Decision-Making and the Leadership Conundrum

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All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership.

— John Kenneth Galbraith

Introduction

The last few years have seen a series of exposés of wrongdoing within the government vividly brought home to the public by the print and visual media. The involvement of people in leadership roles in the political establishment, bureaucracy, corporate sector and even the media, who misused their position for personal gain, shook the confidence of the nation. Inevitably, the glare also fell on misdemeanours by some in the armed forces. Transgressions by Services personnel, even if mundane, are viewed more seriously as higher moral and ethical standards are expected from the armed forces due to their training, motivation, discipline and regimental ethos, despite coming from the same social milieu. Within the Services, there has been a lot of soul searching on what went wrong and why. Along with a lot of self-flagellation, there is the endless lament that the ethical leadership standards of the Indian Army are declining. Discussions on the subject, though animated, are limited by one's own experiences and are based more often than not on hearsay and selective

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amnesia. The broader picture indicates that the armed forces continue to acquit themselves with honour on all core issues and nothing in today's environment suggests that in the matter of fundamental values and roles, there has been any devaluation from yesteryears.[1]

The subject, however, needs constant attention and reiteration and must remain in the forefront of our consciousness. India's military has stood the test of time in combating external aggression and internal disorder and has done yeoman service in providing assistance during natural disasters and other calamities. That notwithstanding, incidences of leaders who have lost, or may be, never possessed, a moral compass to direct their lives, are increasingly coming to the fore. Such leaders exercise power conferred by the appointment they hold. While the exercise of power may extract obedience, the right to lead remains a moral imperative. This dictates an understanding of morals and ethics in the prevailing cultural milieu and the cultural construct under which such attributes operate. These issues are discussed in this paper with a view to evolving an understanding of how ethical leadership and effective decision-making may be developed in the Army.

Power and the Right to Lead

Power is a capacity to act which enables a leader 'to make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs. Power, however is also viewed as a right to act, with both capacity and right being seen to rest upon the consent of those over whom power is exercised. In this determinism, power is viewed as a matter of instruments, techniques, and procedures employed in an attempt to influence the actions of those who have a choice about how they might behave. This eschews the determinism of power as merely a quantitative capacity.[2] As power consists of the attempt to influence the actions of others,

it will remain an inescapable feature of human interaction and so too will resistance to the exercise of that power. Its manifestation is both relational and reciprocal and could be viewed as a process wherein the leader and the led work together and in tandem with each other. In order to form and maintain that relationship, the leader both constrains and enables and is, in turn, constrained and enabled. This relationship defines the limits of power and presents opportunities to individuals to earn the right to lead.

In his book, *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle East Response*, Bernard Lewis has observed:

> When things go wrong in a society, in a way and to a degree that can no longer be denied or concealed, there are various questions that one can ask. A common one is, "Who did this to us"? The answer to a question, thus, formulated is usually to place the blame on external or domestic scapegoats—foreigners abroad or minorities at home. The Ottomans, faced with the major crisis in their history, asked a different question: "What did we do wrong"? The debate on these two questions began in Turkey immediately after the signing of the Treaty of Carlowitz; it resumed with a new urgency after Küçük Kaynarca. In a sense, it is still going on today.[3]

These two questions are important when viewed in the context of leadership. The first line of inquiry can only lead to conspiracy theories and paranoia. In sharp contrast, when we ask the latter question, it inevitably leads to an alternate line of thinking: "How do we put it right"? Leaders ask the right question and then set about putting things right. This line of thinking throws up challenges, which constantly require effective decision-making on a regular basis and further defines the relationship between the leader and the led. Morally intense events would also require leaders to use their values and beliefs as guides for ethical decision-making. Such moments provide a leader with the prospect to influence the thoughts and emotions of others as also the opportunity to earn the right to lead. This recognition will take place or

not take place even though the leader's position is formally sanctioned by the organisation. Leadership is the dynamic enabling-constraining process that occurs between people rather than the sole function of the individual leader. The one who is recognised as a leader is the one who has the leadership qualities and the consent to influence the group. Obviously, such parameters are not static. The potential for a shift in power is, therefore, present in any given moment as long as there is interaction occurring.[4]

In defining moments and crunch situations, the act of leadership is emblematic of psychological strength and human positivism and is co-related to the character of the leader. Courage and humanity are the predominant emotional and interpersonal characteristics on display when a leader earns the right to lead. The latter is defined as the interpersonal strength that involves tending and befriending others, and additionally consists of the character strengths of love, kindness, and social intelligence.[5] Courage is the emotional strength that involves exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, and is defined by the character strengths of bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality.[6] Such leaders tend to display bravery in defining moments and do not shrink from threats, challenges, or difficulties. They stand up for what they think is right, regardless of consequences and persevere in completing challenging tasks. They deal with the unknown and lead despite instability and unpredictability. They also display integrity and take responsibility for their feelings and actions, thus, retaining the loyalty of followers and obtaining support from peers and superiors.

Courage, however, is not composed of just observable acts, but also of the cognitions, emotions, motivations, and decisions that produced them.[7] Three types of courage, thus, come to play: physical, moral, and psychological. Physical courage helps one to overcome the fear of physical injury or death. Moral courage entails maintaining integrity at the risk of personal and professional advancement and involves the readiness to take professional risks for the sake of principle. Doing the right thing by

carefully weighing competing claims has a long history in philosophical reflection. When people are confronted with moral dilemmas, the unconscious automatically generates emotional reactions. It is only after the emotions have produced a decision that people create rational reasons to justify their moral intuition. The capacity to make moral decisions is, therefore, innate but requires experience and reflection in order to develop fully. Psychological courage includes the ability to confront a challenging situation; it is bravery inherent in facing one's inner demons, includes aspects such as self-awareness, assessment, esteem, control, and confidence, and is an essential element of charismatic leadership.[8] Leadership is also about relationships, which, in turn, are sustained by shared moral values. Organisations need shared values else they may break down into mere societies or even mobs, eventually leading to the culture itself disintegrating. It follows then, that leadership must be value-based. This understanding brings to the fore our beliefs, values, and purposes in defining moments of decision-making.[9]

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The Cultural Construct

Culture is a "repertoire of socially transmitted and intra-generationally generated ideas about how to live and make judgements, both in general terms and in regard to specific domains of life"[10]. Prominent social and political theorists such as Tocqueville and Weber have postulated that culture exerts a decisive influence on a people's economic and political development. Socialist economies, thus, produce a cultural milieu in which anti-market, anti-profit schooling and insider privilege have planted and frozen anti-entrepreneurial attitudes. People, thus, fear the uncertainties of the market and yearn for the safe tedium of state employment. Or they yearn for equality in poverty, a common feature of peasant cultures around the world.[11] The

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above construct shows that culture has an influence on leadership traits.

In his work, *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture*, TS Eliot asserts that the development of culture must be organic and cannot be consciously guided. It requires both unity and diversity with respect to regions, religious sects, and social classes. Thus, a national culture, if it is to flourish, should be a constellation of cultures, the constituents of which, benefiting each other, benefit the whole.[12]Here Eliot speaks of a common core, but with enough diversity to provide stimulation for each other. In this context then, leadership is a moral activity, emphasising both the inner values we hold and their application within the organisational culture. This imposes an obligation to be more than just a passive reflector of history and tradition only. The leader has to be transformational, committed to moral principles and with the zeal to see that those under him as also the organisation grow apace.

Reflections on the works of Socrates and others give one the view that their theories were centred on the moral agent – the emphasis being on a just person. While the West has drawn heavily from the thoughts of the ancient masters, the modern moral theory is action-centred, explaining morality in terms of actions and their circumstances, and the ways in which actions are moral or immoral. To the modern thinker, just actions are logically prior to just persons and must be specifiable in advance of any account of what it is to be a just person. These thinkers can roughly be divided into two groups. Those who judge the morality of an action on the basis of its known or expected consequences are consequentialists; those who judge the morality of an action on the basis of its conformity to certain kinds of laws, prohibitions, or positive commandments are deontologists. The former view an action as moral if it provides the greatest good for the greatest number. Deontologists say an action is moral if it conforms to a moral principle.

While these thinkers are not uninterested in the moral disposition to produce such actions, their focus is on actions, their consequences, and the rules or other principles to which they conform. This focus explains the contemporary fascination with such questions of casuistry as, say, "The conditions under which an action like abortion is morally permitted or immoral".[13]

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In India, the defining concept has been *dharma*. In almost all post Vedic uses of the word *dharma*, morality, ethics and virtue always seem to be implicated. However, Hindu beliefs about common *dharma* are more subtly adumbrated: they are encoded into the behaviours of idealised epic characters of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. These epics form the core vocabulary of every artistic arena in Hinduism, and indeed, of the larger cultural landscape of South and Southeast Asia. Moral instruction is gleaned through constant exposure to them in various idioms. Ultimately, one aspires not simply to emulation of epic characters, but to an active recreation or grafting of the epic narrative onto one's own individual life. In the reverse of what one is conditioned to do in ordinary Western-style modern life, where one places high importance on individualistic goals, according to the ideals of the *Ramayana*, one should sacrifice one's own interests for the sake of one's nuclear family. One should sacrifice the interests of one's nuclear family for the sake of a more extended notion of family. Finally, one should sacrifice the interests of all narrow notions of family for the sake of broader notions of family, for *dharma*.[14] The credo of the Indian Military Academy fits in beautifully with this concept. However, while *dharma* as a cultural construct is ideologically progressive, the practised reality is different. Herein lies the conundrum.In his book *The Pan American Dream*, Lawrence E Harrison identifies certain values, attitudes or mindsets that distinguish progressive cultures from

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static cultures. In progressive cultures, merit is central to advancement, the radius of trust and identification extends beyond the family, the ethical code tends to be more rigorous, justice and fair play are universal impersonal expectations, and authority tends towards dispersion and horizontality. Static cultures look to connections and family for advancement, the family circumscribes the community, the ethical code is less rigorous, justice is often a function of who you know and authority is concentrated in vertical silos.[15] Progressive culture, as enumerated above, conforms to the concept of *dharma* in India but its observance seems to be more in the breach. The Indian reality is of a static culture mentality; we need to change and revert to our cultural roots.

The Conundrum

The central role of family in Indian society establishes clear hierarchical relationships within the family and within society, with close family ties often leading to nepotism and a feudal mindset. As the military is drawn from society, people joining the forces come with ingrained attitudes; many people, thus, do not view nepotism as a serious ethical aberration. Tendencies towards nepotism are transferred over time to the strong institutional bonding in the Army based on arm and Service affiliations, regimental loyalties, school ties, et al. While many frown at such behaviour, the numbers of those who would desist from taking advantage of such bonding to further their self-interest dwindles to a mere handful. This leads to some seeking postings under a 'known' superior with the possibility of earning reports based on factors other than merit and to favourable considerations in selections for promotions. The cycle is self-perpetuating and leads over time to an increasing number of mediocre

officers occupying senior positions in the military hierarchy.

Culture affects in other ways too. Unlike the West, where children are encouraged to think and act independently, the Indian family structure promotes deference to the head of the family for even mundane decisions. This translates into deference to superior authority whether in the family or at school and later in life as an adult wherein even life choices are dictated by the desires and preferences of the elders. The custom of touching the feet of relatives and those in positions of authority is a direct outcome of such cultural constructs. Our schools also promote such a culture. Erroneous equation of such deference with respect and honour, results in a loss of individuality and leads to sycophancy, servility and obsequiousness. Sasthi Brata in his book, *My God Died Young*, caustically states his decision to go West was due to this "…obsequious, cringing facet of Indian personality".

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The hierarchical decision-making structure of the armed forces also tends towards attitudes of unilateralism and could preclude consultative mechanisms. As mentioned earlier, authority in progressive cultures tends towards dispersion and horizontality, whereas in static cultures, authority is concentrated in vertical silos. This limits the narrative to individual views being the dominant input in the decision-making process. Ethical leadership can, however, only be sustained on a foundation where the views of all stakeholders are considered. Such structures, if non-existent, would need to be created. Allied with this, a leader is required to take decisions and stand by them. This, of course, does not preclude the consultative process. However, ingrained cultural attributes mentioned earlier militate against effective decision-making and dilute leadership traits. The phenomenon of every decision being vetted at higher and higher levels of command is a fallout of cultural attributes. This leads at times to ridiculous situations where

decisions, which should rightly be taken at the level of Colonel, find their way to three-star Generals for approval. Play safe attitudes kill the leadership spirit, lead towards indecisiveness, promote mediocrity and sycophancy and, hence, need to be countered with an alternate narrative. There is, hence, a need to promote a counter culture within the military if the desired leadership attributes are to be developed. Gen K Sunderji as Army Chief attempted such a course correction. He communicated his thoughts on the subject through a letter written by him addressed to each officer of the Army. Amongst other things, the Chief desired that juniors address their superior officers by rank and not 'sir' them in every second sentence spoken, to curb sycophancy.[16] This culture has yet to take roots.

A Paradigm for Leadership Growth

The start point for promoting an alternate culture to nurture leaders of substance must begin at the roots. Here, we need to look firstly at the selection system where the Services Selection Boards (SSB) will be the lead players and then at our training academies – the National Defence Academy, Indian Military Academy and Officers Training Academy. These are the nurseries which will produce our future officers and so the greatest care and circumspection must be exercised here.

The SSB procedures perhaps need a relook. To claim that our selection system has stood the test of time and, hence, needs no change is denying the emergence of a changing, aspirational India. Such review cannot be left to the DIPR (Defence Institute of Psychological Research), but must be led by the Services themselves, with inputs from leaders in the field encompassing multiple disciplines. The next step will to be nurture the selected lot in the training academies. Here we come up with inherent contradictions. The prayer at the National Defence Academy which all cadets recite at the morning muster parade cannot remain a mere recitation of words but must be converted into an actionable plan. The words are stirring, emphasising duty and honour to the country and to

the Services. Ethical conduct is emphasised through the words…"*awaken our admiration for honest dealing and clean thinking and guide us to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong*" and also… "*endow us with the courage which is born of the love of what is noble and which knows no compromise or retreat when truth and right are in peril*",[17]but this cannot remain simply a morning prayer. There must be an actionable plan to convert the words into a way of life which becomes second nature to the cadets. The aim must be to turn them into men of character and substance who will not flinch when upholding a principle. Undoubtedly, the task is difficult for the cadets also have to be taught to obey orders without hesitation. How then are they to be taught to resist orders which are illegal and immoral? Who is to determine the same? These are the challenges to overcome; they would require a culture where openness is encouraged and space exists to oppose authority. There is then a need for live conversations in our training establishments of ethics and values, where people hold each other responsible and accountable about whether they are really living the values – and this has to be internalised to become a part of academy life. Creating this culture is the primary challenge. It means that cadets must have knowledge of alternatives, but still choose to stay within the bounds of ethical behaviour because it is important and inspires them. Making a strong commitment to bring such a culture to life is an essential part of ethical leadership. The 'authority trap' has to be avoided; this would require established and explicit ways for subordinates to 'push back' if a person thinks that something is ethically wrong and the values of the organisation are being eroded. The process of developing these mechanisms must be created in our training establishments. In due course of time, these will be transmitted to our units and establishments, creating a unique Army culture, which could be emulated by the nation.

Another criticality lies in the selection of directing staff to these establishments. They must be men of exceptional honour and commitment, and the process to select them, the most rigorous. Each person so

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selected must be able to walk the talk, whether he is the Commandant or the Divisional Officer. We need to ask ourselves a simple fundamental question: why is it that a few people in the training academies achieve a cult-like status and the rest don't? In the early Seventies, the Deputy Commandant of the National Defence Academy was Cmde Ronald Lynsdale Periera. Why is he still remembered today with awe and reverence? Certainly not because he rose to become the Naval Chief. It was his ethical conduct which endeared him to all who were fortunate enough to come in contact with him. Our academies need to be filled with officers who exhibit that spirit.

Finally, leadership is all about decision-making. Sometimes, the choice is between ethical behaviour at the cost of personal advancement. What the leader chooses will be a product of his upbringing and conscience but the options lie in the 'black and white' domain. However, most choices will not be that simple. Difficulties arise when the options are between two courses, both having tremendous positive possibilities; or in having to choose one among a range of options, each having negative consequences. Character is shaped through making difficult decisions as exemplified by William Styron in his novel *Sophie's Choice*. In the book, Sophie is forced, when imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, to choose between two unbearable options. While most of us will never have to bear the burden of such difficult decision-making, the challenge is to train our leaders in making such choices. Sam Manekshaw, in his address to officers at the Staff College, Wellington, spoke of five fundamental attributes of leadership: professional competence, justice, courage, loyalty and decisiveness. It is the last named quality, however, which finally defines a leader. The ability to take a decision and accept full responsibility for one's action will, in the ultimate analysis, define a person and what he stands for. Creating an

environment where such leadership can flourish is the challenge and an objective, which must be aimed at and realised. For that, we need to get back to our cultural roots and the philosophy of *dharma*.

Notes

1. This paragraph is extracted from the article "Ethical Leadership: The Way Ahead" written by the author and published in *Scholar Warrior*, Spring 2011.
2. Jon-Arild Johannessen and Tom Karp, "Earning the Right to Lead in Defining Moments: the Act of Leadership," *The Journal of Value Based Leadership*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter/ Spring 2010.
3. Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
4. Ibid.
5. Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (American Psychological Association, Oxford Press, 2004), p. 37.
6. Ibid., p. 36.
7. Ibid.
8. Johannessen and Karp, n. 2.
9. Joseph P Hester and Don R Killian, "The Moral Foundations of Ethical Leadership," *The Journal of Value Based Leadership*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter/Spring 2010.
10. Orlando Patterson, "Taking Culture Seriously: A Framework and an Afro-American Illustration," in Lawrence E Harrison and Samuel P Huntington (eds.), *Culture Matters—How Values Shape Human Lives* (New York: Basic, 2000), p. 208.
11. David Landes, "Culture Makes Almost all the Difference," in Harrison and Huntington (eds.), Ibid., pp. 2-3.
12. TS Eliot, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), pp 50-52.
13. Richard Parry, *Ancient Ethical Theory*, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, available at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-ancient/
14. Arti Dhand, "The Dharma of Ethics, the Ethics of Dharma," *Journal of Religious Ethics,* Vol. 30, No. 3 (Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp. 347-372.
15. Lawrence E Harrison, "Promoting Progressive Cultural Change," Harrison and Huntington (eds.), n. 10, pp. 299-300.
16. The letter written on February 1, 1986, by Gen K Sundarji to all officers of the Indian Army is available at http://debashis1.tripod.com/sundarji/sundarji.htm and is relevant even today.
17. The full version of the NDA prayer is available at http://www.nda.nic.in/cadet-brief.html