

“Personal Leadership: Insights from the Bhagavad-Gita”

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Abstract

The Bhagavad-Gita, an ancient Hindu scripture, encapsulates profound wisdom on personal leadership, decision-making, and navigating life's challenges. This white paper delves into its teachings, emphasizing the essence of mindful decision-making, the metaphor of the universe as a university, and practical applications for leaders seeking personal and professional growth.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bhagavad-Gita, a dialogue between Lord Krishna and the warrior Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, serves as a timeless guide for leadership, decision-making, and self-awareness. It highlights the interconnectedness of life's events and the importance of embracing these lessons. This paper explores key principles from the Gita that are pertinent to effective leadership in today's dynamic world.

Learning from Life's Events

The Gita teaches that events in life hold profound lessons. Nothing occurs by chance; every experience presents an opportunity for learning and growth. This foundational belief mirrors the scientific principle that seeks understanding in every occurrence, laying the groundwork for informed decision-making.

The Universe as a University

Arjuna's transformation of a battlefield into a classroom symbolizes the Gita's perspective on life as an educational journey. Leaders, like Arjuna, can convert challenges into opportunities for learning, fostering a mindset conducive to growth and development.

Composure and Spiritual Awareness

The Gita advocates for cultivating composure amidst chaos. Effective leaders draw strength from spiritual awareness, maintaining balance and clarity

in decision-making even in turbulent times. By aligning with a higher purpose, leaders can navigate challenges with resilience and grace.

Subordinating Impulse to Purpose

Leaders often encounter impulses that might hinder their progress. By understanding the nature of these impulses – stemming from the mind's default programming – effective leaders learn to detach themselves from impulsive reactions. This enables them to focus on their purpose and goals, overcoming distractions and fears.

The Bhagavad-Gita is a guide to personal leadership, offering a conversation between two leaders and guiding us on the essence of decision-making and the principles on which we can make those decisions.

The first thing to learn is that things don't happen by chance; there's something to be learned in everything that happens in our lives. This faith is also the foundation of science.

Moreover, the Bhagavad-Gita setting itself demonstrates how the universe is a university. Firstly, Arjun converts a battlefield into a classroom by his questions to Krishna.

Secondly, by having the Bhagavad-Gita spoken on a battlefield, the Bhagavad-Gita demonstrates a vision of spirituality that is socially responsible. The Pandavas tried their best to avoid war and it was their duty to protect their citizens from a tyrannical ruler. They fought not for property but for service to society.

The battlefield setting also demonstrates the urgency of spiritual wisdom. Action without vision is a nightmare.

The Bhagavad – Gita is a timeless text due to its guidance against our negative thought patterns or self-advantaging thought patterns.

When we say that there's something to be learned in every situation, how does that work out practically? There are many times when we just get failures or we just get some adversities and there doesn't seem to be any redeeming feature in that.

To recognize this, we have to broaden our vision of success. So, the second sutra is "Redefine Success." If we look at the world around us, the definition of success is often defined in terms of material goods

and gadgets. This is often an imposed definition of success.

For example, in the 1920s, cigarette companies found that their market had reached saturation. All the young males who had enough money to smoke were already smoking. So, how to expand their market?

One of them had a brainwave and said that actually, 50% of the market is untapped because women don't smoke. So, at one particular point, they decided to have targeted advertising in the Independence Day parade of America in 1929 on the 4th of July. They had some of the most prominent female icons going along with that parade at the most visible point in that parade. At the most visible point, they had all been paid to flip out special customized thin sleek cigarettes made for women. They all figured out and with a flourish, they lit it and started smoking it. I don't know how the photo journalists were shooting photos and they asked what are you doing and they had been paid to say "We are lighting the torch of freedom."

Now, that was the time that the suffragette movement was gaining momentum and women had this conception that we have been exploited, we have been restricted by men for so long and now we're becoming free. Somehow by emotionally associating the cigarette with the symbolism of freedom, it became a whole cultural wave. Within just a matter of months, thousands and all thousands of women started smoking.

At that time, the harmful effects of cigarette when smoking were not known so much and in general, the reports that had come had been suppressed. What to speak of the harmful effects for women especially women when they are pregnant for themselves and their child.

None of this was known later when it came to light there was a heavy social cost of that. So, the point is that quite often people are manipulated.

If we look at the world around us, the advertisements reflect our desires and they reinforce our desires. What people desire is advertised but it's not only that what people may have a little interest in that is desire is reinforced.

So, quite often our definition of success whatever it may be, we have to evaluate whether this is my



own definition of success or is it something that externally has been fostered already.

Students will be told you have to become an engineer, you need to become a doctor. The student may have the son or the daughter may have interest in some other field but somehow the pressure comes and that's what they choose and sometimes throughout their life they are caught in the career that is that they are not suited for.

When the refrigeration sucks is imposed, it often becomes debilitating. Debilitating means it saps our morale. We are laboring for a success which even if we achieve it doesn't satisfy us. And sometimes it can even become destructive.

Destructive means when success is defined solely in terms of material aggrandizement.

When India became independent, some of the departing British asked Gandhiji if India would follow the British model of development. Gandhi replied that the British, a small country, required the whole Earth's resources to fuel their model of development. If India followed that model, we would need many more Earths. The point is that everyone wants to be successful in life, but we have to find a definition of success that is innate to us. If we simply adopt the definition of success that is fostered on us by someone else, we will not only be unfulfilled but we may even be frustrated and harm ourselves or others.

I will first classify our being into two levels: material and spiritual. Later, I will further classify the material into three levels. But at this stage, let me give an example to illustrate what it means to have two aspects. We have physical bodies, but at our core, we are spiritual beings. When we seek satisfaction only through material things, we set ourselves up for frustration.

Imagine Mercedes car being used for plowing. Suppose a person who has been a farmer all their life and only knows about tractors and blowing as the only uses for vehicles. A friend from the city comes and gives them a Mercedes car, and they use it for plowing. What is going to happen? Three things:

- The field is going to get spoiled. The field is not meant for plowing.
- The car is going to get spoiled. The car is not meant for plowing.

- The driver is going to get frustrated.

So, when we, as human beings, live solely for materialistic pleasures, these same three things happen. Let's see how.

As I said, materialistic definitions are imposed. Oscar Wilde said that fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to change it every six months. We now consider fashion to be a sign of beauty, but when something goes out of fashion, everyone starts frowning and saying, 'You're so old-fashioned.' Not only do we not feel beautiful or good-looking when wearing or having that particular fashionable thing, but we actually feel ugly and have to give it up. So, it becomes intolerable after six months.

Yes, I am talking against a materialistic definition of happiness. I am not talking against material things. We all need material things in our life, such as gadgets, cars, and whatever else. But the problem is not buying the device; the problem is buying into the underlying definition of success. I mean, get the best guidance, but if I think that getting this gadget and parading it before everyone else is going to make me happy, then I'm wrong.

I saw an advertisement with a young man driving a car, a girl with adoring eyes looking at him, and another young man glaring from behind. The advertisement caption was, 'Buy this car and enjoy the envy in your neighbor's eyes.' What a pathetic level of enjoyment! Instead of enjoying something we positively do constructively, we look at the envy in other people's eyes and think that that's what will make us happy.

So, the problem is not buying the car; the problem is buying into the underlying definition of success, thinking that this is what will make me happy.

Leadership requires the ability to subordinate impulse to purpose. We all have our impulses. Maybe someone does something wrong, and I get the impulse to lash out at them. If I'm in a leadership position, I can't lash out at them. But quite often, lashing out verbally at people alienates them; it doesn't serve the purpose, and it often creates an atmosphere of resentment and insecurity in the team, making the whole situation worse.

So, we all have impulses, but we have a higher purpose, and we need to subordinate our impulse to

our purpose. 'Okay, I feel like doing this, but no, I will not do this because this will have harmful effects.' Actually, at one level, all of us need to do this, all of us, whether we are leaders or not, in whatever capacity of leaders we are. We all need to support an impulse to purpose. But it is all the more consequential for leaders because their actions affect not themselves alone but many other people.

Daniel Goleman, an American psychologist, wrote a book called *Emotional Intelligence*. In the book, he states that there is perhaps no psychological skill more fundamental than resisting impulse. He conducted an experiment at Stanford University with five-year-old children. The children were given two marshmallows and told they could have one now or two if they waited 20 minutes. Most of the children grabbed the marshmallow immediately, while a few were able to wait.

The researchers followed these children for the next 20 years and found that the resisters were more successful in various aspects of their lives. They were less easily frustrated, better able to pursue challenges, and more self-reliant and confident. The grabbers, on the other hand, were more stubborn, mistrustful, and resentful.

This simple experiment demonstrates the importance of delaying gratification. The ability to resist impulse and pursue long-term goals is a critical skill for success in life.

Today's world often celebrates the ability to grab the short-term pleasure. However, this short-term vision can be debilitating. Wealth is a necessity of life, but it is not the purpose of life. When wealth is made into the definition of success, it can lead to a mismatch in the inner dimensions of our lives.

We all need wealth, but it should not be the sole measure of our success. We should also focus on our mental and spiritual well-being. When we make wealth the end goal, we risk becoming comfortably miserable.

It's not just a matter of relocating from one country to another. Often, a change in location is accompanied by a change in values and priorities. If people become more and more materialistic, then the definition of success becomes more constricted. If we think that material things alone will give us happiness, we are setting ourselves up

for disappointment. Material possessions are never enough, and they can always be lost.

A book called *The American Paradox* by an American researcher explores this idea. He found that various social parameters, even those related to material well-being, have declined in America from 1950 to 2000. For example, while there has been tremendous progress in terms of technological gadgets and wizardry, the depression rate has doubled, the divorce rate has tripled, the crime rate has quadrupled, and the number of children born outside of marriage has sextupled. Overall happiness levels have also gone down by ten times.

Fanatical materialism is when material things alone define a person's worth. If you don't have certain material possessions, you are considered good for nothing or useless. It's like salt in food. Salt is important, but if there is too much, it will ruin the taste. Wealth is important in life, but it should not be the only thing that defines us.

Imagine if someone gave you a plate filled with only salt. You wouldn't be able to eat it. That's what happens when we reduce success down only to material things. We set ourselves up for frustration.

The example of the Mercedes being used for plowing illustrates this point. When a Mercedes is used for plowing, the field, the car, and the driver are all damaged. Similarly, when we focus only on material things, we damage ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us.

There are many reasons why suicide rates are so high. One of the underlying reasons is that people feel that there is nothing to live for. When we have a wrong definition of success, we may feel that we cannot achieve it or that it is forever lost to us. If there is no point to live, then suicide may seem like the only option.

This is how the driver is frustrated, the car is getting damaged, and the field is getting spoiled. When we use a Mercedes for plowing, we are damaging ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us.

A biologist once said that every species on Earth contributes to the ecology of the planet in some way or the other. If any one species is extinct, to some extent, the Earth's biodiversity, the Earth's biosphere, and its ecological balance get affected. This applies



to every species except one: the human species.

He said that if tomorrow all humans became extinct, there would be no problem for the ecology. In fact, most ecological problems would be solved if humans became extinct. This is not very flattering for us humans, but it is undeniable that humans are the most intelligent species on the planet. If there's a classroom full of all species on the planet, the human would be the smartest one in the class. But if we use our intelligence to destroy ourselves and the planet, then we are not very smart after all.

The Bhagavad-Gita explains that our contribution to ecology is meant to be spiritual, not material. This means that we are not here solely for material purposes; we are also here for spiritual fulfillment. When we fail to fulfill our spiritual purpose, we seek that fulfillment at the material level, which leads to excessive exploitation of material resources. Humans are the only animals who sleep when they are not tired, eat when they are not hungry, and fight without provocation. This is because we operate with a materialistic definition of success, which disrupts the ecology and causes us frustration.

Leaders who operate with a materialistic definition of success not only frustrate themselves but also everyone else. Scientific studies have shown that people who attend spiritual programs at least once a week live an average of seven years longer than those who do not. Religious youth also show significantly lower levels of drug and alcohol abuse, premature sexual development, criminal delinquency, and suicide tendencies. Elderly people with deep personal religious faith have a stronger sense of well-being and life satisfaction than their less religious peers.

Redefining success means expanding our definition to include not only physical well-being and material wealth but also spiritual well-being. Spiritual well-being is the state of being connected to something greater than oneself and having a sense of inner peace and purpose. We nourish our spiritual side through spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, and service to others.

The Bhagavad-Gita offers three insights into who we are:

- We are souls, not bodies. The soul is eternal and unchanging, while the body is temporary and

subject to change.

- We are part of God. The soul is a spark of God's consciousness.
- We can harmonize the material and the spiritual. We can live in the world but not be of the world. This means that we can enjoy material things without being attached to them.

When we understand our core spiritual identity, we recognize that we are indestructible, no matter what challenges we face. This knowledge provides us with a sense of security, allowing us to face problems without feeling immediately threatened. It's like standing above a volcano; you're aware of the danger, but you don't feel immediately threatened. When we perceive ourselves as material beings, we become easily disturbed by external events, feeling threatened by the ups and downs of life. However, when we recognize our spiritual essence, we remain grounded and composed, even in the midst of turmoil.

Some may wonder if this concept of an indestructible core is merely a mental construct or if there is any tangible evidence to support it. Let's examine this distinction between being disturbed and concerned. Being disturbed implies feeling threatened, while being concerned indicates awareness and proactive engagement without feeling threatened. This analogy can be applied to our perception of a volcanic eruption. From a safe distance, we can observe the situation with concern, but we do not feel personally threatened.

The foundation of public leadership is personal leadership. This means that if I am to lead others effectively, I must first be very clear, purposeful, and focused in my own life.

The first important point is to redefine success. If a leader has a narrow or limited definition of success, then failure within that definition can be devastating and demoralizing. However, if we have a broader definition of success, we can withstand setbacks and failures. As Einstein said, "Seek not to be a man of success, but a man of value." Even if we fail in our endeavors, we can still develop our skills and become more valuable people.

The second point is to cultivate composure and confidence. A leader's morale has a direct impact on the morale of the entire team. If a leader appears

disheartened or defeated, it can quickly erode the group's semangat and motivation. Therefore, it is essential for leaders to maintain their composure and confidence, even in the face of adversity.

The third point is to develop an awareness of one's spiritual code. This awareness provides a sense of security and stability, even during challenging times. Leaders who are rooted in their spiritual code can face setbacks without being overly disturbed, allowing them to move forward purposefully and guide their teams effectively.

The fourth point is to subordinate impulse to purpose. Leaders, like everyone else, can experience impulses that may damage their prospects if acted upon impulsively. By understanding that these impulses stem from the mind's default programming, leaders can learn to separate themselves from these impulses and avoid acting impulsively. For example, if a leader fears being unable to answer a question during a presentation, they can choose not to let that fear distract or worry them. Instead, they can focus on preparing well and delivering their presentation to the best of their

ability.

CONCLUSION

This white paper outlines the core principles of personal leadership drawn from the Bhagavad – Gita, emphasizing their relevance in contemporary leadership paradigms. Personal leadership forms the bedrock of effective public leadership. By assimilating the teachings of the Bhagavad – Gita – redefining success, fostering composure, spiritual awareness, and controlling impulsive reactions – leaders can navigate complexities, inspire their teams, and achieve holistic success.

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