

# Understanding Leadership

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Speaking to you in Singapore's School of Public Policy named after one of Asia's great leaders, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, we can only reassure ourselves on the salient role of leadership.

When we think about leadership, a range of thoughts cross our mind: The leader as a 'hero' or a 'great man' who accomplishes a major goal against all odds for his/her followers or a leader as a rare and 'charismatic' individual with extra-ordinary qualities and a grand vision. In fact, according to some scholars, the history of the world is the history of great men. The great-man theory of leadership continues to be of popular interest to showcase individual leadership in the political and corporate world.

While there have been many studies on leadership, the dimensions and definition of the concept remain unclear. To treat leadership as a separate concept, it must be distinguished from other social influence phenomena. The key to concise conceptualization of effective leadership is elusive; even definitions of leadership exhibit little convergence.

## **Types of Leadership**

We all recognize that some of the greatest leaders known to humanity have been the founders of various religions. The Buddha, Confucius, Jesus Christ, and Prophet Mohammad are fine examples of **religious leadership**. On the other hand, Alexander the Great, Chinghiz Khan and Napoleon Bonaparte, for instance, exemplify **military leadership**.

In the opinion of a sociologist, leadership is common to all the different stages of the social process, from its simplest and most primitive to its most complex and highly developed manifestations and he defines leadership as the pre-eminence of one or a few individuals in a group in the process of control of societal phenomena. In some societies, it is supposed that a leader can or should emerge from only a certain section of the society or even particular families. Not surprisingly, when we look at the vast studies on leadership, most of the early literature focused on the question: **Are leaders born or made?** This school of thought originated with an influential study of the hereditary background of great men and a later study that advanced the notion that the survival of the fittest and intermarriage among them produces an aristocratic class that differs biologically from the lower classes.

The advent of the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity made popular by the French Revolution at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century led to a gradual decline of such old fashioned views of **dynastic or hereditary leadership** during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world witnessed a radically different form of leadership. This kind of leadership emerged from mobilizing followers on the basis of an ideology or a philosophy which articulated a grand vision of freedom from exploitation of man by man and colonial rule for the vast sections of humankind. **The political leadership** of Lenin in Russia, Mahatma Gandhi in India, Chairman Mao in China, Martin Luther King in the United States of America, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, Nkrumah in Ghana, Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and Nelson Mandela in South Africa is a case in point.

In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of an international concern about the environmental consequences of economic development undertaken since the times of Industrial Revolution found its expression in the United Nations Conference on Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. In other words, the ecological consequences of the various pathways of development being pursued against the backdrop of a burgeoning world population and the depletion of Earth's resources emerged as an issue of pressing global concern. The idea that economic development has to cater to not merely the needs of the present generation but future generations as

well without compromising their ability to utilize nature's resources ushered in the new concept of sustainable development and **environmental leadership**.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, as we know, will be remembered for the birth of several new nations, rapid spread of universal suffrage, democracy, education, women's rights including reproductive rights, transport and communications, medicine and health, media, science, technology and economic development. The unprecedented pace of development and dissemination of information and communication technologies has led to a situation where some have access to new technologies but many are without any such access. What kind of a **technological leadership** is required to bridge this digital divide?

Stem cell research, gene splicing and cloning have raised concerns from various sections of society on grounds of ethics and religious point of view. The epidemic proportions of global public health issues such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria is a huge challenge to the **scientific leadership** of the international community.

What kind of **civil society leadership** is required when public trust in governments is on continuous decline? Is there a role for **corporate leadership** in ensuring that ever increasing amounts of wealth generated in the market contributes to not only shareholder value but also to alleviating poverty?

What are the challenges facing **educational leadership** to create appropriate human resource capacity to meet the needs of a knowledge economy at national and international levels? How far have we encouraged **women's leadership** in our societies and with what results?

### **Exercising Leadership**

A central theme of the literature on leadership has been the role of leadership vision which involves (a) the envisioning of 'an image of a desired future', which (b) when effectively articulated and communicated to followers, serves (c) to empower those followers so that they can enact the vision. In other words, there is something

uniquely 'human' and strikingly 'empowering' about leadership and it comes with an onerous responsibility.

An eminent writer on the subject defines "leadership as leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both leaders and followers. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their followers' values and motivations".

But the more we look at the vast literature in this emerging discipline over the last forty years or so, the less we notice the emphasis on the 'human dimensions' of leadership.

In an attempt to study the observable and measurable aspects of leadership behaviour - a trend borrowed from the research methods of varied disciplines that actually contribute to our understanding of leadership - it appears that 'we lost sight of the "deep structure", or meaning of leadership'. It has been argued very cogently that 'existing research has mapped only a portion of the domain of leadership phenomena due to a concentration on relatively few leadership constructs and because of the popularity of a limited set of empirical methodologies'.

The various themes of leadership cited above, focus on the larger context of leadership and human dimensions of leadership.

### **Context of Leadership**

The understanding of the 'context' in which a problem is situated is important for exercising leadership in a meaningful and productive manner. Understanding this context is also important because it shapes leadership – consciously or otherwise – more than any other factor. A prescription about what leadership skills are required and what leadership styles are possible can only emerge from a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the context of leadership.

Leadership studies have not fully recognized the role of context in leadership and much less theorized about the same. Prof. Rosenau analyses the role of context and the constraints on leadership in his recent work. The formal and informal requirements of leadership, the dynamic nature of followership and the critical look at what constitutes 'charisma' in the broader sense as highlighted in his work helps us unravel the multi-dimensionality of leadership.

It is perhaps desirable to examine the context of leadership from two perspectives – one, that is eloquently presented in Prof. Rosenau's paper which emphasizes on factors that "constrain their (leaders) policies and limit their conduct" and two, is what I attempt here. In as much as we are talking about leaders or leadership, what is the larger context that determines all leadership action? Is it the national/international system (structural) or the forces that are driving and shaping that national/international system (processes)? Is it possible to identify an all encompassing element(s) that best describe the context in which we find ourselves today?

I argue that globalization and diversity are two core all-encompassing elements that provide an over-arching context in which leadership is exercised at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It follows then that **leadership is all about managing globalization and diversity** for the benefit of all. Leadership is the art of adapting to the many challenges emerging from such a context with appropriate skills, strategies and sensitivity.

#### **(a) Globalization**

Simply put, the context in which leadership is exercised today is largely defined by globalization and the forces unleashed in response to such globalization. A striking feature of the process of globalization is that it creates at any given point of time, winners and losers. Some sections of the society are lagging behind and some are left out. Surely, this has been a fact of history. What makes it an inescapable component of the context in which leadership today operates is the pervasive influence of

democracy, human rights and media. Leaders have to face this challenge of coping with increasing complexity.

The forces unleashed in response to the process of globalization are all a part of the diversity that characterizes our humanity. I am referring to diversity in all its manifestations – cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnic, national, gender, class, professional, ideological, and so on. Some of these forces are passive and some very active, some apparently are very conflictual and some very combative. These forces appear in all walks of life: markets; world of ideas; culture; ecology; social groups like women, youth, indigenous peoples; sub-national groups, NGOs and terrorist groups.

### **(b) Diversity**

All through history and even today, when we examine the news and events around us that depict intolerance, violence, conflicts, war, terrorism, refugees, human rights violations, genocide and so on, we realize that the root cause of it all is our inability, even a failure, to manage diversity. There is surely any number of instances when we do in fact celebrate our diversity. But at times, when one group is pitted against the other or when a group perceives to be the loser vis-à-vis the other with the attendant sense of relative deprivation or marginalization or exclusion, we have the ingredients to trigger unrest, tension, conflicts and human tragedies.

In the light of the above, it is clear that the management or mismanagement of diversity by leadership has profound consequences. At worst of times, the leadership that looks at diversity as a constraining environment is sometimes prone to be either confrontational or aggressive. It can lead to an emergence of ‘leadership based on fear and force’ – a fear that you are likely to lose all that you have if you do not fight the ‘other’. When fear becomes a negative emotion, we can only imagine the consequences of such a leadership style. At an extreme level, we can surely locate the current war on terror as posing a huge challenge to managing diversity at all levels. Regrettably, some of the analytical prescriptions offered by influential writers such as

Robert Kaplan to win the war on terror diminish the importance of international law and international organizations, elevate military means and are even destructive of democratic governance.

### **Changing Functions of Leadership**

At best of times, a leadership that understands the need to manage diversity is deeply engaged in delivering effective but 'routine and transactional' leadership. The art of aggregating multiple interests and also crafting a balance therein is seen as a function of **transactional leadership**. Transactional leaders "approach followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another: jobs for votes or subsidies for campaign contributions. Such transactions comprise the bulk of the relationships among leaders and followers, especially in groups, legislatures, and parties". In other words, transactional leadership is characterized by its central focus on provision of material rewards to followers in return for their committed effort.

The task of organizing our society and improving the quality of life for all depends on leadership and governance. The larger context of globalization and diversity should be seen therefore as inviting the leadership of the day to view this context not as a constraining space but as one expanding the functions of leadership. This requires leaders with new attitudes and skills.

The art of managing globalization and diversity at systemic level to design and implement an equitable society therein, is seen as a function of **transformational leadership**. Transformational leadership is defined as the process of pursuing collective goals through the mutual tapping of leaders' and followers' motive bases toward the achievement of the intended change. Transformational leaders differ from transactional leaders in the sense that they are willing to change the framework in which they operate by engaging the followers more actively "that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents". In the corporate world, the idea that winning companies build leaders at every level has taken a firm root.

The task of dealing with diversity or multi-cultural or multi-sectoral groups; co-sharing of governance at national level among public, private and independent sectors; and, developing a positive equation with international organizations are, in my opinion, the most important characteristics of this new context and this calls for leaders and leadership that is markedly different from the 'routine and transactional' types.

The challenge today is to identify, train and encourage 'systemic and transformational' leadership. Such leaders exhibit three qualities that encompass the **human dimensions of leadership**: (a) a systems approach and systems thinking in understanding and solving problems; (b) a high level of emotional intelligence including compassion, sensitivity and listening skills; and, (c) an innate ability to transform situations and relationships from competitive and conflictual to consensual and co-operative frameworks.

This is not to say that at every major level and in every major domain of society we are seeking 'systemic and transformational leaders'. What we surely need at every major level and in every major domain of society is a leadership that understands the systemic and transformational context in which it is operating at the dawn of this century. And that systemic and transformational context is defined by globalization and diversity.

### **Leadership and Followership**

Leadership is a two-way street. Prof. Rosenau states in his work a very important and valid principle: Creative leadership requires a voluntary followership. It very much flows from the existing scheme of things that 'extensive expectations' will continue to dominate any followership and its interaction with leadership in an era of globalization. This is in line with human nature and its expectations from leaders in times of profound change and/or chaos or in times of flux as embodied in globalization.

In my opinion, in such a context, followership will likely be different. I envisage a kind of **fragmented followership** - not necessarily bad or negative - due to the multiple loyalties of citizenry/followership.

The multiple primordial as well as modern loyalties of an individual are not only a feature of our societies but also a big contributor to their robust development. We can surely cite loyalties of individuals in the realm of say, religion, political ideology, environmental protection, bioethics, language, ethnicity, solidarity (with the poor and disenfranchised), nation-state (my country, right or wrong), world government and universal principles of human rights, to name a few. Fragmented followership can be seen either as a limiting factor on leadership or as an opportunity to adapt appropriately to such a context.

In conclusion, any limitation – if so perceived - is in my view a function of the menu of choice that is available to a leader. Those leaders who master the contradictory forces of globalization at the systemic level and deliver results at regional/local levels will have greater followership. In the past two decades, nations have seen great leaders who understood the dynamics of globalisation and diversity and have tried to adjust with this process for the moment. What we now need is the emergence of master-statesmen at political level or for that matter even thought leaders to enunciate the much needed vision about managing globalization and diversity. And in this age of rapid dissemination of new media technologies, such leaders will have enormous power, influence and authority, and even moral and soft power that could perhaps equal the founders of various religions in the past!

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