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CORPORATE GOVERNANCE THROUGH ANCIENT INDIAN SCRIPTURES



Daammyat: Self Control, Data: Charity, Dayadhvam: Compassion. Three pillars of the Ethical Philosophy as elucidated in Brthadaranyaka Upanishad

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CRISIS MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE BHAGAVAD GITA'S TEACHINGS

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Introduction

Life is a beautiful and unpredictable roller-coaster ride; we all have our own highs and lows. There are challenges on an individual level and at a collective level. Family units, small and large businesses; all deal with different types and forms of crises and have their own coping mechanisms. Sometimes, the challenges can be extremely overwhelming, such as the current covid-19 pandemic.

These days, most of us are compelled to re-evaluate how we deal with and respond to life and its challenges. We each face some or the other form of dilemma – be it at home or at work. Globally, the pandemic has affected the world economy and the way businesses function – there are severe or even drastic changes being made to adapt. Business leaders are forced to make tougher calls to embrace these changes and keep their businesses afloat.¹

We are undeniably in the midst of a crisis that has destabilized various organizations.² Facing some of these harsh conditions can be mentally daunting; several decisions made in the business world have far reaching impacts and consequences – there are policy changes, cash-flow issues, people management, contract re-negotiations etc. The unprecedented nature of the current pandemic and its impact on businesses can put the strongest of the leaders in a state of dilemma and turmoil.

However, does this mean that life is at a standstill? No, life continues to move on irrespective of how we choose to react or respond to it. Some businesses and individuals can decipher a way out soon and some need more time – there are different market condition or economic policies or cash flow sources or profits and reserves etc. Regardless of the time, at the helm of every decision is an individual who not only triggers these decisions but is also deeply affected by it. At times, such crises have as much negative impact as a positive impact. This is where we refer to one of our scriptures, *the Bhavagad Gita*, to explore how such dilemma can be dealt with in any crisis – be it a corporate scenario or a personal scenario.

Allegory between a Corporate Leader and Arjuna

¹<https://www.egonzehnder.com/industries/technology-communications/insights/all-eyes-and-ears-on-communications-during-the-covid-19-crisis>

²Kayes DC, Allen NC, Self N. Integrating learning, leadership, and crisis in management education: Lessons from army officers in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Journal of Management Education*. 2012;37(2):180-202. DOI: 10.1177/1052562912456168

Our Indian scriptures have different environments and timelines, but the words of wisdom are timeless and can be effectively applied even in the present scenario³. The first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita is called the *Vishada Yoga*; it begins on a sorrowful note with Arjuna feeling trapped in an inner dilemma, right amidst a raging war. Arjuna is caught in a life and death situation involving near and dear ones. He, being one of the Pandavas[leaders], is responsible for his choices and the possible impact they can have on various stakeholders [family, kingdom, soldiers etc.]

Today, majority of the corporate leaders [Board Members, Senior Management or persons in Key Decision-Making or Liability roles] are faced with serious challenges. The impact could well be on both professional and personal lives and there is the added responsibility of being accountable to stakeholders. If we take a parallel to Arjuna, the leaders are faced with the dilemma that there will likely be strong consequences no matter what decision is taken. Similar to the impact of the Kurukshetra war, these decisions may also have negative repercussions in current times and this could very well lead to mental duress.

Mind's Behaviour

The *Vishada Yoga* tells us about Arjuna's confusions and his state of mental agony. He is seen justifying his state through rational and logical excuses and tries to convince himself. In other words, his intelligence is bested by his emotions in the midst of a crisis.

*My limbs become weak, my mouth dries up,
My body trembles, and my hair stands on end.
Gandiva (the bow) slips from my hand;
My skin is burning, I can scarcely remain standing;
My mind is reeling.*⁴

Arjuna is clouded by his fears and self-pity. He is seen forgetting his original purpose and the actual reasons for why the war was being waged. When the mind is confronted by ego, it believes that it is the doer of all things – good and bad. This attachment to selfhood adds to his despair and weighs him down. He is stuck instead of moving into any action or decision.

A leader might feel similarly when having to make tough or drastic choices, especially in the middle of a pandemic induced crisis. There might be little clarity about the future when the entire world economy seems to be crumbling around. This leads to inevitable changes to be made within the business to cope and sustain through the crisis. On the one hand, there is a knowledge of the external environment and economic situation and on the other hand, there is the responsibility towards the job and the business. It might not always be feasible to have a decision that harmoniously impacts both situations.

Limited Perspectives

³Paramahansa Yogananda, *God Talks With Arjuna—The Bhagavad Gita: Royal Science of God-Realization*. Motilal Books of India. 2006: ISBN: 9788189535001

⁴ Sri Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad Gita As It Is, Chapter 1 – Verses 28 to 32*. Bhaktivedanta Book Trust; 1993

The way we view things can define how we respond to life. Arjuna believed that his actions could change destiny and people's lives. His perception of the Kurukshetra war gave him only a cataclysmic outcome⁵. He was however merely delaying the inevitable by choosing not to act. He believed what he saw to be the only truth and could not look at the larger picture or at the greater meaning of the war.

Lord Krishna then chose to guide Arjuna by revealing how and why his mind was limited, in the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita – *Samkhya Yoga*.

*When a man dwells upon objects of sense,
Attachment to them is born.
From attachment, desire is born,
And from such desire anger arises.
From anger arises delusion, and from delusion loss of memory.
From loss of memory the destruction of intelligence,
And from this destruction, he perishes.⁶*

Be it a leader or anybody for that matter, understanding that we are not entirely the victims of our circumstances and still have a choice in how we respond to challenging situations goes a long way. It not only helps calm the mind, it enables us to gradually notice that we cannot and do not need to control everything by ourselves.

Yes, tough decisions have tough consequences, there could be despair, hopelessness and several stakeholders impacted – but does this mean that everybody can always be pleased and taken care of? This is where Lord Krishna reminded Arjuna that he cannot control everything. Accepting our limitations and being true to ourselves can be tough. We must own our responsibility and do the right thing, even if at times it may seem extremely challenging.

A Higher Power

The most important lesson for us to remember is that we are neither the creators nor the destroyers of life. We are merely passing through this sojourn and choosing a lifepath based on our levels of awareness. As Lord Krishna explains the various things in life and shows Arjuna his true form, in the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad Gita – *Vishvaroopā Yoga*, he explains His nature and who He is at Arjuna's request.

*Time am I, the world-destroyer grown mature,
Engaged here in fetching back the worlds.
Even without you, all the warriors standing over against you will cease to be.
Therefore stand up, gain glory;
Having conquered enemies
Enjoy a prosperous kingdom.*

⁵ Steven Crimi, The Outcome of Crisis in the Hamlet and Bhagavad Gita, Moksha Journal, Issue II

⁶ Sri Swami Prabhupada, Bhagavad Gita As It Is, Chapter 2 – Verses 62 to 63. Bhaktivedanta Book Trust; 1993

*By me they are already slain:
Be you merely the occasion.⁷*

Whatever we believe, is true for us. Maybe some of us believe in religion, some in the concept of God or the Universe and some may choose to believe in neither. The Bhagavad Gita conceptualizes the philosophy of God or a Supreme Power. One may choose different names or forms, but even science acknowledges this powerful and limitless source that is stronger and larger than us and is beyond our limited comprehension. Recognizing this and detaching from the self could enable us to live our life with a better sense of faith and optimism.

Focusing on the bigger picture, owning our choices responsibly and understanding that though we may have the ability to decide and act on everyday life with impact, there is a far greater meaning to life will help us gain a better perspective in how we can manage people and crises even in the corporate world. We are all still part of an eco-system with co-dependency and nature has a way of bringing us down on our knees no matter what our financials might look like.

Conclusion

The current pandemic has changed the way we live and look at life to a large degree. Whether these perspectives will sustain, or grow is up to both the leaders and stakeholders. The corporate world has been staggering and adapting to this pandemic. While there have been despondent situations, we must not forget the progress happening in other areas and the opportunities created in different areas of life.

Being in a crisis does not mean it is the ultimate end or that everything is hopeless. Even in the darkest moments, there is always hope for those who believe. More importantly, the approach we take to handle these challenges are the biggest test of our characters. Like Arjuna, it is easy to feel dejected and to want to give up when faced with painful decisions, but we all have our truths and being aware of how we accept, tackle and manage is still within our power.

As people in responsible situations in a business world, we each confront different types of people, changes and challenges. Understanding that this is a part of life and not necessarily the entirety of it will add more perspective to how we can tackle and get through it. Tough calls need not be followed by tough expressions. The best leaders are not necessarily the richest in terms of their bank balances, but they are the richest in their wisdom and empathy.

Like Lord Krishna teaches in Chapter 2, *Samkhya Yoga*, of Bhagvad Gita:

*Karmanyevadhikaraste,
Ma phaleshukadachana*

⁷ Sri Swami Prabhupada, Bhagavad Gita As It Is, Chapter XI – Verses 32 to 33. Bhaktivedanta Book Trust; 1993

*Ma karma phala he tur bhuh,
ma tesangotsvakarmanye⁸*

You have a right to “Karma” (actions) but never to any Fruits thereof. You should never be motivated by the results of your actions, nor should there be any attachment in not doing your prescribed activities.

⁸Sri Swami Prabhupada, Bhagavad Gita As It Is, Chapter XI – Verses 47. Bhaktivedanta Book Trust; 1993