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A descriptive study about the management concepts depicted in great Indian epic Mahabharata

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Abstract

Management Concepts is off many types, few of key concepts include Team Work, Division of work, Allocation of Work to Appropriate Persons, Leading, and Motivating etc. Management Concepts are present all around us right from our Home, in our Work Place, Temples , in classical tamil Literatures like Thirukkural, Silapathikaram and even in our Great India Epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. Just like 'Ramayana', the epic 'Mahabharata' also has many management lessons for the present day business leaders and managers. Greed, jealousy, quest for power, trying to achieve goals irrespective of the fairness of the means deployed – all these contradictions in life are very poignantly brought out. This paper would discuss in detail about the management concepts depicted in Great Indian Epic Mahabharata.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Management Principles, Technology, Skills, Leadership

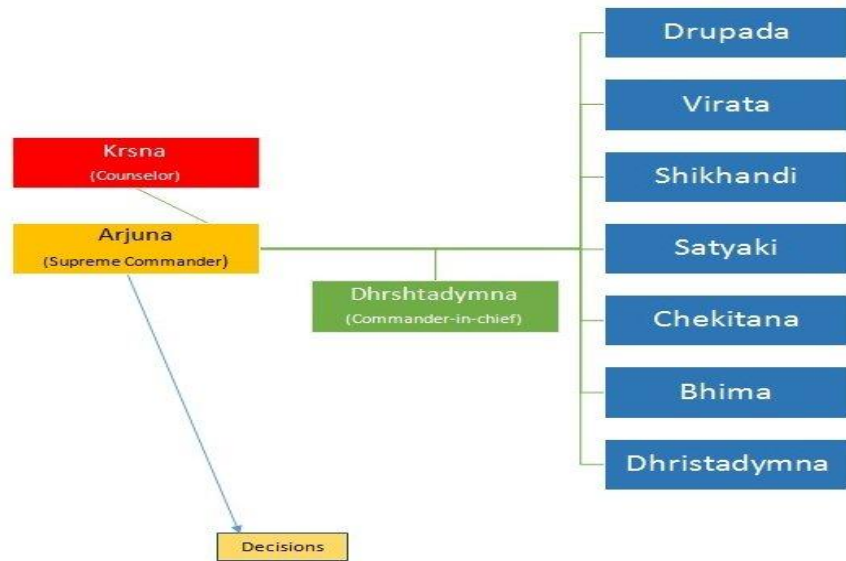
Introduction

The Mahabharata, meaning Great India, is said to have been written by a Brahmin named Vyasa, between 400 and 100 BCE, but no one really knows. Across centuries, priestly writers and editors with different attitudes in different centuries were to add to the work, and the Mahabharata emerged three times its original size. The Mahabharata was divided into eighteen books of verses interspersed with passages of prose. It attempted to describe the period in which Aryan tribes in northern India were uniting into kingdoms and when these petty kingdoms were fighting to create empire. The work attempted to be an encyclopedia about points of morality. One of its heroes is Krishna, described as a royal personage descended from the gods – an eighth incarnation of the god Vishnu.

The Mahabharata's heroes are described as yearning for power but, like the heroes of the Ramayana, devoted to truth and having a strong sense of duty and affection for their parents. New contributions to the Mahabharata gave greater focus to the gods Vishnu and Shiva. A story incorporated into the Mahabharata became known as the Bhagavad Gita (the Lord's Song), shortened by many to the Gita. The Bhagavad Gita became Hinduism's most popular scripture and into modern times it would be read by many for daily reference – a work that Mahatma Gandhi would describe as an infallible guide to conduct. In the Bhagavad Gita, Vishnu acquired a new incarnation: Krishna. Krishna was originally a non-Aryan god in northwestern India.

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Appendix Chart 1: The Pandava Organizational Structure



Appendix Chart 2: Kaurava Organizational Structure:



Objectives of the Study

- To Study about the management concepts depicted in Great Indian Epic Mahabharata

Methodology

- Type of Research : Qualitative research
- Data collection technique : Secondary data

Management Concepts Depicted in Mahabharata

1. Work on your Weakness, improve your Skills and Constantly Learn

During exile the Pandavas, having recently lost their kingdom and honour, utilized their time to acquire new skills. Arjuna, the most skilful archer in the world set out to acquire new weapons. Yudhisthira acquired teachings from various wise rishis and learnt the game of dice, his nemesis, and became undefeatable in the game. It was these newfound skills that gave them an edge in the final war. In the modern times the principles of management/technology learnt today will be archaic in the future. Thus we have the need to constantly improve, especially in times when career is at ebb.

2. Share Responsibility

The Kauravas had a centralised leadership with one head of the army at a time who had the control of the entire 11 divisions (akshouhini). Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Shalya and Aswathamma pass the command as they fall and for a brief period the army is leaderless. Despite the commanders Duryodhana is in de facto control. This dichotomy in leadership often results in clashes.

The Pandavas on the other hand have a modern management structure to their army. Arjuna was the chief commander of the army, with Lord Krishna as his counsellor. Dhristadyumna was the commander-in-chief and also commander of one of the seven divisions (akshouhini), as six others were for their.

The sharing of responsibility, thus power leads to a democracy in the management and reduced reliance on one individual, thus reducing risk.

3. Teamwork Succeeds

The Kauravas had number advantage (11 divisions Vs. 7 of Pandava) their generals fought their individual battles:

- Bhishma: because of the vow to protect the throne of Hastinapur
- Drona and Kripa: allegiance to the throne
- Karna: his friendship to Duryodhana and prove his mettle against Arjuna
- Shalya: a Pandava ally to demoralise the Kaurava

They were a group of brilliant individuals which made a terrible team. Often described as bees, hornets and mosquitos put in a jar with clash of egos (Bhishma-Karna, Bhishma-Shakuni, Karna-Shalya). On the other had the Pandavas fought with one goal, setting aside personal beliefs like Yudhisthira lying to Drona or Arjuna killing Karna. Again all of them were a part of decision making process. Teamwork succeeds where individual fails, but the team formed must have the same vision, goal and passion.

4. Commitment over Competence

The Pandavas used trickery of some sort of the other to overpower the Kaurava commanders: Bhishma, Drona and Karna shows that the Kauravas had highly competent people with them. It was the difference in the commitment of the people on both sides that made the difference.

- Bhishma: gave away his secret to die and did not attempt to kill the Pandavas
- Drona: too indirectly gave away his secret
- Karna: only humiliated but did not kill Yudhisthira and Bhishma

On the other hand the Pandava army showed extraordinary commitment:

- Abhimanyu, a 16 year old lad underwent a suicide mission in the chakravyu. It took the combined effort of 7 competent warriors to overcome this committed soldier
- Ghatotkach deliberately fell on the army ranks causing damage even in death
- Yudhisthira went to face Karna knowing full well he would be defeated

When selecting a team it is always better to have people who are passionate and committed rather than people who excel individually. The best man for the job is not the one

with the best skills but with the greatest commitment.

5. Take calculated risks, but always have dynamic strategies

In the beginning of the war Yudhisthira went to ask for the blessings of the elders, who invariably revealed the secret of their defeat. This was a master plan executed finely for levelled up the moral or the dharma cause which bound together his army.

He took the calculated risk and offered all the people to change sides if they wanted to. In reality he was exploiting the lack of cohesiveness of the enemy but it may have backfired. The competence of the warriors and the strength of the divisions were skewed towards the Kauravas which could have precipitated defection from his side. Though it played in his favour when Yuyutsu crossed over to the Pandava side.

Any venture in the real world comes with associated risk with it and all the decisions require us to take decisions after evaluation of these risks. Pandavas and Kauravas both took risks but while Duryodhana's decisions were whimsical and egoist, the Pandavas took calculated risks which mostly paid off. But again the various decision making of the two armies teach us one thing: there are no perfect plans.

6. Women Empowerment

Mahabharata, and by extension Hinduism, is probably the oldest and the only to recognize the importance of women in all realms of the societal working. Some suggest that woman is indicative of the world we surround and man of the people in it and that when Draupadi is dishonoured it suggests the exploitation of the world by its inhabitants.

In the epic the Kauravas had a total patriarchal structure, with commanders like Bhishma, a celibate who could not consider a woman's perspective.

Pandavas relied on the involvement of women and their thoughts. Kunti, their mother was the supreme authority, and her word was dharma for Yudhisthira. Draupadi was a companion to the Pandavas, and had it not been for her motivation the Pandavas would have reclined to the forest forever.

In any decision making structure women always bring in a holistic view of the situation. The aggressive and dominative masculine traits are balanced by harmonic and sustainable traits of a woman. It is only in a team that is able to have this balance that is able to sustain in the long term.

7. Lord Krishna: the best crisis manager of the world

A discussion of any aspect of Mahabharata is incomplete without the mention of Lord Krishna. His divinity scintillates throughout the tale and Pandavas would have had a hard time winning but for him. For a moment let us set aside his divinity and view him in the scope of a manager.

Stages: Extending the discussion the avatars of Vishnu, (who is a householder worldly God) defines the stages of a manager in an industry:

- Parasurama: is a rule follower, and leads the organization in its very early phase where discipline is paramount
- Rama: sets an example even by sacrifice and his ideals drive the organization

- Lord Krishna: the ultimate coach, who develops and instils sense of responsibility in his pupils. He is a crisis manager who never gets involved directly but through ideas
- Buddha/Kalki: depending on the success of the system either detaches himself or ends the system if it is unsustainable

The managing principle of Lord Krishna are complex, especially since at times they seem to be full of trickery, deceit and in conflict of Dharma. He used all methods of negotiations to avoid a conflict but on battlefield it is winning that matters. On pondering you discover that no one but Lord Krishna knows his exact purpose on the battlefield. Duryodhana is fighting for the letter of the law and Pandavas on the spirit of the law. Krishna is there to uphold principles.

His actions teaches us something very important, recognize the larger purpose. Is it to surpass the rival? No, he says. Take into account the larger view to mirror your actions. Do not be myopic to the future needs for present wants. He is the first preceptor of sustainability.

Then again is his coolness in the midst of battle, probably because he is not involved in conflict. A question arises in my mind that He being God could have stepped in and stopped the massacre to punish the wrongdoers. Is he justified in his decision of not taking up arms? And it turns out that he is. Not engaged in battle himself he is able have a different view of the situation and can offer ingenious alternates. The leader who monitors thus comes up with solutions that escape the team on real time work.

Each of his actions when views from different views yields a new perspective. Everytime I read the epic his genius as a manager dawns upon me whose understanding and implementation is a life long journey.

The timelessness of Mahabharata and the management derived is a subject of immense research. Timeless and holistic, thus complex as the text is, it truly offers a direction towards solution of all problems.

A very subtle teaching of the epic is sustainability. The Goddess earth (Draupadi), comes as a cow to Vishnu to complain of her over exploitation, and God as a cowherd wipes out a generation of these people, (the princes dishonouring Draupadi). He promises to return again to establish order, unless we become sustainable.

8. Seize Every Opportunity

Look out for opportunities outside your scope of work. Never hassle yourself too much with the motive of defeating your competitor. Rather, invest all energies on a bigger goal – to add strength and power to your business.

9. Win Allies

Five brothers won against a hundred. How do you think Pandavas did that? The relationships they established over the years paid off. You may be busy focussing on your own growth at the present, but you must start reaching out to more people and making allies. They will push you forward when the time comes.

10. Distribute Work

The more people you have, working towards different goals, the more efficient the output is going to be. One-

man leadership strategy didn't work for Kauravas and there is no way it's going to work for you.

11. Know How To Build Team Spirit

Kauravas were plenty in number but null in strength. Make your team work towards a single goal instead of personal ones. Take contributions from everyone. Hear everyone out; make them learn how to work with each other.

12. Give Your Team Individual Goals

Allot individual goals to each team. This will help build up enthusiasm and in turn, help you in the longer run. Even though Pandavas were working towards the same ultimate goal, they had individual roles in the battle too.

13. Commitment – Keep It Strong

Once you're up for a challenge, do not back out. Had Pandavas fretted about being negligible in number in comparison to the Kauravas, they would've never even tried. Determination and commitment will surely take you a long way.

14. Know Every Member's Potential

If you're going to manage a team, you better know what role they suit the best. Pandavas knew how to harnesses energies from each man in their army. You should be smart enough to use your team's ability and potential to the maximum.

15. Concentration

Multi-tasking is a buzzword in professional circles. But Arjuna displays a kind of concentration which involves a complete focus on the task at hand. In the process, he evolves into an excellent archer of his times. Whether it is the bird whose eyes alone he is able to see before shooting his arrow, or the rotating fish whose eye he has to pierce based on the image cast in the water urn placed below in the court of King Drupada, he excels in accomplishing the task at hand.

Managers who look satisfied with their day's work would invariably share the same secret with you – of having done something satisfactorily that day! Aiming for perfection, they are at least able to excel in the tasks at hand. And focusing on one thing at a time surely helps!

16. Perseverance

Notice the kind of setbacks Pandavas get to suffer in their lives. They survive the insidious designs of their Kaurava cousins at Varanavat. After losing their kingdom and wealth to Kauravas in an unfair game of dice, they undergo an exile for twelve years in forests. This is followed by a year of remaining incognito, which they do so in King Virata's palace. When a peace proposal gets discussed with Kauravas, Yudhishtira offers to settle the dispute between the brothers by being content with ownership of five villages only. Even this gets turned down by Duryodhana.

The tenacity of bouncing back in the face of adversity that Pandavas display is worth emulating. Many MNCs are put off by the way the Indian market is skewed – with a miniscule share of the well-heeled who have global exposure and a vast majority of common people who aspire for reliable products and services at highly discounted prices. **GE** and **Nestle** have learnt their

lessons. **McDonald's, KFC, Domino's, Pizza**

Hut and Café Coffee Day in the fast food business have also sharpened their teeth by offering mouth-watering menus in the range of INR 44-119!

17. United We Stand

The mother of Pandavas, Kunti, delivers a master stroke by getting Draupadi to accept all the five brothers as her husbands. The result is a whole unified family which goes through its trials and tribulations as a single unit. Each of the brothers has a USP – if Yudhishtira is the epitome of virtue upholding '*dharma*' (righteousness) at all costs, Bhima and Arjuna are great warriors who have to be kept on a tight leash, impatient as they are in extracting revenge from Kauravas. Nakula and Sahdeva have their own unique qualities. Together, the five brothers form a multi-skilled and invincible team.

Large conglomerates like **Tatas** often sound similar in their overall configuration. Each company within the group's fold has a unique place in the market. Each is headed by a stalwart who is a subject specialist in the field. The companies operate in fields as disparate as salt and software. Yet, all of them are connected by a common value system and a similar business philosophy.

18. Strategy and Leadership

In a careful reading of the major turning events in the whole narrative, Krishna emerges as an eminent strategist. He keeps Draupadi's frustration under check. He knows that Kauravas would never agree to let Pandavas have their share of the kingdom in a peaceful manner. Yet, he himself goes to plead their cause so that peace is given a last chance.

In the battle that ensues, he virtually leads the 7 divisions of Pandavas' army to a decisive win against the 11 divisions of Kauravas' army. The manner in which Krishna persuades a demoralized Arjuna to take up his arms by enunciating the basic principles of life in the *Bhagavad-Gita* is exemplary.

One of the basic concepts enunciated by Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita* is that of the everlasting nature of the soul. The concept of a soul now finds a resonance even in modern management literature. In 'The 8th Habit', **Stephen Covey** urges professionals to pay heed to their 'inner voice'. While proposing the whole person paradigm, he speaks of the four dimensions of a person – spirit, body, heart and mind.

Coming back to 'Mahabharata', all mighty warriors on the Kauravas' side fall with specific inputs from Krishna. In case of Bhishma, Arjuna attacks him standing behind Shikhandi. Dronacharya is misled to believe that his son Ashwatthama has fallen at the behest of Krishna. When Duryodhana appears to be invincible in his mace fight with Bhima, he gestures to the latter to hit the former below the navel, thereby incapacitating him. When Balarama gets upset with Bhima for having broken a cardinal principle in his final fight with Duryodhana, Krishna intervenes to pacify him by reminding him of the several injustices perpetrated by the Kauravas on Pandavas.

Once the war gets over and all his sons have got killed, Dhritarashtra attempts to kill Bhima by crushing him in a close embrace. Krishna is able to read his mind and deftly pushes across a metal statue instead, thereby saving Bhima's life.

Much like a business leader of modern times, Krishna displays vision, flexibility in approach, resourcefulness and an excellent capacity to command. He is the trouble-shooter par excellence who leads, inspires, guides and motivates.

19. Execution and Followership

If Krishna proves his leadership skills, Pandavas display the skills of being true followers and executors. Yudhishtira, considered an epitome of virtue, agrees to announce the false news of Ashwatthama's death, thereby leading to Dronacharya getting vanquished. Motivated by him, Arjuna takes up his arms against his grandfather, Bhishma. Bhima listens to Krishna and ends up killing Jarasandha (much earlier in the narrative) and Duryodhana (towards the fag-end of the battle).

Often, seniors in companies lament about the lack of some qualities in their assigned leader. But one needs a sense of humility, confidence in another's ability and the motivation to achieve a super-ordinate goal to work as an effective team member. An objective assessment of the situation at hand, unqualified support for the overall goal, registering dissent wherever necessary and balancing the leader's weaknesses with one's own strengths are some of the factors which result into better execution of plans.

20. Key to Failure

As the crown prince of Kauravas, Duryodhana initiates a war which has to be fought under the leadership of commanders who have a soft corner for the Pandavas! With the exception of Karna and his own brothers like Dushasana et al, all his commanders – like Bhishma, Dronacharya and Shalya – are only duty bound to support him. Their real sympathies are with the Pandavas. Thus, he is saddled with an army which is far superior to that of Pandavas in terms of sheer numbers, but sorely lacks in motivation. Duryodhana's greed, envy and jealousy lead him to his doom.

In the business world, we often come across fool hardy leaders who set their goals so high as to be unrealistic. If a proper assessment of the resources available at their command is not made, failure is bound to follow.

21. Avoid Arrogance

One of the several sub-plots in 'Mahabharata' is that of Nahusha who falls from grace after having occupied the throne of Indra, king of the Gods. His fall comes about because of sheer arrogance and pride.

Power and pelf bring in severe obligations in their wake. Successful CEOs understand this, take extra care to keep their pride in check and tailor their inter-personal relationships accordingly.

Conclusion

'Mahabharata' is rich with several other narratives which could be useful to management practitioners. Also, each narrative may be interpreted in several ways, depending upon how one goes about analyzing it. We have presented only few of the management concepts that are depicted in this paper

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