

The Essential Leadership Wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita*

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ABSTRACT

The Bhagavad Gita, a part of the Mahabharata composed more than 5,000 years ago by Vyasa, is a timeless leadership classic and its wisdom is highly relevant to leaders of today. Here, in this paper, the authors examine the various tenets of the Bhagavad Gita and provides its wisdom to contemporary leadership. Some of these teachings will certainly inspire the leaders to change from within and transform their leadership from transactional to transformational and towards transcendental. In presenting this wisdom, the authors have employed hermeneutics, which is a method to interpret ancient texts combined with some qualitative inputs received from leadership seminar participants. This paper is significant for both leadership theory and practice.

Keywords: Dharma, Leadership, Love, Resilience, Spirituality, The Bhagavad Gita, Vision

1. INTRODUCTION

It is appropriate to begin this paper by quoting the *Bhagavad Gita* (Hawley, 2006, p. 64): “Learn to love Divinity in everything – everything – you do. Little by little, convert your entire earthly existence into an inner mood of constant worship.”

The *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the sacred books in Hinduism (Vedanta), is basically appealing on the account of the contents of the book; it contains the tried-and-true methods of gradually and carefully reaching these higher planes of consciousness; it is not about religions but more on rising above our worldly miseries and

afflictions; it’s about being greater than our mundane problems or (leadership) troubles.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a small part of the Mahabharata. On the eve of what promised to be a great battle, Sri Krishna was driving the chariot of Arjuna, the warrior-hero. The two armies were ready to engage; Arjuna seemed confident of victory but all the same was troubled. He foresaw that in the battle he would kill members of his own extended family who were fighting on the other side. He was very reluctant to do this, and one way to avoid it would be to refuse to fight. Luckily, there was someone he can ask for advice, his charioteer, Sri Krishna. The *Bhagavad Gita* was Sri Krishna’s reply to Arjuna’s questions.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* have been commented by many renowned scholars and philosophers

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from all over the world over the centuries many renowned scholars and elucidated its teaching in many publications and lectures. It is universal and non-sectarian and its teachings are applicable not only to Indians (Hindus) but to everybody. The message of the *Bhagavad Gita* is not only limited to spiritual development but also in other aspects of human capital development, including leadership development. The original version of the *Bhagavad Gita* is in Sanskrit language, which is one of the oldest languages in the World. Charles Wilkins translated the first English language version of the *Bhagavad Gita* in 1785 (Muniapan, 2005, 2006, 2010). At present there are more than 1000 English language versions and commentaries of the *Bhagavad Gita* written by many scholars in India and around the World. The *Bhagavad Gita* has also been translated into more than 500 world languages other than English.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* has exercised an enormous influence, which extended in early times to China and Japan and lately to the western countries (Muniapan, 2005, 2006, 2010). The two chief scriptural works of Mahayana Buddhism – *Mahayana Sraddhotpatti and Saddharma Pundarika* – are deeply indebted to the teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Mahatma Gandhi who preached the *Bhagavad-Gita* philosophy, said: “I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming external tragedies – and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita*” (Mahadevan, 2001, p. 1).

2. PAPER'S AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This paper will explore the ancient truths from the *Bhagavad Gita* for our modern world and these will be related to the art and wisdom of leadership. In this paper, the various tenets of the *Bhagavad Gita* will be examined, and they or their relevance floated out and applied to the leadership basics. The *Bhagavad Gita*'s ethical principles start from what is good: specifically

the moral issue of whether it is right for Arjuna, the warrior to fight and to kill his kinsmen in the battle. It is widened out to consider the kind of life that would be most fulfilling for Arjuna and in fact, for anyone of the leaders. The issues here are not what we would usually think of as moral but rather ones of value (axiology). Discussing what the most desirable kinds of life are is closely linked to the world picture, the metaphysics, of the *Bhagavad Gita*. In this regard, when applying the *Bhagavad Gita* to our leadership ways, when we lead, we would want to ask ourselves are we leading in a way that is morally good or ethical as well as with the peace of mind and for total goodness for the greatest number of people; in short, the authors would also want to make key lessons of the *Bhagavad Gita* useful and utilitarian. Or at least provoke us into thinking more on our leadership ways and improve on these ways.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a qualitative research methodology called hermeneutics, which is the interpretation of ancient or classical literatures. Hermeneutics is not a well defined field. It is also concerned with the usage of language and the process of using language. The *Bhagavad-Gita* is written in the *Sanskrit* language, one of the oldest languages in the world. The content analysis of selected verses from the *Bhagavad-Gita* has been made to provide its relevance to leadership. The reference to the *Bhagavad-Gita*'s commentary and analysis used through this paper is based on the works of Hawley (2006). Some qualitative inputs received from a leadership seminar participants were also used in this paper. These inputs are to be highlighted in brackets.

4. LEADERSHIP

Leadership is one of the most researched subjects and interesting topics of discussions in management around the world. Leadership is generally defined as the process of influencing

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