus, we find Krishna suggesting to the Pandavas a treacherous plot to kill Drona, who was the guru of the Pandavas and the Kauravas on a day when Drona's fury and skill in the war field had become impossible to face, and he was causing the death of thousands of Pandavas warriors by the minute. Drona was like a whirlwind on that day, uprooting mighty warriors and ordinary soldiers alike by their hordes. Seeing the Kauravas losing the battle, Drona had entered into a savage rage and after using other weapons to decimate huge chunks of the Pandava army, he had eventually begun using the Brahmastra itself, one of the most powerful weapons of mass destruction of the day.

Realizing the seriousness of the situation Krishna tells the Pandavas how Drona is simply invincible – not even the lord of the gods himself can defeat him in war so long as he wields weapons in his hands. Krishna asks them to forget conventional morality and rise up to the need of the hour. True, he tells them, slaying one's teacher in the worst of sins, but time has come to do it. “The only way he could be killed is if he lays down the weapons”, says Krishna. “And therefore, Pandavas, forget about the sin of killing one's teacher and do what is needed for victory. I believe he will give up battle if he hears that his son Ashwatthama is dead. Someone should now go to him and tell him that Ashwatthama has been killed.” (*Mahabharata*, Drona Parva: 191.11.13) A mean, vicious, and cruel plan, unrighteous to the core. And that precisely is what they do, through Arjuna, the acharya's favourite disciple, does not like it and Yudhishtira was sceptic about it. Bheema readily goes and slaughters an elephant called Ashwatthama that belonged to a kind on his own side and then goes and announces to Drona that Ashwatthama has been killed. The Acharya does not trust him, and approaching Yudhishtira known for his integrity, asks him if it is true. Yudhishtira is closer to Bhishma in spirit and in his perception of dharma; he lacks the daring and courage, the higher vision of Krishna. Left to him he would not tell the lie – knowing this Krishna rushes to his side. The *Mahabharata* describes Krishna as very distressed at that time – he has reasons to be agonized this is a decisive moment, Yudhishtira in

his obtuse understanding of dharma is capable of giving up the whole plan – and with it the war and Krishna’s mission in life – establishing dharma in a land from which it was fast disappearing. Krishna tells him, “If a furious Drona fights the battle this way for just half day, let me assure you, your entire army will be decimated. I beg you, Yudhishtira, save us all from Drona. This is a time when a lie is superior to the truth.” (*Mahabharata*, Drona Parva, 191.46-47)

It takes the courage of a Krishna to say that. It takes the vision of Krishna to justify that. Bheema too rushes to Yudhishtira and informs him that he has just killed an elephant called Ashwatthama and begs him to listen to what Krishna says and tell Drona that Ashwatthama has been killed. And then Yudhishtira, the one everyone believed was incapable of telling a lie, is more or less persuaded to lie, though he still clings to the truth in word and lies only in spirit, as is frequent with those of conventional morality. He tells the Acharya aloud that Ashwatthama has been killed and then adds softly that it is an elephant that has been killed, so softly that Drona does not hear those words.

The Acharya, the revered and beloved guru of the Pandavas, is shattered by the news of the death of his son who was dearer to him than his life – it was for the sake of his son that he had taken up weapons, it was his sake that he had climbed from the austere heights of Brahmana hood and become a Kshatriya by profession, if he was spreading death in the battlefield like a firestorm now, it was all because of what he had to do for the sake of his son. Drona suddenly loses interest in the war and laying down his weapons, announces to Duryodhana and others that it is now for them to carry on the war, he is finished with it. According to Bushan (2001), Sri Satya Sai Baba has recited ancient Sanskrit slokas from Vedas, given to humanity thousand years ago as follows: “*Na karma, Na Drajava, dhonena, Thyagenaike, omrutatwa manshu*”, which means: “Not by action not by progeny, not by wealth, but by sacrifice done can mortality be achieved.” He said that “*Thyaga*” was the key word which meant “*sacrifice*”, selflessness and renunciations of self-interest. It is this virtue which enables a leader to achieve the impossible.

#### IV. Methodology and Findings

The research methodology used was qualitative. In order to gather data, the methods used to collect data were mainly from focus group discussions with a group of Senior Staff at the MGI. The focus group discussions were held on few occasions and the representatives of the different schools were allowed to form part of the discussions so as they could ventilate their ideas and teachings regarding the contribution of leaders as far as *Mahabharata* was concerned and also as far as MGI was concerned. Surprisingly most of the people strongly believed on the words and teachings of Bhishma to Yudhishtira and also the teachings of Krishna concerning leadership. They were all very willing to learn further and how to implement the advices of Bhishma as far as possible in the context of the MGI and also in order to lead the organization in a much more effective and efficient manner. Most of the proposals made by Bhishma and Krishna were found to be essential attributes of a leader, particularly a transformational leader. Some attributes are as follows: 1) Right action and righteousness; 2) Truth and

peace; 3) Good conduct; 4) Self-restraint, righteousness and straight forwardness; 5) Filled with compassion, love, humility and ability to protect its people; 6) To be peaceful and protective; 7) Enable people to live in freedom and in happiness; 8) Innovative; 9) Creating a good atmosphere and promoting a healthy environment; 10) Supervising his people personally; and 11) Should avoid harboring malice and procrastinate.

Moreover, it was found that leaders require other attributes and skills that would enable them to lead more efficiently and effectively a tertiary education environment taking into consideration global trends and challenges facing in the higher education, sector. These attributes include collaboration, concurrency, good human relation skills, excellent communication skills, fairness, commitment, interpersonal skills, sound judgment, sense of values, enthusiasm, intelligence, flexibility, adaptability, knowledge in the field of leadership, charisma, sociability, diplomacy, empathy, ambition, self-confidence, subjectiveness, attractiveness, talkativeness and so on.

### Conclusion

It is not easy to become a leader. One may be born as a leader but still requires appropriate training to become a good, skilled, effective and efficient leader in leading a tertiary education institution like the Mahatma Gandhi Institute. The most basic aspect element in any leadership model remains a shared vision and to achieve same the following aspects are to be taken into consideration: 1) Capacity to change; 2) Prepare staff for the transformation; 3) Institute initiatives to deal with emotional effects; and 4) Development of skills and knowledge to operate in the new environment.

Most of the values and skills that a leader requires in order to lead an institution have already been taught and revealed in the “*Mahabharata*” and other related epics. We need to go back to the source to be able to learn how to lead and to acquire leadership skills. As in the foregoing pages, it has been noted that rising above conventional morality to levels of higher morality, raising his followers to these levels – this is not the only quality of a transformational leader. A transformational leader has wisdom, has a vision, has the ability to communicate that vision, has the courage to act out that vision, has the ability to identify his followers and to address their true needs. He creates trust in his followers, has the power to motivate them, is proactive, has immense energy, purpose, total commitment, passion, courage and a powerful presence. At a personal level, he is kind, compassionate, shows understanding and acceptance, and has the power to laugh in the middle of calamities. He is gentle and firm and has the humility of, as the Tibetan Shambhala tradition puts it, the Himalayan tiger – the proud humility of a person who is himself, has no pretensions, does not wear masks.

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