



Ancient Wisdom for Modern Leadership: Ethical Lessons from Mahabharata through the lens of Character Strengths

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Abstract: This chapter investigates how Peterson and Seligman's psychological framework of character strengths might be integrated with ethical leadership concepts found in the Mahabharata. A culturally rich viewpoint on values-based leadership is provided by "Naitik Netritva," or ethical leadership in the Indian tradition, which closely relates to the six fundamental qualities of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. The study demonstrates the complex relationship between moral judgement and leadership conduct through a theme analysis of important Mahabharata characters, including Krishna, Yudhishthira, Arjuna, Bhishma, Karna, and Duryodhana. Arjuna's moral bravery, Yudhishthira's dedication to dharma, and Krishna's strategic insight are examples of virtuous leadership, whereas Bhishma and Karna's moral conundrums highlight the difficulties of value conflict in leadership positions. The fallout from immoral leadership motivated by ego and moral blindness is best exemplified by Duryodhana's demise. In support of character-centric leadership development models that priorities ethical resilience, emotional intelligence, and value-driven decision-making, this study emphasizes the applicability of ancient Indian philosophical principles in modern organizational situations. The results imply that re-examining ancient writings such as the Mahabharata can enhance paradigms of global leadership and promote ethical, sustainable practices in contemporary entrepreneurship and governance.

Keywords: *Ethical leadership, Naitik Netritva, Mahabharata, Organizational Ethics*

1. Introduction

Leadership “is an art and ability through which manager motivates and positively influence a group of people to achieve a certain goal” (Mulugeta & Hailemariam, 2018; Dinibutun, 2020). Ethical leadership defined as “a social practise by which professional judgement is autonomously exercised. It constitutes a resource rooted in three ethical dimensions, critique, care and justice; as well as a powerful capacity to act in a responsible and acceptable manner” (Langlois et al., 2014). Empathy and emotional intelligence are two important characteristics for a successful leader (Cavaness, Picchioni, Fleshman, 2020). Karam et al. (2019) asserts that creating a climate where employees feel secure and are satisfied, requires the leader to introduce innovation and remove barriers and stereotypes (Koopam et al. 2019). A relationship centred approach towards employees compassion, fairness, integrity and reliability are essential of an ethical leader for cultivating trust and respect (Awang et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019).

The leaders also act as a role model for their employees by endorsing and reinforcing ethical behaviours in the workplace, thereby, fostering a sense of security for their staff (Deng et al., 2023). Leaders are innovators, who adapt to diverse working situations and embody a sense of justice, benevolence, compassion, stability, realism, determination and optimism (Kjesllstrom, Stalne and Tornblom, 2020). Additionally, emotional stability, creativeness, an attitude of cooperation, integrity (Simons et al., 2015). Ethical leadership includes team building, supportive environment, justice and transparency (Karam et al., 2019; Koopman et al., 2019, Martin et al., 2022, Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). Ethical leaders prioritise transparency as a means of fostering open and honest communication. They uphold a genuine communication line with their staff by conveying and presenting information, irrespective of any potential controversy (Al khaled, Fenn, 2020). **Various components of ethical leadership identified by the researchers are discussed in Table 1.**

Table 1: *Ethical leadership dimensions identified by various researchers.*

(Source Bajpain et al., 2024)

Author (s)	Dimensions
Kanungo and Mendonca (1996, 1998)	Conceptualised three dimensions of Ethical leaderships. a) leaders motivation b) leaders influence strategies c) leader's character.

Trevino et al. (2003)	Introduced two dimensions, a) moral person b) moral manager
Resick et al. (2006)	a) Character b) integrity c) altruism d) collective motivations e) encouragement
Lee and Cheng (2010)	a) Personal ethics b) interpersonal behaviours c) articulation of ethical standards d) ethical knowledge implicit by nature
Kalshoven et al (2011)	a) People orientation b) fairness c) power sharing d) concern for sustainability e)ethical guidance f) role clarification g) integrity
Fehr et al. (2015)	a) Care/harm b) airness/cheating c)loyalty/betrayal d) sanctity/degradation e)authority/subversion f)liberty/oppression

2. Character Strengths

Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined character strengths as “a ubiquitously recognized subset of personality traits that are morally valued”. Linley and Harrington (2006) refers to strengths as “ways of thinking, feeling and behaving that come naturally and easily to a person and that enable high functioning and performance”. Peterson and Seligman (2004) “a strength is valued for moral and intrinsic reasons whereas talents are valued for taking tangible outcomes”. Peterson and Seligman (2004) gave 24 character strengths under 6 virtues of wisdom and knowledge (i.e., creativity, curiosity, open mindedness, love of learning and perspective); courage (i.e., honesty, bravery, persistence and zest); humanity (i.e.. Kindness, love and social intelligence); justice (i.e., fairness, leadership and teamwork); temperance (i.e., forgiveness, modesty, prudence and self-regulation) and transcendence (i.e., appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour and religiousness/spirituality) (Park & Peterson, 2009).

2.1 Character Strengths and Ethical Leadership

Ethical leaders show values such as honesty, humility and moral courage which are important for effective leadership (Sosik et al., 2019). Ethical leadership grounded in character strengths, fosters enhanced psychological flourishing among leaders and their teams (Sosik et al, 2019).

Table 2: *Defining Virtues and Strengths**Source: (Ruch et al., 2010)*

Virtue	Define	Strengths
Wisdom and Knowledge	Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge	Creativity, curiosity, open mindedness, love of learning, perspective
Courage	Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal	Bravery, persistence, Honesty, Zest
Humanity	Interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others.	Love, kindness and social intelligence
Justice	Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life.	Teamwork, fairness, leadership
Temperance	Strengths that protect against excess	Forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation
Transcendence	Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning	Appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour, religiousness

2.2 Ethical Leadership in the Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagvad Gita emphasises the need of ethical conduct and righteousness. The verse from Chapter 16, Verse 3 highlights

“श्रीभगवानुवाच। अभयं सत्त्वसंशुद्धिर्ज्ञानयोगव्यवस्थितिः ।

दानं दमश्च यज्ञश्च स्वाध्यायस्तप आर्जवम् ॥1॥

अहिंसा सत्यमक्रोधास्त्यागः शान्तिरपैशुनम् ।

दया भूतेष्वलोलुप्त्वं मार्दवं ह्रीरचापलम् ॥2॥

तेजः क्षमा धृतिः शौचमद्रोहोनातिमानिता ।

भवन्ति सम्पदं दैवीमभिजातस्य भारत ॥3॥

The verse highlights Daivi Sampad or the divine qualities. The verse affects both personal life and social framework. It emphasis on values such as fearlessness, purity, self-

control and compassion, which are necessary for spiritual and holistic development. Shree Krishna in the verse says “fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness in the path of knowledge and yoga, charity, control over the senses, sacrifice, study of scriptures, austerity and straightforwardness. Non-violence, truthfulness, absence of anger, renunciation, tranquillity of mind, aversion to fault finding, compassion towards all beings, freedom from greed, gentleness, modesty and lack of fickleness. Vigour, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, freedom from malice and absence of arrogance, O Aruja, these qualities belong to those who are born with divine nature”. Thus the verse speaks about Abhyam (fearlessness), Sattva Samshuddhi (Purity of mind and heart), Jnana Yoga Vyavasthithi (Steadfastness in knowledge and yoga), Danam (charity), Damah (control of senses), Yajna (Sacrifice), Svadhyaya (study of scriptures), Tapah (austerity), Arjavam (straightforwardness), Ahimsa (Non-violence), Satyam (Truthfulness), Akrodhah (absence of anger), Tyagah (Renunciation), Shanith (peacefulness), Daya (compassion towards all beings), Aloluptvam (freedom from greed), Mardavam (gentleness), Hrih (modesty), Achapalam (Absence of restlessness), Tejah (vigor & enthusiasm), Kshama (forgiveness), Dhrti (fortitude), Shaucham (purity), Adroha (freedom from malice), Naatimanita (absence of arrogance)

Table 3: Spiritual Figures and Leadership Virtues

Spiritual Figure	Virtue in Leadership	Scriptural Reference	Leadership Insight & Lesson
Krishna	Strategic Insight and Caution	न हि कश्चित्क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठत्यकर्मकृत् । कार्यते ह्यवशः कर्म गुणैः स्वाभाविकैबलात् ।। (श्रीमद्भगवद्गीता) “No one can remain actionless even for a moment” <i>(Bhagavad Gita 3.5)</i>	The verse highlights the idea that one cannot completely neglect action, as even action is a form of action. Ethical leaders show consistency between their values and actions, which fosters trust within the organisation (Nosrati, 2023).

Yudhistir	Righteousness and Moral leadership	"धर्म एव हतो हन्ति धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः “Dharma destroys those who violate it, dharma protects those who uphold it” <i>(Manusmriti 8.15)</i>	The verse highlights Yudhistris wisdom and ethical understanding, where he emphasizes that happiness comes from contentment, duty and righteousness. Moral involves prioritising organisational interests over personal gain, exemplifying diligence, refraining from claiming credit for others contributions, abstaining from revengeful behaviour through misuse of authority (Ling & Chen, 1987).
Arjuna	Duty and Moral Courage	क्लैब्यं मा स्म गमः पार्थ नैतत्त्वय्युपपद्यते। क्षुद्रं हृदयदौर्बल्यं त्यक्तोत्तिष्ठ परन्तप “Do not yield to unmanliness, O Partha (Arjuna); it does not benefit you. Abandon this petty weakness of heart and arise, O scorcher of enemies!” <i>(Bhagavad Gita 2.3)</i>	The verse highlights the importance of Courage. Krishna reminds Arjuna to act with courage and fulfil his warrior duty. Duty is fundamental to ethical leadership as leaders are accountable for fostering conditions that promote proactive behaviour (Wang et al., 2020). Further, ethical leaders cultivate attributes such as conscientiousness in their followers, so as to behave ethically in difficult situation (Pakizekho & Barkhordari Sharifabad, 2022)

Karna	Ethical Dilemma	"सुखदुःखे समे कृत्वा लाभालाभौ जयाजयौ। ततो युद्धाय युज्यस्व नैवं पापमवाप्स्यसि॥ “Considering pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat as the same, engage in battle. Thus you will not incur sin. <i>(Bhagavad Gita 2.38)</i>	The verse shows that despite knowing his true lineage, Karna chose loyalty to Duryodhana over personal righteousness, reflecting internal conflict. The researchers explored moral disengagement where in personal loyalty may collide with ethical decision making (Trevino, Brown & Hartman, 2003).
Bhisma	Conflict between Loyalty and Dharma	"लोभः प्रवृत्तिरारम्भः कर्मणामशमः स्पृहा। रजस्येतानि जायन्ते विवृद्धे भरतर्षभ॥ “Greed, excessive endeavour and restlessness arises when passion dominates, O Bharata” <i>(Bhagavad Gita 14.12)</i>	Bhisma/s silence during Draupadi’s humiliation reflects his internal struggle between Dharma (justice) and his loyalty to throne. Ethical leadership encompasses both competence and ethics, and leadership excellence cannot be assessed without evaluating the leader’s moral vision, integrity, values, character, and willingness to take responsibility and care of others (Ciulla, 1995)
Duryodhan (unethical leadership)	Unethical Leadership & Ego	"अहङ्कारं बलं दर्पं कामं क्रोधं च संश्रिताः। मामात्मपरदेहेषु प्रद्विषन्तोऽभ्यसूयकाः॥ “Possessed by ego, power and arrogance, desire and anger, they hate Me (righteousness) in their own and others bodies” <i>(Bhagavad Gita 16.18)</i>	The verse highlights Duryodhan final moments where he refuses to accept his mistakes and remain prideful. Narcissistic leaders are egocentric, attention seekers, and disregard others perspectives or well-being (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Thus, destructive leaders are

			ruled by charisma, need for power, narcissism, negative love history and hatred based ideology (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007).
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Using the framework of character strengths and scriptural wisdom, the table "Spiritual Figures and Leadership Virtues" offers an integrative examination of significant Mahabharata characters, scrutinising their deeds and moral decisions. Drawing from words in the Bhagavad Gita and other scriptural sources, each of the following figures; Krishna, Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Karna, Bhishma, and Duryodhana—is linked to a crucial leadership attribute that they either represent or oppose.

This comparative analysis provides timeless insights into the moral dilemmas that leaders encounter by highlighting the ways in which these individuals embody different facets of moral or immoral leadership. For example, Arjuna represents moral bravery and obligation, Yudhishtira represents righteousness and moral integrity, and Krishna represents strategic intelligence and caution. While Duryodhana is the opposite of ethical leadership—driven by vanity, hubris, and a contempt for justice—Karna and Bhishma, on the other hand, show the internal struggle between personal allegiance and ethical values.

The table demonstrates how deeply rooted moral virtues impact decision-making, leadership effectiveness, and organisational outcomes by tying each character's leadership behaviour to particular biblical allusions and contemporary ethical frameworks. This ties ancient wisdom with modern leadership theory.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present article highlights the importance of ethical leadership drawing profound insights from Mahabharata to offer culturally nuanced paradigm for value centric leadership. Moreover, this study illustrates the complicated intricacies of moral decision-making in leadership by examining the virtues exhibited by important characters like Krishna, Yudhishtira, and Arjuna as well as the moral quandaries Karna and Bhishma experienced. Leading with moral principles, judgments, and connections is the essence of ethical leadership. By encouraging ethics, fostering moral behaviour, and forming a culture that supports moral decisions affects organizational decision-making. The performance of the organization is greatly influenced by the leadership style; hence, ethical leadership is not a

desirable attribute but a practical requirement for the sustainable long-term success of an organization. Revisiting ancient wisdom can significantly improve leadership development initiatives by encouraging character-based decision-making and ethical resilience.

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