

S.V. NATHAN



# In praise of the everyday leader

*'The future is not what it used to be!' - Yogi Berra*

**T**HE past six decades have witnessed enough literature being churned out on leadership. There are so many theories on leadership, which beat any cognitive effort towards a unifying theory. It is energising to read about Jack Welch, Lee Iacocca and our own Narayana Murthy and Abdul Kalam. Seemingly ordinary men, who have transformed organisations. The leader at the top is able to make an impact on organisations and give directions for the future, and drive change. There are also the leaders down the hierarchy who are not the visible kind, and yet in their own quiet way lead tremendous change. They actually provide long-term strength to an organisation. And while some of them even grow into positions of eminence, some others remain as middle level leaders. They do things that can be replicated across organisations, and they do not carry the burden of limelight.

This article is not so much as about the leader at the top, but rather about the many mini-leaders, commanders who brave the winds day-on-day, everyday. This article is about the everyday battle and about making significant strides in the war for excellence.

## **New world, new game, some rules**

Businesses have changed; hierarchies have been replaced by networks, big *babu* systems by seamless processes, and management by control has evolved into relationship-based management and coaching.

The new game is about speed, adaptation and rejuvenation. In these circumstances, it is easy to say that knowledge is power and teamwork is strength. Such



aphorisms on leadership abound and it is evergreen, valid for eternity. Nimbleness and responsiveness to the marketplace is the key – finding better ways, adding value.

### **Stand by your people**

My idea of a leader is Captain Nautiyal, my first boss in the industry. I recollect vividly an occasion where I had committed a major *faux pax* and would have got the rough end of the stick from my CEO. Nautiyal stood up for me and braved the waters. And he did this

for many of those who worked with him.

I never forgot the incident as then, in my formative years as a trainee, standing up for your men seemed to me a valuable leadership trait. Nautiyal never made it to the top. But to me, and the many who worked with him, he was a very fine leader.

### **Diversity is strength**

Many years ago, we were asked to pick a team that would compete in a certain project. There was a

mad rush to put together a top gun team comprising the best guys in class. Murali, a successful professional, now in GE, picked a team, which had an odd combination - one that was not really top-of-the-class. There were 'soft' guys, some 'workers' and 'plodders' and yes one 'thinker'. This team won hands down. The virtue of diversity: The ability in putting together a team, which has diverse skills is far more important than an assembly of like-minded experts or the 'best guys'. In the globalised environment, the





*Leaders at various levels across the organisation will be more important than the leader at the top.*

understanding of 'culture' and diversity are a key requisite.

### **Breaking rules, creating networks**

In the early part of my career I worked with a British multinational company (MNC). As in any MNC, there were rules and more rules and enough policies to spend a lifetime understanding them. And yet Sartaj Singh always found a way. He broke every rule in a creative way. And he was a pastmaster in the art of networking. He knew many within the organisation and outside. And he used to help us with his 'contacts'. If you had a problem, never mind if you worked in his 'division' or not, he always found a way for you. He stuck his neck out on many an occasion. He believed in the power of networking and encouraged those who worked with him to 'just try it'. The 'permission raj' is over. Call it self-empowerment or what you will, but taking a ball as if it belongs to you and carrying it through using a network of social relationships is going to be a key differentiator in tomorrow's age. This is actually the counterpoint of empowerment. Empowerment is the right given by superiors, whereas today it is more of believing in such a proposition and moving ahead. Sartaj Singh is now the Managing Director of FMC-Rallis India.

### **Mobilising resources**

My brother was on the task force, which had the unenviable job of putting the flooded Patalganga plant of Reliance back on track in record time. A meeting was

arranged to assess what was needed to put the plant on track. Water pumps, rewinding of all motors, bulldozers and the like were found to be the critical resources. You needed more bulldozers than were available in Gujarat to help the situation. And they arrived in three days flat! A plant of Siemens stopped its regular production and attended to the rewinding of all motors of the Patalganga plant. The plant was up and running in 40 days. It was an amazing feat. An inspiring moment in the history of Reliance. Unthinkable, and yet it happened because the Ambanis led from the front in making sure that managers were supported and many stood to a man to make sure that resources were not the restraining factor. It is an unsaid part of the culture. My brother never stops talking about it. Working from a standpoint of possibilities rather than constraints. Standing by the men in the trenches.

### **Double vision**

Manu Anand was an accountant with a difference. An affable man, his subordinates loved him, as he understood the intricacies of accounts and the pain of audits. He lived in the current and helped his folks with innovative solutions. And he also lived in the world of tomorrow. Always challenging the ways of the business and egging it on in new ways. Visualising new scenarios and possibilities of the future. His bosses too loved him, especially for his double vision – one eye on the present and another on the future.

Constantly challenging the here and now and setting outcomes for the future. Currently Anand leads Frito Lay, India, as its CEO.

### **Create trust**

Steve Borgia is simple person. Candour is his middle name. A photographer who worked with the United Nations, his team in the marketing division of a concept marketing company liked his direct approach. When the market turned topsy-turvy, the company nearly went down under, but his team stayed with him. Borgia was a person who spoke from the heart. He did not beat around and gave the bad news directly. His team trusted him, rallied around him and stood by him in the roughest time. Plain speaking, enlisting support and creating trust were his hallmark. Borgia is now the President of Sterling Holidays.

### **Add value, inspire**

Leaders add value. Even simple events such as meetings are opportunities for adding value. Such events leave you better prepared and more eager to do a job. Prabhalakshmi, a branch manager at a leading networking company, runs a tight ship. An everyday leader, she believes in what she calls 'presence'. Each day she had an 'open door' hour set aside for her people. Being present for people who need her. Adding value in all their requirements. You knew you have a safety net with her around. You always came away

from her with a distinct feeling of having added value to yourself. Never the one to give you advise, but one who lets you experiment and 'discover yourself'. Last heard of, she was the country head of a business line at Microland Ltd.

### **The common thread**

In the new age, the single hero waving a magic sword, rallying the troops will give way to a multitude of everyday mini-leaders. Leaders are not born; they are created. Not the leaders at the top, but many who live in organisations as middle managers, and a few who make it to the top too. Noel Tichy of the University of Michigan Business School, says the primary role of a leader is to communicate a vision in a meaningful manner and mobilise resources for the mission.

Competencies by themselves will not change substantially. The thinking and the doing axis remain unchanged. The ways are different. Group think and speed gain currency. The shift perceptibly is towards 'networking' diversity handling, coaching and being 'present'. The ability to work in a team is not taken as an area to work on, but as a fundamental requirement.

### **The mandate**

The mandate is apparent. Identify the mini-leaders in your midst. Support and nurture them. Make rounds of the war room stories. Build them into the fabric of your culture. People will see the leader-champions in their midst.

Actually leadership at several levels is already recognised, at least by the people! Workforce engagement rises significantly where there is recognition of such leaders. Communicate the achievements of such leaders, and loudly at that. This is not to put pressure on such leaders, but to give the right signals to others who need to boot-strap themselves even as they understand the organisation's expectations.

The leaders across various levels of organisation will be more important than the leader at the top. Transformational leadership is unitary at best. Leaving lasting impressions on the system and the culture of the place is the big derivative of the everyday leader. With the requirement of survival and growth in any organisation, the deployment of the skills of the everyday leader is important. With 'project' type of work gaining ground, adapting, (meaning capturing knowledge and seamlessly moving to another task) seems awesome to expect of a leader. And yet, these skills are what are learnt at schools and colleges!! The world is about predicting outcomes and the day belongs to the everyday leader. ■

*(The author is Director, Human Resources, Philips Software Centre, Bangalore.)*



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